

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH (Address-in-Reply) – 18th March 2008

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (8:05 PM) —As the member for Hughes, it is a privilege and an honour to be able to add my name to that of my colleagues and members of this House in responding to the address of His Excellency the Governor General at the opening of the 42nd Parliament of Australia. I thank the constituents of my electorate of Hughes for the privilege of representing them here in this place as their federal representative for a fifth term. We have just witnessed a significant change in Australian politics and, firstly, I would like to note the smooth transition of government that has just occurred. This is a tribute to Australia's strong democratic traditions and the principles of the representative parliamentary system upon which those traditions are based.

The new government has made a large number of commitments to the electorate. Unsurprisingly, a lot of those are underpinned by the policies of the previous government. The 11-year period of economic prosperity under the Liberal leadership of John Howard and Peter Costello was defined by a number of great economic achievements: the commitment of a policy of budget surplus as a means of reducing public debt and public demand for money; the positive revolution in waterfront productivity; the restructuring of our tax system to provide incentives for those who work harder; and the development of incentives to give the most disadvantaged a path from welfare to the dignity and security of work—to name but a few.

The result of these achievements was to create perhaps the world's most successfully developed economy of the past decade, one that was referred to as the 'wonder from down under' by United States economic commentators. Despite its vehement opposition at the time, the new Rudd Labor government has committed to retaining all of these initiatives. While there are a few questions as to whether it can actually maintain its commitments, it is clear that the ideas and policies of the coalition have triumphed.

The Governor-General in his speech referred to the current uncertainty in the global economy and the challenges the new government have on their hands. Fortunately for the new government, they have inherited an economy that is underpinned by strong economic fundamentals and one that will prove it can weather the current global uncertainty if it continues to be managed with discipline and diligence. As the opposition, we will be ever watchful.

Over our time in government, the coalition put the budget back into the black; eliminated government debt; started saving for the future; restored Australia's AAA credit rating; and delivered more jobs, lower inflation, lower interest rates, lower taxes, higher wages, more productive workplaces, higher pensions, better living standards, more funding for important priorities like health, education, defence, transport and the environment, and more funds for state governments for them to provide those services expected by modern Australia.

The coalition has a proud record in relation to financial management. When we came to government in 1996, we inherited a \$10 billion budget deficit, one which we converted into a surplus by our second term in office. We inherited \$96 billion in government debt, which we completely eliminated by the last term of the coalition government through that solid economic management. We inherited levels of government spending equal to 25 per cent of GDP. They are now equal to 21.2 per cent. We also inherited a ballooning unfunded superannuation liability, which we addressed by creating the Future Fund.

A strong economy is not something that happens by chance. Managing Australia's \$1.1 trillion economy requires discipline, focus and experience. It requires an ability to put aside short-term politics and media spin, and take hard decisions in the national interest. The coalition took difficult but necessary decisions to establish the Future Fund. For the first time in Australian history, Australia has a specific fund to provide for the superannuation of our Navy, Army, and Air Force personnel and other Australian government employees as we go, rather than passing the bill on to the next generation. Removing this burden will help offset the effects of our increasingly ageing population, which looms as a great future challenge for both state and federal governments in Australia.

During the coalition years, we reformed the tax system to provide tax relief and reward hard work and initiative. This included the largest tax relief in Australia's history in 2000, which was followed by further tax relief in the 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 budgets. Further encouragement was given to enterprise, initiative and savings through the lower company tax; halving individuals' capital gains tax; removing benefit taxes on superannuation; replacing the complex wholesale sales tax; reducing petrol excise; and moving from a 150 per cent diminishing value rate on

business assets to a 200 per cent rate. This was to encourage investment in plant and equipment and technology. The coalition invested in key infrastructure, including the AusLink national land transport program with an investment of \$38 billion and the largest innovation packages in our history in Backing Australia's Ability.

