

NATION-BUILDING FUNDS BILL 2008
NATION-BUILDING FUNDS (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS) BILL
2008
COAG REFORM FUND BILL 2008
Second Reading

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (1.05 p.m.)—It is always great as a rural and regional member to rise in the House to talk about infrastructure funding, because you always hope that funding will be made available in regional areas for key and vital infrastructure. I am sure that as a result of the [Nation-building Funds Bill 2008](#) and the [Nation-building Funds \(Consequential Amendments\) Bill 2008](#) there will be funding available to assist in building critical infrastructure in rural and regional areas. We would like to see transport hubs and intermodals. We would like to see refurbishment and rebuilding of terminal access for regional aviation. We would also like to see pavement strengthening and runway upgrades for aviation in rural and regional Australia, because there is no point spending an enormous amount of money on putting in an enormous amount of security at rural and regional airports if the passengers land on substandard runways. As I said, rural and regional members are always hopeful that infrastructure funds will deliver good and key quality infrastructure building projects in rural and regional Australia. The former government did that through the AusLink proposals and we have major infrastructure building projects that are still in progress which will make a difference for all Australians.

The primary reason I stand here today to speak on the Nation-building Funds Bill 2008 is the establishment of the three separate financial asset funds: the Building Australia Fund; the Education Investment Fund, which I spoke on yesterday; and the Health and Hospitals Fund. Health is the key area that I would like to raise today, and I raise it with hope that the voices of the people in the region and the electorate that I represent in the Riverina will be heard. I am going to take this opportunity to speak on the bill with reference to the Health and Hospitals Fund and to the words in the Prime Minister's statement yesterday on the financial and fiscal issues that are confronting Australia and the possible need to go into a temporary deficit but, in doing so, being able to shore up and build critical infrastructure projects such as hospitals. That was the thought that struck me when I heard those words spoken.

I want to again remind the House of probably the most urgent and critical piece of health infrastructure that is required. Earlier in the week I initiated a question in the House that was asked by the member for Cowper on the blowing out of hospital waiting list times for Wagga Wagga. The Minister for Health and Ageing indicated that money has been put into reducing these waiting times from the New South Wales state government perspective. I have always maintained that it was not going to be easy for the waiting list at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital to be reduced, because the infrastructure is simply not available to reduce any such waiting list—the theatre time is not available. The operational mechanisms of theatres are simply unacceptable and are almost unable to be used in many instances. There is an enormous regional referral centre that is responsible for the referral of over 170,000 people, at today's count, to one hospital with around 220 to 240 beds.

The Wagga Wagga Base Hospital was made a regional referral centre. It was just an announcement made on paper. The rest of the hospitals in my electorate—such as Griffith, which services a community of around 30,000 people—were downgraded to being just local hospitals, and the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital was determined to be the regional referral centre. What happened in order to enable Wagga Wagga Base Hospital to fulfil the obligations of being the centre? Nothing happened as far as infrastructure enhancements go. All that happened, as I have said in this House time and time again, was that two-bed wards were made into four-bed wards and four-bed wards were made

into eight-bed wards. It just seems to be an ongoing saga, so I would like to point out to the House the process that has taken place and the plight of the people of the Riverina.

I take encouragement and heart from the words of the Prime Minister that one of the benefits of taking this nation into a deficit would be the ability to build this important hospital infrastructure. I want to say, 'Please, Sir, let us be first,' because I think we deserve it. The Wagga Wagga Base Hospital was designed in the 1930s. During the latter half of the 1950s the then minister for health, with significant support from an ever-growing population, lobbied the Health Commission of New South Wales to replace the outdated and defunct original hospital. The current building that we have was built in 1962. There was no input into the design by our professionals: Wagga doctors, specialists et cetera. Then we had our original 110-bed facility transformed into a 220-bed facility by transforming those single rooms into doubles, doubles into quadruples and so on. Some small scale redevelopments have taken place, but there has really been nothing to enable the hospital to meet the capacity that is required of it.

We have been promised this capacity for the hospital for around 30 years by successive state governments, both coalition and Labor. On 20 February 1980, \$15 million was provided for in the Labor state government's 1979-80 capital works program for a Wagga Wagga Base Hospital redevelopment program. The amount was intended to finance all phases of the planning and the construction. On 12 September 1980, no money was allocated to the project in the government's 1980-81 loan program. On 6 November 1980, the government promised Wagga Wagga that a new hospital would be built on the corner of Red Hill Road and Holbrook Road. They said that a 250-bed hospital costing \$30 million would be constructed, starting in 1981. The then Premier, Neville Wran, said, 'I see no reason why the site should not be prepared next year.'

In May 1981, the Liberal Party member for Wagga Wagga, Joe Schipp, said that there were warning signs that there might be delays to the development. In June 1981, the then Minister for Health, Kevin Stewart, confirmed that there was no specific allocation in the state budget for the promised Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. In February 1982 the government scrapped all plans for a new hospital. The then minister, Laurie Brereton, said that it was one of a number of projects scrapped because of a shortage of funds. In April 1982 the government diverted the planning money to some short-term renovation, and in July 1982 more than 1,000 people attended a protest rally to complain about the government's treatment of Wagga Wagga, including the dropping of those hospital plans.

