



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

BILLS

Steel Transformation Plan Bill 2011

Second Reading

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Nash, Sen Fiona

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Senator NASH (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (18:13): So many of my colleagues on this side of the chamber have called today a sad day and a dark day, and there is absolutely no two ways about that: it is a sad day and it is a dark day. Here we are yet again dealing with legislation relating to a carbon tax that this government simply should not be bringing in. The government should not be giving it to the Australian people. We know that because, as I have said in this place before—and I had a discussion with somebody today about the number of times that people on this side of the chamber have said this—Julia Gillard, the Prime Minister, said, 'There will be no carbon tax under a government I lead.' It is true. That is why we keep saying it, because it is absolutely true: this Labor government promised the Australian people no carbon tax. And yet here we are now dealing with yet another piece of legislation relating to the carbon tax. It is a very sad and dark day indeed.

The government had an opportunity to wait for the commencement date for the carbon tax bills until after the next election. They could have simply done that. Even if we take it at face value—some people might—that the Prime Minister did not mean to lie to the Australian people when she said, 'There will be no carbon tax under a government I lead,' even if we take it that somehow that was not a lie, it does not take away the fact that the Prime Minister should be taking the carbon tax to the Australian people before it commences. It is as simple as that. This piece of legislation, the Steel Transformation Plan Bill 2011, is part of the whole carbon tax process that is being foisted on the Australian people, and they do not want it. I can tell you, Madam Acting Deputy President Adams, we on this side of the chamber know they do not want it. The reason they do not want it is that they understand exactly what is happening here. They know exactly what is happening. What is happening is that this government is bringing in a piece of legislation that is actually not going to achieve what the government is trying to achieve.

In the legislation that we have been dealing with up until now—the clean energy legislation—object (b) talks about supporting the development of a cleaner environment and the government's intent to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The clean energy legislation does not do that. This piece of legislation, the Steel Transformation Plan Bill, does not do that. Nothing in any of the legislation that we have been dealing with today changes the climate. Nothing in any of the legislation that we have been dealing with up until this point in time reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Isn't it interesting, colleagues? Emissions are actually going to increase by 2020, from 578 million tonnes to 621 million tonnes.

It is also so interesting that no other country in the world is doing or is moving toward doing a carbon tax like the one we are going to implement—not one. That is not me and my colleagues on this side of the chamber saying that; that is the Productivity Commission saying that. So relate that back to object (b), which is to support that development. Support what? Nobody else is doing what we are about to do with this carbon tax, which is irrevocably going to change the economy. It is going to create structural change in how this country operates, in how the economy operates. The Steel Transformation Plan Bill is part of that, which is why we on this side of the chamber are not supporting it.

Senator Edwards: No way.

Senator NASH: I will take that interjection, Senator Edwards. No way will we support this or any part of this, because we have promised the Australian people—and, unlike those on the other side of the chamber, we are actually going to stick to the promises that we make before the election—that in government we will rescind the carbon tax. We will get rid of it. We feel so strongly about this on behalf of the Australian people—we know they do not want the carbon tax—that we will get rid of it.

We know the carbon tax bills have gone through today, and we assume this bill is going to go through at some point in time as well. That has not weakened our resolve one little bit, because the Australian people deserve to have some champions in this chamber fighting on their behalf for the outcome that they want. They know that the carbon tax and its associated legislation, like the Steel Transformation Plan Bill we are debating tonight,

are not going to change the climate one little bit. The government is off on this frolic of having to lead the world, be in front of the game and make sure we do not get left behind, with a piece of legislation—or pieces of legislation, thousands of pages!—that is not actually going to do what the government is intending it to do: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I do not know, but I would say that is stupid. That is just stupidity from the government, when we know the impact it is going to have.

We would not even need to be debating the Steel Transformation Plan Bill if it were not for the carbon tax, because it is a very simple fact that you would not need compensation if there were not a carbon tax in place. None of this should be happening. When you see the government put in place this carbon tax and then this attempt at compensation for the steel industry—as my good colleague Senator Fierravanti-Wells said earlier, those who are unkind might say that it is a pork barrel—it is extraordinary. Why are we doing any of this? The Australian people get it. They keep asking: 'Why are we doing any of this in the first place, because it is not going to change the climate one little bit?'

Senator Edwards: Ninety per cent of them didn't vote for it.

Senator NASH: What percentage was that?

Senator Edwards: Ninety per cent.

Senator NASH: Ninety per cent of the people did not vote for it, because those on the other side went to the last election saying that there would not be a carbon tax, and the people trusted them. The people of Australia trusted the government and trusted that it was telling the truth. That is why it is such a sad and dark day today, when we see the Australian people being let down so badly by Julia Gillard and this Labor government—cobbled together with the Greens and the Independents—who are giving them the carbon tax that they believed would not be given to them. I turn back to the Steel Transformation Plan Bill. A little earlier, Senator Thistlethwaite was talking on the other side of the chamber about how the government had to support the industry and how this was a terrific compensation package for the whole industry. Colleagues, do you know how many firms this is actually going to assist? This is out of the entire, huge industry, with something along the lines of 19,000 workers.

