



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2010-2011

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2010-2011

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 2 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 2 March 2011 Page 25 Questioner Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (11.31 am)—I rise to lend some brief comments on the amendment to the second reading of the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2010-2011 and related bill. I note the opening words of the amendment:

Whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading,—

It being an appropriation bill—

the House call on the Government to bring forward its timetable for resolving the inequity ... in independent youth allowance payments for inner regional students ...

The amendment goes on to say, ensure that there is a review, criteria are addressed, all students who had a gap year in 2010 and meet the relevant criteria qualify and, of course, it be appropriated. The issue is the word 'inequity'. The amendment calls on the government to address the fundamental issue of inequity. One group is being given a greater benefit over another.

One of the great things about the Australian culture and the Australian way of life; one of the great things about all people integrating and accepting our values and way of life is that we actually believe in the common vernacular term of the 'fair go'. We are quite happy that a rising tide raises all ships. We are quite happy that when it is tough, it is tough for everyone. What we are not happy about is when a government deliberately legislates inequity, when it favours one group over another, one constituency over another. What we are not happy about is when a Labor government governs for minorities rather than governing for the majority of the country and seeking to ensure minorities and the marginalised are not impacted.

What the amendment calls on the government to do is to stop governing for minorities and to start governing for the nation whilst realising its responsibilities to the hurt, the downtrodden and the poor but not to ensure inequity is enshrined in legislation. There are so many other areas where inequity is being pushed either in legislation or by the absence of legislation. It would have been nice if, in the appropriation bill, the government had realised its responsibilities to those DFRDB recipients who had served 20 years or more and are over the age of 55 in the now closed scheme and had sought to appropriate and to change provisions so that pensions would be indexed not only by CPI but by the male total average weekly earnings, MTAW, 27.5 per cent thereof or the new living cost index. This would have removed another inequity. In 2007 government indicated that it would seek to remove this inequity. The government's election promise stated that it would seek to install justice, all of which has fallen on deaf ears.

In 2010, the coalition made an election promise that we would index DFRDB and DFRB pensions for those aged over 55, of which there are 56,000 recipients, the same way as age pensions—through CPI, MTAW or the living cost index, whichever was greater. In honour of that election commitment, we have introduced a private member's bill in the Senate, which is sponsored by the honourable Senator Ronaldson and seeks both the removal of that inequity and to look at the issue of justice for those DFRDB recipients, those fighting men and women whose DFRDB pensions are not keeping pace with the cost of living. That is another area where the coalition has chosen to step up and deal with inequity, whereas the government continues to legislate for inequity. That is what the bill in the Senate seeks to address.

We look forward to the government supporting in the Senate the DFRDB bill to remove inequity. We look forward to the Greens honouring their stated election commitment, which was published on their website and is still there, that they agree with the coalition's premise on the indexation of the defence pensions. These pensions are received by our fighting men and women, who have sacrificed so much—not only those who have served overseas but those in uniform who have moved around at the command of their government. They have sacrificed so much blood, sweat, tears and time for the government and the people of this nation. In their stated policy, the Greens have agreed that they would support the coalition on this. I look forward to the Greens honouring their promise, and I am sure that they will.

In the House of Representatives I look forward to not only the government but also the Independents, who hold the balance of power, supporting the DFRDB private member's bill if and when it comes down from the Senate. The Independents have previously stated categorically that they would support the coalition on this. Indeed, the member for Lyne passed a motion in this place calling for this inequity to be removed. The majority of those Independents looked their retired military personnel—their veterans—in the eye during the election campaign and said, 'We will join the coalition in standing and seeking for this inequity to be removed.' I am sure the Independents are men of honour, and I am sure that if the bill comes to the House of Representatives they will honour the decisions they made last year and in previous years. They will honour the motions they have put forward and seek to remove this inequity.

Unfortunately, the concept of inequity that the DFRDB private member's bill seeks to address and to remove permeates many other areas of government policy. I have been inundated for the last two days by communications on the carbon tax. The people of Fadden, on the northern Gold Coast, are genuinely and sincerely disappointed in the Treasurer and especially in the Prime Minister, the holder of the highest office and leader of leaders in the nation. Two weeks out from an election, the Prime Minister said, 'The government I lead will not have a carbon tax.' A more categorical statement could not have been made. The Treasurer made the point that the opposition was using the introduction of a carbon tax as an issue and completely and utterly rejected it. The word 'reject' is a strong, active verb. Yet having scraped through the election, fingernails left largely intact, and having formed government with the support of the Independents, the Prime Minister and the Treasurer have now said, 'I'm sorry; we're going to do it anyway.' That will put a whole range of further inequity into the nation.

The government needs to realise its responsibility and govern for all the nation. It seems that a phrase that started with the member for Griffith and has continued with the current Prime Minister—'we will govern for all Australians'—has simply been seen as a platitude. It has become a hollow phrase with no meaning. It is a phrase that continues to be draped in the raiment of inequity, of governing for minorities rather than for the whole. In fact, in the 50 to 60 communications I have had to my office on the carbon tax, the word 'inequity' comes up constantly. Of these 50 to 60 I have only had two that support the government's position. That is it—just two out of 60 of the communications my office has received on the carbon tax support what the government is bringing forward.

This is what people are sincerely disappointed with. They are not angry per se; they are probably not even astonished—perhaps they thought the government would do this after all—but they are disappointed that their Prime Minister would do it. Symptomatic of some of the communications I have had is 'We voted for the Labor Party, we voted for the current Prime Minister, Ms Gillard, and we are so disappointed that she would treat our vote with such contempt, that she would seek such an inequitable way of addressing the risk of climate change.' Yet dealing with things in an equitable way is the theme that this government continues to put forward.

The coalition went to the election with a very firm commitment for direct action to deal with the risk of climate change—no different to the way any other company deals with risk. When something may or may not occur, you put in a range of measures that mitigate the risk. But, while you are putting in place those mitigation measures, you should be cognisant that if the risk you are mitigating occurs, will what you put in place deal with it and, if it does not, will what you put in place have a tangible benefit subsequent to the fact? In the totality of that discussion the coalition came to the point that a direct action plan best meets those risk options. If indeed the risk of climate change comes to fruition, then a direct action plan will address the five per cent reduction on 2000 levels, which is ostensibly a 28 per cent reduction from current levels—it is not insubstantial—but, more importantly, if the risk does not turn out as catastrophically as some expect, the direct action measures will make a tangible and real and permanent and lasting difference to the fabric of our nation: it will improve air quality, it will improve green space, it will provide a larger number of trees and it will increase the yield of crops as we seek to sequester carbon in soil and increase the nutrients of that soil. The whole world recognises it is disappointing that there is only one nation in the world—one—that right now has more trees than it did 100 years ago, and that is Israel.

The issue of inequity is creeping in through so much of the government's legislation. The amendment being put forward seeks to address this inequity. I urge the government to heed common sense and to support the opposition's amendment so that youth allowance can be provided for all deserving Australians, not just the small and limited number that the government's bill provides for.