

million when we came to office to over \$816 million this year. It shows the clear leadership that this government is looking to have in providing security and safety for our people.

So there are a range of areas of concern—hoon driving, drugs, speeding and safety in the home—but prevention is probably one of the most important things. It is notable that this government is again trying to take the lead, even in things like the family relationship centres, which are trying to build stronger families and which have the flow-on effect of providing the sort of environment that our young people need to steer them away from the involvement in drugs and crime that leads to some of these statistics later in life.

I support this bill because it is yet another example of the cooperation that needs to exist between levels of government and of leadership from the Commonwealth government in making sure we have processes that give our police forces at whichever level every tool that they need to successfully prosecute crime and make communities around Australia, particularly in the electorate of Wakefield, safer.

Mr RUDDOCK (Berowra—Attorney-General) (4.48 pm)—in reply—I first thank all those members who have participated in this debate on the Crimes Act Amendment (Forensic Procedures) Bill (No. 1) 2006, particularly the members for Gellibrand, Herbert, Swan, Fisher, Werriwa and Wakefield. Can I just say, in relation to the comments from my friend the member for Wakefield, how much I appreciated his insightful comments about what was happening in his electorate and the relevance of these matters not only to law enforcement but also to the active role the Commonwealth is pursuing in dealing with issues of serious criminality. The commendation that he made about the work of our Australian Federal Police is something that I will pass on to the Commissioner when I see him.

The primary purpose of this bill of course is to address specific impediments raised by the states and territories that have prevented the exchange of DNA profiles on a national basis. I think it is very important that we have harmonisation of laws across the Commonwealth. While these matters have relied substantially on the way in which states and territories have implemented arrangements for DNA profile matching, these amendments are designed to allay the concern that the states and territories have and to encourage all jurisdictions to commit to interjurisdictional matching.

The amendments, amongst other things, address the recommendations contained in the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee's report and I wish to briefly record my own appreciation for the work of the committee and to thank them.

The intent of this bill was to always grant access to state and territories to the relevant DNA information held, and to ensure that officials authorised under relevant state and territory law would have access, not just officials with an audit role. The government's amendments have removed the word 'audit' from the text of the bill, giving effect to that policy objective. The government's amendments also clarified the intent of the legislation that state and territory databases remain subject to the control of the relevant state or territory. The amendments address the issues raised by states and territories and do not make substantive changes to the way in which DNA profiles will be used, accessed or controlled.

The government's amendments also change the situations in which DNA profile matching is allowed in order to mirror other jurisdictions' matching tables and to remove any unnecessary restrictions on the matching of DNA of volunteers for unlimited purposes. These purposes also allow for DNA from suspects to be matched against DNA obtained from suspects at other times. Therefore, these changes implement the eight recommendations of the independent review of part 1D of the Crimes Act by Tom Sherman AO in 2003.

Obviously, I am delighted at the support that has been given to the measure. I think it is a very important contribution to our continuing program of law reform in the area of criminal detection and apprehension and, as I said earlier, I thank all members for their contribution to the bill and commend the bill to the chamber.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Ordered that the bill be reported to the House without amendment.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Skills for the Future

Debate resumed from 12 October, on motion by **Mr Abbott**:

That the House take note of the document.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (4.53 pm)—I appreciate the opportunity to speak this evening in response to the Prime Ministerial statement to the parliament, Skills for the Future. It is certainly welcome that the Prime Minister has turned his attention to the issue of the skills crisis that has been affecting this country for quite a while now.

Indeed, as has been indicated on a number of occasions, particular skills categories have been on the skills shortage list for nine out of the last 10 years. On top of that, ongoing warnings have been provided by the Reserve Bank almost each year for the past five years about the impact that that skills crisis was having on the economy, and in particular the role that it was playing in contributing to the increase in interest rates—indeed, three consecutive increases to date since the election and seven on the run.

