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Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

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Speaker Elliot, Justine, MP

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Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond) (16:03): I am very pleased to be speaking in this address-in-reply. I would like of course to start by thanking the people of Richmond for re-electing me for a fourth term. It is indeed a great honour and a privilege to represent what is in fact the most beautiful part of Australia, the electorate of Richmond, with its diversity and its people, its communities and its landscape. It is truly unique. From the pristine beaches to the beautiful hinterland, it is one of the most beautiful parts of Australia. I would like to thank all of those who supported me throughout the election campaign and to all those people who volunteered their time because they had such a strong commitment to Labor values and the Labor policies we took to the election. I thank them and acknowledge all their hard work.

I also acknowledge the many people in the community that I spoke to and continue to speak to over the years on the issues they have raised, particularly the concerns they have about the impact of a Liberal-National government. I can assure the people of the North Coast that I will be holding this government to account on a whole range of issues, all those issues that impact the people of the North Coast. We are already seeing that some of those impacts are hurting the people on the North Coast. We are seeing cuts by the government particularly to areas around regional development funding—around five cuts. We are seeing cuts to the schoolkids bonus as well. There is a lot of concern about plans for a \$6 GP tax, which will be devastating for an area like Richmond, particularly with the large number of pensioners we have in my area. Just today in question time we saw the Prime Minister refuse to rule out cuts to the age pension, which also would be devastating for many people as there is a very high proportion of old age pensioners living on the North Coast of New South Wales.

We also saw from the government last year the threat to impose GST on the rents of mobile home residents and, indeed, a strong community campaign forced a backdown on this unfair tax grab. We are also seeing a strong community campaign against the government's plans for that doctor tax and their plans to dismantle Medicare. Right throughout the country we are seeing people mobilising because of their concerns about our universal health system, and I certainly stand with them in making sure that people can access the healthcare services that they need when they require them. It is only been a number of months and we are already seeing some very harsh impacts being felt particularly in regional areas and, as I say, I continue to highlight those concerns.

During the campaign there was also a very positive response to the record funding the Labor government delivered to the area. A major issue in my electorate was opposition to harmful coal seam gas mining, which I will detail a bit later on. I would like to say that I am very proud to have worked closely with many people on the North Coast to deliver this record funding whilst I have been the local MP. More than \$1.5 billion was delivered for local improvements and many of those came from the economic stimulus projects that are so vital in protecting local jobs and also in providing very, very important infrastructure.

I would like to outline some of those that have made a very big difference on the North Coast of New South Wales particularly the Pacific Highway upgrade. More than \$350 million was allocated for the Sextons Hill upgrade and more than \$550 million for the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale upgrade, which is, in fact, the single biggest ever infrastructure investment on the North Coast. It is being constructed as we speak, and we look forward to that being finalised and having all those Pacific Highway upgrades finished up there.

I was also very proud to deliver the GP superclinic to South Tweed. It has been open for a long period of time now and is providing exceptionally great service to many people within the area. All of the funding to local schools has made a huge difference as well.

What was also really important was the investment in community infrastructure, like the Murwillumbah Community Centre, or the Byron Regional Sport and Cultural Complex or the Lennox Head Community Centre. Indeed, there was other sports infrastructure, like the \$5 million in funding for the new Arkinstall Park upgrades for netball and tennis facilities in South Tweed. This also is under construction and we very much look forward

to that being finalised. It is a great resource for locals. We are hoping that it will be a bit of a central point for a lot of training, as well, particularly on the netball front.

There was also more than \$2 million for the world's first surfing centre of excellence at Casuarina Beach. It is great to have that open and providing some really important mentoring for many people who come there from right across country. And it is great to have a world first surfing centre of excellence at beautiful Casuarina Beach.

So, as I have said, it has been a real honour to be given the opportunity to continue to represent the people of the North Coast and to work with them to keep on achieving those best results for locals and to improve our infrastructure and surrounds on the North Coast.

Richmond is indeed a very diverse electorate, and that is what makes us incredibly special. It stretches from Skennars Head in the south to Tweed Heads in the north, and from Byron Bay in the east to Nimbin in the west. Richmond has significant agricultural areas and urban areas as well, like Tweed Heads. It has very vibrant and active coastal areas, like Byron Bay, and really strong, rural based communities, like Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby. They are very diverse areas.

During the election and over the past year I have continued to have many discussions with the people of the North Coast, and the message is very clear and consistent—locals have a very clear idea about the sort of community they want. They want one where they are able to access the services they require, whether those are health, aged care, education or community services. They want to see investment in regional infrastructure. Very importantly, they want to have jobs in their local regional area and they want their children to be able to have quality jobs in their regional area. And they want to see an emphasis on making sure that we have strong local economies.

