



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**FAIRER PRIVATE HEALTH
INSURANCE INCENTIVES BILL 2009**

**FAIRER PRIVATE HEALTH
INSURANCE INCENTIVES (MEDICARE
LEVY SURCHARGE) BILL 2009**

**FAIRER PRIVATE HEALTH
INSURANCE INCENTIVES
(MEDICARE LEVY SURCHARGE
—FRINGE BENEFITS) BILL 2009**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 2 June 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 2 June 2009
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Questioner
Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP

Source House
Proof No
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Question No.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (8.25 pm)—I rise to stand up for the hardworking residents of my electorate, the mums, dads and kids of the northern Gold Coast, by voting against the bills package that Labor has put forward. I stand here with great pride to vote against the Fairer Private Health Insurance Incentives Bill 2009. I can only imagine the embarrassment of the government and their backbenchers. For those who do not know how parliament works, and there are many such people in the country, the whips decide on a speaking list and that determines the fair and orderly working of the parliament. I look at the speaking list in front of me and I see a long list of members of the Liberal and National parties—the coalition—defending their members as I stand here today to defend the 53,168 members of the electorate of Fadden—55 per cent of my electorate covering 73,392 people—who have private health insurance. But as I look at the speaking list, which tells me the order in which people will debate and stand up for what they believe in in this House, and look at the Labor side of the page, one can only imagine my surprise when I see it is blank. It is absolutely blank. There is no-one speaking.

The bill introduced before this one was the Fair Work (Transitional Provisions and Consequential Amendments) Bill 2009, through which Labor are looking to monumentally screw the workforce of this nation, and the list of their speakers is as long as your arm. But when it comes to standing up for the health of hardworking Australians not one is there. There is no-one speaking here. The minister introduced it and then there is no-one else, not a sausage. If I can use those famous words of Toyota, there are bugger-all speakers on behalf of the government—none. Do they care so little about the private health insurance issue, do they care so little about insurance needs and do they care so little about the health of Australians that not a single member of the government has the courage of their convictions and has the ticker for the truth to come in here and defend the health of their constituents? I find it outrageous that not a single member of the governing party has the courage to stand here and defend their constituents and their healthcare needs.

I am disappointed that the government has lost complete control of the nation's finances. I think Australians are becoming deeply anxious about the level of control of the finances that has indeed been lost. What I am grossly disappointed about is that,

because it is looking as if peak debt is rising to \$315 billion, the Labor government are now seeking to pull some of that reckless debt back by sacrificing the health of Australians on the altar of their reckless spending. Their changes are seeking to put in a means test for singles at \$75,000 and for families at \$150,000 whereby the public health insurance rebate, the current 30 per cent rebate, will be gradually decreased with different thresholds for children and decreasing thresholds as income rises.

If you look at what the Labor government said prior to and since the last election, you will see that four times the Prime Minister made it clear that he would not do this. On 24 August 2007, in an interview with Leon Byner, the Prime Minister was asked:

Lorraine wants to know if you are going to take off the rebate for private health funds which currently the government supports, that's the 30 per cent rebate we are talking about.

The Prime Minister said:

Absolutely not.

In a letter to the AHIA on 20 November 2007, the Prime Minister said:

Both my Shadow Minister for Health, Nicola Roxon, and I have made clear on many occasions this year that Federal Labor is committed to retaining the existing private health insurance rebates, including the 30 per cent general rebate and the 35 and 40 per rebates for older Australians.

On 25 February 2008 in a press conference in the Prime Minister's courtyard, Mr Rudd said:

The private health insurance rebate remains unchanged and will remain unchanged.

Still on 25 February 2008, he reiterates it. Three times the Prime Minister stood there, unequivocally saying to the nation, 'We will not change this.' His Minister for Health and Ageing made the point four times that she would retain the health rebate. On 26 September 2007, just before the election, she said:

On many occasions for many months, Federal Labor has made it crystal clear that we are committed to retaining all of the existing Private Health Insurance rebates, including the 30 per cent general rebate and the 35 and 40 per cent rebates for older Australians ... The Liberals continue to try to scare

people into thinking Labor will take away the rebates. This is absolutely untrue.

That is her first unequivocal statement. On 18 May 2008, on Macquarie radio, the health minister said:

We continue to support the 30 per cent, 35 per cent and 40 per cent rebate for those Australians who choose to take out private health insurance.

On 8 October 2008, we had the third unequivocal statement by the health minister:

Private health insurance consumers will still be able to claim the 30 to 40 per cent rebate and the lifetime health cover incentives will remain in place.

Finally, on 24 February 2009, she told the *Age*:

The government is firmly committed to retaining the existing private health insurance rebate.

That is what Minister Roxon told the *Age*. There we have three unequivocal statements by the Prime Minister and four equally unequivocal statements by the health minister—seven statements in total—that the private health insurance rebate would not be touched. You would think, if a prime minister and health minister were worthy indeed of their word, they would only have to say it once, but they told the nation seven times that their vote was safe with Labor. They looked families in the eye and said, ‘The health of your families is safe with us.’ Prior to the election, the Prime Minister said to the people and the families of Australia, ‘You vote for me and the health of your families is safe’—reinforced by seven firm statements. The result: nothing short of a bright shining lie.

Labor hate private health insurance. That is why everyone was so wary of their motives and intent, why they were questioned so diligently prior to the last election and since and why there was a degree of circumspection and cynicism. Seven times they said it was fine. Seven times they lied. In Labor’s policy, in their platform, in their pedigree, in their DNA, in their deeds and now in their debt, they hate private health insurance with every part of whom they are. It is ideologically driven. They simply want everyone to be in the same public system.

Let me remind this duplicitous government of the state of our public health system—the system that Prime Minister Rudd said he would take over 18 months after his election if it was not fixed. Queensland Health currently has over 36,000 people on the waiting list. There are a further 159,000 waiting to get on the waiting list. How that could possibly be construed as ‘fixed’ is beyond me. On the Gold Coast there is only one public hospital—Gold Coast Hospital. Right now, if you go to Gold Coast emergency—the biggest emergency department of any Queensland

Health hospital—you have a 45 per cent chance of waiting eight hours in emergency to be seen. In this environment, this government wants to take away the private health insurance rebate which, on its own estimates, will lead to tens and tens of thousands of Australians leaving private health and, therefore, going into the public health system that is already overloaded and stretching at the seams. The question is: how has ideology become so bad as to overtake and confound common sense?

We do not seek to frustrate the government’s budgetary process. Whilst we are appalled at the debt, whilst I am personally shocked at the amount of debt within 18 months—from a massive surplus to the dreadful debt position we are in—and whilst it appals every fibre of who I am, I do understand that the government needs to run the country, however badly I think it is doing it. Hence, in the budget reply, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, the Leader of the Opposition, proposed a 3c tax per cigarette—a 12.5 per cent across-the-board tax—to make up the revenue that would be lost. Yet here we have a perfectly sound opportunity to provide a tax to further dissuade Australians from using cigarettes, which are a burden on our health system, but the government chose to ignore it to continue its ideological assault on health. There is nothing that can be done with the bill except to vote against it. For the sake of the 73,000 Australians covered by private health insurance in the great electorate of Fadden on the northern Gold Coast, in good conscience I can do nothing else.