It is, no doubt, one of the most important challenges facing the nation and I note that the Prime Minister, as a background to his announcement, outlined that he thought the problem was that the labour market is the strongest it has been in generations and what we were suffering is the sort of problem we want to have because the economy is going so well. The unemployment rate, as it is measured, is so low it is a predictable problem, and in fact it is not really a problem but certainly something the government had finally decided to turn its attention to.

I want to take issue with a few of the presumptions in the backgrounding that the Prime Minister provided in his statement. In particular, it is true that the overall unemployment levels have dropped, but this ignores the fact that there are within those figures categories of people who continue to experience high unemployment. For example, in the Illawarra region, which I represent, there have consistently been general unemployment figures of double the national average rate. Sadly, we have not seen a great improvement in that situation over the time that the Prime Minister has trumpeted the achievements of his government in the economy.

Even more damning and more concerning is the fact that, in the last recorded figures on youth unemployment, youth unemployment in the Illawarra region hit 40 per cent for the first time. That is an unacceptable level of unemployment amongst our young people. It is certainly something that concerns the parents of my constituents, who are concerned about the future for their young people.

It is true that the Prime Minister can point to general averaged-out improvements in unemployment, though even there we could have an argument about the changes that were made to how we measure unemployment and whether work for one hour a fortnight really constitutes employment. But putting that aside, even if we presume that the average has hit that level, the figures ignore the fact that there are significant pockets of people who are not getting the benefits of the good times of the economy. It is incumbent on the government to address that. I profoundly believe that a government experiencing good times as well as bad should not just sit back and say, 'Well, that's tremendous. Everyone is doing fine.' It has the responsibility to identify those who are missing out even in those circumstances and find ways to assist those people to be part of the good economic times.

The statement that the Prime Minister made on Skills for the Future is welcome in that it addresses some of the issues for mature age people in the workforce, who may want to upskill. There is no denying that that is a useful thing to do, but it does not particularly address or target the issues in regional areas that have not experienced the sorts of growth that we might see in states such as Western Australia and Queensland and it certainly does not address the issues faced by many young people who are still locked out of those employment opportunities.

I make that point because it has been very frustrating to me personally—as I know it has been to the Labor Party generally—that the Prime Minister has consistently refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. Having been a TAFE teacher for seven years of my life, before coming into this place, and having had sons in the age group looking for work, it is certainly something that was consistently at the front of my mind. In March 2005, when there was a debate going on about the skills crisis in the country, the Prime Minister responded to a question asked by the shadow minister for education about the skills crisis. The Prime Minister said:

... I have absolutely no intention of embracing this absurd rhetoric—which is quite false, when you actually look at the increase that has occurred—that there is some kind of skills crisis.

In March 2005, the Prime Minister was saying that it was all rhetoric, that it was absurd, that there was no problem. Was it a one-off brain snap? In March 2005 did he perhaps find himself anticipating an Easter break and perhaps not being on the ball in the game? No. He repeated it again, in September this year. He obviously continued with the view for at least 18 months. He said:

All I ask is that you not mistake boiler-plate rhetoric about a skills crisis ... with anything approaching actual policy insight.

In September this year, only a month ago, we had the Prime Minister saying that we should not mistake rhetoric and concerns on this side of the House with any real policy imperative—that there was not a crisis, that there was not anything that had to be addressed. You can imagine how gobsmacked I was when this non-problem had \$800 million thrown at it! That is what we saw from the Prime Minister's statement to the House, which we are addressing today. According to the Prime Minister's own definition, that is \$800 million to fix a non-existent crisis—probably a first for any government.

So, to me, what that reflected was that the Prime Minister well knew that the reality out there in communities was that people knew there was a skills crisis. So did businesses—indeed, I have had several representations in my local areas from the Australian Industry Group talking about exactly that problem. I look back over several

surveys of small businesses, done by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, about what the key significant issues were for them and what they felt were the key blockages to business expanding, and they have consistently identified, for at least the last four years, that the major issue for them was access to a skilled workforce. Obviously all of those voices, including the voice of the Labor Party, made it clear to the Prime Minister that he could not continue to dismiss the issue as 'boilerplate rhetoric', but had to acknowledge that it had real bite in the community and that, in fact, people were seeing the reality of it on the ground and there had to be something done about it.