In areas like mine, importantly, they also want to see that we have a sustainable environment, and they want to see effective action on climate change. That was a very big issue during the election campaign. All of these issues featured very prominently during the campaign but, indeed, the single issue that was raised with me time and time again was the very real fear shared by many locals about the impact of harmful coal seam gas mining on the North Coast. Indeed, this continues to be the single largest issue across all levels of government, all community groups and all individuals no matter where you go. This is the issue that people talk about; it is the issue of concern to them. They have real and genuine concerns as to what could happen to our environment, to our water and to our communities if this industry were allowed to expand on the New South Wales North Coast.

In a very real way, the 2013 federal election in Richmond was a referendum on whether the community wanted coal seam gas mining. In fact, the people have now spoken clearly. It was clear by the result in the Richmond electorate that the voters have rejected coal seam gas mining. They believe it is unsafe and environmentally destructive. As I said, the electorate has made it very clear how they feel about it. They are very worried about the ramifications of coal seam gas mining, the effect it will have on current and future generations and the impact on our area.

Nearly all the villages and towns, along with the local councils of Tweed, Byron and Lismore on the North Coast, have made declarations to be coal seam gas mining free. In fact, the movement against coal seam gas mining has been growing for a considerable period of time. In the past few years, it has grown more and more. This movement is now directed specifically against many in the National Party in our area and their very strong pro-CSG agenda. It particularly refers to our state members of parliament. In fact, as we know, it is the state government that regulates and licences coal seam gas mining. What concerns me and concerns the community is that all of our state National Party MPs on the North Coast actively and publicly endorse coal seam gas mining in our area. In doing so they have ignored the people of the North Coast. They have chosen to support the interests of big coal seam gas mining companies and completely ignore the will of the people who they have been elected to represent.

To understand how big an issue this is, and the impact of it, it is important to examine the magnitude of public support against coal seam gas mining and to look at the history of this community activism. I will run through some of the major events. There are many more, but here are some of the community's major concerns.

On 9 April 2012, the Lismore City Council voted 6-5 in support of the motion to have a specific poll to gauge views on coal seam gas mining. The poll was then held in conjunction with the September 2012 local government election. The result of this poll was overwhelmingly against coal seam gas mining, with 87 per cent voting against

it—a huge number. Also, on 25 October 2012, Tweed shire councillors voted 6-1 for a moratorium on coal seam gas mining.

On 31 October 2013, Byron shire councillors—off the back of a survey which showed that some 98 per cent of residents wanted the shire declared, and to remain, CSG free—re-stated their support for a gas-field-free shire that incorporates a coal seam gas mining exclusion zone. Also, the North Coast peak council for local councils, NOROC, considered this coal seam gas mining issue so significant that they funded research on the effect of CSG on the environment. This means we now have a situation where the councils and nearly all the villages and towns along the North Coast have themselves made declarations to be CSG-mining free. This is a strong declaration of the people's will. In fact, when you drive through those smaller villages—and we are lucky to have many vibrant and wonderful villages on the North Coast—you will see many 'lock the gate' signs and you will see signs declaring that they are coal seam gas mining free. We have had dozens of small villages continue to make those declarations, and they go from street to street to make sure that their concerns are heard about how worried they are about the impact of this industry possibly expanding in our area.

Across the North Coast we have had many groups that have come together to support this anti-coal-seam-gas-mining movement. This list is not limited to but includes groups such as: the North Coast Environment Council; Gasfield Free Northern Rivers; the Tweed Lock the Gate Alliance, led by Michael McNamara; the Nimbin Environment Centre; the 100% renewable energy campaign; the Caldera Environment Centre; Transition Byron Shire; the wonderful Knitting Nannas Against Coal Seam Gas Mining, who continue to do such a great job in highlighting their concerns; and the Byron Environment Centre. There are many other community groups and individuals who have been part of this ongoing campaign to make sure that their concerns are always heard in relation to this.

I think there has been possibly no greater demonstration of those determined to stop coal seam gas mining than the display of strength at various protests and rallies. On 14 May 2011 in Murwillumbah some 8,000 people marched through the town to demand a stop to coal seam gas mining. This is very impressive, particularly when you consider the town's population is far less than that. People came from far and wide to be part of this protest. Also in May 2012 around 7,000 people marched against CSG in Lismore. Again that was a major number for a regional town. On 15 October 2012 around 4,000 people marched against CSG in Murwillumbah in a day of action against the industry, and that day was known as Rock the Gate.

As recently as December 2013 we saw the Tweed Shire Council reaffirming its call for a moratorium on CSG operations. I was pleased to see that they reaffirmed that. I point out to the House that that motion was carried five votes to two. The two people who voted against it were—yes, you guessed it—the National Party councillors. At all levels of government—whether it is at the council level, the state level or the federal level—we see the National Party's pro-CSG agenda. That was confirmed for us as recently as December in the vote at council where we saw the two National Party members vote against it.