In March 1988 the then opposition leader, Nick Greiner, pledged to continue to work on the hospital if the coalition were elected. After the coalition won the election, they decided they would reinstate the architect for the new works on the hospital. In June 1988 doubts arose from Peter Collins, the then Minister for Health, because he said that the hospital works had not been included in the former government's five-year works program. In July 1988 they said, again, that there would be no major redevelopment of the hospital for another five years but that there would be upgrading. Then in July 1988 Albury had a \$70 million facility built. It has gone on and on. In October 1988 the hospital board said that the Wagga Wagga redevelopment had been set down for 1992-93 at a cost of \$30 million.

We moved on and nothing happened in the nineties, and then in March 2003 finally the state government announced \$400,000 for the planning of a new regional hospital at Wagga Wagga and the opposition pledged to build a new hospital in Wagga Wagga. In October 2005 there was a value management study done that said a new hospital was needed to be built on the existing site at an estimated cost of more than \$222 million. Then in March 2007 specialists were angry that there was no ability for them to do their work. They were made aware that work on the hospital would not start before 2011 and

could not be finished before 2015. On 15 March 2007 the Riverina residents held a public rally of around 2,000 people and demanded that they be provided with a new hospital.

The process moved on and the health minister in New South Wales indicated that, yes, there was an option for a new hospital under a public-private partnership or for perhaps the government to build it. Then came the debacle of electricity privatisation. The then Minister for Health, Reba Meagher, made commitments and said that the hospital would go ahead and that building would commence hopefully in 2009. Then there was an issue with Morris Iemma, the former Premier, wherein he had a problem with his own Labor colleagues on electricity privatisation, and ultimately electricity privatisation fell through in New South Wales. Of course, as a result of that, the then health minister, Reba Meagher, came out and said that because the coalition did not support electricity privatisation—and the member for Wagga Wagga happens to be a Liberal member—the coalition were responsible for the so-called demise of electricity privatisation. That was untrue; it was brought about by Labor members themselves. Even so, the minister came out and said that the hospital was tied to electricity privatisation, which was absolutely untrue. She also said that, because it was linked to privatisation, the base hospital would no longer be built.

This is the saga that has been taking place for nearly 30 years and people are tired of it. They are sick and tired of this process. Then we had the fall of the Iemma regime. We now have the Nathan Rees regime, with a new Minister for Health, Mr Della Bosca. Of course, New South Wales have found themselves in significant financial decline and are having problems with their budget, so a minibudget has come out. What was again scrapped in the minibudget? Wagga Wagga Base Hospital.

The Wagga Wagga Base Hospital has referral centres for Cootamundra, Temora, West Wyalong, Hillston, Hay, Griffith—you name it and they have got it. We are now finding that whether you have access to adequate treatment or bed treatment in the Riverina almost boils down to whether you can afford to go away to Sydney to have the most fundamental of care because the hospital is stretched to capacity. I find this absolutely unacceptable.

Rebecca Holiday, a young journalist with the *Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga's daily paper, contacted Mr Della Bosca's office and was told, 'The future of Wagga Wagga Base Hospital lies with the Commonwealth.' So Mr Della Bosca conveniently wiped his hands of the future of the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital and said it now lies with the Commonwealth infrastructure funds—the Health and Hospitals Fund and the infrastructure fund—which makes it very relevant to this bill. When we contacted the minister's office to find out how I as the federal member for Riverina could initiate action from the Commonwealth on the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital, we were advised that the minister's office did not know that they were responsible for the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital construction because Mr Della Bosca had not advised the minister's office that that was what he was telling the journalist from the *Daily Advertiser*. We then went back to the state government to tell them, 'The Commonwealth does not know about the redevelopment of the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital, so it seems that the ball is back in your court,' only to be told again that it would be subject to the Commonwealth-state discussions on the \$10 billion Health and Hospitals Fund.

I am thus taking this opportunity in the House to make this plea on behalf of the people of the Riverina to have the federal government minister assist the state government in moving forward the construction of the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital by enabling the state government discussions to make Wagga Wagga Base Hospital a priority piece of capital works infrastructure—to be built on time and delivered not only to the people but also to the professionals, who are working in absolutely unsatisfactory

conditions, and the patients, who are being treated in absolutely unsatisfactory conditions.

I raised in this House the situation in the children's ward. It was so infested with termites that the major problem and crisis for the children was certainly not the illness they were in hospital for but that the children's ward was so infested it was on its last legs. It sat out on a veranda and it was obviously a major concern. The Greater Southern Area Health Service did move to have that remedied very, very quickly, for which I am grateful.

The bottom line in using my time in this House to be as constructive as possible is to say that I welcome nation-building funds, but out of those nation-building funds I want responsibility taken for the construction of the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital.

In closing, could I mention my absolute dismay at the demise of the Communications Fund, which again is robbing rural and regional Australia of their rights and entitlements. Again, I make the point that the Labor Party voted against the sale of Telstra in this House. I know because I was on this side of the House at the time voting against the sale of Telstra. I am astounded and dismayed that I now find a raid on this Communications Fund that will ensure that, with the bundling of this money, rural and regional people will be again left when considering the need for up-to-date communications in rural areas. I express my disgust at that decision and believe that that is so unjust and so wrong for the government to now do this.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Byrne**) adjourned.