



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Votes and Proceedings

Hansard

THURSDAY, 13 MAY 2004

CORRECTIONS

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Thursday, 20 May 2004

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Thursday, 13 May 2004

Mr Causley took the chair at 9.40 a.m.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Burke Electorate: Maltese Australians

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Burke) (9.40 a.m.)—Steve and Lillian Schembri, who reside in my electorate, were born, grew up and were educated in Australia. They were compelled to leave the country with their parents at the age of 18. Mr and Mrs Schembri were both forced to renounce Australian citizenship at the age of 18 in order to retain Maltese citizenship after they moved to Malta with their parents. This was a requirement of Maltese law at the time. This law was changed in 2000. They have maintained close and enduring ties with Australia through their numerous relatives in this country. They see their future and the future of their children in Australia, yet the government denies them the ability to reacquire Australian citizenship because they are over the age of 25.

Several of Mr Schembri's relatives, all citizens of Australia, are known to me and my staff through their involvement in community activities and service. Mr Schembri is a qualified solid plasterer and has been offered employment in Australia. His trade qualification is relatively rare and highly desirable in this country. Maltese law, prior to 2000, required young people of Maltese descent to renounce their Australian citizenship between their 18th and 19th birthdays in order to retain their Maltese citizenship. Those failing to do so became ineligible for free tertiary education in Malta and were unable to hold certain jobs, access social security benefits or purchase property without approval.

While the Australian government says it is unable to provide a proper estimate of numbers, it is understood that there are, at most, a couple of thousand Maltese Australians who have renounced their Australian citizenship because of this provision. It is highly unlikely that every single eligible person will apply in this regard. Minister Hardgrave has indicated that the Maltese community has raised the issue with him and that it is under consideration. I consider the minister's position to be a cop-out, given the history and given the unfair application to Maltese Australians. It is not immediately clear why this needs to be in line with age requirements on citizenship by descent, other than from a sense of bureaucratic tidiness. Meanwhile, many people are suffering needlessly from this law, and Australia has very little to gain and much to lose by denying many former Australians the chance to contribute meaningfully to the Australian community.

In my electorate there are many Maltese Australians and many who suffer from this inequitable situation. I think it is about time that we changed the law, given the discriminatory nature of its application. Labor is looking to consider this matter and to change the law in order to ensure that people such as Steve and Lillian Schembri will be able to become full Australian citizens, as they were prior to going to Malta, where they were forced to renounce their Australian citizenship. (*Time expired*)

Budget 2004-05

Mr JOHN COBB (Parkes) (9.43 a.m.)—I feel very moved at this time to talk about the neglect of country roads and branch lines in country New South Wales, especially in my electorate of Parkes. This is at a time when thankfully the coalition, and John Anderson in particular, has announced the extension of the Roads to Recovery program, with another \$1.2 billion over four years. The 14 local governments in the Parkes area have fallen over with relief that the Commonwealth is doing that. On top of that, a further \$1 billion for country roads was announced in the budget. It is to be announced soon how that money will be disbursed. But we also have well over \$3 billion in the budget towards road and rail infrastructure. This is very necessary. The neglect of country roads and rail in my electorate is very damaging.

The West Wyalong to Burcher line is being closed. We have more trucks on the roads and less maintenance being given to them. I felt so strongly about it that I recently mailed out a request for people to send in a response about what they felt about branch line closures and maintenance around my electorate. We have over 2,000 responses by people who did not just have to put a cross in a box and send it back; they had to put their own stamp on it and mail it. That is an enormous response from an electorate when we consider that most of those people live in towns. I hope that, on behalf of my constituents, Andrew Stoner, the leader of The Nationals in New South Wales, will present their responses to the state government—to Mr Costa and to the minister for roads. There will be road closures in my electorate if the state government continues to ignore the result of failing to repair country branch lines.

Thankfully, the ARTC is taking over and getting \$540 million to spend on the main lines in New South Wales in a month's time—that is, before the end of this financial year—but it is still up to the state government to pay the cost of maintaining those branch lines, which they are not doing. Obviously, they are considering closing a