



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Abbott Government

Attempted Censure

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (18:34): I want to start by thanking the voters in the electorate of Sydney for once again allowing me to represent them in this place. It is an honour that I am conscious of every day and a responsibility that I take very seriously. Each of us, no matter what office we hold, is here only at the will and with the permission of the people who send us here. I aim every day to do my very best for the constituents that I represent.

There is no more important work in the Labor movement, our political wing, than making policy that keeps people in work. On our watch, we created a million jobs and kept unemployment at historic lows, against the prevailing trend in other major economies. Our stimulus packages in response to the global financial crisis, which those opposite voted against and still deride, meant Australia was alone among OECD countries in avoiding recession. It is a big deal, and we should not forget it. A generation of Australians were spared the ravages of recession and joblessness because of the political courage of the world's best Treasurer, the member for Lilley, and the previous government.

We began building the NBN. Prime Minister Gillard and her state counterparts landed the Murray-Darling agreement. Against a mountain of opposition we put a limit on pollution and a price on carbon. The Liberals say that they believe the global warming science, but they are not prepared to do a single thing really to reduce the threat of climate change. Bizarrely, the two parts of our policies that they most oppose are the market signals of carbon pricing and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, which would actually make money for the government.

We delivered health reform and made the most significant investment in health and hospital infrastructure in living memory. In my electorate I attended the opening of the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse Cancer Centre, and in the neighbouring electorate the Kinghorn Cancer Centre. Both of these were made possible by the hard work of fundraising committees, but there was also nearly \$170 million in Commonwealth investment for Lifehouse, and around \$70 million for Kinghorn.

On 1 January the kids dental program Grow Up Smiling began, although I note that the government has been very careful not to publicise it. We now have the best five-year cancer survivor rate in the world and we will improve those numbers even more with better screening, plain packaging of tobacco and Gardasil vaccination extended to boys as well as girls.

We designed and began the rollout of DisabilityCare—and I want to pay tribute to my friend the member for Jagajaga for the extraordinary amount of detailed policy development and the supervision of the beginning of that that she is responsible for—a progressive reform that goes to the very core of what Labor is about, making people's live a little bit easier.

We delivered better school reforms so that every child, no matter where they live or how much their parents earn, can get a great education. We built new infrastructure in every primary school in Australia and many, many high schools, and I am proud of this record. We are proud of this record, and it is why everyone on this side of the House will fight this government's efforts to dismantle it.

What lies at the centre of the Labor record is the idea of equality of opportunity. Government cannot fix your life if things are going badly, but the decisions that governments make can make life harder or just a little bit easier. Labor exists in our national life—at least in part—to soften the harsher edges of our society. Our work is to make sure that: no matter where you are born or who your parents are, you have a fair shot at life.

Labor also exists to look to the future and to prepare for the opportunities and challenges of a changing world. Labor has been very successful in eliminating many of the inherent material inequalities in Australian society over the past 100 years. Because of Labor we have got an age pension, and it was Labor in our last term in government

—again, under the stewardship of the member for Jagajaga—which delivered the biggest ever increase in the age pension.

Because of Labor we have a universal health system. Because of Labor we have a fairer and higher quality education system and because of Labor people now have more adequate retirement savings. But we should not kid ourselves that the only inequality that exists in Australia is material. Late last year for a few days marriage equality was a reality in the Australian Capital Territory, and I would like to recognise the hard work of ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher for seeing the legislation through but of course also the thousands of committed and idealistic marriage equality campaigners who have worked to make marriage equality a reality—if only for a week. But, as we all know, the High Court has ruled that marriage laws are for this parliament to decide, and so we must.

But our project for a fairer society goes hand in hand with a strong economy. I mentioned earlier the priority that Labor puts on jobs: all of our actions during the GFC were designed to prevent the devastation of widespread unemployment. That is why it is particularly shocking that, as the global economy begins to recover, the Liberal government is presiding over the destruction of full-time jobs—the worst destruction of jobs since the recession of 1991-92; more job losses than during the height of the GFC, and what is worse they do not seem to have any plan to stop these jobs washing offshore.

Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard had articulated plans to grow Australian jobs at least in part through our economic engagement with the growing economies in our region. They looked ahead to the opportunities and challenges that we face as a nation.

It is humbling to be selected as Labor's foreign affairs spokesperson. I am following in very giant footsteps: HV Evatt; Bill Hayden; my friend Gareth Evans; Kevin Rudd, who has been so generous with his time; and Bob Carr, of course. I also should not forget Gough Whitlam, who was foreign affairs minister when Australia recognised China at the end of 1972.

Labor has a proud history when it comes to shaping Australia's foreign policy. It was John Curtin who, when the country faced its greatest threat, made it clear that Australia looked to our new ally, the United States, rather than our old friend, Britain. He put Australian interests above all else.

