



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

BUSINESS

Rearrangement

SPEECH

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
Speaker Xenophon, Sen Nick

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Senator XENOPHON (South Australia) (10.25 am)—There has been a lot more heat than light shed in parts of this debate. I have never heard in any parliament that I have been in in the last 11 years anyone talking about a mass outbreak of incontinence. I do not know if that is a useful addition to the debate in terms of what Senator Evans put to us. Senator Fielding is right. Suggesting that someone may be a patsy simply because they have agreed to a process for the scrutiny of these bills is not helpful either. With respect to Senator Coonan—and I do have great regard for her—I do not know if the ghosts of Rex Connor and Tirath Khemlani are too relevant to this debate either. That was a significantly different set of circumstances.

The Senate should do its job. That is why I have been pleased to co-sign a motion with Family First, the Australian Greens and the opposition—the coalition—to ensure that these bills undergo appropriate due process. It is extraordinary for the government to expect that these bills be passed in a period of a matter of hours after a marathon session of the House of Representatives. That is not what Australians expect the Senate to do. Given that something like half a million Australians voted differently between the lower house and the upper house because they wanted that level of scrutiny and that level of accountability, we need to do what Australians want us to do. This is about scrutiny and about being a watchdog and about not being a rubber stamp.

I will not speculate on the merits or otherwise of this package. We ought to have due process to look at it. We will have a short but comprehensive inquiry into what this package will mean for Australians. We will hear from Treasury about what modelling has been done in relation to this package. We will consider the implications of this package and the implications of the debt that will follow, along with the implications of taking any action now, given the worsening global financial crisis.

I also think it sensible that we have a process that looks at the issue of housing separately. I agree with Senator Bob Brown that that is a sensible approach. It is also appropriate that there be a deadline of midnight next Thursday so that these matters are dealt with by that time. This is a very significant piece of legislation. We are in dire times. It is important that we in the Senate do our job.

I will say one more thing in relation to the government saying that it is so urgent that we should deal with the bills relating to household assistance because otherwise Centrelink will not be able to cope with making the payments in time. I have not seen the evidence from the government that chaos would ensue. We are talking about considering this legislation appropriately and properly over the next few days, not about two, three or four weeks. We just need some time to do our job. I have yet to see any firm evidence from the departments that not passing this legislation this week, but rather dealing with this legislation next week, will have dire consequences.

That is why I am very pleased to be a co-signer to a motion by all non-government senators to show that there is unanimity at least on the issue of due process and giving this issue the appropriate scrutiny which it deserves.