



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# SENATE

## Hansard

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**Wednesday, 24 September 2008**

<b>Facsimile:</b>	Senate	(02) 6277 2977
	House of Representatives	(02) 6277 2944
	Main Committee	(02) 6277 2944

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

# PROOF

the people there who need those hospital services so desperately.

While we are on Labor neglecting the regions, we cannot go past the extraordinary decision that we saw at budget time to cut Regional Partnerships funding for projects that were underway in the run-up to the election. I find that completely appalling, and I will give an example of it. A skate park was one of the projects put forward under Regional Partnerships in the run-up to the election, and I commend Daphne White, who was one of the many people in the region who did so much to try and get this project up and running. Now, \$110,000 does not sound like very much, and that is because in the scheme of things it is not very much. This is an area with a very, very high population of young people—young people who need something to do. They were incredibly involved in getting this project up and running, but they saw all that being axed and ripped out from underneath them.

There was such a hue and cry about all these projects in the pipeline being axed that the minister had to do a huge backflip a few months later and say, 'We're now going to assess all those projects that were in the pipeline.' We saw at the time the Labor MP, Justine Elliot, boasting, 'This is what we can do if we all work together,' referring to the backflip of the minister in saying that these projects would now be assessed.

Local skater Luke Wyatt said that 'local skaters would be stoked' to hear that the government had reversed their decision. This is a skate park for young people for a measly \$110,000 in a region that is rapidly expanding. By the way, it was not pork-barrelling because we had the local clubs, the state government—mind you, they were only going to contribute a paltry \$30,000—and the council working collectively because they knew this project was something that was so needed for the region. So they resubmitted it, it was reassessed and guess what? The Labor government said: 'We're sorry but you can't have your money for your young people in the town for your skate park. It's not going to happen.'

**Senator Mason**—You're kidding!

**Senator NASH**—I am not kidding, Senator Mason—it is absolutely true. This is appalling. All those young people in particular knew how important it was for them to have somewhere to collect and be together, and the government ripped it out from underneath them. And guess what? The reason the government gave was that there was not a commitment in place. Interestingly, the Regional Partnerships guidelines say that if you enter into a contract then it becomes null and void. You are not allowed to do that under the guidelines.

What we have seen here is an appalling decision by the Labor government to rip this money away from that local community. I challenge Justine Elliot, the local

member, to prove that she is more than 'just in Canberra' and more than 'just too busy', to invest in her local people and to actually go out there and fight for those people that are in her local community, because those people need her. The Labor government has neglected the regions time and time again, and now it has happened again on the far North Coast. (*Time expired*)

#### Centenary of Holland Park Mosque

**Senator FURNER** (Queensland) (1.51 pm)—As Australians we pride ourselves on being a nation built on many cultures and religions to form our great multicultural society. One of the most enjoyable things about being a representative of the people of Queensland is being able to take part and celebrate in our nation's multiculturalism. On Saturday, 30 August 2008 I had the privilege to attend the celebration of Queensland's oldest mosque in Holland Park, Brisbane. Holland Park Mosque, first built of wood in 1908 in the days of the White Australia policy, is now made of brick. It is hard to believe that this country restricted access to migrants until only 30 years ago. We are now a rich, diverse culture. Brisbane alone now has a population of over 20,000 Muslims and this figure continues to grow.

During the morning's proceedings I was sitting next to the commissioner of police chatting about the Islamic community in Brisbane. We discussed the events and atrocities that happened to other mosques as a result of 9-11 attacks, where, as a result of stereotyping and xenophobia, attempts were made to burn down mosques. When I looked around the crowd, there were children playing on rides and mothers caring for their babies. The question really struck me then why some people in our society have concerns about people who dress differently or who wear their hair in a different way.

The President of the Islamic Society of Holland Park, Mustafa Ally, compiled for the occasion a comprehensive book on the history of the mosque and the people who contributed to it, which was well received by guests on the day. Mustafa received the 2008 Multicultural Citizen of the Year Award at the Australia Day Awards this year. He is a big community supporter in Brisbane and a proud Australian citizen.

