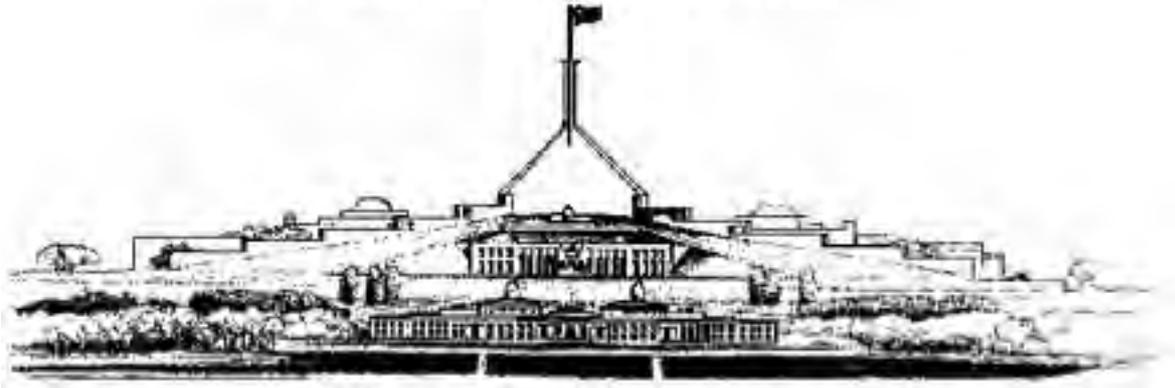




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2006-2007

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 11 May 2006

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 11 May 2006
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Questioner
Speaker Beazley, Kim, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr BEAZLEY (Brand—Leader of the Opposition) (7.30 pm)—This budget fails Middle Australia and mortgages our kids' future. That is why tonight I want to speak to the families of Australia about our shared hopes and aspirations for the future. I want to speak directly to the millions of Middle Australians at home with their families in the suburbs, the country towns, the cities and the bush. This is for them. Probably they are just finishing dinner, washing the dishes, helping the kids with their homework, all the time trying to keep half an eye on the TV—managing the competing demands that crowd each waking moment; sitting at tables in kitchens where the magnets chase the bills around the fridge door until payday; figuring out if there is enough in the bank to cover this month's mortgage or if there is enough petrol in the car to get to the child-care centre, then school, then to work and then home; doing the mental arithmetic of family life; tired at the end of another working day, knowing it starts all over again tomorrow. They are the ones I really want to speak to—not the politicians, not the journalists.

The people who are important to me and crucial to our nation's future are the families of Middle Australia, the ones who have built our prosperity, because after 10 long years of the Howard government they deserve a break—not an easy ride or a handout, just a fair go; reward for all the effort they have put in to build our national wealth; recognition that our future prosperity rests squarely on them.

I have one critical message for them: millions of Middle Australian families will build the next generation of prosperity and I will reward them for it when they do. Middle Australians need a government that makes their lives simpler, not more complicated—that lightens the load, not weighs them down; a government that gives parents the time and flexibility they need to do the most important job there is—raising the next generation; a government that looks at those kids and sees the prosperous future of an entire nation and that understands that investment in the hopes and aspirations of Australian families brings the dividend of a modern dynamic economy.

Mr Speaker, through you, I say this to the families of Middle Australia: tonight I seek a binding agreement between us—between you and the government I will lead. Tonight I announce my pact with Middle

Australia because, quite simply, it is your hard work, the hard slog of Middle Australia, that has generated our economic good fortune. Looking ahead, Australia is counting on you to do the next round of heavy lifting that will deliver future prosperity. We are relying on you to drive a new wave of economic prosperity and it is about time you got something back.

So my pact with Middle Australia has at its core one promise. Through you, Mr Speaker, it is this: under a Beazley Labor government, when you put in you get back. Here is the deal: when you work hard I will make sure you get a tax system that rewards you. When you put in those long hours at work and at home I will give you more time with the kids. When you do your job properly you will have the certainty that job security provides. When you work overtime and on public holidays I will protect your penalty rates. When you want to learn and train I will ensure you get all the support you need. I will ensure that when you put in you get back.

And I will correct a great wrong imposed on Middle Australia, on the people who built the good times but who have long been duded by the government and again this week by the Treasurer. There have been five budgets without a decent tax break. Then \$10—\$10 already gone, gone on the triple whammy: wages threatened, rising interest rates and soaring petrol prices.

Fair dinkum, this Treasurer is like a poker machine. You put in, you pull the arm—nothing. You put in again, another pull—nothing. Time after time—nothing. And then, at last, the lights flash, the bells ring, crowds gather round, 'Jackpot!' the Treasurer crows—10 bucks. That is the drop—10 bucks. Surely, Middle Australia deserves better than this.

