



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Abbott Government

SPEECH

Monday, 9 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 9 February 2015 Page 75 Questioner Speaker Lambie, Sen Jacqui</p>	<p>Source Senate Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania) (17:06): I am grateful that Senator Moore, from Queensland, has submitted for discussion today's matter of public importance, which has told of the chaos, division, dysfunction and mistrust at the heart of the coalition government.

Today has been a historic day. A Prime Minister survived, by the skin of his teeth, a serious attempt by members of his own party to get rid of him. The only person to blame for this attempted political hit is the Prime Minister himself. Of course, he and his apologists will attempt to blame others for the Abbott ministry's near-death political experience. They will attack the backbenchers and lay the blame for government chaos, dysfunction and mistrust at our feet. However, any Australian with common sense, eyes that can see and ears that can hear will know that the deep dissatisfaction and lack of trust felt by members of the Liberal Party—indeed, by the great majority of Tasmanians and other Australians—has been caused by the Prime Minister's tin ear, heart of stone and inability to admit he got it wrong and to apologise for his actions.

Up until today the chaos, division, dysfunction and mistrust at the heart of the coalition government has been caused by one man and one man only, and that is Tony Abbott. But from today onwards the chaos, division, dysfunction and mistrust at the heart of the coalition government is shared by every member of the Liberal Party room. This morning they had an opportunity to use the knowledge and the common sense that God gave them and elect a new leader who would govern in the best interests of all Australians, not just a select few—the rich at the top end of town. When the time came for that this morning, the Liberal Party room choked and failed to show courage. This morning the Liberal Party room was once again controlled by cowards who are more concerned about their damned titles and the perks of office than about the suffering of normal Australians.

Tonight, if you are a homeless person in Tasmania you have an official wait of 21 weeks, or over five months, on the public housing list. According to the Tasmanian Council of Social Service report, the latest waiting list figures for public housing show there are 2,465 applicants on the wait list—and that is growing by the day. The average wait time for people who are housed is 36 weeks. How do you think the 2,465-plus Tasmanians who are struggling to feed and house their families would view this Abbott government's record of government and their behaviour today? I think they would be entitled to view the behaviour of this government with a sense of mistrust. No-one would be surprised if a homeless Tasmanian described the federal Liberal government's performance as one of chaos, division and dysfunction. And if the homeless knew that one of the main reasons they were denied the chance of state public housing was because the Abbott federal government insisted that over half—or \$17 million—of the federal housing budget of \$32 million a year invested in Tasmania's public housing be paid back to the Commonwealth government to service a federal debt of \$200 million, then I have a feeling that words a little stronger than 'chaos', 'division', and 'dysfunction' would be expressed.

Parliamentary Library research I commissioned, which studied the funding crisis surrounding the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, states:

Leading Australian housing researcher, Professor Patrick Troy describes the funding situation under the CSHA:

Most of the Commonwealth funds advanced to the States since the 1945 CSHA were actually repayable interest bearing grants (the average citizen held the mistaken belief that a 'grant' was just that when in the arcane language of the Commonwealth it was actually a 'loan').

One consequence of this was that each year the States were forced deeper into debt and was one reason they could not fund the needed infrastructure. It was a neat pea and thimble trick.

So here we have the federal government caught out big-noting themselves about giving, in Tasmania's case, \$32 million while slyly taking straight back off them—that is right!—a cheque for \$17 million within 24 hours. Is it any wonder this Abbott government is mistrusted and viewed as dysfunctional?

In order to help this government recover the trust they have shattered with ordinary Australians and to help them repair their damaged reputation, I call on the Prime Minister, Mr Abbott, to waive the \$200 million of Tasmania's public historic housing debt. A debt of \$320 million for South Australia was scrapped a few years ago, and while I do not begrudge the people of South Australia that money, I make the point that both South Australia and Tasmania are suffering from similar social and economic crises and challenges—unemployment, economic stagnation and homelessness.

If the Commonwealth government can scrap the public housing debt of \$320 million for South Australia, they can also scrap the public housing debt of \$200 million for Tasmania. They can just scrap that \$200 million debt for Tasmania, because Tasmania needs it. This would mean that the backlog of \$90 million in housing maintenance could be addressed. I agree with retiring TasCOSS CEO Mr Reidy, when he says that Tasmania needs more affordable housing, and that waiving the public housing debt would be a great start to fixing our public housing crisis in Tasmania. Waiving Tasmania's public housing debt would also have an immediate effect of fixing the crisis of public confidence in this government's ability to prioritise the proper investment of public funds.

It would not be right of me to stand up today and not mention Defence pay. Put aside Mr Abbott's lies and broken promises to every Australian in higher education, health funding, Medicare co-payments, funding of the ABC and SBS, aged pensions, workers' superannuation, veterans' superannuation and entitlements, and God only knows what is coming up over the next few weeks. Put aside the fact that Mr Abbott's leader in the Senate—our very own Tasmanian Senator Abetz—has twiddled his thumbs and enjoyed the prestige of political office for 21 years and has done absolutely nothing to save the jobs of 10,000 Tasmanian workers that are at risk because of the outrageous Renewable Energy Target and our Bass Strait crisis. Put aside the fact that Senator Abetz has allowed his Liberal Party to put its foot on the throat of the Tasmanian economy by creating a crisis with the Bass Strait shipping and transport costs. Put aside the fact that Senator Abetz and his prime minister are happy for Tasmanian business to be placed at a huge disadvantage compared with the mainland states and to pay unfair and excessive freight charges. Put aside all those facts and outrageous injustices and there remains one injustice that the people of Tasmania and other states of Australia will not easily forgive the PM for, and which contributes to the deep level of mistrust for this Abbott government.

How can the Prime Minister and his cabinet, even after today, steal money from the men and women of our Defence Force—especially at a time when we rely on their protection so much? It would only take \$121 million to deliver a fair pay rise for our Australian Defence Force personnel. If Mr Abbott wants to make a fair dinkum attempt to repair the damage he has caused to the office of prime minister and to the morale of our diggers, then all he has to do is announce—like his backbench member, Mal Brough—that he will support a fair pay rise for members of our Australian Defence Force. In the centenary of Anzac—and I say it again; this is the centenary of Anzac—how can he, in all good conscience, stand with our diggers and have photos taken with them with a smirk on his face as he takes food from their children?

Mr Brough had me cheering in front of the TV when he told a reporter on 3 February 2015:

Our defence force is one of the best in the world because of its people and the very least we can do is to ensure that their wages are not diminished.

Being a Liberal, Mr Brough is not without his faults but I am glad he has supported my stance on ADF pay. He is a former officer in the Army, but unlike the lazy Tasmanian Liberal backbencher, former Army officer and ex-brigadier, Mr Nikolic, Mr Brough has on this matter shown courage, honour and a sense of loyalty to his former colleagues by challenging the PM and speaking out for our diggers and their families.

Department of Defence figures indicate that nearly 800 Tasmanians are employed: 90 on a permanent basis and 700 in the ADF Reserves. There are almost 8,000 veterans living in Tasmania. We should never forget the thousands of Tasmanians who have left our state and served in mainland or overseas locations. Every one of those people would be prepared to reassess their opinion this government—that it is cruel, unfair and cannot be trusted—if it would only do the smart and conscious thing and give a fair pay rise to our ADF.

It is now time for action. The PM has a perfect opportunity to step up to the plate. He can do that with the flick of a pen today. The men and women in the ADF put their lives on the line for us every day. I want to see some action out of this PM, and this is the first action I want to see. I want the PM to replace the money that he has stolen from them—and I want it done today! (*Time expired*)