



SOCIAL SECURITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (GREEN ARMY PROGRAMME) BILL 2014

SPEECH

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 24 MARCH 2014

I rise to speak on the *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Green Army Programme) Bill 2014*.

This Bill seeks to establish a new payment - the Green Army Allowance - a payment for those people participating in the Government's Green Army Programme.

This is a key component of the establishment of the Government's Green Army Programme.

But it does not establish the Green Army itself.

The Green Army will be governed by agreements between the Government and Green Army Service Providers.

And the details of these agreements have not yet been developed.

Nor have the tender documents that will outline the details of the Green Army Programme been provided to the Opposition, despite our requests for the Government to do so.

And so the details of how this Programme is actually going to work remain a mystery.

Rather than reveal the details, the Government has asked us to vote for a payment that will be a part of a scheme we know very little about.

This makes it very difficult for us to judge the merits of the Green Army Programme.

We simply cannot be sure that the scheme will work.

Let's be honest, this Government's record on environmental management hardly inspires confidence that this program will be a glittering success.

From regressive moves on climate change to undoing protections on the world's largest marine reserve.

And let's not forget this Government's position on cattle grazing in the beautiful high country of Victoria.

This Government has a shameful record on environmental management after just six months in office.

So we have some significant concerns about how this program will work.

That is why we have moved amendments today.

Because we want to make sure that the program is the best it can be.

Labor wants to protect participants if they get injured.

We want to ensure participants have access to appropriate training.

We want people to have access to quality supports to assist them in the transition into work.

And we want to know what risks there are in terms of displacement of existing workers.

Put simply we have not received adequate assurances that these matters are being addressed.

Labor is concerned that this Bill does not provide sufficient protections for participants in the Green Army Scheme.

Specifically we have concerns with regards to occupational health and safety, workers compensation and rehabilitation.

We believe greater consideration needs to be given to the implications of why participants are not deemed 'employees'.

This exemption means that participants are not afforded protection under a range of Commonwealth Laws.

Including: the *Fair Work Act*, *Work Health and Safety Act*, and the *Safety Rehabilitation and Compensation Act*.

Labor is also concerned about the possible risks that this Bill may pose to the employment opportunities of existing workers.

We believe the Government must assure Australians that employees will not lose their job because their employer prefers a Green Army participant to do their job instead.

As mentioned earlier Labor also has some concerns about training provisions, ongoing training and careers pathways in relation to this Bill.

And this is the area I want to focus most of my attention.

In previous iterations of this programme, training was a compulsory component of the scheme.

Under Howard's Green Army, the program required 134 hours of accredited training.

Under Labor's 2009 amendments, the program committed participants to 130 hours of accredited training.

This meant the participants in the programs had a real opportunity to build skills and go on to work.

And yet, under the current scheme, the Government has indicated that whilst training is a component of the program, this is to be negotiated with each participant and there will be no minimum hours.

And so we have moved amendments today highlighting our concerns about the lack of detail in the training provisions of this program.

Nevertheless, the Opposition will support the passage of this Bill, because, at the heart of this program is something which we care about very deeply: getting young people to work.

We want better pathways to real employment for our young people.

And we know that the pathway to work is an increasingly difficult one, particularly for young people.

Transitioning from school to further education to employment is one of life's transitions which leave young people particularly vulnerable.

These challenges were highlighted in the COAG Reform Council's report *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance*, about which I have spoken before.

A chapter of this report is dedicated to the transition from year 12.

Its findings are very concerning.

The report found that from 2006 to 2011, the proportion of 17-24 year olds who were fully engaged in post-school study, training or work had fallen by more than one percentage point to 72.7 per cent.

More than a quarter of Australians aged between 17 and 24 are not fully participating in work or study after they finish school.

Despite nearly thirty years of decline in the rate of youth unemployment in this country, it is clear that the Global Financial Crisis has had a dramatic impact on young people's employment prospects.

Today, youth unemployment in Australia sits at more than 12 per cent, over double the overall rate of unemployment.

Youth unemployment currently represents almost 40% of all unemployment in Australia.

In other words, more than one in three unemployed Australians are aged between 15 and 24.

Youth participation is now a very serious issue for this country.

And it seems to be getting rapidly worse.

Just this morning, the Brotherhood of St Laurence released a report which analysed new data on the increase in youth unemployment in particularly areas around Australia.

It makes for sobering reading.

Their analysis shows that in at least one area, over the past two years youth unemployment has risen by as much as 88 per cent, and in many other areas it has grown by similar amounts.

It is clear that in some areas around Australia, youth unemployment is becoming increasingly entrenched.

The report indicates that under current trends, youth unemployment could hit 46 per cent in parts of Australia by 2016.

We need to do everything that we can to support young people to work or study.

That much is clear.

But this Bill will only support young people if the training provisions in the scheme are the best that they can be.

This program will only be a success if it facilitates a transition to work.

It must not develop into a low paid, low skilled workforce.

That is why the training provisions of this programme are so important.

Because, as the OECD report *Learning for Jobs* indicates, “vocational education and training can play a central role in preparing young people for work, developing the skills of adults and responding to the labour market needs of the economy”.

Australia’s changing economy requires a highly skilled workforce.

Many of the unskilled jobs that existed even ten years ago no longer exist.

They have been replaced by new technology, or they have moved overseas.

Australia's labour market is increasingly skilled.

And these changes are only going to continue into the future.

This requires a skilled workforce.

And if we are to build a skilled workforce, with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the new high skilled labour market, we must have a strong training sector.

This means making sure that the provision of training is a key aspect of this Green Army Programme.

It means the training must reflect changing employer needs.

It means building a strong foundation of basic and transferable skills for participants.

So that they can have every opportunity to transition from this scheme into proper employment.

That is why we are requesting of the Government some further clarification on the details of the training aspects of this program.

And then the details of the scheme must be properly scrutinised.

Labor knows that we need good policy from committed governments if we are to meet the challenges of the future labour market.

Good policy and proper investment in skills.

In Government, Labor knew this to be true.

That is why we invested in skills and training for smarter jobs and a stronger nation.

Labor believes in a strong public provider that underpins a high quality VET system which is why we support TAFE.

That is why we devoted resources and energy into vastly improving the fragmented and poorly funded system the Howard Government left us with.

Our record on TAFE stands in stark contrast to the Liberals.

In my home state of Victoria the Liberal state Government has imposed savage cuts on TAFEs.

\$1.2 billion has been ripped out of TAFEs in Victoria since the Liberals came to office in 2010.

This resulted in nine per cent fewer students enrolling in TAFE in Victoria during the first three quarters of 2013

By contrast the Federal Labor Government invested over \$19 billion in skills funding between 2008-09 and 2012-13, a 77% increase compared to the Howard Government's investment.

In 2011, a total of \$6.5 billion was invested in Australia's national training system, with the Labor Government's share being \$2.4 billion or 37%.

In 2009, the Labor Government committed more than \$6 billion to support state and territory skills and workforce development.

We also announced that all Australians would have access to up to \$90,000 in assistance though VET FEE HELP, and access to training for Certificate III level though the National Training Entitlement.

Despite our misgivings, we will allow the passage of this Bill today.

In the hope that the government will ensure that the Green Army is a pathway program to meaningful employment.

Because, as I have stated, youth unemployment and participation is a critical issue for our country.

It is a critical issue for our young people and it is a critical issue for our economy.

And we must do everything that we can to stop it becoming a crisis.