Day in day out, they are putting in and getting too little back, giving so much, working so hard for so little in return. No wonder they are thinking, 'If the economy is so good why am I under so much pressure?'—why paying the bills and filling the car and servicing the mortgage gets tougher, not easier; why they are forced to endure all the pain of extreme industrial relations changes without any economic gain for the country. How can this government be so pleased with itself? It has duded Middle Australian families and mortgaged our kids' future.

My pact with Middle Australia

The Treasurer has a budget for today—and we have a pact for tomorrow. He smirks at the future; we embrace it. I look ahead to a deal with the millions of Australians he has neglected—a deal that will guarantee our future prosperity. My pact with Middle Australia has that one core promise: when you put in you get back. And tonight there are five key commitments to begin.

Child care

First, new child-care centres at schools. When you go back to work after having a child, you should not have to face the dreaded ‘double drop-off’. My plan for child-care centres at schools ends the dreaded ‘double drop-off’ of kids—for the mums and dads who have kids at child care and kids at school. For a family in Lonsdale it means more time at home together, less time in the car. For the economy it means increased workforce participation.

I want to meet the Australian economy’s pressing need for more skilled workers. My government will do its bit by giving parents the incentive to work without killing family life. That is why I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will provide \$200 million to establish 260 new child-care centres on primary school grounds and other community land. And we will ensure these places go to the areas in our suburbs and towns where child-care shortages mean they are needed most so that parents can work, knowing their kids are getting an educational experience that will set them up for life. I will have more to say about child care in the lead-up to the next election, but I make this commitment tonight: when Australian families put in by working hard we will put in. We will get rid of the ‘double drop-off’.

Skills

Second, when Australians want to learn a traditional trade to become one of the skilled workers the country desperately needs, they should not have to pay. My government will get rid of TAFE fees for the traditional trades. If you do a traditional apprenticeship, you will not pay TAFE fees. I want to get more of the skilled workers our economy needs. So we need to get rid of TAFE fees for the 60,000 traditional apprentices who start training each year.

Labor’s priority is clear: train Australians first and train Australians now. That is why I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will set up what I call skills accounts to help Australian families save for training and skills. And we will make an initial deposit of \$800 per year, for up to four years, in an apprentice’s skills account to get rid of up-front TAFE fees—\$800 a year for the kid in Blacktown who wants

to be a plumber; \$800 a year for kids in Wynnun and Townsville who want to train to be electricians, welders, motor mechanics, chefs and hairdressers.

To help solve Australia’s massive shortage of child-care workers, I will extend my skills account plan to get rid of TAFE fees for the thousands of Australian trainee child carers who start courses each year. So I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will get rid of TAFE fees for eligible child-care courses by making an initial deposit of \$1,200 per year, for up to two years, in a trainee’s skills account. Young people training to teach and care for our kids can use this to pay up-front fees at a TAFE or eligible provider—or they can use it for materials and resources charges.

This country made a mistake when we turned our back on trades education in schools. So tonight I make these commitments. Labor will give every Australian student the opportunity to study at specialised trades schools. We will give younger students the chance to try their hand at a trade with the Trade Taster Program. For older students there will be more school based apprenticeships. I will invest in real apprenticeship schemes, not the fake apprenticeships that use our kids as cheap labour and give them no skills. And I will deliver a \$2,000 trade completion bonus to encourage kids to finish their courses and produce an extra 10,000 tradespeople—the plumbers, the builders, the child-care workers that we need now.

My commitment tonight is this: when Australian kids want to learn a trade my government will be there to help them, and when mums and dads need child care to go back to work I will make sure they can find the child care they need.

Unfair dismissal

Third, no unfair dismissals. When you do the right thing at work, you will not be unfairly dismissed. I will tear up this government’s extreme industrial relations laws and establish genuine protection for anyone who is unfairly dismissed. The Howard government’s law gives supervisors and bosses the green light to sack a worker for any reason or no reason at all. What we need are balanced laws to protect both employers and employees from rogue behaviour, not one-sided rules that give employers all power over their staff—a system that gets Australian values back into the way we work.

That is why I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will put in place a new system to protect working Australians from the threat of unfair dismissal—a simple process for resolving claims which gets the balance right, protecting both sides. In addition to that, we will let employers and employees negotiate over family-friendly conditions and safety training,

without any exceptions, and which are capable of being incorporated in any agreement that they arrive at. That is my commitment to working Australians. When you put in every day to build our future prosperity, I will give you the job security you deserve.

Foreign apprentices

Fourth, no foreign apprentices. If you are prepared to learn a trade, you will not have to compete with foreign apprentices. I want young Australians to get the training opportunities they deserve and which the Australian economy so badly needs. As long as young Australians in Launceston and Gosford are being turned away from apprenticeships and TAFE, I will not allow foreign apprentices to take away their chances in life. We have already had 270,000 extra skilled workers enter this country over the last 10 years, but 300,000 young Australians have been turned away from TAFE. And we are seeing Australians laid off while foreign workers take their places on conditions no-one should have to put up with.

