

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

[Mrs HULL](#) (Riverina) (4.00 p.m.)—I rise today to speak to the address-in-reply to the Governor-General's opening speech. Whilst I was listening to the Governor-General's opening speech, I carefully appraised and intently considered his words and explanations of what the new government were intending to do and how they were intending to govern over the next three years until the next election. It had me thinking about many of the issues that I confronted when I came here as a new member of parliament in October 1998. I thought I should look at my maiden speech to see whether this place had changed my views, whether I was staying true to the ideals I had when I, as a very strong advocate for rural and regional issues, first decided it would be a great thing to represent the constituents of the Riverina and whether I had changed my perspective on those issues confronting our rural seats. When I looked at my maiden speech from 1998 I felt that I could easily make that speech today. I feel quite comforted that I have not lost my way and have not lost sight of the things that matter most to people in rural and regional Australia, particularly to people in the Riverina.

In my maiden speech I spoke passionately about health: the long waiting lists that we were experiencing at the time, the shortage of medical practitioners and the closure of services in small rural towns because they did not have the infrastructure, the services and the medical facilities to attract medical practitioners. I am happy to say that, whilst there are still many health issues confronting the Riverina and of course rural Australia, there have been significant gains made. As a representative of that region, I feel proud that I have stayed focused on these issues.

Many solutions have been delivered by the Regional Solutions Program, through our former Deputy Prime Minister, who at the time was the agricultural minister, the Hon. John Anderson, and subsequently through other ministers. The Regional Solutions Program delivered medical centres in rural communities to ensure that we could attract a doctor, a GP, into our communities. The fabulous medical centre in Gundagai came about under Regional Solutions. Dr Paul Mara is such a champion for rural health. I sincerely admire him and his wife, Virginia, for their attention to rural health. They could be off having a better lifestyle in a larger provincial city or maybe in the city itself, but they do stay committed to rural practice and to rural general practice obstetrics. They are the answer to many people's prayers.

I am very proud of the specialist centres and medical centres that were delivered through Regional Solutions. One was in Coleambally. They have been dotted right across my electorate, and they have contributed to the successful resolution of the shortage of doctors that I spoke passionately about in 1998. In looking through my delivery in regard to those nine years, I could see that each area has been positively influenced by the policies of the former government, and I feel that I have worked to assist in shaping many of those.

Previously in the Riverina, if you had cancer and you were unable to afford to be away from your family for the long and exhaustive treatments in Sydney or you had pressing issues such as family or job commitments et cetera, the only option you had as a cancer sufferer was to accept it and hope for the best. You had to go away many times for 12 months at a time for your treatments to a city that you were unfamiliar with. You had the extraordinary stress of being removed from your family and a comforting environment at a very stressful time.

The former government was able to deliver to the Riverina Cancer Care Centre funding for linear accelerators. The community got behind the push for a cancer care centre, under a former state member, the Hon. Joe Schipp, and with many of our practitioners. In around only 18 months, we were able to raise over \$3 million to build the facility. Then the former government came on and gave the HPG funds in order to fund the linear accelerator. At the end of 2006 we were able to fund the second linear accelerator. Now we see people from Canberra and districts far and wide being sent to Wagga Wagga to have their treatment in the Riverina Cancer Care Centre.

We also had a problem in that, if you had a substance abuse addiction, there was nowhere that you could get assistance. There was nowhere that you could get rehab, so you were vulnerable and had to leave the environs to get assistance for your substance abuse. We were able to fund the Peppers through the National Illicit Drug Strategy. That has been ongoing, providing extraordinary support and assistance for families not only in the Riverina but also beyond to enable them to be rehabilitated and to move successfully back into communities and have life mean something, rather than their being sucked into substance abuse.

We had few carer respite centres and programs, and we have been able to have those delivered. We had, and still do have, enormous issues with dental waiting lists. But, thankfully, we have the Charles Sturt University dental school, which was approved and budgeted for by the previous government in their last budget. We will be extraordinarily thankful for that. It will be training dentists in a rural environment. We have proven through Charles Sturt University the benefit of training rural professionals in a rural stream in a rural environment, including pharmacy training. Before Charles Sturt University offered pharmacy training, you might have got two pharmacists out from the city into the rural areas from every graduation. We had an extreme shortage of pharmacists. But since Charles Sturt has been operational we have had the benefit of being able to retain over 90 per cent of those graduates in rural and regional areas.

We are proving in veterinary science that, if you train a vet on heavy animals and on rural areas, they are more likely to stay in those rural areas. Hopefully, the same will be delivered through the dental program that will be run out of Charles Sturt University in both Bathurst and Orange, with three other campuses to be set up for that training program.

We have worked a long time to try to resolve many of the issues that I cited in my 1998 speech. The Practice Incentives Program under our former government saw well over \$3 million in payments to GPs and the Riverina division of general practice in the region in order to retain those GPs in that region. Again, I looked at my first speech to say, 'Have we made a difference? Have we cut through? Have we delivered on any of the things that I raised then?' I am very proud to say that we have.

