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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Building the Education Revolution Program

SPEECH

Tuesday, 16 June 2009

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Questioner
Speaker Bird, Sharon, MP

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Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (4.32 pm)—It is with great pleasure that I rise to support the minister on this matter of public importance today. I acknowledge that the shadow minister who was at the table spoke with great passion in his contribution to his MPI. It is a sad reflection, however, when that passion cannot be applied to supporting education in this country instead of carping and carrying on about stories that have been running in the national papers. They obviously provide him with criticisms of the program and direct his questions in question time.

The reality is that, in communities right across the country, the most unprecedented and significant investment in capital infrastructure in schools that we have ever seen is going on. Any member of this House who has been to their local schools over recent years would know that the first things that they want to show you are problems that they have with leaking roofs, carpeting that is no longer sufficient or safe in the provision of schooling for the children, and buildings that are inadequate to the modern needs of curriculum, and they cry out for investment in the capital that the schools need. The government, in response to the global economic crisis, determined to inject funding and activity into communities right across the country. There could be no better way to do that than through our schooling system. That is exactly what this program has set out to do.

I understand that there may be individual cases where members would have concerns about how that was being applied. Contrary to the member for Gippsland's contribution just then, there are many members in this House who have talked to their local schools and local builders and have worked to ensure that the program actually works on the ground in the way intended. Indeed, in my own area, the member for Throsby and I, the moment that an overarching contractor was appointed, arranged to meet with him. We talked to him about our expectation of local work being provided to support jobs in our region. We have a region under a great deal of stress due to the decisions of Pacific Brands and the downturn's impact on the steel and coal industries. So, clearly like any member of this House and as the member for Gippsland claims in his speech, we have a concern about local jobs.

We do not come in here and carp about problems; we actually met with the overarching contractor, made our

expectations clear, got commitments from him about the employment of apprentices and Indigenous people in that job creation process and got commitments from him to report back to us about the local contractors that were allocated work. Indeed, only recently he has indicated to us that he has had 350 applications of interest from local builders in our region to work on these projects. That is a tremendous outcome. It is the sort of program rolling out across the nation that one would think local members would be pleased to see happening in their local area. The program not only supports local jobs but also supports the employment of apprentices and trainees at a time when their opportunities are under severe threat. But of course, no, we do not hear any of that from the other side. Not surprisingly, given the construct of this MPI and the opposition's concern about the management of the program, they did not even support the program in the first place.

Members opposite have talked about some of the guidelines around the rollout of this program. I forgive the member for Gippsland because he was not here in the previous parliament, but if he had been I hope he would have been honest enough in today's contribution to recognise the fact that there were schools in my area that had to unveil flag poles and plaques for Investing in our Schools projects that were mortally embarrassed by the fact that they could not even invite me to attend those particular events because the Liberal senator had to be invited.

I am a fair person. I think it is reasonable that if the federal government has a program that it is funding—which this side of the House did not vote against, unlike this current program—a government member comes along and does the officiating. I would have thought that, as the local member, out of respect to the people who elected me, there would not have been a problem with at least inviting me to come along and participate, but that was prohibited under its program. I say to those opposite that, if they are keen to be a part of this program, it would have been nice, firstly, for them to have voted for it—but we will let that pass—and, secondly, that they did something constructive such as talk to the overarching contractors, talk to the local school authorities, make it clear what the intention of the program is and what they expect to get out of it and support it rolling out. But, not surprisingly, instead of that we get opportunism. Those opposite come into

this place picking the problems that may arise and indicating that this is somehow a massive failure of the largest investment that our schooling system has seen in anybody's lifetime.

I am very passionate about the schooling we provide for our young people. I think a very important part of that is the environment you provide for children to attend schools in. If you send kids to schools that are run down, that are getting dilapidated, that have an unattractive environment to be in, you as a community are sending a message to them about how you value that education. In this country, we saw a massive building program of new schools to deal with the baby boomer generation. Not surprisingly, given that that rollout occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, we are now seeing a massive demand on maintenance and extension requirements in our schooling system. We are being part of the solution to that demand. We are ensuring through this program that our schools provide environments that are welcoming and conducive to a modern curriculum and that they are well provided with technology that best positions our young people to get the education they will need for their future. It would be really nice for once to see the passion of those opposite applied to encouraging and supporting this sort of commitment and prioritising of education for our young people rather than the sort of negativity that we consistently see about these programs.

The member for Gippsland has a concern about whether those on this side of the House speak up, so I am going to speak up. In my area, I have 51 primary schools and 11 high schools and I acknowledge that in my area, under the first round of the National School Pride Program, just over \$4 million went into those schools for a range of maintenance and upgrade programs, which was very welcome. Under the second round, just under \$4.5 million went into my local schools, which was also very welcome. Even better, under Primary Schools for the 21st Century, there was just under \$28 million in the first round and nearly \$47 million in the second round. Unprecedented amounts of money are being spent in schools in my area. It eclipses the Investing in Our Schools Program that those on the other side squealed so loudly about when we took government. Their own program was a three-year program that had run out and they were upset that we were not renewing it. I say to them that if they were so concerned about that program not being renewed they should have jumped with glee when both the National School Pride Program and Primary Schools of the 21st Century were put in place. Certainly, that is the reaction in my own area.

For the information of the member for Gippsland, since he wanted to quote some of his local constituents in the media, can I just quote Sharon and Michael.

They do not actually live in my local area; they live in Woronora which is, I think, in the member for Cook's seat. They sent me an email which says:

Dear Sharon,

Yesterday, my wife and I attended our grandson's open day at Coledale public school. It is a very small school with only four or five classrooms, a library about the size of your average kitchen, a staffroom the size of a bathroom for five or six teachers. Sick bay is a fold-up bed in the corridor. During the assembly, the headmistress, Mrs Bradley, was proud to announce that as a result of the Rudd government's stimulus package, Coledale public school will have a new, freestanding library constructed before this Christmas. This will provide additional space in the existing building for a proper sick bay and improvements to the staffroom. Only weeks after the announcement of stage three of the stimulus package, the builders, surveyors et cetera have already been on site and plans approved. Not only jobs for local tradies but the kids will now have a proper library, the most important source of information in every learning institution and community.

Good on you, Sharon, and thank you Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd.

That is the reality; that is what is happening in our communities under this program. (*Time expired*)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—I would gently remind the honourable member that the correct means of referring to male occupants of the chair who are not the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker is as Mr Deputy Speaker. If it happens to be a female deputy speaker, one refers to her as Madam Deputy Speaker.