Also, in outlining the history of the communities' concerns about coal seam gas, on 14 February 2013 the former member for Page, Janelle Saffin, and I launched a petition calling on the New South Wales government to declare an immediate moratorium on all CSG activities and licences within the boundaries of the state parliamentary seats of Lismore, Ballina, Clarence and Tweed on the New South Wales North Coast and further declaring them to be CSG-free and thereafter off limits to the CSG industry. The petition happened because the people of the North Coast were ignored by their state National Party MPs, who failed to represent their concerns.

In a very short period of time the petition got more than 12,000 signatures and was presented to the Speaker of the New South Wales parliament for subsequent debate on 30 October 2013. When the debate occurred it was disappointing for a number of reasons. Firstly, the only North Coast members who spoke were the members for Ballina and Lismore. I assume the member for Tweed was hiding and remaining silent on the debate, as he often does on many issues. I note that the member for Clarence did not bother to speak either. When the members for Ballina and Lismore spoke in the debate neither supported the proposal to have the North Coast declared coal seam gas mining free; neither supported the wishes of the majority of residents. So we had this petition which in a sense forced them to speak about the issue and they refused to back the wishes of the people of the North Coast. They completely ignored them and completely abandoned them. This is not what people want from their state MPs. They want MPs to listen and act on their concerns. They want action. They certainly did not see that.

I think it is also important to note that whilst in government we took action under the EPBC Act in relation to coal seam gas mining. It is important to have that on the record. Federal Labor in government passed an amendment to expand national environmental laws under the EPBC Act. We had water as a trigger in relation to CSG activities to cover the impacts of coal seam gas mining projects on water resources.

Locals know that the biggest threat to their way of life is the ongoing National Party's pro-CSG drilling, fracking and expansion agenda. They know it is the National Party who are the environmental vandals when it comes to this and other issues. We know that the coalition government have a very strong history of supporting coal seam gas mining. We see reports constantly of just how committed both the Liberal and National parties are to the growth of the CSG industry.

It was quite disturbing when we saw last November the new industry minister telling an energy summit in New South Wales that he wanted uniform regulations for the exploration and the production of coal seam gas across state borders whilst warning opponents of coal seam gas to respect the law and labelling some of them as anarchists. That caused a great deal of offence for many people opposed to coal seam gas mining. We are not anarchists. People of all ages and backgrounds have put forward their views in a very democratic way about the concerns they have for the environment. Women from the CWA, which I am proudly a member of, marched in some of the rallies I spoke about. It is offensive that the resources minister called outstanding women like that anarchists. In fact, it is insulting, and it is insulting that he continues to not listen to the wishes of people who are so concerned about this when they are from all different backgrounds.

We are also concerned when we see of late the resource minister talking about setting up a task force. We are not quite sure what this task force will be. We have seen some reports that he is working on the make-up and role of the task force to speed up coal seam gas mining development projects in New South Wales. The new resources minister is very much involved. He is very committed to coordinating and getting coal seam gas mining on the agenda. I would like to know who he intends having on the task force, what he intends them doing and which areas they intend going to. In saying this I am reflecting the views of many people on the North Coast who have said to me that they are very keen to find out the details they can about this task force, because this minister in the first few days he was in power made it very clear that, despite the things he said prior to the election, he is 100 per cent behind coal seam gas mining.

I talk to people all the time about what we can do as a community to keep the issue of stopping coal seam gas mining on the agenda. People are very much aware that it is only Labor on the North Coast who will stop it. They see at all other levels of government this massive push to have mining—whether it is council having the National Party vote, whether it is state MPs pushing it all the time or whether it is the federal minister pushing it. They see that constantly. They know it is Labor who stand with the community. They understand that. We will continue to do that because this has united people unlike any issue I have seen before.

It is important to keep in mind the reason why many people have moved to the North Coast of New South Wales. They made a conscious choice about the area they wanted to live in. They wanted to live in an area that has a pristine hinterland, beaches, beautiful ranges and all of that. They love the area. It is a great place to raise a family and a great place to live. Because they are so attuned to and respectful of their environment, many people of all ages and backgrounds have become involved in this campaign. So, whilst there are many issues I will be fighting for for the people on the North Coast and continue to advocate here or locally at home, this is one issue that as a community we are united on and will be fighting at all levels of government to make sure we get an outcome on. I say this to the National Party: you have underestimated the resolve of people in our area and how far we intend fighting to make sure we have this area coal seam gas mining free.

In conclusion, I would like to make it clear that it is only the Labor Party that will stand with those people; the National Party has walked away. I know that it will pay the price for that in upcoming state and council elections. The fact is people are not going to vote for a party or for candidates who continue to push forward an industry that will be so destructive to our area—not only to our environment but also to our water resources and our water supplies. That is something that troubles so many people. We currently have a licence that goes over one of the major water resources for the Tweed area. The impact will be absolutely huge in our area.

Finally, I say again what an honour it is to have been re-elected and to have been re-elected on a range of issues. One in particular is that I and the Labor Party are committed to fighting to make sure that together we can ensure that the North Coast of New South Wales is coal seam gas mining free.