



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Public Hospitals

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Nash, Sen Fiona

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Senator NASH (New South Wales) (1.50 pm)—I rise today to make a contribution on a matter of public interest. I think this matter is of particular interest to the more than 20 million people around the country—and that is health and our hospital system.

Senator Mason—Hear, hear!

Senator NASH—Thank you, Senator Mason. I know that you indeed will agree that this is a very important issue for people right around Australia.

Let me just take my colleagues and the people of Australia back to the last election campaign. One of the issues that our now Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was campaigning on then was the issue of health and hospitals. I do not know that there is a person around Australia who at that time was not very well aware of the current Prime Minister saying, ‘When it comes to health, the buck stops with me.’ That is what he said. He also campaigned very strongly, I note, in the North Coast seat of Richmond, where the local member, Justine Elliot, was seen on the front of the paper in a huge front-page advertisement with the then Leader of the Opposition and now Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. What did that say? It said: ‘Kevin Rudd will fix our hospitals.’ Very serious promises were made by the Prime Minister that he would fix our hospitals.

Yet what have we seen? I do not think that I have been to a community in New South Wales where the primary issue that is talked about is not health and hospitals—and the fact that those hospitals are by no means improving whatsoever. Not only are they not improving but people are saying to me that they are actually getting worse. This is in no way an indication of the job that our doctors and nurses do; I do want to take a moment to congratulate them for the incredible work they do and the long hours they put in in very, very difficult circumstances. What we have seen in New South Wales is a system that has been completely let down by the state Labor government, and the promises that the federal Labor government have made to fix it are nowhere to be seen. Let me give a couple of examples. If we go out to, say, Dubbo hospital in the centre of New South Wales, this is a hospital that has had to go to the local vet to borrow bandages. If you go a bit further north in the state you come to a hospital where, for a while—I hope it has been fixed now—they were not giving their patients meat, because the Labor government simply had not been paying the local butcher.

We have the extraordinary situation where the Minister for Health and Ageing said, on 24 May, that there were ‘positive signs’ of improvement in public hospitals. Despite continued signs of long waiting lists and hospital strains, the Minister for Health and Ageing, Ms Roxon, said there had been ‘significant developments’ in hospitals, and state governments had agreed to sign on to ‘improved outcomes’. What a load of rubbish. There has not been any improvement in our hospital system whatsoever.

The Prime Minister promised to fix our hospitals. If the best he can do is to come up with a health minister who says there are signs of improvement, and on that basis they are not going to keep the promise that they put forward at the last election, that is a very, very sad indictment of this government. This is a government that is continually saying to us on this side, ‘We are going to keep all our election promises. We are going to honour all our election promises.’

Senator Mason interjecting—

Senator NASH—It seems that the only problem, Senator Mason, is that they are picking and choosing which ones they want to keep and which ones they want to honour. Senator Conroy constantly says, ‘We’re going to honour all our election commitments.’ His voracity in saying that knows no bounds. And yet what do we have? We have a key election commitment being broken. The Prime Minister promised to fix our hospitals if there had

been no improvement. For the health minister to stand there a few weeks ago and say that there had been an improvement is 'fairies in the bottom of the garden' stuff.

Senator Mason—It's getting worse!

Senator NASH—Thank you, Senator Mason. All I can say is that she has not been out to any of those communities and seen the hospitals, which are actually getting worse. I would like to know how many of our regional hospitals in New South Wales the health minister has actually visited. I would ask the health minister to come forward and tell us and the people of Australia how many of the hospitals in regional New South Wales she has actually visited. I hope she would come back and say, 'I've visited lots of them.' I am imagining, though, that she may well not have visited many at all. If she had, I do not see how she could have come to the conclusion that there had been an improvement in hospitals. It is yet another example of the complete disconnect that the Rudd Labor government have with regional Australia. We see it in hospitals; they have got no understanding. Obviously they think they have improved, but they have not. We see it in the millions of dollars that have been ripped out of agricultural research and development. We see it in the millions of dollars that have been ripped out of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. We have seen it in the changes to the Youth Allowance program that are going to significantly disadvantage regional students. These are all examples of how, time and time again, the Rudd Labor government are absolutely ripping the heart out of regional communities—and there is no place better to see where this is occurring than in the area of health.

For the health minister to say that there has been an improvement in public hospitals when we have got hospitals borrowing bandages from local vets and hospitals not being able to feed meat to their patients because they cannot pay the butcher's bills is appalling. This government made a serious commitment to the Australian people, through the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, that they would fix our hospitals. Nothing has improved, nothing has got any better, and we are still seeing that nothing is being done. As I say—and Senator Conroy might come to my assistance, because he knows—on that side of the chamber they are constantly saying that all of those election commitments should be met. If that is true, and if they are absolutely, 100 per cent behind that, then they should be honouring the election commitment to fix our hospitals, because I can tell you that people in the North Coast seat of Richmond are saying to me: 'Our hospital system is in disarray. We cannot get in.' They have got a hospital up there with 30 new beds that they cannot utilise because there is no money to pay the staff. If that is an improvement, I am a monkey's uncle, because I do not think it is.

Senator Cormann—And you're not!

Senator Fifield interjecting—

Senator NASH—Thank you, colleagues! This is 'fairies at the bottom of the garden' stuff if the Rudd Labor government think there has been an improvement in health, because there simply has not. The Prime Minister should come clean, acknowledge there has not been an improvement in the hospital system, and make sure that he honours his election commitment and moves to take over those 750 hospitals and give the people of Australia the outcome that he promised—that he would fix the hospitals. He should do what he said he was going to do.