

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2008-2009
APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 2) 2008-2009
APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENTARY DEPARTMENTS) BILL
(NO. 1) 2008-2009
APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 5) 2007-2008
APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 6) 2007-2008
Second Reading

[Mrs HULL](#) (Riverina) (10.36 a.m.)—I rise to speak today on the issues that I see that will confront my electorate and probably many other rural and regional electorates across Australia as a result of the budget, which will impact on us greatly. One of the issues that we are going to have to confront now is the removal of many of the programs that were key to the establishment, the progressiveness and the sustainability of rural and regional areas. In three key areas, particularly in my electorate of Riverina, we have seen many of these programs cut and slashed. In fact, regional development, communications and agricultural cuts in the budget have stripped more than \$1 billion from regional and rural Australia.

The Labor government has abolished the Regional Partnerships and Growing Regions programs. This measure saves the government \$436 million and it has only put \$176 million back into regional development, all of which has already been allocated. That means that there are no programs eligible for funding, particularly in the next financial year, because that funding has already been committed to Labor's election promises.

But I am relieved because much attention has been paid to the Regional Partnerships program. There have been many assertions about it being a National Party slush fund and claims of corruption. Many derogatory comments have been thrown around about this program by the minister and others. I was very pleased to note that last night the minister recognised the essential worth of at least 86 of these programs. I congratulate the minister on recognising the absolutely essential programs that had funding promised to them but were slashed and burned in the budget process. The minister now obviously recognises that comments made in the past about Regional Partnerships, about the Nationals' involvement, about the former government's involvement and about it being just a slush fund for regional Australia were wrong. He now recognises these programs as essential and accepts that they have integrity, are not flawed and have stood up to the process of scrutiny. I thank the minister for agreeing with the Nationals and the coalition by recognising that these projects certainly are worth while.

I know the projects in my electorate absolutely stand up to scrutiny, because they have delivered medical services. When medical services walked away from my region the program delivered the services back in. When banks walked away from our region this program delivered banking services and other associated capacity into communities through rural transaction centres. We have had many fantastic initiatives. We have been able to establish child care to enable us to attract rural professionals—doctors and lawyers and people of the general professions—of whom we currently have a critical lack. We have had the resources to be able to secure their services in our electorates by the provision of a simple thing taken for granted by most city people—access to child care. The program has assisted enormously in the procurement of many of these services right across my electorate.

The Commercial Ready program has helped businesses in my electorate—new businesses. We have a business called Flip Screen Australia. They would never have been able to get off the ground, employ people and provide valuable economic input into our economy if they had not had the Commercial Ready program. We have seen the destruction of the \$10.5 million Building Entrepreneurship in Small Business program, which enabled small businesses to get skills development in incubation and advisory services to enable them to move forward and to provide innovation and employment opportunities. Many of our councils under the Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils—REROC—and the Riverina Regional Development Board, a New South Wales government development board, have been recipients of grants under this program.

The Small Business Field Officer Program has also been slashed. My small business officer in Griffith is no longer employed and no longer able to give advice to those who want to set up independent businesses. This will affect their ability to move forward and expand and to provide much needed employment opportunities in the ever-increasing squeeze caused by the prolonged seven-year drought in my region. The New Industries Development Program was a great program that increased opportunities for innovative and market orientated industry development for small- and medium-sized agribusinesses. One business in my electorate, Cootamundra Oilseeds, was a previous recipient of funding under this program. It is one of our largest employers in the Cootamundra area. The New Business Intensive Assistance Program has also ceased. There is much red tape and much to comply with when deciding to set up a new business or even for those existing businesses with people who are not familiar with the GST and the BAS and general bookkeeping requirements. For such people that intensive assistance program was invaluable. Again, it has been slashed. We also have the problem of additional funding to our Export Market Development Grants program. We have nothing in the forward estimates after 2010. I think that is a shame because we have had significant beneficiaries of that program who have been delivering back to the GDP of this great nation.

I am disappointed in the scrapping of the Investing in our Schools program. It was able to deliver to the mums and dads of communities. It was not out there pork-barrelling—as we have been accused of—these mums and dads. It was providing the P&Cs with their priorities. There was one particular project in my electorate at the South Wagga Public School. The P&C had been trying to raise money for 15 years to get a covered outdoor learning area. In that time they had only raised \$30,000. When we were able to give them the Investing in our School's grants of \$150,000 not only were they able to build the outdoor covered learning area that they had been waiting for for 15 years but they were able to put in tanks to collect the water off the outdoor covered learning area. They were able to utilise that water to provide the kids, for the first time, with a playground where they could play on grass. That was certainly welcomed.

I understand the need for innovation and technology in schools, but there is also a need to assist mums and dads who are desperately putting in mammoth fundraising efforts to ensure that their children are attending a school that is at least reasonably comfortable, whether it be a public, private, or Catholic school. I am very disappointed to see that program go.

Then there is the Community Water Grants program. Community Water Grants was a program that I was very proud of because it was able to establish best practices, particularly in teaching school students about the need to conserve water. It involved the collection of water to be used in tanks to preserve

groundwater and surface water systems. I feel that schools did a sterling job. In fact, my electorate received \$4.7 million in programs, each and every one of them with integrity.

