



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**Main Committee**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Administrative Fees for Cash Payments**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 7 September 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Monday, 7 September 2009  <b>Page</b> 135  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> Yes  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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**Mr SIDEBOTTOM** (Braddon) (8.05 pm)—I thank the member for Franklin for moving this motion on administration fees. I notice that the member for Page is in the chamber. The member for Page and I also have a similar, quiet pointed motion on the *Notice Paper*. Both of us, in the middle of last month, wrote to the new CEO of Telstra. This morning I received a phone call directly from Telstra's Group Managing Director, Public Policy and Communications. He asked me specifically about the issue, which the members for Franklin and Mallee and others have mentioned in this place—as have I twice before. Essentially, he was asking me to reinforce the arguments that have been put. Most of us share the same demographics, and I put that clearly to him.

I did say to him that Telstra has introduced the stick, which the member for Mallee alluded to, instead of the carrot. Telstra talk publicly about becoming a customer agent again, being customer focused and customer friendly, yet they tell us in a letter that on 14 September they are going to whack on charges for people who pay their bills across the counter and double penalise people who use a credit card. I said that was not customer friendly.

My other point was—and it has been reiterated—in relation to the whole question of computer literacy and access to the internet. The older population are not happy, and in the main do not have the capacity, to use this. I am not saying that they cannot, but in the main they do not want to. When they go out to pay their bills once or twice a week social interaction takes place, and they are being charged for it. I hate to use the term 'un-Australian', but this is very un-Australian from an Australian company that has been performing in a very un-Australian way for several years now. I made clear to the policy director that this is their opportunity to change.

There are concessions for health card holders. I suggested to him that many people just over the threshold experience difficulties with this. They are in the same age demographic as those on pensions yet are not able to access a concession. I suggested that he look at expanding the concessionary side of this un-Australian charge for paying your bills to Commonwealth seniors health card recipients. He gave a commitment that they would look at that.

I also said that I wanted to speak to the CEO himself, Mr Thodey. I am expecting a phone call from him so I can make the views known—no doubt they are monitoring this. I made it very clear to him that this was an issue that is spreading across the parliament. I have letters here from Bass, which is not my electorate. I have several letters from my own electorate of Braddon. We have petitions going out in about nine or 10 different agencies. We have to send more petitions now because they are being filled up rapidly by people who are very upset by this. I am sure my colleagues in this House would have similar cases, particularly those with similar demographics to my own.

We have to keep the pressure on Telstra. You have to continue to raise it on radio and television and through your newsletters. People are inundating us with phone calls and writing us letters. Here is one from Sorell in the electorate of Lyons. A chap claims that it is discrimination because they are allowing concessions for some and not others; they are forcing or herding people onto the internet when they do not want to be on the internet; they are setting up an anti-social system; and they are not accepting the coin of the realm, behaviour which he regards as illegal.

So there is another movement going around that says, 'Just don't pay them full stop; throw your money over the counter and go "ta-ta".' He says, 'They are that pathetic in giving their itemised accounts anyway that it's going to take them months to catch up with you and by then they should have come to their senses and will phase this in properly.' Like my friends the member for Mallee, the member for Franklin and certainly the member for Page have said: use the carrot, not the stick. At least phase it in, expand the concessionary element and start acting like a service agency, which is what Telstra, a mighty company, once used to be. Instead of paying out millions of dollars to CEOs to go 'ta-ta' to a failing company, set up a new standard of service in this country.