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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Gillard Government

SPEECH

Wednesday, 24 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 24 November 2010</p> <p>Page 63</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Emerson, Craig, MP</p>	<p>Source House</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Dr EMERSON (Rankin—Minister for Trade) (3.46 pm)—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker Slipper. I do not know if you noticed but, while that speech was being delivered, there was plenty of chatter going on behind the Leader of the Opposition. This is the second last day of parliament under the new parliamentary arrangements in which the opposition leader said that he would be delivering alternative policies for Australia. He could have brought in some supporters but, instead, what he had was just chatter and a very, very flat effort indeed.

This is a debate, ostensibly at least, about government and opposition agendas—policy agendas. That is what the parliament should be debating, so I want to address that directly in terms of the government's agenda. I will go through our budget policy which is to return the budget to surplus in 2012-13, which would be the fastest fiscal consolidation since 1960 and we would be the only major advanced country to achieve this.

The Leader of the Opposition has said repeatedly that we should not have gone into deficit, that there should not have been deficits in this country. When more than \$100 billion, and at one point an estimated \$200 billion, is slashed off the nation's taxation revenue the prescription of the Leader of the Opposition would have been then to cut a corresponding amount out of government spending—that is, to double the negative impact of the deepest global recession since the Great Depression by keeping the budget in balance at a time of severe trauma for the nation's revenues. In that decision he would have destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australians who wanted the dignity of work but who would have been thrown out of work through the cold-hearted policies of the Leader of the Opposition. Fortunately he did not get a chance to implement that particular policy prescription.

As a result of Labor's efforts through economic stimulus and the efforts of small and larger businesses in this country, instead of losing jobs, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been created in Australia at a time when millions of people lost their jobs in Europe and North America. The government have set about implementing an agenda to deal with some other major economic difficulties bequeathed to this nation by

the previous coalition government. I refer to easing capacity constraints and lifting productivity growth. We need to ease the capacity constraints, namely the skill shortages and the infrastructure drought, inflicted upon this country by 12 years of coalition sloth and neglect.

The former Treasurer of this country, Peter Costello, said that infrastructure investment is not a responsibility of the Commonwealth of Australia. They are saying that they did not believe in investing in infrastructure, including in regional Australia, and they failed to invest in the necessary skills formation to enable this country to deal with those bottlenecks. As a result there were inflationary pressures and, right now with the two-speed economy that we have, these capacity constraints are increasingly severe. It is because of the foresight of Labor governments in understanding these problems and dealing with them that we are making the necessary investments, and I call that a very positive agenda for the nation's future.

The government are setting about dealing with another great legacy from the previous coalition government, and that is a massive slump in productivity growth in this country. Why is this important? Because today's productivity growth is tomorrow's prosperity. Yesterday's productivity growth was negative. Multifactor productivity growth in this country between 2004 and 2008 was negative. Australia was less productive at the end of the period of the previous coalition government than four years before that. We are revitalising productivity growth through our efforts in creating a seamless national economy and, of course, in rolling out the National Broadband Network, about which I will have more to say in a moment.

We are embracing important elements of tax reform by giving small businesses much needed tax relief. So much for the coalition parties being the parties of small business! What are they doing in terms of our efforts to provide tax relief for small business? They are opposing it. What about our efforts in providing infrastructure investment in the regions? They are opposing it. What about our efforts in increasing the superannuation guarantee payments from nine per cent to 12 per cent to give people a secure income in retirement? They are opposing it. Why? Because they

are opposing the minerals resource rent tax that would fund these important productivity-raising initiatives.

Mr McCormack interjecting—

Dr EMERSON—In hospital and health we will have as a result of our reforms more doctors, more nurses and a higher quality health system, which this country deserves. I remind members of this parliament what the Leader of the Opposition said when he was the health minister. He said:

No one should fret over an “unreformed” Australian health system.

He has never believed in reform.

In the last few moments I have begun to explain the government’s policy agenda, and that is what this debate is about. But of course we all remember when it was not exactly determined who would be forming a government in this country.

Mr McCormack interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! The member for Riverina will remain silent.

Dr EMERSON—Members might recall that the opposition leader convened a shadow cabinet meeting to which he invited the media, and he described the shadow cabinet—that is, the coalition shadow cabinet—as ‘a government in waiting’. If you are a government in waiting, then there is an obligation on you as an alternative government to develop alternative policies. But what have we heard from the Leader of the Opposition in respect of alternative policies? Nothing but three-word slogans. Remember he took to the elections, and has been saying ever since: ‘Stop the boats. Stop the waste. Stop the taxes.’ Never mind that his policy of stopping the boats involves Admiral Abbott sitting at Kirribilli overlooking Sydney Harbour, taking phone calls from north-western Australia and deciding which boats are going to be towed back out to sea. That is a policy: stop the boats! That is their policy.

He says, ‘We’re going to stop the waste.’ That is very interesting, isn’t it! They are going to stop the waste, but they go to the election with an \$11 billion gaping black hole. How is that stopping the waste? Then the costings were released. I remember the fantastic media performance from the shadow finance minister and the shadow Treasurer, who could barely be in the same room at the same time so much do they despise each other. The shadow Treasurer revealed later that he had seen the costings—how long before? Two weeks? Two days? Five minutes! Five minutes before the press conference was actually

held—out of his own mouth. He then said, hand on heart, ‘These costings all add up.’ It required the intervention of the Independents to insist that those costings be subjected to Treasury and Finance costings, truly independent costings, and it was Treasury and Finance who identified an \$11 billion black hole. So much for the slogans.

