



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Tasmanian Health System

SPEECH

Wednesday, 19 March 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 19 March 2008
Page 1359
Questioner
Speaker Polley, Sen Helen

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (7.46 pm)—I felt moved to speak in the chamber today about health in general and developments in health in my home state of Tasmania in particular. Health is an important issue for many Tasmanians, and in recent times, with issues such as the election driven takeover of the Mersey hospital by the previous government, as well as the assorted problems with regard to funding, it is more important than ever. Tasmanians have the highest incidence of heart disease and diabetes in Australia, so proper funding of health is a priority.

The health system in Tasmania did struggle for funding under the previous Liberal Howard government for many reasons. The coalition knows full well that the previous government ripped \$1 billion out of the public hospital system—\$1 billion! But we have Senator Barnett coming in here and attacking us over health—dropping bombs and trying to take the populist line in his home state of Tasmania—when in fact the coalition had 11½ very long years to do something about this and set the long-term agenda for resolving some of the health issues that we are facing in this country. It is quite unbelievable that they come into this chamber and lecture us regularly.

The Rudd Labor government is working towards achieving better outcomes for Australians. We are about stopping the blame game and seeking those long-term solutions that Australian families deserve.

Senator Abetz interjecting—

Senator POLLEY—I can assure the chamber and Senator Abetz that we certainly will not be ripping \$1 billion out of the health system. We are taking these problems seriously. In the first three months of the government, the federal health minister has met four times with her state colleagues to negotiate health reform. That is already double the number of times that the previous minister met with state health ministers in a whole year. That is how serious and how determined the Rudd Labor government is about finding long-term solutions.

Only recently the Prime Minister was in Launceston to commit to the \$15 million Launceston Integrated Care Centre and to talk to healthcare professionals from the Launceston General Hospital. That is an election promise that we delivered on, just as we intend

to deliver on all of our election promises. We do not do ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ promises; we just deliver on what we have promised. A nice change from the previous government, and one I am sure that the Australian public have already noted.

May I remind the chamber that this \$15 million commitment was just part of the federal Labor government’s \$50 million commitment to the Tasmanian health system. The integrated care centre that the federal government has committed to in Launceston will give the best possible outcomes for local families. It will utilise professionals working together in a team environment, linking hospitals, community health services and doctors. It will provide a range of services to the northern region, including mental health, outpatient chemotherapy, and allied health services such as physiotherapy and podiatry.

While I am on the topic of health funding, may I congratulate the state Labor government for just yesterday announcing a further \$6 million in funding for northern Tasmanian health services. As a resident of Launceston, this is certainly pleasing news. I know the Launceston community and northern Tasmanians in general will be very pleased with this outcome. This money will go towards a number of new initiatives, including \$2 million to set up a wireless communications platform within the Launceston General Hospital, \$3.5 million to meet the current year costs of the natural gas conversion project and \$500,000 for the purchase of medical equipment. This equipment includes a new cryostat machine to assist in the diagnosis of samples to detect breast cancer. For regional areas, this includes cardiac monitors for Flinders Island and Cape Barren Island, \$8,000 for an ECG machine at Deloraine hospital and \$10,000 for a new patient lift at Beaconsfield.

The implementation of a wireless platform in the Launceston General Hospital is a move to be commended. It allows doctors to use their laptops to access information at all points within the hospital with regard to the diagnosis and treatment of patients. This is a fantastic example of how technology can be used to provide better outcomes for patients and should be applauded. The natural gas conversion plan is also a scheme that should be lauded. The new equipment will take over from older appliances that utilise LPG. The natural gas powered cogeneration plant will enable the

Launceston General Hospital to generate up to 80 per cent of its own energy needs.

The Labor government has committed to a range of initiatives not just for northern Tasmanians but for all Tasmanians. The GP super clinics that we intend to build in Devonport, Burnie, Bellerive and Sorell are a case in point. Not only that, but the federal Minister for Ageing, the Hon. Justine Elliot, has only just recently announced 62 new aged care places and \$2.6 million in capital works on aged-care facilities in Tasmania across both Lyons and Bass—a testament to the representations of the local members of parliament, the Hon. Dick Adams and Jodie Campbell, and the sterling work they have been doing for their electorates. The provision of adequate numbers of aged-care beds is a very important starting point, especially when we consider the increasing proportion of the Tasmanian population that can be considered aged.

Senator Parry interjecting—

Senator POLLEY—Through you, Mr Acting Deputy President, I remind my Tasmanian colleagues that they had 11½ years and did none of this. The recent ABS statistics regarding population demographics in Australia showed that Tasmania's elderly population as a proportion of total population is increasing. In early January, the Rudd Labor government, working with the state government, put forward \$8 million to deliver an additional 895 elective surgery procedures and to help bring down the elective surgery waiting lists. This was part of a total \$150 million that was given to all the states to help over 25,000 patients statewide. Again, Senator Barnett, I ask why the previous government did not take such an obvious step to alleviate pressure on hospital waiting lists.

As part of this commitment the states were given strict reporting requirements to ensure that the money was being effectively used. To take our election health commitments further, we committed \$3.5 million for a state-of-the-art PET scanner for the state. This is something that I am extremely proud of, as I and my colleagues lobbied for the PET scanner in Tasmania over a long period of time. My time on the community affairs committee means that I am well aware of the benefits of PET scans, and I am glad that this service will be easily available to my fellow Tasmanians. Having one in Tasmania will cut down on costly visits to Melbourne to have patients' illnesses diagnosed, and hopefully it will ensure that Tasmanians are not put through unnecessary operating procedures due to lack of diagnostic tools.

I do not usually like singling out any one person, but I must point out the contribution of Dr Robert Ware to the cause of PET in Tasmania. Dr Ware has worked tirelessly towards this end and his efforts

deserve to be recognised. In addition to PET, we are extending Medicare eligibility to the MRI scanners at Launceston and the north-west coast. This is another initiative that will allow Tasmanians greater access to diagnostic services—services that can be life saving. And while I have the opportunity, I would also like to congratulate Dr Stephen Ayre for his stewardship of the Launceston General Hospital. Dr Ayre is moving on to new challenges and I wish him well.

To sum up, I think that it is obvious to all of us that the federal Labor government has made a large-scale commitment to the future of the Tasmanian health system. Fifty million dollars worth of investment and state-of-the-art medical services such as PET are all things that the Howard Government failed to provide in its time in office. I call on all of my Tasmanian Senate colleagues to support the federal government's initiative in providing better outcomes for my home state of Tasmania.