It is important to address the issue, not only because of the real human stories behind families where there is insufficient work or there are young people in the family who are unable to access work and make a start in a career, but also because it is fundamental to our economy. That was the message of the Reserve Bank consistently—in particular, the impact that it has on productivity growth. We had a pretty amazing record under the Hawke-Keating governments of achieving really significant—and, in fact, world-leading—productivity improvements and we have seen those basically disappear over the last 10 years. We have here a challenge, in the human stories of people in communities that have not been able to access the growth that has happened in the economy. They are saying: 'We need our young people in jobs. We need our mature age workers who were made redundant through restructuring to be able to access jobs.'

Then we have had organisations like the AiG, the ACCI and the Reserve Bank saying the biggest blockage to our future expansion is the inability to access the skilled staff that we require and to improve productivity through upskilling staff. The frustration that we felt, I have no doubt, they were feeling. You only had to look at the number of times they kept putting reports out as a signal to the government to say: 'We think this is important. For goodness sake, do something about it. It is not good enough that you have cut the funding through TAFE significantly—in fact, quite dramatically—up until 2000 and, begrudgingly and very gradually, reinstated some of it since 2000. Your brain-snap campaign ideas, such as Australian technical colleges, are too little, too slow and unlikely to really address the problems we are facing.'

So what we had was an accumulation of all those circumstances. The Prime Minister finally had to acknowledge that there was a problem and that he had to do something about it. So he gives us \$800 million to fix a crisis that he has been denying for many years.

Ms Macklin—Is still denying.

Ms BIRD—Indeed, the shadow minister is quite right—which he is still denying.

In the proposal that the Prime Minister put forward, obviously the most significantly-funded item is the provision of vouchers to people over the age of 25 who had not completed a HSC to go and get themselves literacy and numeracy training. I have to say—and on this comment I hope I am wrong but I doubt I am—if somebody is out there in a job and is over 25, I very much doubt that they are going to be rushing the government on a voucher to go and do some literacy and numeracy training at TAFE. I think that that is a bit pie-in-the-sky. I think if they were going to provide a voucher they would have been better off providing a voucher that could be utilised for skills which were actually job-related.

I was an English teacher and so I think it is really important and a useful thing to do to upskill people in their literacy and numeracy. This is a pragmatic response. I think the take-up on this system is going to be very slow. And we saw bungling with the literacy voucher that this government implemented for school age children—a captive audience; it was not hard to identify who they were or how you had to access them—which dragged out to the point where there were kids who had failed the exam, were entitled to the voucher and did not get it until two years later when they were sitting the next exam.

So I think my cynicism about this particular program can be forgiven because of the track record the government has on these sorts of programs. Nonetheless, I will acknowledge that it is a worthwhile thing to do. I just think it is an awful lot of money for a not very well-thought-out process, and I suspect a lot of that money will still be sitting there at the end of the year.

The other thing that the government has done is to look at providing traineeships for mature age workers. That is a good idea. There are people in industries who do a lot of work that gives them skills and, if they had the opportunity to get the actual qualifications to become a full apprentice and then a tradesperson, they would certainly take it up.

The problem I have with this program is that, in an area like mine, the vast bulk of the apprenticeship opportunities actually sit in small businesses. If you are a small business—I am talking five, 10 people—it is highly unlikely that you are going to have the capacity to allow somebody who is working as a full worker for you now to become an apprentice. So who will be able to access these opportunities? Medium to large sized businesses. That is where the apprenticeship opportunities will happen. In my area, many small businesses utilise some pro-

grams whereby the group training companies employ the apprentices and they are then placed in small businesses to create those opportunities. The problem with this program is that it does not enable small businesses to effectively access it. I encourage the government to have a look at that, because it is worth while giving mature age people with practical skills they have got on the job the opportunity to upskill.