Mr Lyons interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Bass will remain silent, particularly because he is not in his seat.

Dr EMERSON—Then he said, ‘Stop the taxes.’ ‘Stop the taxes’ was the third slogan. What is their position on tax? Their position is to apply a great big new tax on everything you buy to fund the Paid Parental Leave scheme, which they now oppose and which, obviously, the Leader of the Opposition said back in 2002 would happen over his dead body. But then he had a metamorphosis and said, ‘I’ve got a good idea. Why don’t we increase taxes to pay for my Paid Parental Leave scheme?’ And now he says, ‘We’re going to stop the taxes’! In fact, they would increase the taxes.

These three-word slogans are really catching on, Mr Deputy Speaker. What is his climate change policy? No carbon price. What is his telecommunications policy? Demolish the NBN. What is his health policy? Local hospital boards. What is his budget policy? An \$11 billion black hole. What is his education policy? Cut school funding. They are very catchy, aren’t they, these three-word slogans? That is the depth of the work that the Leader of the Opposition has done this year and in the lead-up to the election. He has no policies. All he has is slogans.

And you do not need to rely on me, Mr Deputy Speaker, to accept that analysis. Just ask the member for Moncrieff, because the member for Moncrieff has expressed today in the media the frustrations that so many members of the coalition are expressing about this totally negative, totally opportunistic Leader of the Opposition. Why wouldn’t the member for Moncrieff become frustrated? He was actually in shadow cabinet at one point, then he was demoted from shadow cabinet to the outer ministry and now to the back bench. Why? Because he has got some ideas; he has got some alternative policies. I do not agree with his alternative policies on bringing back unfair dismissal laws for small business, but at least he has had the courage to say, ‘I’ve got some policies and I think as a coalition we should debate these policies and we should substitute reasonable policy’—‘reasonable’ from the coalition’s point of view, not from our point of view. But at least he has policies in place of these three-word slogans. I do not know that this intervention by the member for Moncrieff is going to help his career, but maybe he will

be joined by others with similar courage who will say they have had a gutful of the Leader of the Opposition believing, as he says, that the coalition is 'a government in waiting' and that he can skate through with focus tested three-word slogans.

I heard during question time the Prime Minister talking about the National Broadband Network and the ongoing demands for the coalition that there be cost-benefit analysis and so on. The Prime Minister made the perfectly valid point that it would not matter what happened; the coalition would never support the National Broadband Network. And the Leader of the Opposition said, 'Wrong.' Well, the Prime Minister is right because even now in his contribution to the matter of public importance he described the National Broadband Network as a disaster. Does this sound like a policy that at some point the Leader of the Opposition might embrace and that at some point, if there was a cost-benefit analysis, he would support? What did he say earlier, in May this year, about this? He said, 'I think it's a bad idea.' What did he say on the Alan Jones program? He said, 'Well, we won't go ahead with it, Alan. We just won't go ahead with it.' That sounds like a pretty conclusive 'no' to me, and that is what the coalition's policy is: no to the National Broadband Network, no to lifting productivity growth in this country, no to supporting the regions.

I have listened to the interjections from a new member of the National Party in this parliament, the member for Riverina, and he should be supporting the National Broadband Network. He should be supporting regional development in this country. He should be supporting the regions. But, no, again the National Party falls in behind.

Mr Truss interjecting—

Dr EMERSON—Here we have the ostensible Leader of the National Party, Mr Who. In surveys he actually rates below 'Who?' and 'I don't know' and such answers when people are asked who is the Leader of the National Party. 'I don't know' actually rates above the current Leader of the National Party.

Mr McCormack—Mr Deputy Speaker, I raise a point of order. The minister really should refer to the National Party leader by his correct name, not Mr Who.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I call the minister, whose time is rapidly running out.

Dr EMERSON—I thank the member for that wonderful point of order, that I should not call the leader Mr Who. I will call him Doctor Who.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I draw the minister to the provisions of standing order 64. He ought not to refer

to other members by terms other than their position or the name of their electorate.

Dr EMERSON—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. When the Leader of the Opposition was contributing to a debate here, I think it was his first contribution in the new parliament, this is what he said:

The Australian public expects the government to keep to its commitments. If this government could not keep to its commitments, the Prime Minister should not have accepted the Governor-General's commission.

Okay, a commitment that we made at the last election was the National Broadband Network. Hold us to account, insist that we implement the National Broadband Network, but don't get in the way and don't try to stymie it. After all, the opposition leader said this government should keep its commitments, which include a commitment to the National Broadband Network, a commitment to GP superclinics—an entire election program. But this Leader of the Opposition, who has spat the dummy, has just been spoiling and sulking and thwarting every piece of legislation he possibly can in this parliament because he has no policies. He is still grumpy, he is still mean and upset because, under the born-to-rule mentality of the coalition and of the Liberal Party, he did not get the nod. So he said, 'I'm going to wreck and ruin and rant,' and that is what he has been doing ever since.

This government will get on with its agenda of implementing good economic policies for a stronger economy, for a prosperous economy, for a fair society and for a sustainable environment in this country.