The social concerns of our Australian communities are also very important to me and to many of my constituents. We need to remember that the economy is really a means to an end. I say this because, without a strong economy, no government can do very much for those of its citizens who are in need of social welfare support or special assistance. When an economy is weak and in decline, it is those at the lowest levels of our society who suffer the most. They have no buffer against adversity and are the most vulnerable of our citizens. Good economic policy and good social policy go hand in hand, but good economic policy leads the way and dictates the kind and quality of social welfare we can provide for our most vulnerable Australians. A sound economy dictates the kind of society we can become. It allows us to be the best we can be and bring all Australians to share and enjoy in the 'commonwealth' of our nation in the real sense of that word.

Speaking of our most vulnerable Australians, the talk from the government in recent weeks in relation to carers and seniors was nothing but disgraceful and disrespectful. I was pleased that the opposition-led outcry from fair-minded Australians forced the Rudd government to rethink its plans to withdraw their special payments. I want to know if this behaviour will be the norm for the Rudd Labor government's approach to fiscal policy. Hopefully, that carers and seniors were the first target of the Rudd razor gang is not symbolic of future savings measures to be aimed at those in our communities who are least able to withstand the pain. The new Prime Minister obviously did not mean a word of his first speech as leader of the Labor Party when he talked about compassion. He said:

Compassion is not a dirty word. Compassion is not a sign of weakness. ... compassion in politics and in public policy is in fact a hallmark of great strength.

I could not agree more. There was a marked absence of this compassion in the measure against carers and senior citizens. Carers are the only welfare recipients who must work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and there is often a good chance that they have lost the lifestyle that many Australians take for granted. They often lose the opportunities for work or a career. They often lose their marriage, the house, the job and the peace of mind afforded by financial stability. The Prime Minister was literally forced to show that compassion of which he waxed so lyrical in his first leadership speech. This episode was intensely watched by the whole Australian community. We in the opposition and the Australian community will continue to be ever watchful in the event of any future instances of a lack of compassion for this vulnerable group of Australians. To illustrate how difficult life for carers can be, I would like to share a letter one mother sent to me of the reality that is her daily life every day of the year. I spoke yesterday on the motion to recognise the need for greater Australian support for those in our community who give their lives to care for their disabled family members. Regrettably, I ran out of time before I could read this letter fully into the *Hansard*. This mother is a member of a new organisation in my electorate known as the Sutherland Shire Disability Accommodation Action Group, formed out of the desperation of parents trying to gain appropriate supported accommodation for their adult disabled children. She begins:

Whenever I read about another mother killing her disabled child, I wonder whether it will come to that for me, and would I be able to do it? People do become desperate and overwhelmed. My disabled daughter 'S' has become my world and I, hers. And therein lies the problem.

She was born in 1978—induced for the doctor's convenience as he was going on holidays. She turned blue and stopped breathing. She had streptococcal pneumonia and was found to be 4-6 weeks premature. She spent a month in special care.

From about 6 months of age I knew there was something wrong. Then followed years of doctors and therapies until I finally had to admit you can't mend a broken brain.

Eventually she attended a special school. Transport was provided but I needed to be there before and after school, so full-time work was out of the question. One problem with going to school out of the local area was that she had no friends to play with and so all her time was spent with me.

Eventually I found a job with a small company run by a couple with kids of their own. They were very flexible with hours, emergencies and phone calls. I brought 'S' to work with me in school holidays.

In 1996 my marriage, like so many others involving disabled children, had come to the point where I took 'S' and left. I had calculated all eventualities before taking such a big step—or so I thought ... I was working for the small company and 'S' was travelling by train to her day-program and managing alone with a few phone calls, until I got home.

Six weeks later the small company collapsed. I quickly found a job with a big company—no flexibility, longer hours and NO phone calls. 'S' went on a 4-night respite camp for a break. When she returned, something was terribly wrong. She didn't sleep, muttered all night to someone, cried all day, got lost following 'voices' and didn't remember to eat or drink. Eventually she was diagnosed with schizophrenia brought on by her absolute terror in being apart from me. Even with hospitalization and treatment the situation was horrendous. She was drugged, terrified, and either constantly crying or staring at a wall for hours. In the 30 minutes it took me to get to work each day there would be 10-12 phone messages awaiting me with her just crying. She couldn't travel alone or stay home alone. Finally, the company gave up; I was fired, and thus became her carer.

