



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Charter of Budget Honesty Amendment
(Regional Australia Statements) Bill 2015**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 24 March 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker McGowan, Cathy, MP	Question No.

Ms McGOWAN (Indi) (19:26): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased to present a bill for an act to amend the Charter of Budget Honesty Act 1998. This bill is to be known as the Charter of Budget Honesty Amendment (Regional Australia Statements) Bill 2015.

When I stood on my feet for the first time in this chamber on 2 Dec 2013, I committed to listening to my community. I said that I would go anywhere in Indi to listen to people's concerns. I have listened and I am here to deliver the message from Indi. The message is simple. The government must demonstrate that it is listening to the people who live in regional Australia.

This amendment bill answers the call from my community. It calls on the government, when formulating policy, to ensure that regional impact statements are prepared and accompany every budget, every year.

I also said that I would focus especially on those who live in the more isolated rural areas—people who are disadvantaged because of poor public transport, patchy mobile phone coverage, terrible internet connections, and fewer employment and educational opportunities.

This amendment bill addresses this commitment; it gives voice to those who live in regional Australia and it goes to the very heart of regional living.

In regional Australia, government initiatives often have a disproportionate impact on communities due to the lack of infrastructure. This is clearly evident when patchy and nonexistent mobile phone coverage or internet connections and little or no access to public transport limit the day-to-day life of communities.

The purpose of this bill is to call for regional Australia statements to provide information to allow the assessment of the impact of government policy decisions on regional Australia to be understood.

The absence of a Rural and Regional Ministerial Statement in the 2014-15 budget caused great concern in my electorate and throughout regional Australia. To my knowledge, this statement has been included in every budget since 1996-97, except for the one year of 2006-07. It has been sorely missed.

Without this statement in the budget, people who live in regional Australia in communities in Indi such as Wodonga, Wangaratta, Benalla and Alexandra can't be sure that their needs have been taken into account in the creation of the budget.

Using the 2014-15 budget as an illustration: co-payments for doctors' visits, changes to the funding for the higher education, changes to pensions, changes to allowances for young people and changes to the price of petrol—to name just a few—all had significant negative impacts on people who live in regional Australia.

It is the intention of this legislation to avoid repetition of these circumstances in the future and to ensure that the people who live in regional Australia can have full confidence that the government has taken into account all the circumstances relevant to their lives when it makes important decisions.

And so to the bill before us tonight.

In summary: the purpose of the amendments is to ensure that the framework for the conduct of government fiscal policy, which includes obligations on the government to provide regular financial reporting, should include an obligation to publicly release and table a Regional Australia Statement with each budget economic and fiscal outlook report and with each Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook report.

The major elements of the bill are as follows.

Item 1 proposes an obligation upon the Treasurer to publicly release and table Regional Australia Statements together with each budget and MYEFO.

Item 2 inserts a new part 5A—Regional Australia Statements.

Section 19B outlines the purpose of Regional Australia Statements, this being to provide information to allow the assessment of the impact of government decisions on regional Australia.

Section 19C details the contents of the statements, including the likely economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts on regional Australia of key government initiatives. Specifically, it requires coverage of:

the likely impacts on regional Australia of key government initiatives, or significant changes to such initiatives, since the last Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook report was released or in connection with the budget; and

progress made in implementing key government initiatives that are likely to have an impact on regional Australia.

It calls for Regional Australia Statements to be prepared having regard to the following:

the economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts of government initiatives;

the economic drivers of regional communities;

the disproportionate effect that government initiatives may have in regional communities due to a lack of infrastructure, including:

(i) mobile phone coverage;

(ii) reliable internet connections; and

(iii) access to public transport;

the lack of access that people living in regional communities have to government services due to cost and long travel distances and times;

the effect that lack of competition in regional communities has on:

(i) the cost of living and doing business in regional communities; and

(ii) the cost and difficulty involved in complying with regulatory requirements for people and businesses in regional communities.

Section 19D allows for the Treasurer to request Commonwealth bodies to provide information to help in the preparation of Regional Australia Statements.

There has been extensive consultation on this proposed legislation, including with colleagues in this place—on both sides of the House. Stakeholder groups in the telecommunications, transport, health, education, agriculture, environment and human services areas are strongly supportive of this initiative.

At this point I would like to acknowledge and thank my staff, the volunteers in my office and the Clerk of the House for their help in preparing this legislation.

My voice is the voice of regional Australia.

In this bill, the voice of regional Australia is loud and clear to the government.

I call on the government to acknowledge the impact that government decisions have on regional Australia and I call on the government to commit to this bill by publicly releasing and tabling Regional Australia Statements with every budget and MYEFO.

Intended results of this legislation are that it improves knowledge and understanding of the impact of fiscal and budgetary measures upon the community; that, as a result of greater information and understanding, there is more confidence and trust in government and in government's ability and willingness to govern for all Australians; and that, with greater trust and confidence, there will be increased participation in our democracy and a willingness to take on leadership positions necessary to advance this great nation of ours.

I commend this bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Craig Kelly): Is the motion seconded?