



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE:
TAKE NOTE OF ANSWERS**

Home Insulation Program

SPEECH

Tuesday, 23 February 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Boyce, Sen Sue

Source Senate
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Question No.

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (3.26 pm)—I wish to further comment regarding Senator Arbib's answers in question time today. I generally do not at all mind being right, but I must admit that on this occasion it is a somewhat sour experience. On 11 February this year, in regard to the Home Insulation Program, I said:

... this is going to cause a frenzy of activity in the market, but for what purpose?

I said it would simply allow the 'cowboys' in. I continued:

It is one small section of a market. It will attract ... people who do not have a clue what they are doing, and it will attract people who are dishonest. We will have dozens and dozens of stories of pensioners who are ripped off by people who go up into their roofs, apparently fiddle around for a while and then leave. It will be months before they discover that they did not get what they paid for; they will be lucky if they get anything.

I had assumed then that the inordinate haste with which the government was developing this program would encourage shonks and cowboys and cause fraud and dishonesty. I did not realise that it would be worse than that—that it would cause deaths and untold damage to what has been for years a very stable industry in Australia.

It is interesting to look at the figures that both Senator Arbib and Minister Garrett have used, and tried very hard to avoid, on the costs of checking out the current disaster. We are talking about up to \$60 million at present simply to check whether or not what has been done is adequate. That is just the cost of checking. All these stories ignore time after time the costs not only, regrettably, to the families who have lost people but to the many small and medium family businesses in Australia that for years—20 or 30 years in some cases—have been installing insulation in Australia. They are companies like that run by Mr Russell Browning in Bulimba, in Brisbane, where yesterday 14 sackings were announced. That is being repeated in hundreds of family businesses all over Australia. Why? Because this government could not wait to be seen to be doing something. Thank God, I suppose, they did something, but why, when they have so little expertise in this area, when their ranks are composed of people who have not worked in the construction industry ever or for dozens of years, do they think they know how to run this program?

Senator Forshaw told us that it was a good thing that the government had been tightening this scheme in September, in October, in November and in December. I am sorry, but four attempts to fix it? Did Minister Garrett and Senator Arbib not realise after the second attempt that in fact this could not be fixed and that it was a bad program? This is not an example of good activity; this is an example of a bad scheme and of throwing bad after bad.

I am bemused by the fact that this government will not acknowledge that we have not said that Minister Garrett was guilty of industrial manslaughter. In fact, Mr Abbott has simply made the point that in New South Wales consideration would be given to raising the matter of investigating whether Mr Garrett would have been guilty of industrial manslaughter had he been working in the private sector. In his defence we have Minister Gillard saying, 'Peter can't be in every roof in Australia,' meaning Minister Garrett. But I bet Minister Gillard will be there beside every family business owner and every small business in Australia when they are forced to put off staff and have debts they cannot meet because of the way the government has behaved. I bet Minister Gillard will manage to be at their shoulder. As has been pointed out by Mr Abbott, the buck stops with the CEO—in this case, the minister. He has not acted appropriately. He was warned that this was becoming shonky. He was warned that there had been death and that there would be ongoing, irreparable damage to a very worthwhile industry.

Question agreed to.