Mustafa's book looks into the difficulties Muslims faced in the early 1900s during the time of Australia's first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton. Some of you would be aware that in 1901 the Immigration (Restriction) Act was introduced to secure racial purity. Australia used xenophobic language tests to prevent undesirable people migrating to Australia. It sounds similar to legislation put through this parliament by the previous government. Sir Edmund Barton, at the time, commented:

The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman.

We saw a decline in the Muslim population up until the days of Gough Whitlam, who, in 1975, brought an end to this intolerant legislation through the Racial Discrimination Act. Visionary Labor leaders, such as Gough, implemented legislation that contributed to the fabric of our great society today.

During the rest of the day I met with Muslim community leaders and other dignitaries and spent time looking at the wonderful architecture and history of the mosque. I met many proud Australian families, mosque community groups and friends—friends like Abdul Obeid and his son, Abdul Jr. They were pleasing faces to see. On that day I learned for first time that the Muslim faith in Australia dates back to the 17th century. Today there are 340,000 Muslims, 36 per cent born in Australia, who are part of our diverse nation.

It is sad to think that during the previous government's time, multiculturalism, while it existed, was not embraced. There was mandatory detention; the 'Pacific solution'; the treatment of refugees; the apology, or lack thereof—ministers claiming the stolen generation never happened; and the citizenship test on Australian values. These all occurred under their watch.

But we are turning a new page, and being at the centenary of the Holland Park Mosque reminded me of the pride I have in being a part of a multicultural society and part of a party that recognises and embraces cultural diversity. I am proud that we now have a Prime Minister and an immigration minister who are committed to making positive changes for our nation. We have seen the apology to the stolen generation, a boost in skilled migration and a restoration of our immigration system. Detention centres are now being used only as a last resort for the shortest practicable time. There have been 13,041 humanitarian visas granted, helping people escape war, political strife and persecution; there has been \$3.4 million in grants to help refugees prepare for the Australian citizenship test; and eventually the temporary protection visa regime will end. I am proud to be part of a government that embraces our diversity. I am an Australian who is proud of our rich diversity. The many people who attended the centenary of the Holland Park Mosque are proud to be part of our diverse nation.

#### **DISTINGUISHED VISITORS**

**The PRESIDENT** Order! I draw the attention of honourable senators to the presence in the President's Gallery of a parliamentary delegation from the Senate Committee on Education, Science, Culture, Human Rights and Petitions from the Parliament of the Czech Republic, led by Senator Jan Halek, first Vice Chair of the committee. On behalf of all senators, I wish you a warm welcome to Australia and, in particular, to the Senate.

Secondly, I draw the attention of honourable senators to the presence in the President's Gallery of the

Australian Political Exchange Council—25th delegation from United States of America. On behalf of all senators, I wish you a warm welcome to Australia and, in particular, to the Senate.

**Honourable senators**—Hear, hear!

#### **QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE**

##### **Age Pension**

**Senator FISHER** (2.00 pm)—My question is to the Minister representing the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Senator Evans. Minister, what would be the current rate of the single age pension had the Howard government continued Labor's policy of linking the pension to the CPI only and not changed to the higher of the CPI or 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings?

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I thank the senator for her question, although again it seems that the Liberal Party are more concentrated on stunts rather than the important issues that are at stake here. The answer, Senator, as you know, is that the pension has been benchmarked against 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings for some years.

**Senator Humphries**—Courtesy of?

**Senator Sherry**—The Hawke-Labor government.

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—That is a decision when the indexation arrangements—

**The PRESIDENT**—Senator Sherry and others! Senator Evans is entitled to be heard during the giving of his answer.

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—As Senator Sherry rightly interjects, indexation arrangements were first put in place by the Hawke government, and there were some changes made by the previous coalition government. Both sides of parliament supported an indexation method that best sought to assist pensioners to keep pace with the changing costs of living and to retain their relativity to the movement in average weekly earnings.

Those decisions were taken by successive governments to try to ensure that pensioners did not fall behind and that they were linked to a method that best reflected the movements in the costs that face pensioners and the movements more generally in the economy. Those decisions by successive governments were good decisions and over the years they have assisted pensioners generally to keep up with the rising costs of living.

What we do know is that, over the years, pensioners have increasingly found things are tough. They have certainly found things are tough since inflation started rising under the previous government and the cost of their food, electricity, gas and petrol has been going up. We acknowledge that pensioners are doing it tough and