The one thing that I raised that I was specifically involved in was the RAAF base at Forest Hill. It was under threat of closure at the time through the Defence Efficiency Review. That would have seen a loss of around 1,500 jobs in Wagga Wagga alone in my electorate. We had already been reeling from the loss of many hundreds of jobs prior to the 1998 election. We were able to save that RAAF base. Not only did we save those jobs and the base as it was but the building works are almost completed and the extension of the RAAF base commenced in January this year whereby you will see all of these recruits in the Royal Australian Air Force being trained in Wagga Wagga.

There are things that we have achieved since the 1998 election. The one thing that I was very passionate about was the effective competition policy. That is still, I believe, one of the pressing issues confronting my constituents. When I made my maiden speech, I was extraordinarily concerned by what competition policy was doing to rural and regional areas. It was one of those areas that seemed to be delivering more 'disbenefits' than benefits. It was something that had been a campaign, almost a crusade, of the then former Keating government. Then competition was equally taken up by the last government. It was pursued equally as aggressively. I am one of those people who stood against competition policy and its effects from the former government that I was a part of, and it appears now that my voice is going to have to continue to be carried in the chamber opposing deregulation, opposing these issues that affect the people who I represent.

I stand here today not aggressively anti government policies, because I was aggressively anti those policies when I was part of the government. I chose to vote against the sale of Telstra, against my government. I fought against my government at the time on the issue of the deregulation of the wheat industry and the removal of the single desk for wheat. I thought we put up a mighty fight against the deregulation of the wheat industry. I know it seems that I have done this issue to death, but I stand here in genuine despair for those people who I represent because I am back here now on the opposition benches and I am still fighting the same issue of deregulation and the removal of the single desk.

In my maiden speech, I said:

When asked for their opinion on national competition policy, most people in rural Australia feel that it has accelerated rural decline. It has the enormous potential to cause even further problems for us. Much of this, it could be said, may have been brought about by globalisation. However, the government needs to recognise that there have been obvious effects on rural communities.

The obvious effect is, again, on rural communities where I see the devastation of the removal of the single desk, without certainty for my growers. These growers have been in seven years of drought and they have constantly rallied to the cause. Their resilience is like none other. Unless you live and work and move amongst these people and understand how their lives are dictated by the climate then you could not understand just what resilience they have. But their resilience is sorely being tested by this latest blow—that is, the removal of the single desk for wheat. Till the fat lady has sung, as the old cliché goes, I will fight to have my voice heard, regardless of opposition to my voice. I will continue fighting that policy. It is not a personal vendetta against the new government, against the new minister; it is a vendetta against a policy that I see is wrong. It is a policy that is misunderstood. It is a policy that nobody should have to have imposed upon them.

We saw the government in their infancy, as they came into power, remove, rightly or wrongly, Australian workplace agreements. Whether you do or do not agree with the removal of AWAs, the very fact is that the government had the right and made the choice to do that. Whether I agree or disagree, the government had that right, as the former government had the right to do many things that they did. But the problem we have at this point is this. AWAs have been removed from the general man or woman on the street, simply because they were seen to be pitting the most vulnerable, those least able to look after themselves, against the strongest and those who were most able to exploit that weakness in both the general community and the workplace. Yet the government have applied the same AWAs to my wheat growers, those least able to manage who deal with grain traders of enormous power—with no watchdog; with no Fair

Pay Commission; with nobody there to ensure that they have a voice or somebody to look after their interests; and with nowhere for them to go. AWAs have certainly been applied to every wheat grower across Australia. AWAs have now been given to them whereby they will have to negotiate with myriad traders with ultimate power.

If they do not, they have nowhere to sell their commodity. They have to take the lowest price, because there is nowhere to go, where they can say, 'This is not fair.' There is no Fair Pay Commission; there is nobody to turn to. You are there standing alone—you, your wife and your children are there at the mercy of the most significant of traders, who, in the past, have proven that their interests are, most certainly, not the interests of the grain growers whom I represent. Their interests are the interests of the shareholders.

What we will now have will be multiple buyers out there competing for grain with farmer against farmer, neighbour against neighbour and cousin against cousin. Those buyers are all going to be selling in a single selling system, so the price will be as low as they can go and it is not going to come out of their pockets; it is going to come out of the growers' pockets, in particular the pockets of the growers whom I represent. So, as I look at the issues that I raised in 1998, I am happy to see how many of them have been treated. While they have not been resolved entirely, enormous treatment has been given to ensure more equity in the lives of rural Australians. But I am sad to say that competition policy, which reigned under the Keating government and reigned under the Howard government, will now reign under the Rudd government. That disturbs me in the extreme. Again, this is not an attack on the government; I am purely putting a position that I feel my growers would expect me to put on their behalf. I thank the House, and I remind it, in my address-in-reply, that rural Australians should have the same entitlements as to equity— *(Time expired)*