Senator Edwards: Two.

Senator NASH: Thank you, Senator Edwards. Two companies are going to be assisted. Because of the definition of 'eligible corporation' in proposed section 4, only two companies are going to be eligible. What a complete dog's breakfast—yet another one from this government. When we look at their stuff-ups in the past, we see they have no ability to implement any kind of policy properly—the school halls debacle, the BER, pink batts, GroceryWatch, Fuelwatch—

Senator Edwards: Cash for clunkers.

Senator NASH: Yes; thank you, Senator Edwards. And there has been a total inability to manage our borders properly. Why on earth would we think that they could get something like a compensation package for steel right? Obviously, they have not, with only two companies to be assisted.

Colleagues, you can only be gobsmacked by the way in which this is going to operate. The government talks about it being a four-year plan. Given the way it is structured, it could be, I think, only about a year and one day and all the money could have disappeared altogether. There is even confusion over how long the plan is supposed to be. Is it four years or five years? I think Minister Greg Combet is talking about it being over five years but we have the official department website saying it is over six years. This government cannot manage a thing and cannot deliver any policy properly to the Australian people—and, to see that, we only have to look at where the government is not compensating. We have this picking and choosing as to whom they are going to compensate and the fact that they are giving upfront compensation in bulk, one-off payments to welfare recipients. So how on earth can they ensure that that funding is going to go, over the 18-month period of time, to those people that need it, when it is needed, when the carbon tax has imposed those electricity cost increases? The government simply cannot give that guarantee. Now we see this compensation package that is going to help only two firms—two firms, I repeat—out of the myriad firms out there. Every other steel business is not going to receive so much as one single cent of assistance under this legislation.

It is one thing to look at the compensation that the government is going to provide to the steel industry; but what we should really be looking at are the industries that the government have turned their back on and have not even considered compensating in a proper manner: those in agriculture, our farmers. We saw over the last couple of days the complete inability of Minister Penny Wong to answer in any detail whatsoever the questions that we on this side of the chamber were asking, rightly and properly, about what the impact was going to be on the agricultural industries, what the impact was going to be for irrigators, what the impact was going to be for the dairy sector. The government were simply incapable of answering the questions.

Farmers are the heart and soul of this country. They generate real wealth for this country. They work from dawn to dusk and beyond to be the backbone of this nation. And what have this government done for them? What recognition have this government given to the situation that they have now placed our farming sector in because of the incredible financial impacts of this carbon tax? Nothing. They have not considered the impacts in any real way, in any shape or form. They have not even done any modelling to actually see what the impacts are going to be, because they simply do not care. Here we have the Steel Transformation Plan Bill in front of us. What about farmers? What about those men and women—and their children—who are the backbone of this nation? What about them? The government simply do not care, and that is what makes it such a sad and dark day for the Australian people. And I cannot understand for a moment why on earth this government keeps hanging our farmers out to dry.

While I am on farmers, what was extraordinary today was that at a Greens press conference Senator Bob Brown said one of the reasons the Greens' stocks have been growing rapidly in the bush is 'our strong action to curb climate change'. If we had ever wondered if the Greens did believe in fairies at the bottom of the garden, that was the absolute proof today. I do not know who Senator Brown has been talking to out there, but he has certainly not been talking to the majority of farmers because I can tell him that, absolutely, right now, farmers across this country do not want a carbon tax. But, no, Senator Brown cannot possibly let reality get in the way of a good story—that would be wrong for him, wouldn't it! I can tell him right now that those words that he uttered this morning are wrong. Australian farmers do not want a carbon tax. For the fairies at the bottom of the garden, the Greens, along with the Labor government and the Independents, to cobble this together to give the Australian people a carbon tax is simply wrong.

I go back to my comments earlier that it is not going to change the climate one little bit. We hear from the other side of the chamber all these words of spin about a clean energy future and talk about all these new jobs that are going to be created. But we have not heard from the other side of the chamber about any one specific job that is going to be created. I have not heard of one. We have had this throwaway bandaid line that there are going to be all these jobs created. Well, they should tell all these people working in the steel industry and in the agricultural industry and all the other people across this nation who are going to lose their jobs because of the carbon tax—and that is not scaremongering; that is a fact—why the carbon tax is a good thing for them and they should tell them how fantastic it is that all these new jobs are being created. But I can tell you this, Madam Acting Deputy President Adams: those people want the jobs that they have got. They do not want some new job in some green industry doing basket weaving or something somewhere else; they actually want to hang on to the jobs that they have got. But this government is threatening those jobs, and the Australian people know that. The Steel Transformation Plan Bill is part of the carbon tax that this government is giving to this country, and it is simply wrong that we have a day like today, such a sad and dark day, for the Australian people, so we are not supporting this legislation. The coalition will absolutely get rid of this carbon tax. It is our pledge to the Australian people that we will do that.

Proceedings suspended from 18 : 30 to 19 : 30