



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Building the Education Revolution Program**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 16 November 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Polley, Sen Helen

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**Question No.**

**Senator POLLEY** (Tasmania) (10.10 pm)—It is very hard to give a speech following on from the two speakers tonight in the adjournment debate. I concur with their comments. It has been, yet again, another historic day for Australia to acknowledge our wrongs of the past. But tonight I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk candidly about the immense differences being made to school communities across Tasmania as a consequence of Building the Education Revolution.

The education revolution was a cornerstone of the Labor federal election campaign in 2007 and quickly became a popular and widely supported policy platform. It was popular for one very simple reason, and that is that education is unanimously regarded as one of the critical issues in society. Every parent, every teacher and every community wants the best possible standards of education for our children because each and every one of them understands the integral relationship between a good education and an innovative, productive and cohesive society.

Education achieves its greatest potential through a balance. The balance is reached through dedicated and skilled staff, sufficient resources administered in effective ways, well-planned systems of teaching and learning, and infrastructure conducive to heightened learning. If one part is not measured or weighed appropriately then the balance cannot be achieved and we, as a community, suffer collectively as a consequence.

A high quality of education is what every community wants for its children and for itself. Yet core need was ignored and neglected, and funding whittled away over a significant period by the former Liberal government. Under the former government, funding was diminished, resources were squeezed and infrastructure was left to stretch beyond its effectiveness. The losers out of this were all of us as the standard of education that feeds the lifeblood of our communities slipped. The Rudd Labor government noted this slippage and countered it with the promise of a revolution. And it has delivered. Those on the opposite side of the chamber scoff at the idea of a revolution. They have accused, talked and blustered. In fact, they have done everything except provide a meaningful commitment to improving the quality of education in this nation.

Since the program commenced in February this year, there have been significant and undeniable steps forward in improving educational infrastructure across Australia. The focus on investing in infrastructure has been a wise one. Infrastructure investment, which was sadly ignored for too long, improves teaching and learning by creating the best possible environment for those in our community.

Old, poorly air-conditioned, poorly heated, cramped, and temporary classrooms are all too common across Australian schoolyards. A lack of outdoor learning areas means children miss out on opportunities that encourage further learning and skills. Poorly equipped gymnasiums, outdated library facilities, exteriors beyond repair and inefficient use of space—all of these have hampered many schools from creating the ideal learning environment for our children. For too long we have lived with the mentality that teachers are good at making the most of resources they have and that somehow this is enough reason to sit on our hands. Our commitment to solid investment in our schools is a clear indication of how seriously we as a nation value education.

The opposition may gripe—and they do—about how much the program costs, but this mindset ignores two fundamental points. The first is that real, tangible, worthwhile investment costs money—in fact, it costs more after significant periods of neglect, as has been the case. No change is ever achieved in this world without a commitment to do whatever is required to achieve it. The second point is that every dollar we spend now in investing in education will be repaid tenfold. Our investment will reap great benefits in increased teaching capacity, learning opportunities and the flow-on effects of productivity and prosperity.

In my home state of Tasmania, with a population of a mere 500,000 people, a staggering \$439 million commitment has been made to education infrastructure. In a highly decentralised state, with a number of smaller, rural and regional schools, for too long many of them have made do with conditions that are less than optimal. But 272 schools will expand and renew through the funding of 599 projects. Classrooms will be updated, amenities will be built, libraries will be modernised, outdoor learning areas will be upgraded, science labs will be constructed and buildings will be renewed and refreshed. The results will not be

simply to make the schools look better. Buildings and resources that have been utilised for decades and have long since become obsolete will be brought into the 21st century. Our children will get a 21st century education and the entire community will benefit.

I recently read a media release that outlined this very fact. The release stated that the use of school facilities by community and sporting groups increased by over 7,600 hours in the last financial year. Schools have been encouraged to make educational facilities available to the wider community, and the response has been very strong. The benefits of new and improved facilities, such as gymnasiums or meeting spaces, are therefore accessible to a wider population, and so the value of the investment is increased exponentially.

I recently visited a number of schools in my home state of Tasmania. Outside Launceston I visited what to me was an innovative, exciting environment in a district school that is the centre of that community, and its buildings are widely utilised by the community. Funding under the Building the Education Revolution program was in the process of turning their poorly heated tin shed into a modern gymnasium. The gym will have improved amenities and community meeting rooms as well as improved parking. Suddenly, an entire town and its surrounds will benefit from something that can be used and used and used again. People are able to come together and collaborate in ways that are meaningful to them, and all the facilities have been provided by the investment of this government.

I also spent a day visiting some schools in Hobart recently—private and public. I take the interjection earlier from the senators over there. It was really quite interesting, when you speak to the school principals about the management of the programs and the investment that has been made in the school, that none of them—not one principal, not one teacher, not one from those school communities—could fathom the criticism by those opposite of this major investment in the future of our young people. They were raving that they have been able to run the projects at a local school level, meaning students, teachers, parents, architects and builders have all had input into the design and building work. This is a far cry from the Tasmanian Liberal senators' claims that the program demonstrated a 'lack of value' and that they had principals, teachers and builders calling for a review of the requirements imposed. It is a staggering investment in Tasmania now and into the future. But what have my Tasmanian colleagues across the chamber had to say on such a historical investment? Far from supporting this investment in our schools and our children, they have done nothing but search endlessly for any reason to be unsupportive. May I reiterate that not one school

in the north or the south of the state raised any concerns at all—

**Senator Bushby**—With you!

**Senator POLLEY**—They were very grateful for the investment that the Rudd Labor government has made. I will take the criticisms, but I challenge you, Senator, to go and visit the schools in your home state and hear firsthand how valued that investment and those dollars are to the Tasmanian community, and more so for our Tasmanian students.

No system is ever perfect. No plan is ever implemented without incident. But this should never stop us from trying. The Rudd government does not shy away from a tough fight—and thank goodness, because we have much to show for it. I am truly proud of having something tangible for my grandchildren to touch and utilise as a consequence of our ambitions and efforts in government. I am proud to be a part of that and I am very proud of the innovative way that those Tasmanian schools are utilising every single dollar that this government is investing in the students, the teachers, the school communities and the wider community in general. Each of those schools is now engaging more with its community because they are inviting the community to be part of their school community.

I am always amazed that it does not matter what this government has done since we have been in government; those opposite always have to look for the negativity. They can never say, 'Wow, this is a good program,' or acknowledge the fact that they made mistakes for 11½ very long years. They did nothing but rip money out of education in this country. They put us on the back foot, and now it has taken us to show the way and to invest in the education revolution. This is the beginning of what I see as a very fruitful decade, with more to come. But the thing that struck me was that there are schools that have been using the same libraries since the 1960s. So many of the principals and the project managers were talking in relation to the decade that— (*Time expired*)