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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Braddon Electorate: Health

SPEECH

Monday, 15 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 15 November 2010 Page 157 Questioner Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (9.29 pm)—Tonight I want to talk about health in Braddon. This is always an issue in my electorate, as it is in many other members' electorates, but I want to focus in particular on hospitals and, even more particularly, on the lack of cancer services in my region. My region has some of the poorest health indices not only in Tasmania but also, unfortunately, in Australia—comparable in some instances to the Northern Territory. Generally, the issue of health is associated with hospitals. There is a decided relationship between being crook and going to the outpatients or the emergency ward of our hospitals.

You may well remember that, in the 2007 election, an iconic, if you like, election issue was made out of the former Prime Minister John Howard coming to the electorate of Braddon and announcing that the federal government, the Howard government at that stage, would take over the Mersey hospital—with all the implications that that had. Ironically, I suppose, that was a precursor to what the Rudd government looked at, and the Gillard government is now looking at, as part of the health and hospitals reform. Unfortunately the issue in 2007 was essentially, and forgive me for saying this, a political ploy—a stunt—to help the coalition retain the seat of Braddon.

I understand that in politics all things are possible. I thought, however, that the idea was not good health policy. However, that is what happened and the Tasmanian state government acceded to that political demand and, for one dollar, sold the Mersey hospital to the Commonwealth. There was no planning associated with it—plenty of rhetoric but no planning—and the then Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, knew nothing about the region and was against it but, like a good political party acolyte, set to work to try and make it happen.

There was some talk of \$45 million per year—not that we knew many of the figures—associated with the Commonwealth takeover. Whatever the case may have been, the Rudd opposition—soon to become the Rudd government—acceded to the Tasmanian government's wish and to the Commonwealth government's wish and honoured the agreement. In government, we set about to implement Commonwealth ownership of the Mersey Community Hospital. We have committed \$180 million over three years to that hospital. It was nothing like the \$45 million that was originally talked about.

In time and through a very cooperative approach, finally with the state government rather than with a private provider, the Mersey Community Hospital has been integrated into the Tasmanian health plan and most especially into the North West Area Health Service for health and wellbeing in my region. I am really pleased that we have been able to achieve that. So from straight out political stuntsmanship there has been a good outcome. The Mersey Community Hospital has grown and evolved. The suspicions—which I cannot relate now, but they have a long history—between Mersey Community Hospital and the North West Regional Hospital, formerly Burnie Regional Hospital, have melted away and there is tremendous cooperation between the two. The Mersey Community Hospital is now playing a really important and significant role in the provision of good and safe health services for the north-west coast of Tassie. I congratulate everyone who has played a part in making this happen.

The Mersey Community Hospital has now gone on to develop a terrific reputation for the surgery it does. It provides an HDU, which has been relocated, through a funding arrangement and in partnership with the state government, to provide very good high-dependency-unit services and I congratulate them. Endoscopy also is a specialist area of the Mersey Community Hospital—and indeed statewide. So that has been a good story but full of a lot of political angst.

The other area that has been full of political angst has been the provision of cancer services. In 2007, Kevin Rudd as opposition leader came to Braddon and committed \$7.7 million to the provision of a linear accelerator to the north of Tasmania with a preference to the north-west. Unfortunately the north-west was not able or capable of providing those services without a lot more investment both from the state and the Commonwealth. That linear accelerator went to the north of Tasmania and it was viewed as a broken promise, particularly on my part, and I can understand a lot of the community angst associated with it.

More recently, the federal government committed about \$5.4 million along with the state government to provide a regional cancer centre for the North West Regional Hospital, and I congratulate them for that. It was intended to try and provide a range of chemotherapy chairs, service provision and a million dollars, also by the Commonwealth, for an MRI machine. We also committed \$3 million to the provision of new residential care units at the North West Regional Hospital in Burnie.

During the last election campaign, Tony Abbott arrived and promised \$7 million for a linear accelerator. As I mentioned earlier, it is not possible to provide a linear accelerator for \$7 million without the bunker and the physical infrastructure that goes with it. The Liberals also then made a promise to provide it by 2013, which beggars belief and reaches the height of cynicism in terms of politicising health.

The federal government, through Minister Roxon and particularly through Prime Minister Gillard, made a further commitment of \$16.5 million to provide a linear accelerator and a bunker and associated services to bring about comprehensive cancer services to the north-west. So that was on top of what was essentially \$16.5 million from the state and federal governments prior to this to provide a north-west cancer centre and the provision of comprehensive radiation services when it is safe to provide these services. An expert committee has been appointed to advise on the provision of these services.

I look forward, along with the people of the north-west coast, to the provision of more comprehensive services. I congratulate everyone for the integrated health services that we have been able to bring about because of the north-west health area plan. I also thank the federal Labor government for the \$10 million towards the Tasmanian patient transport scheme along with other important investments in health in my region. I hope we can continue to work together to bring about safe and reliable services into the future.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Before I call the next speaker, I gently remind the member for Braddon of standing order 64, which provides that he ought not to refer to other honourable members by their personal names; they should be referred to by their electorate or title.