



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

MOTIONS

Gillard Government

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 September 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 13 September 2012
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Questioner
Speaker Nash, Sen Fiona

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator NASH (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (16:29): Before I make a contribution to this debate, I would just like to acknowledge some of my Western Australian National Party colleagues up in the gallery here with us today. It is good to see them over here with us on the other side. Welcome to the Senate.

Mr Acting Deputy President, I have to say that Senator Moore is one of those on the other side for whom I have the greatest respect—no doubt about that at all. But I have to say that when Senator Moore was speaking I just tuned out. I think that is like what the Australian people are now doing en masse—they are just tuning out when the government are talking about money, when they are talking about the budget or when they are talking about the economy, because they know that this government simply cannot manage money. And add to that the fact that they simply do not believe anything that the government says anymore. The government cannot manage money, and everybody knows that. We see the same cycle from decades past: Labor gets in, runs up a huge debt, they eventually lose an election, the coalition comes back in and we are left with a giant debt that we have to fix, and we have to put the country's economy back to rights again.

That is not just a fanciful story. When you go back to history it has happened time and time again. It is no wonder, Senator Williams, that the Australian people simply do not believe a word the government says, not a word—

Senator Williams: They've given up!

Senator NASH: They have given up—thank you, Senator Williams. They have just given up. I apologise to Senator Moore for tuning out. Usually, I listen with great intent to Senator Moore's contribution because she makes very sensible and balanced contributions. But on this particular issue, no go. Unfortunately, as I said, I did tune out, as many of the people across Australia have done and continue to do.

Senator Fifield, in his opening statement, referred to 1996 and the \$96 billion of debt that the incoming coalition government had to deal with. I can remember that very clearly; not that I was in this place at the time, but I was very involved in the National Party. I think I was about 16—sorry, Hansard, that was a joke! But I remember it very clearly and I remember hearing from John Anderson about the ERC and what the coalition had to do to get the economy back to rights. And it was really, really tough.

It was \$96 billion and it took us about 10 years, give or take, to pay it off. And in that as well there was—let us not go there!—the sale of Telstra of around \$30 billion. At the moment we are now looking at this \$120 billion black hole from Labor. They glibly try to make it sound as if it is no real problem at all—it is no bother; it is all fine, everything is on track and the economy is going well. You cannot escape the fact that there is a \$120 billion black hole under this Labor government's management of the economy.

Again, I refer to my colleague over there, Senator Williams, who has an amazing grasp of economic issues, I must say.

Senator Kim Carr: Amazing! It is truly amazing!

Senator NASH: I mean that most sincerely! He has a tremendous grasp of economic issues, and I know that he would back me up with everything I am saying. We are left with the situation now where I think that there was around \$70 billion in net Commonwealth assets when the coalition left office in 2007. Since then, Labor has delivered the four largest budget deficits in Australia's history and the list just goes on and on.

In 2012-13—and I am going to refer to my notes because I want to get this absolutely right—the government will be spending around \$100 billion a year more than in the last Howard-Costello budget. Interest payments on Labor's debt are running at \$22 million a day which, interestingly, colleagues, equates to about \$300,000 in the 20 minutes that I am going to be speaking. These are facts that the government cannot get away from.

Interest payments on Labor's debts since 1 July 2009 are \$15 billion; \$15 billion—that was a 'b', not an 'm'—'b' for billion. It is interesting, colleagues, isn't it? Labor often talks about budget surpluses but it has not delivered one for more than 20 years. Again, probably back when I was 16!

Senator Crossin: Now you are making that up!

Senator NASH: They have just increased Australia's debt limit to a record \$300 billion—I am not making this one up! I am not making any of this up, Senator Crossin. \$300 billion at the last budget debt limit—

Senator Crossin: You are making it all up!

Senator NASH: Okay, Senator Crossin, let me ask you this: do your budget papers say that Australia's debt limit is now \$300 billion? Because if your answer is not 'yes' then you have no idea what you are doing on the other side of the chamber. You have no idea. If I had asked you this a year ago and said, 'Senator Crossin, in the budget in 2011 did the debt limit go to \$250 billion?' Again, you would have to say, 'Yes'. You would have to say yes because it is true. It is a fact. And not only that; I love the way, Senator Humphries, that these things get slipped through—

Senator Humphries: That's right!

Senator NASH: Slipped through in the budget! And remind me if I am not correct: I think that in 2011—or it may have been 2012—that all this was tied into the budget so we actually cannot object to the lift in the debt ceiling because it is all tied in with everything else and we would have to oppose the entire budget. Clever on the government's behalf, of course.