People sometimes think that carer equals no full time job, equals what a life. Well, imagine all you'd do for a very young child—dressing them, washing them, cleaning them up after 'accidents' and then imagine doing it for a 28 year old woman, who won't learn to do more than she does now. Imagine never being able to go anywhere alone—not even to see a friend for a chat or a cup of coffee without your 'child' with you. Imagine listening to her cry all night because you have a cough and she fears you might die and leave her. Imagine lying awake every night worrying about what WILL happen to her.

We do have respite, but only one day a month. And now, four years ago, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. My caring time is infinite. It will be the most difficult task to settle 'S' into a group-home or similar accommodation. It must be done while I am here and able to help her cope. I have been told that the only way to get accommodation is to abandon her at a police station. I can't do that. She would retreat from reality forever. She is my problem and I will not leave her unresolved.

What do we want? Peace of mind, I think, for both of us. For me, not having to abandon her or to be at death's door and still not know if she will have somewhere to live, and for her, relief from the terror of 'if something happens to Mum where will I go?' She knows she can't manage alone. Vague promises are not enough.

This is a sobering letter and one that I could not put down and one that we here in this place have a duty to address. Now is the time for some significant, real measures to be put in place to assist the many thousands of carers across Australia in a similar position. Now is the time to really look seriously at how we accommodate, in supported accommodation in local areas, people who are adults with disabilities. The issue of supported care for adult children is one that really does reach into the hearts of many people across my electorate and across Australia. They must be located in their local areas, not at a place that is two hours drive away. They must be available to their parents and family members to be able to continue to support them and to include their disabled family member in family gatherings and in other social activities.

One way that we could practically assist carers and our senior citizens—indeed, every other person who is dependent on welfare—is to allow them to earn a little more money than is given to them under welfare. I put for consideration the suggestion that we could allow them to earn the \$6,000 threshold that is available to all wage earners—to you and me—that we can earn before we have a tax liability. Such an amount would supplement the welfare payments and be of no cost to the government outlays. Let us consider this: all wage-earning Australians have a \$6,000 tax-free threshold before incurring any tax liability; welfare recipients should be able to have the same consideration, as a matter of fairness and equity, as fellow Australians.

To secure this threshold, welfare recipients could be asked to undertake a lesson or two, perhaps in home budgeting, on an annual basis. It would also be available, of course, to Indigenous Australians. Amounts exceeding the \$6,001 threshold would be deducted from the welfare payment, as is the present practice. But the benefits of this measure would include no cost to budget outlays and it would encourage people to benefit from the socialisation that comes with employment even if it is only part time. It could lead to more permanent work. It would give recipients, including some on the disability support pension, the opportunity to make a little extra income. It would lead to a better understanding of household finance and it would assist some recipients out of the welfare mentality. It would impose a work ethic and self-discipline and it would provide personal empowerment and increase self-esteem. It would provide recipients with

the safety net of the full social welfare security base while enjoying a limited participation in the workforce.

I would like to hear some feedback on this idea, which I am sure would be welcomed by welfare recipients and it would assist them in a practical way to alleviate financial hardship and even rise above the poverty experienced by many Australian families. Even though we here are aware that there are challenging times upon us, Australia is still the lucky country for so many Australians. It is our duty in this place to ensure that that luck is shared with all and every fellow Australian that we can possibly reach.

The Governor-General said in his address that the government will implement a new policy agenda focused on social inclusion. The focus on social inclusion aims to improve the opportunities for all Australians to participate fully in Australian economic and social life. Well, the Rudd Labor government did not get off to a very good start by attacking carers and senior Australians. These are the very Australians that should be the focus of the government's intention to implement social inclusion. It is our duty on the opposition benches to be ever watchful that exercises such as the carers and seniors debacle are not repeated and that we do not end up with government policies that actually deliver social exclusion. Australians deserve better than that and I accept my part in the responsibility to ensure our fellow Australians receive their fullest opportunities that being in this wonderful country can deliver. After all, it is their birthright.