



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Primary Schools for the 21st Century Program

SPEECH

Wednesday, 2 June 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Bird, Sharon, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (5.35 pm)—This MPI today is not about the administration of a program; it is about the fact that those opposite have always hated the program—Primary Schools for the 21st Century. They are absolutely infuriated by the fact that we have put into the schools across this nation the long overdue and long desired capital infrastructure they have been crying out for for decades. As a former schoolteacher I have probably spent more time in classrooms than many who have contributed to this debate, and the one thing that I know is that we had primary schools that were not designed for a modern teaching environment. Most primary schools did not have halls, for example, so assemblies and special events were held in the outdoor areas. So many primary schools have been crying out for new halls to be put in, because our curriculum today requires the provision of all sorts of activities that these sorts of multifunction learning centres are critical to.

I am a passionate supporter of libraries and the importance of modern libraries that can incorporate not only the printed information of a modern world but also online information. Indeed, it is something that I think we would be very much failing our young people in if we were not committed to it. I am very disappointed to see the opposition also attacking the digital education revolution, which is, I think, the most short-sighted thing I could possibly have heard from those opposite. The reality is that the opposition voted against the program. They do not support it. It is significant not only in the educational sense but also in its context, and that is what those opposite never want to talk about.

The member for Bradfield talked about so much money in such a short time. There is a reason for that. This is actually about intervention in the economy when private money and construction in all of our communities, including the communities of those opposite, were being withdrawn. I, like many of my colleagues I have spoken to on this side, had building companies in my local area, at that time when the global financial crisis rolled out and private building construction in our regions start to be withdrawn, ringing me saying, ‘When is the government going to put these contracts out for this school building work? I have got staff I am keeping on simply waiting for these contracts. If these contracts don’t come out, I’ll be laying staff off.’ They were the conversations I was having at the time and the critical infrastructure that

we were putting into schools was a significant part of sustaining employment in regions right across the country including in my own area. I was not going to say to those building companies, ‘Let’s not rush this. Let’s just wait and see how we can roll this out in an extended way.’ The reality was that an important component of this was that it was stimulus work to underpin jobs, which it was profoundly successful in doing in all sorts of communities including mine.

So I think it is one of the more outstanding programs put in place by this government. I will passionately defend it. It is very easy on any program of this size to be critical. Let us not forget that it is a bigger school capital program than the Obama administration put in place across the whole of the US. It is a program that this country should take pride in. If you want to go and nitpick and find a few examples here and there, you can do it—of course you can. But if you have problems in schools in your area—like those in my area where people come to me with particular issues—then you get them solved. You do not destroy the whole program that has been so profoundly significant for all of our schools and for employment in all of our regions. It is a disgrace that the opposition have merely taken the opportunity to foster and build up the problems rather than resolve them and get behind supporting the program. This will be a legacy that schools will remember for generations to come, because the capital works that they will be using to transform the curriculum that they can develop and implement in their schools are invaluable. I look forward to all of those in my own area, and I would think anybody in this place would support and look forward to new facilities for schools in their area and support the impact that has on jobs for so many people in their regions. It is not a motion before us about management; this is a motion about the fact that they have consistently tried to pull down this program.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms JA Saffin)—Order! The discussion is now concluded.