This is like a family going to their bank manager every year and saying, 'Please, sir, may we have some more?' and taking no responsibility for the economic sustainability of their family budget. All they do is just keep coming back here and saying, 'Please, can we have some more?' There is no responsible economic management from this government, and that is just a fact. I am not making it up, that is just a fact. You only have to look at the figures to see. I know that my good colleagues from over in WA would agree with me in saying that, because the mismanagement is appalling, absolutely appalling.

The point is, colleagues, that if the government did not waste so much money they would be able to direct properly the money that they do have to far more appropriate and useful policy measures. When we look at the waste and mismanagement, people are just astounded. And the hits just keep on coming; that is what amazes people. Just when you think you have seen the last possible—possible—bit of waste and mismanagement from government, up comes another one. It is great: the hits just keep on coming! They are just a bit like Alvin and the Chipmunks—there is another one just around the corner, just when you thought you had got through the lot. We should just have a look at the list of waste and mismanagement, because, like Pinocchio's nose, it is ever growing. We have Labor's failed border protection policies that have now blown out the immigration budget by over \$5 billion; \$650 million of that is in detention costs. We have the Home Insulation Program. Who can forget the pink batts? There was \$2½ billion mismanaged, with at least half a billion dollars spent fixing the mistakes. We have the computers in schools blow-out; that is a favourite of many. Mind you, I am absolutely supportive of computers in schools, and everybody would know that I am absolutely supportive of everything we can possibly do to improve education outcomes, particularly for rural and regional students. But there was about a \$1½ billion blow-out. We have Green Loans and Green Start. The \$175 million Green Loans program was mismanaged and then eventually dumped and then replaced with the \$130 million Green Start program, which never started. We have the solar homes program, an \$850 million blow-out, with the program cancelled. The program was originally meant to cost \$150 million. The list goes on.

What is really impressive is the talkfests that we have seen. I note for Hansard that 'impressive' was highly sarcastic. Labor's talkfests include the 2020 Summit. Who cannot remember the 2020 Summit? Does anybody have any idea of one outcome from the 2020 Summit? Anyone? I did not think so. We—when I say 'we' I mean we the taxpayers—spent \$2 million on that. The Henry tax review cost \$10 million. The list goes on and on.

Two of my favourites are Fuelwatch and GroceryWatch. They sounded really good, didn't they? 'Let's have Fuelwatch and GroceryWatch to make fuel and groceries cheaper.' Nearly \$30 million was spent setting them up, and then they were dumped. Then, of course, we have Labor's NBN, involving Senator Conroy, a personal

favourite of the Senate here, with the blow-out to over \$50 billion—and that is not even included in the budget. This is extraordinary from this government.

There was spending of \$2.1 billion on consultancies over the last four years. Let us just think for a moment, colleagues. If all of this waste had not happened, think of all the things that that funding could have been far more appropriately directed to which would not have resulted in this situation we have with this huge blow-out—the \$120 billion black hole. You will love this one, my WA colleagues: the pool tables that used to be in Parliament House here.

Senator Williams interjecting—

Senator NASH: Senator Williams remembers the pool tables. I must say that I am not too bad at the old pool table myself, but I had not frequented these ones. The government sold them for \$5,000. Fair enough, you might say—very sensible. They were not being utilised terribly much, I understand. The government sold them for \$5,000. They then spent \$102,000 determining whether or not they got value for money. That is a wise, wise use of taxpayers' money, isn't it? Again, Hansard, that is sarcasm.

This is extraordinary. The list just goes on and on. When we see federal government departments and agencies spending more than \$10 million checking what is said about them in the media, I think the Australian taxpayers would rightly be absolutely astounded and would think, 'How much money do you need to spend on checking what it is that you've said and done?' I just go to an article in the *Australian* on 27 August, and I will quote from it:

FEDERAL government departments and agencies are spending more than \$10.3 million a year checking what is said about them in the media.

The hefty monitoring bill from external companies would pay for more than 100 full-time staff each earning \$100,000 a year. An analysis by *The Australian* —

and I have great respect for the *Australian* and for the author—

revealed the Department of Health and Ageing ploughs more than any other department or agency into monitoring with a bill of—

any guesses, Senator Williams or Senator Humphries?

Senator Williams: Five?

Senator NASH: No, you need to increase it: \$940,000 for press clippings and transcripts in just one year, 2011-12.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Furner): Order, Senator Nash! I remind you to address your comments through the chair.

