Community Sport Infrastructure Grant Program

Order for the Production of Documents

SPEECH

Wednesday, 26 February 2020

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator HANSON-YOUNG (South Australia) (10:16): I rise to contribute to this discussion this morning and reflect on how outrageous it is that the government continues to cover up the Gaetjens report and refuses to release it to the public. The job of this chamber is to ensure that government is doing what it promised it would do. This chamber is all about scrutiny. It's meant to hold the government to account. That's why people put us here. They put us here to have their voices heard, their concerns heard. They vote for us to stand up for the things they care about. I tell you what: many Australians are just appalled at the revelations that continue to come forward as to how badly the government abused its power to dictate which community groups should receive funding through this sports program and which shouldn't, based on who it thought it could buy votes from. Of course, the government continues to sit on this report. It doesn't want it released to the public and it wants us to believe that somehow the Prime Minister's mate has given him a glowing reference—surprise, surprise.

The government, it seems, can't walk past a grants program they don't want to rort, whether it is sports rorts 1 or 2, infrastructure programs, water programs or the Environment Restoration Fund. The list continues to grow—program after program after program where the coalition government, the Liberal and National parties, have their hands in the kitty, either for themselves, to win votes, or to give to their mates. The level of rorting in this government and the abuse of power and privilege is extraordinary.

The sports rorts saga has really struck a chord with everyday Australians, because many Australians know that their sporting facilities are pretty tired and not up to scratch. They would like a little bit of support, a little bit of effort put in. That's why, as community organisations, volunteers, they spent hours and hours filling out applications, hoping that their application would be assessed on merit.

How naive of us all to think that a responsible government would assess things based on merit and need. This government doesn't know anything about merit and need. Look at some of the members on the bench over here. They're not there based on merit. We know that's one of the biggest problems that's riddled this government. They're there because they've done good deeds for their mates. They're there because they'll bend over backwards when their lords tap them on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, can we have this grant ticked off; can we have this piece of legislation changed; can you stand in the way of climate action because we're from a fossil fuel company?' Merit is not what this government is built on. Merit is not something that this government walks with. It is not a true value and principle that they hold dear. It has been seen for what it is through this program.

I'm quite concerned that it's not just the sports rorts that have been abused throughout the last 12 months in this government in a desperate plea to hold onto Liberal and National Party seats. There are other programs as well. We know that the Environment Restoration Fund—a $100 million fund—was rorted by this government. There are plenty of environmental projects out there in our local communities that need funding and support. But what do you know? The ones that got the money or were promised the money were the ones that were in seats that this government was desperate to keep. Many of the organisations that were awarded funding and promised funding under the Environment Restoration Fund didn't even apply for anything. They didn't even know the money was going to come in the door until they got a phone call from the local member of parliament: 'You know, there's an election coming up and I think there's a lot of good work you've been doing. We have just decided to give you a grant. We have just decided that your community organisation's been doing great stuff in the environment space and we think you deserve some support.' What do you know!

I've referred this fund to the Auditor-General—it's similar to the sports rorts referral—because it needs an independent assessment. Like many of these things, if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it probably is a duck. I would say that this program, the Environment Restoration Fund—$100 million of taxpayers' money handed out or promised on the eve of an election—is just as dodgy as the sports rorts that have come before it.
As we know, this government is in the regular pattern of behaviour that when there’s a grant fund there to be rorted, they can’t get enough of it. When the taxpayer is footing the bill, this government can’t seem to control themselves. The extraordinary brazen approach, the arrogance, is what has really upset the Australian people—the sheer arrogance and brazen attitude that, even though it’s taxpayers’ money, if you’re in government you can do what you want with it. No, you can’t. There should be scrutiny. There should be accountability. Part of your job as government is to ensure proper process.

The Auditor-General’s response to the sports rorts was absolutely damning. The brazen attitude and treatment of taxpayers’ money was gobsmacking. We keep seeing this pattern of behaviour over and over again. All you need to do is look at what’s happened in the Murray-Darling Basin. When Mr Barnaby Joyce was water minister, he had a big bucket of money, and what did he do? He handed it out to his mates, because the National Party and the Liberal Party, when there are public funds available, can’t control themselves. They want to get some of it—not for themselves, but for their mates. They just can’t be trusted. And Mr Angus Taylor is in trouble. He tried to deny it, but his involvement in the Eastern Australia Agriculture company and the amount of money that was doled out to that company from the taxpayer by Mr Joyce when he was water minister is now before the Auditor-General as well. It smells dodgy, it looks dodgy; I reckon it is dodgy. That was worth $80 million.

It’s as though this government thinks public funding is just confetti. They throw it around—over their selected electorates, of course. They invite their friends over for a party, throw around the confetti and hope no-one asks any questions. The Australian people are sick of governments that act like this. When there is such a decline in public trust, in the institution of parliament, in the institution of government and in our public bureaucracies it should be the government of the day that works to restore faith, trust, transparency and integrity. But if we had that, the government couldn’t buy themselves elections. They’ve got no interest in ensuring that integrity is put back into the system. That’s why we’ve got to get rid of this mob. That’s why this government needs to be booted out at the next election—because they can’t be trusted with public money, they can’t be trusted to tell the truth, they can’t be trusted to take responsibility when they stuff up. This government is rotten to the core, and it needs to go.