



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
PROOF
ADJOURNMENT
Aged Care
SPEECH

Wednesday, 16 September 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 16 September 2009</p> <p>Page 89</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Polley, Sen Helen</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (6.57 pm)—Last week, Senator Barnett attempted to give us a rousing speech about the apparently magnificent job that the former Howard government did in relation to aged care. By the way he talked, anyone would have believed that the former Liberal government had been the champions of the aged-care sector and had overseen a period of massive and effective reform. He would also have had us believe that the sector has been undermined entirely by the Rudd government in less than two years and that the sector was baying for Labor blood. I am struck by Senator Barnett's gall, his self-delusion or his lack of memory retention.

If memory retention is the issue, I can certainly cover for Senator Barnett what the former Liberal government actually did for aged care, but it may not fit with the distorted, nostalgic memories he appears to hold. In 1997, shortly after forming government, the now opposition made so-called 'radical reforms' to the aged-care sector. The first of at least six ministers for ageing, Minister Moylan, boasted that the Aged Care Bill 1997 would 'guarantee positive outcomes for older Australians.' So what kind of 'positive outcomes' did they get?

In 2000, after already having burnt through two ministers for ageing, the shocking and shameful 'kerosene baths' scandal rocked the aged-care sector. The discovery that an aged-care facility had bathed 57 residents in a bath containing diluted kerosene to treat an outbreak of scabies highlighted the complete failure of the former government's inspection system. One resident sadly died. Staff at the facility had apparently complained repeatedly to government authorities about the incident but with no response. The Victorian Health Services Commissioner went on to say that the area responsible for the complaints process, which should have acted on this information, had been poorly resourced.

When questioned about the scandal and the implications it had for the accreditation and inspections system, the minister at the time, Bronwyn Bishop, said:

... there is no crisis in aged care ...

No crisis! The inspections system broke down to the point where staff felt free to bathe elderly residents in kerosene and there was no crisis! The minister

then went on to refer the investigation to the wrong authorities, delaying what should have been a swift and clear response by the government to such a disgraceful episode. She instead ran around claiming that it was not really her responsibility. How laughable that as the Minister for Ageing she felt no responsibility to refer the death to the appropriate authorities.

The Deputy Prime Minister at the time, John Anderson, conceded that the government had been 'a little tardy' in ensuring its aged-care reforms worked properly. This was the problem. They had claimed to be making radical reforms but had never bothered to keep a watching brief on those reforms. A complete lack of commitment by the former Liberal government to proper inspections led to an industry that was unchecked. The result was a breakdown in the standard of care for our elderly in some homes. This is not surprising, given that a damning report released by the Commonwealth Ombudsman later that same year said that the former Liberal government's scheme for dealing with nursing home complaints was unclear and confusing. Therefore, it is no wonder that serious complaints had fallen through the cracks. The scandal led to the Hogan review being instigated. That review was taken to the 2001 election as an election promise but unfortunately sat in somebody's bottom drawer until 2004, after costing taxpayers \$7.2 million. The minister was eventually forced out of her portfolio in 2001, due to the then Prime Minister's lack of faith in her. Unfortunately, her replacement did not fare much better.

In the fallout of the kerosene bath scandal, the former Liberal government made a commitment to do an annual spot check of each and every one of the 3,000 aged-care facilities. They did not come close to reaching the target. They did not even meet 20 per cent of their target. Over a five-year period they still could not meet that target. At that time, the country was in uproar at the treatment of our elderly, and the former government could not even find the motivation to achieve 20 per cent of their target. Many homes went on to close or went into receivership and there were continual stories of facilities failing to meet key quality accreditation standards and of abuse of residents. The National Audit Office said that year that the accreditation system, which cost taxpayers \$11.5 million each year and for which aged-care providers

were charged a fee, had no mechanism in place for assessing whether or not the care provided to our older Australians was actually improving.

The former government then demonstrated their lack of commitment to their own previously stated intentions by voting down Labor's amendment. That clearly demonstrated how cavalier their attitude was to addressing the serious and fundamental issues that were facing the aged-care sector. They said they would achieve an annual spot check in each facility. They failed that test. They were all talk and no action, no commitment and no heart. The former Liberal government had six ministers for ageing in eight years. This demonstrates the lack of commitment that the former Liberal government had to maintaining and promoting a quality standard of aged care and the 'poison chalice' mentality of the government's own members toward the portfolio.

I would like to ask why Senator Barnett has chosen now to adopt a deep concern for the state of the aged-care sector and to speak so passionately on the issue. In his speech last week, Senator Barnett sarcastically and childishly said several times:

Hello, Tasmanian Labor members of parliament. Please listen.

... ..

Please stand up for the viability of aged-care services in Tasmania.

He accuses us of not listening and not acting. Yet what is his record on the issue? Why the sudden crusade? And how can he be proud of the past efforts of his government and his own past efforts in listening and acting? Senator Barnett has held office since 2002. Between being appointed to the Senate as part of the government and the time that they lost office he would have had hundreds of opportunities to speak on this issue and to express his obvious concern. There should be volumes of speeches by the senator in *Hansard* calling on the then Liberal government to achieve better outcomes for the aged-care sector. I can tell you there are not volumes. Senator Barnett, in fact, in that time spoke only three times directly on aged care. Three times! He was happy to sit in almost complete silence as the industry suffered crisis, scandal, financial devastation and mounting demand for services. All his government ever did was tinker around the edges with technical amendments and praise themselves for all their efforts.

I cannot and will not sit by and allow Senator Barnett to try and delude those in the Senate and the public with his statements that are at best misguided. In his speech last week, Senator Barnett referred to a petition he was presented with by a Presbyterian aged-care facility in

Tasmania. He implied that this showed a large division between the current government and the sector and he played up his role as champion of the industry. The chairman of the board of directors for that very same home, the Hon. Dr Frank Madill, a former state Liberal member, spoke at the recent Senate committee inquiry into residential and community aged care in Australia. I chaired that committee. He gave a very different picture from what Senator Barnett would have us believe. When I asked if we needed a medium- and long-term strategy for aged care, Dr Madill said:

This is not the fault of the current administration. This has not happened because there has been a change of government in Canberra at all. This is something that has built up ...

When will Senator Barnett and those opposite stop trying to glorify their past efforts and start to acknowledge the current situation? No-one is saying that the aged-care sector is all roses at present. There are a lot of areas that require significant effort. If you read our report you would know that we had in excess of 30 recommendations. Coming into this chamber and rewriting history does nothing for the sector.

I would also like to put on the record that, unlike Senator Barnett, who sat in government very silently, I am out there talking to the industry. I am talking to older Australians and their families. I am listening. The government have already demonstrated our commitment to older Australians in many ways. We will continue to bring about the best outcomes for the industry and, more importantly, for the Australian people. I would like to put on record too my acknowledgement of the very positive and tireless work that those in the sector do for older Australians. I cannot allow it not to go on record. In fact, Dr Frank Madill, very publicly, only two weeks ago, congratulated me as chair of that committee on having the foresight to speak up for the industry. (*Time expired*)