I note there have been concerns raised in the House by many people on the government side about the replacement of a bowling green turf with a synthetic surface. That makes absolute sense if you are living in a dry area. Our country towns do not have picture theatres, tenpin bowling alleys or the great entertainment facilities found in cities. For some of our communities the only social fabric that can bring us together is a bowling green—just two little bowling greens with a bowling club where regional people, farmers and local inhabitants can get together. We have such a fantastic response from our young people. Our schools are the biggest participants in lawn bowls. Our young people are there, taking their instruction from older people, who give great mentoring and role modelling. That is what happens in a rural community.

When you see it in action, it actually makes you feel very pumped in your heart and soul. You say, 'Here are some young people gathering together with a group of elderly men and women to learn from them and be involved in a healthy aspect of life.' If the only opportunity for that healthy aspect of life is a bowling green that requires a considerable amount of water to keep the surface in place, it stands to reason that the turf should be replaced with a synthetic surface. If a struggling community has little water and it is environmentally sound to put a synthetic turf in, it stands to reason that the community should be able to get some assistance. Whether you are on the outskirts of Western Sydney or Melbourne or in the Riverina, it stands to reason that you should be able to apply for these grants and not come under some sort of cloud with people saying it is an absolute waste of money.

When I was going through the budget, I wanted to see what benefits had come to rural health. When I was a government member I did not believe in line items for the Riverina. I wanted to have money available for the Riverina when we needed it. I did not want to have an allocation to the Riverina and then be forever waiting for another allocation. When I wanted and needed assistance for the people I represent, I wanted to be able to go to the minister with a properly constituted proposal that had integrity, and I expected it to be supported.

Rural health issues in regional Australia are staggeringly difficult. I noticed an entry in the budget papers which seemed at first glance to be a fabulous initiative, and I was very warmly appreciative. I congratulated the government on many of their initiatives. I thought the childcare and some education components were terrific. I thought: 'This is great, we're now going to have an additional workforce to meet the needs of Australian communities. We're going to enhance the medical workforce by the addition of 5,000 international medical graduates. Wow, this is fabulous; we'll get some spin-off.' But then I looked for the line item that gave us some resources for the training of those 5,000 international medical graduates. There was no sign of any allocation—no budget line anywhere for resources.

GPET, the General Practice Education and Training program, does a fabulous job right across Australia, whether you are in the Riverina or in any other electorate. But it is an intense and enormously difficult job, because it provides vocational education and training support for medical graduates who are seeking to become general practitioners. There are 21 regional training providers to do that. Our GPET force is already burdened, with 21 trainers, but now we have no one to assist our international medical graduates to obtain necessary education

and training to fit them into Australian general practice. That is what we are trying to achieve. We are trying to attract more people into Australian general practice training programs. I am not being critical at this point. I absolutely welcome the 5,000 places. But I am not sure whether the requirements that international medical graduates will have to undertake to fit into the Australian GP process have been overlooked—and they will be quite extensive. I would like to raise this matter in the House today to bring it to the attention of the minister—whom I think is a tremendous minister. You need to apply money to enable those 5,000 medical graduates to enter into general practice. It is essential. I appeal to and urge the government to look at this issue and to consider this not as a criticism but as an appeal for only what is required. I am not asking for any more than what is required.

As a past chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, which dealt with substance abuse—illicit drugs, alcohol, tobacco and prescribed pharmaceuticals—I am concerned about the implications, ramifications and unintended consequences of the alcopops tax. In my view, the alcopops tax seems to be counterproductive and disingenuous because, out of all of the proposed revenue that will be collected from the alcopops taxation, only \$58 million will be put into programs. I have long called for the delivery of programs on the ground. I called for it when I was part of the last government. I argued for fewer research programs and more delivery of assistance on the ground. But only \$58 million of the tax windfall from the imposition of this excise on alcopops will be returned. If this were a genuine proposal, all of that revenue—it is fortuitous additional revenue; it is not part of a budget surplus—should go into actually doing something on the ground such as providing more rehab and detox centres. I have no detox centre anywhere in my electorate. I have fought for and delivered a rehab centre, but I do not have any detox centre for regional people to go into in order to be able to attend a rehab centre. If you cannot do detox, you cannot attend rehab. I called for it from the last government and I will call for it from this one. It is essential.

I have a letter from the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia, who are very concerned by the unintended consequences of the tax. I have seen an article in the *Australian* today that says sales of alcopops have plummeted by almost 40 per cent in the fortnight following the lightning tax hike, but sales of 375-millilitre bottles of full-strength spirits have gone up by 20 per cent. Sales of 700-millilitre bottles of full-strength spirits have gone up by 21 per cent. Sales of dark spirit ready-to-drinks—scotch, rum and bourbon—have gone down by 39 per cent and sales of light spirit RTDs have gone down by 37 per cent. I am not quite sure we have managed to achieve the intention of the tax, and there will be more of this to come.

I am very concerned that we have just transferred the problem of substance abuse from one drink to another drink. I hope that after seeing these statistics the Prime Minister will reconsider how he wants to spend the tax take on addressing these problems, which will only increase with people mixing their own drinks and not knowing how much alcohol they are putting in. We are obviously going to have a big problem dealing with these issues, and I think the spend has to be much greater.