It was Ben Chifley's government which led Australia's pioneering work with the United Nations in the aftermath of the Second World War, with Australia becoming one of the first signatories to the UN Charter. Chifley's external affairs minister, 'Doc' Evatt, became one of the first presidents of the UN's General Assembly, and oversaw the UN's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—such an incredible example of an opportunity to put into action and put into international law the values that we all share.

I would also like to just take a minute to mention Labor's Jessie Street, who was a founding member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and before that attended the League of Nations assemblies throughout the 1930s making a marvellous contribution to the establishment of a human rights framework that included the human rights of women.

It was Gough Whitlam's government which led the world when Australia established its diplomatic relationship with China in 1972. It was Bob Hawke and Paul Keating who began to grasp Australia's future as part of Asia, and establish APEC, which set up Australia as a significant player in our region.

Under Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard's governments, Australia's role as a significant middle power was cemented when Australia won a seat at the UN Security Council, won the right to host the 2014 G20—really established the G20 as the predominant economic body for deciding global economic and financial matters, replacing the G8—strengthened our relationship with China, turned our relationship with Indonesia from one that public surveys in Indonesia graded as lukewarm to warm, and began planning for the Asian Century and how Australians could benefit from the growth of our neighbours.

We have long sought to articulate a foreign policy which is in the interests of Australia, first and foremost, and consistent with our values as a progressive party. Labor is the party of the fair go. But we do not believe that the fair go should stop at our borders. Australia is a middle power with regional and global interests, the 12th largest economy in the world, a member of the G20 and a founding member of the United Nations. We are a significant player in our region and a constructive player globally.

That is why it is so disappointing to see how this government has already reduced our international development program in the short time they have been in government. This government likes to couch their \$4.5 billion cut to foreign aid in the language of thrift: that Australia needs to get its budget in order before we can afford such largesse.

But our international development program isn't largesse. It is not a conceit we allow ourselves when the budget bottom line may be better than usual; it is a necessary and vital part of both our foreign policy, our relations with our neighbours and our responsibility as a good global citizen.

There are many arguments in favour of international development aid for what it can do to help us develop stronger trading partners, lift countries that have previously been aid recipients out of poverty to become strong trading partners of Australia and alleviate security risks and health threats in our region. All of these reasons are no doubt true, but there is another reason that goes alongside these. There is the simple idea that we should, where possible, work to eliminate some of the most dire forms of inequality that exist in our world. This speaks to something larger than a mere policy difference. We see a role for government in tackling inequality, whether it be at home or abroad. Those opposite have never really bought into this. It is not too long a bow to draw to link what the government is doing in foreign aid to what is already taking shape in other policy areas.

It is already clear, less than five months since the election, that this government is not the government they said they would be before the election. The Prime Minister said his government would be one of no excuses and no surprises. The Prime Minister said he was on a unity ticket with Labor when it came to education. The Prime Minister said there would not be any cuts to healthcare. The Prime Minister said Work Choices was dead, buried and cremated. The Prime Minister said DisabilityCare was safe. Yet the country was treated to the spectacle last November of the education minister announcing three or four different education policies in a week, without really ever committing to the previous government's Gonski funding model, and threatening billions of dollars in promised funding. At its heart, the Gonski model is about ensuring that no child in Australia will have their education jeopardised because of where they live or how much their parents earn. Who would have voted for this government if they knew their true plans for education?

In January, we heard the government was considering a \$6 fee for a visit to the doctor. While, on its own, to many people \$6 may appear not much, what if you have got four kids, you are on a limited income and the kids all get sick at once? More insidiously, however, the threatened charge tears at the very concept of Medicare—that our system is universal and that, if you are sick, you can see a doctor. That is what makes Medicare such a loved part of the Australian social fabric—it covers all of us equally. I was proud to be health minister when bulk-billing rates reached 82 per cent. Who would have voted for this government if they knew their true plans to destroy Medicare?

Just recently, in the last few days, we have been hearing about the government's view on the award system and the awards that many workers are entitled to. We have been hearing the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and other members of the government blaming the workers of SPC Ardmona and the workers of Toyota for demanding conditions that the government believe are too generous. Who would have voted for this government if they knew their true plans for the Australian workplace—to ship jobs offshore and attack the pay and conditions of factory workers and others who rely on fair awards?

Just over a month ago it was revealed the government's 'commission of cuts' is looking into privatising the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and that they have changed the 'launch' sites for the NDIS to 'test' sites. Of course, that makes those of us who follow this very nervous indeed. Who would have voted for this government if they knew that, just five months in, Australia's first national disability insurance scheme would already be in jeopardy?

There are already other examples, of course, but these four speak volumes about the difference between us and the government—under threat, less than five months into the new government's term, are longstanding and newer policies that are aimed at taking some of the hard edges off some of life's challenges for Australians.

What we are seeing here, as the Liberals shed their pre-election claims of unity tickets and revert to type, is that the old differences between Labor and the conservatives remain. We are the party which aims to make this country a fairer place. Yet the first moves by this government have been to attack our health and education systems, undermine disability support and attack the pay and conditions of factory workers. It has been a very poor start indeed.