Now the Prime Minister is allowing foreign apprentices to come to Australia and take apprenticeship places here. He is even giving businesses incentives to take them on. These foreign apprentices are headed to regional areas where youth unemployment is already too high and wages too low. To get their visas, foreign apprentices must accept whatever wages and conditions are on offer—and young Aussies have to compete with them. If they do not like it, they lose their visas and they are out. Over time, this will ruin the job prospects of young Australians.

That is why I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will abolish foreign apprenticeship visas. No government I lead will import foreign apprentices from overseas while Aussie kids are turned away from training. It is just plain wrong. So this is my commitment: train our kids first, before you train anyone else's.

Broadband

Fifth, real broadband for your kids and your business. If you invest in a computer for your kids' education, they will have real broadband to equip them for the learning of the future. Australia needs a 'fibre-to-the-node' broadband network across the country. To you and me, this means a broadband system 25 times faster than the sorts of speeds available in Australia today.

That is why I announce tonight that a federal Labor government will invest in a joint venture with telecommunications companies to build this super fast computer network. Labor would draw on the \$757

million Broadband Connect program as well as provide an equity injection from the \$2 billion earmarked for the Communications Fund to deliver the public funding of this partnership with the private sector.

This will deliver broadband that can instantly download documentaries, educational software and digital books; broadband that can host virtual classrooms where children could video conference around Australia—a digital school of the air for all. Plus we will offer a 'clean feed' to parents who want to make sure their kids are learning on the internet, not being exposed to pornography and violence.

Half a century ago Labor imagined an Australia where every child had a desk with a lamp to study on at night. Tonight this is my commitment: when you put a computer on that desk, I will give you a connection that plugs you into the world and brings every book ever written into your home. This is an investment in national infrastructure that equips our kids for the future—part of my plan to rebuild Australia's crumbling road, rail, ports, electricity and communications networks.

We will take the politics out of infrastructure spending with an independent expert body—Infrastructure Australia. We will make it easier for super funds to invest in infrastructure, and we will set up a Building Australia Fund to invest in the productive infrastructure of the future. When Australians want to compete in the world I will make sure they have the 21st century infrastructure to take on the world's best and win.

A pact for future prosperity

Why a pact like this for Middle Australia? Because it is Middle Australia that has driven 14 years of prosperity. With proper rewards and the right incentives, Middle Australia will have the capacity and the will to lead the next generation of economic growth too. Right now our country has great opportunities. And I have great hopes for our future—an unshakeable faith in the Australian people. I know their talent, ingenuity, hard work and good humour is unmatched. The Beaconsfield miracle is proof enough of that. If only I could say the same of this government. If only I saw at the cabinet table the values I see at the kitchen tables of ordinary Australian families.

World economic conditions have given this government the best luck, the best opportunities and a real chance to do something for the nation not just for themselves. Australia is part of the fastest growing region in a world economy that is growing at its fastest rate in 30 years. This on top of mineral prices soaring to record levels, export prices at their best in half a century and, globally, lower interest rates than anyone

can remember. The minerals boom is putting an extra \$160 billion straight into this government's pockets. There has never been anything like it. Yet where has it gone? What can we point to that lasts?

With the minerals boom, the Treasurer had a once-in-a-lifetime chance in this budget to set Australia up for the 21st century and he blew it. Just imagine what we could be achieving. Just imagine if this government were making real investments in our schools, TAFE colleges, universities and research labs so that we led the world with the best trained workforce. Instead, Australia is the only advanced country that has actually cut its public investment in training in professions and trades—minus eight per cent over the last 10 years; the next worst industrialised country, plus 15; OECD average, plus 38.

Imagine if they were building a communications network that gave all Australians access to world class internet infrastructure. Instead we lag behind, with internet infrastructure that leaves us trailing the rest of the developed world and even Slovenia and the Slovak Republic. Imagine if people could drive through cities like Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne without it taking half a day's work to get to work. Imagine if we had a government with the foresight to deal with climate change now, so that great Australian icons like the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu are still there for our grandkids. Imagine if we had a government which thought enough of pensioners to give them a decent break. Imagine if infrastructure decisions were taken in the national interest not just the interests of The Nationals. Imagine if we had a government that governed for Middle Australian families instead of governing for themselves and their mates.

If this government thought that any of these things were important, it would be doing more, much more—more to lift workforce participation and productivity; more to build a better future for our kids; to fireproof our economy from future risks; nation building. Instead our kids' inheritance from this government is foreign debt reaching half a trillion dollars and growing faster than ever before—one of the world's highest foreign debts.