The biggest gap in the whole thing, in terms of \$800 million, is addressing that issue that I raised in an area like mine where you have 40 per cent youth unemployment. When my son, who is now 23, finished school, for two years there were five boys sitting at my house every day. Four of those boys would have killed for an apprenticeship opportunity. They were desperate for an apprenticeship opportunity. All four of them eventually got one when they turned old enough to have a car and be able to travel to Sydney. That was the reality for them. So they all now do that terrible commute from Wollongong to Sydney, like 20,000 people do.

Since the package was going to be this significant, I would have liked to have seen part of it target those young people, creating opportunities for them and supporting initiatives by people like the Illawarra Business Chamber, who have been targeting our chronic youth unemployment by providing expanded opportunities for young people in apprenticeships. It is a massive hole in this proposal.

Mr HUNT (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage) (5.07 pm)—In speaking in support of the Prime Minister's Skills for the Future package, I want to start in my own electorate of Flinders. This package comes in the context of work over the last 10 years which has seen unemployment drop by over four per cent, from a high in the nine per cent bracket to a low in the five per cent bracket. What that has meant in practice is thousands of jobs—over 4,000 jobs and 4,000 families who have had the benefit of work, who have had the dignity of work, who have had the economic outcomes which come from work and who have had the personal satisfaction of working. That is a profound and real outcome for people in the towns of Dromana, Rosebud, Rye, Hastings, Somerville, Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang, Pearcedale, Cowes and Grantville—real jobs having a real impact on people's lives. That is the local context and the human context of this package.

The national context is that we have seen over 1.9 million jobs created between 1996 and now. So the story of Flinders is the story which has been told all around Australia, of 1.9 million individuals who have new jobs and new forms of employment. There has also been an increase in the participation rate to the highest level in Australian history. That rate includes those who have jobs and those who are looking for work. You would imagine that there would be a high unemployment rate if more people than ever, a greater percentage of the population than ever, were seeking to be in the labour force. No. We actually have the lowest unemployment level, of 4.8 per cent, in 30 years.

If you want to see what is the real legacy of the last 10 years, it translates into this notion of the highest participation rate in Australian history coupled with an unemployment rate of 4.8 per cent, which is the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years. Those two things together represent more people working not just because we have got a bigger population but more people working as a percentage of the population than at any other time in Australian history. Against that background, the consequence of having more people as a percentage of the population actually employed means that we have the challenge of trying to fill the places of more jobs chasing fewer spare workers. That is precisely the challenge that every economy seeks to balance. It certainly beats the alternative of having more unemployed workers chasing fewer jobs. In fact, it is a tremendous challenge to have to deal with.

What are the actions that we have taken to date? There are three principal actions. Firstly, we have encouraged an increase in the number of apprentices from 154,000 in training in 1996 to 403,000 in training at present—almost three times the level of people currently passing through the apprenticeship process. Secondly, we make absolutely no apologies for the reforms which are encouraging employers to take on employees and encouraging more people to enter the workforce. They take the form of the workplace relations changes, and 205,000 jobs have been created since those reforms came into place. What that shows is that, given that this is three times greater than the long-term average for that same period, something must be happening.

I make no bones about the fact that there is undoubtedly an effect from the booms in Western Australia and Queensland, but it seems unlikely that this growth in employment just happened to occur at precisely the time that there were changes from the workplace relations legislation. There is a high likelihood of a real correlation. Also, we make no apology for the Welfare to Work reforms to help people to transition back into the workforce. Both of these things have added to the work for apprentices in helping to provide and create the highest participation rate ever in Australian history.

Given all of these things, there is no doubt that we have had challenges in trying to fulfil and achieve the quotas and levels that we want in relation to certain trades. So this package that the Prime Minister puts forward, of \$837 million over four years, aims to address four particular needs. Firstly, for people who in their mid-life do not have the appropriate level of training or the desired level at school, there is a voucher of up to \$3,000 to continue with