Senator NASH: Certainly. I am suitably admonished. Thank you, Mr Acting Deputy President.

Senator Marshall: Not suitably.

Senator NASH: No, suitably admonished. Thank you very much, Mr Acting Deputy President. It is no wonder that the Australian people are shaking their heads when they look at this black hole. They think, 'How on earth did the government get us into this position?' When we look at all that waste and mismanagement, it is not at all surprising.

As I said, if the government had not wasted and did not continue to waste so much money, they would not need to make the cuts that they have. One cut in particular that I think Australians are very well aware of is the \$5.45 billion cut to defence in the May budget. Australians are quite rightly outraged about that. In particular—which I think is just appalling—the government is restricting free flights home for soldiers on recreational leave to those soldiers who are under 21.

Senator Humphries: Disgraceful!

Senator NASH: Thank you, Senator Humphries. I will take that interjection. That is absolutely disgraceful. So we see the list of waste and mismanagement, yet our defence forces are bearing the brunt of that. That is absolutely unacceptable. I went yesterday to the funeral of Private Robert Poate, who was an old boy of Canberra Grammar School and was an incredible Australia. The fact that other Australians just like him who are continuing to serve are suffering from budget cuts from this Labor government because they have wasted so much money is absolutely appalling and unacceptable.

The list goes on. Let us go to agriculture, because the hits just keep on coming. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry spent \$77,627 on consultants to alter its mission statement. What happened then? They removed the word 'agriculture' from their mission statement. So we have nearly \$80,000 with all this help and the consultants that they needed to do more than just change the mission statement—though I am sure there was a significant contribution towards it—which was 'increasing the profitability, competitiveness and sustainability of Australia's agricultural, fisheries and forestry industries'. That is what it was. They changed it to, 'We work to sustain the way of life and prosperity of all Australians.' What is that? I am a farmer. To spend all that money on advice and consultants, eventually altering their mission statement to remove the word 'agriculture' from it—what is this government doing? That is absolutely extraordinary. It is not at all surprising that the people of this nation have just about had a gutful. They also spent nearly \$80,000 coming up with identity branding to work out how the department projected itself. All of that wrapped up in that \$80,000 is absolutely extraordinary.

What is interesting is that, if we had not had all of this waste and mismanagement that I have been talking about, we would not have had to have cuts like the Labor government abolishing Land and Water Australia, cutting \$63 million in CSIRO agricultural research and a \$12 million cut in funding to the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. In the 2009-10 budget Labor cut cargo screening resources at ports and airports by \$58 million, obviously risking our borders when it comes to plant disease and animal risk, and cut the government's contribution to biosecurity by \$35 million. When we look at all these things and look at the list of waste, people wonder, not surprisingly, what on earth this government is doing. How dare they put at risk our borders? How dare they cut funding for agriculture for our farmers, who are the backbone of this nation? And yet we see \$80,000 going on trying to get identity branding for the department. It is absolutely ludicrous.

When it comes to education, colleagues have already mentioned Gonski and the costs there. Again, if we had not seen the waste and mismanagement, we would not have had to see the cuts that we have seen. The minister has admitted—and I take his point—that, when they made changes to youth allowance, they could not have any greater impact on the budget. What I find absolutely appalling about that is that part of what they did was put a \$150,000 parental income test cap on independent youth allowance for students. As the minister said at the time, that was because there is technically only X amount of money to go around in the youth allowance changes and it was a savings measure. So we see this situation from this Labor government where there is a parental income cap for students wanting to get independent youth allowance. How incongruous and stupid is that? These are students who have proved themselves independent of their parents. That is the nature of it. That is why they go and work for a year. They are independent of their parents when they go to university. But this government, which clearly has no understanding at all of the needs of rural and regional students, puts a cap in place saying, 'By the way, if your parents earn that, too bad: you're not eligible and cannot even apply.' That is \$150,000 before tax for two parents. We are talking about a police officer and a schoolteacher whose children are unable to apply for independent youth allowance because of this government's stupid parental income cap because they did not have the money to increase the budget for the youth allowance measures.

When we look at all this waste and mismanagement, it is absolutely no surprise that the Australian people have concluded beyond all doubt that this government cannot manage money. They do not believe a word the government say anymore. The government no longer have any credibility. They never had any ability to manage the economy properly. The Australian people are seeing through this government day after day. They are seeing the negative impacts we are seeing right through our communities because of the economic mismanagement of this government, because the government have no vision for the future, and the Australian people will make this very clearly felt at the next election.