For our kids, this government leaves a massive burden—already \$500 million of interest payments every single week, while Australia racks up even more debt with the worst run of trade deficits in our history. Even the Treasurer's own department has finally warned this year that Australia's foreign liabilities 'cannot continue to rise forever'. Things are good right now because of the years of hard slog by Middle Australia. But, according to the Treasurer, he is the one who has created the good times—

Government members interjecting—

Mr BEAZLEY—They are into the self-congratulations again. You had nothing to do with it; it is all them. You only have to look at the Treasurer's smug capering on the day that interest rates went up. We remember that. He was like Wile E Coyote in momentary triumph before the anvil falls. You only need to see that to see what he really thinks of Middle Australia. For 10 years he has ignored the long hours they have put in and the sacrifices they have made to achieve our nation's economic success. And still he refuses to acknowledge that, if we are serious about building our future prosperity, Middle Australia must start getting something back.

Mr Speaker, what has this budget done? When the budget party is over, when the back slapping is done, when the tuxedo has been dry-cleaned and the champagne has run out, what is left in the morning? Nothing to help Middle Australia build the nation's future prosperity because, to build that future prosperity, Middle Australia needs a lot more than just tax relief. I support the modest, overdue tax relief that Middle Australian families received in the budget. They will need every cent of it, especially when they are facing the triple-whammy of higher interest rates, higher petrol prices and extreme industrial relations changes. So of course I welcome this tax break for the families of Middle Australia. But I make this point: no tax cut can make up for your losing your penalty rates. No tax cut can make up for your being unfairly dismissed. No tax cut can find you extra time to spend with your family. And no tax cut will give back the jobs that the Ballarat apprentice welders lost to Chinese workers.

My point is this: sure, the government is offering tax cuts, and I support them, but I will also deliver job security, education and training, child care and nation building. That is my pact with Middle Australia because, like me, Middle Australia is asking: what else? Where is the down payment on the future? Where is the investment in skills, in kids and in families? Where is the vision that Australia needs—the vision we need to build prosperity?

This budget fails Middle Australia and mortgages our future. It has no plan to take pressure off interest rates. If interest rates go up again, Middle Australia knows who to blame—the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, if your failure to fix the skills crisis forces interest rates up again, the buck stops with you. If your failure to show national leadership on infrastructure forces up interest rates up again, the buck stops with you. And if your failure to turn around Australia's current account deficit forces interest rates up again, the buck stops with you.

Mr Speaker, there are dangerous holes in this budget. There is no plan to free us from being hostage to Middle

Eastern oil prices, no plan to develop new Australian fuels, no plan to fix our crumbling infrastructure—clogged roads, slow internet connection, near empty dams and overburdened ports—no plan to stop kids from being turned away from TAFE colleges or, if they get into uni, ending up with a debt the size of a home mortgage, no plan to tackle the growing crisis in kids' health and no plan for child care.

We have these plans and we have these ambitions. And I can do these things because there are some things I will not be spending money on. Unlike the Howard government, I will not splurge a billion dollars on advertising—and they have got millions more through these budget papers. I will not spend a billion dollars on their war in Iraq—the wrong war, a war where Australian money bought Saddam's bullets—and I will never spend half a billion dollars with lawyers and consultants to impose a nasty dog-eat-dog industrial relations system on hardworking, decent Australians.

This government's legacy is this: a nation not equipped for the future, an economy vulnerable when the sun stops shining, a government that does not reward Middle Australia. Under its watch, the boom times are not building future prosperity; they are building foreign debt. This government is not laying the solid foundation our kids need for a prosperous future. That is what Middle Australia needs—a government that will build a future for our kids and the country—one that builds prosperity; a government with new economic policies based on Australian values—one that will protect the Australian way of life; a government with my blueprints to tackle skills and infrastructure, climate change and children's health, Australian fuels and national security; a government with my pact with Middle Australia—a pact to end the 'double drop-off', to get rid of TAFE fees in trades and child care, to end unfair dismissals, to train Australians first and to give our kids a high-tech future. In short, a pact with one crucial promise: when you put in you get back—a promise at the heart of every policy I will take to the next election.

The Treasurer has always been arrogant. He has not changed. But the Prime Minister has changed. Remember his annual family holidays at Hawks Nest? Not anymore. Now it is Washington, Ottawa and Dublin. When the Prime Minister leaves Australia tomorrow, I will stay and fight for Middle Australia. I will not cut and run from a debate on industrial relations or a debate on our national future or from an election fought in Middle Australia. When I am Prime Minister, expect three things: expect nation building, expect Australian values at work and, most of all, expect me to reward the hard work of Middle Australia—because, under a Beazley Labor government, when

you put in you get back. My pact with Middle Australia is the way forward.

Mr Abbott—A speech by Bob Ellis, plagiarised from Newt Gingrich, I move:

That the debate be adjourned.

Question agreed to.