



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

COMMITTEES

**Employment, Workplace Relations, Small
Business and Education References Committee**

Report: Government Response

SPEECH

Thursday, 8 February 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 8 February 2001
Page 21756
Questioner
Speaker Collins, Senator Jacinta

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator JACINTA COLLINS (Victoria) (3.48 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the Senate take note of the document.

The Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee's report was entitled *Jobs for the regions: a report on the inquiry into regional employment and unemployment*. Some senators may recall that, when this report was tabled in the Senate in September 1999, the committee reported on a comprehensive review of employment issues relevant to regional Australia, hence the words in the title 'jobs for the regions'. I thank Senator Ian Macdonald for the tabling of this report. It is unfortunate that Senator Macdonald is not here to address the tabling, because there are several important issues raised in the document which I have not had much time to consider. It arrived in my office today without any covering letter, just as the government's response. We had little notice that it was to be tabled today. Despite that, there are some comments which I think should be raised. I understand that Senator Mackay also has had an opportunity to have a brief review of the government's response and will also address some issues that I will not cover now.

Firstly, I think it is quite unfortunate that the government has delayed some three times responding to the very important recommendations in this report. I think I stated that it was tabled in September 1999. It appears that the lack of timeliness in the response to this report indicates what has been happening in relation to regional policy across the board. The government has sought to detail a number of initiatives it believes are addressing some of the recommendations moved by the committee. A cursory glance through a number of those seems to indicate that there has been as much progress in relation to acting on policy initiatives for regional Australia, including those set forward in the Regional Australia Summit and the task force proposals, as there had been on getting this report together. It has been a very slow process.

Unfortunately, I also need to say that, apart from the lack of timeliness, in some areas the substance of what is in this report is equally of concern. In a moment I will go to just one of those areas in relation to the Job Network. Before I do that, I want to go back to what was said in the introduction of our report on this very important issue. As an overall statement, opposition and Australian Democrat senators joined together and said that at the outset the Commonwealth government must take an increased responsibility both for regional development and for past policies that have contributed to regional decline. From my brief look at the report, there seems to be no recognition by this government of the serious impact of those policies—which was highlighted throughout this report—and of the concerns of many Australians that much of Australia's regional decline has actually been as a result of Commonwealth government initiatives.

As was stated in the opening of the report, many submissions to the committee expressed disappointment at Commonwealth actions such as the withdrawal of Commonwealth agencies from communities and blamed these actions for initiating decline in those communities. The committee's report contains reference to overseas experience in redressing rural and regional decline and we felt that these experiences would provide the government with a useful guide to how the Commonwealth could take action to review policies which have contributed to those declines and to develop policies and initiatives to promote rural and regional development. Unfortunately, if you look at the answers in relation to the progress under the task force, there do not seem to have been significant initiatives in relation to addressing a number of those areas. Opposition and Australian Democrats senators felt that it would be breaking the faith of the many rural and regional Australians who participated in this inquiry not to convey their desire for action to the Commonwealth, which they believed to be the best placed level of government to address their serious problems. The Commonwealth government, unfortunately, though, does not seem to have picked up this message, as it was again reinforced arising from the regional summit.

I was somewhat bemused when I read the introduction to the government's response where it indicated that in its interim report, released in April 2000, the steering committee recommended the adoption of an aspirational, guiding vision for the future development of regional Australia and to have as a national goal:

A strong and resilient regional Australia which, by 2010, has the resources, recognition and skills to play a pivotal role in building Australia's future and is able to turn uncertainty and change into opportunity and prosperity.

So the steering committee was asking for aspirational, guiding vision from this government. Unfortunately, what I have had the opportunity to absorb of this report does not reflect aspirational, guiding vision.

If I go to one particular area, as I will not have the opportunity to concentrate on more than just that, in relation to the Job Network, we do not see that aspirational, guiding vision. In fact, at the moment with what is happening to Mr Brough, one wonders who is going to guide Employment Services in the absence of a minister to take responsibility for the portfolio, as I am sure that Minister Abbott is fully absorbed in relation to gaining an understanding of workplace relations issues.

If we go to some of the issues raised about the Job Network, we can see some of the problems that are reflected in this report as a whole. In recommendation 9, the committee had called for further investigation to be made into the effects of the unbridled competition in the provision of employment services. What the government has done in its response is to essentially gloss over that issue completely. It talks further and further about 'operating a fully competitive framework' and 'benefits in terms of output in relation to having this competitive framework' but does not address the issues that were concentrated on in the report. It does not address the issues raised by witnesses to the inquiry about a lack of guaranteed training. Nor does it address more recent issues about quotas for breaches under the Job Network or about parking mature aged unemployed, a problem particularly in regional Australia. We would accept that there has been some improvement in regional Australia's access to agencies but there is no improvement in the lack of transparency and the lack of accountability within the system. Senators might recall that this system was established through a delegated instrument and it is not only the unemployed that are having problems with accountability with the system but the players within the system, the agencies, are also having problems with making the government accountable.

On the issue of accountability, in relation to recommendation 9, on page 30 the government report says that the performance of Job Network and the fact that it is outperforming the CES demonstrates that the introduction of competitive tendering and competition in the provision of employment services has led to better outcomes for job seekers. All of this data is selective and is controlled by the department. The department is not prepared to allow independent assessment of these things and to put forward adequate figures that can be used to make fair comparisons. There are several academic reports that indicate that the government's figures are highly questionable.

This brings me to the government's response to our recommendation 11, where the government outlines its evaluation process but says that the evaluation will have a high degree of transparency and will include an independent review. This is the first that I believe I have heard of an independent review. Unfortunately, the government's response does not indicate how this independent review is going to occur, who is going to conduct it and what exactly it is going to look into and I look forward to more information. I hope that getting more information on this will not take as long as this report took to get out of the government. I suspect, though, looking at this indication of an independent review, that I am going to be disappointed, as I have been on many occasions, because I suspect that the government is representing something that does not exist in fact. (*Time expired*)