



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

Office for Regional Australia Bill 2019

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 18 February 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker McGowan, Cathy, MP	Question No.

Ms McGOWAN (Indi) (10:57): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

In summary, in presenting this bill I would like to continue my call for the need for an overarching, comprehensive, long-term and non-partisan approach to dealing with regional Australia through a white and green paper process. I want to recognise that good regional policy is absolutely needed for our nation. And, third, I want to call out the government's absolutely inadequate response to the *Regions at the ready* report.

The government is mistaken if it believes its response to *Regions at the ready: investing in Australia's future*, the report tabled last week, demonstrates a strong and ongoing commitment to the future of rural and regional Australia.

Last week, eight months after the committee released its report, the government responded to the report's 13 recommendations. These recommendations were the result of a year of analysis, 14 public hearings and more than 200 written submissions, and to say that I'm underwhelmed by the government's response is absolutely an understatement.

Most disappointing is the lost opportunity to progress the vision outlined in the report for the sustainable growth and development of all of Australia.

The response fails to establish a white paper process and instead offers an 'expert panel'.

As a result, colleagues, I have taken action together with the member for Mayo to present this private members' bill, the Office for Regional Australia Bill 2019.

This bill will address the deficiencies in the government's approach, developing an office for regional Australia modelled on the Productivity Commission:

to give the community greater input to policy implementation and a means to investigate negative impacts of regulation;

to support the development of regional strategic plans and regional deals; and

to back the RDA network in their role, with research and analysis to drive development in regional Australia. The bill puts into action the principles and recommendations established by the Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation.

It's not rocket science. Why does it take the crossbench to act on a government report? We, with our limited resources, are bringing legislation to the parliament. We are not saying, 'We need another month.' We are not saying, 'We need another committee.' We are taking action. We are doing the hard work that rural and regional Australia needs. Can I say, colleagues: the people in my community, the people in Mayo and the people in Mallee are noticing who's doing the work for regional Australia in this place.

This office will hold inquiries about matters relating to policy. The Office for Regional Australia will support coordination, collaboration and innovation in relation to policy. It will develop and support our RDAs. The Office for Regional Australia will provide advice to the minister about matters relating to regional deals and regional planning. The Office for Regional Australia will promote public understanding of matters relevant to policy that impact on regional Australia.

The bill requires that the minister table a statement embodying the government's policy for regional Australia, and this may be developed through a formal white paper process. The bill also provides for the development of a

parliamentary joint committee on regional development and decentralisation to provide parliamentary oversight of the work of the office. Just let me take a minute on this one, colleagues. When I was first elected to this House, in 2013, I put my hand up to be on the regional development committee. It didn't meet. Nothing happened. I went to see the minister, the National Party minister for regional development. He said: 'No, Cathy, you've got it wrong. It does transport.' I said, 'Well, how does the parliament get input into regional development?' He said, 'Oh, it's an ad hoc committee that meets occasionally.' The House of Representatives does not have a committee on regional development and decentralisation. Can you imagine that? To all the colleagues out there in rural and regional Australia: if you're wondering why the government is doing such a bad job, it's because there's no committee here and no process here to develop it. It was in the report, and we're saying it absolutely needs to be established as a matter of urgency.

The second example I want to give of my real frustration with the system is child care. Last week I tabled in this House a petition from my community about rural child care. Just give me the indulgence of a few minutes to explain my absolute frustration with the lack of government understanding of how rural and regional Australia is different to the cities—how one size doesn't fit all—and how the market conditions in rural and regional Australia are different to those in the cities. The government came up with a way—very useful in some parts—to reform childcare payments. It needed to be done, but it had a one-size-fits-all process. The government took what we had in rural and regional Australia, which was a really good program of mobile childcare services, basically got rid of it and said everybody must be transitioned into centres. The industry, and the Aboriginal community that relied on these mobile childcare services, got organised and came to see us. They said, 'Can we have something different?' So we tried to work with the government of the day—no action. We tried to get an impact statement done. We said to the minister in questions in writing: 'Have you done an impact statement on what this means for rural and regional Australia?' The response was: 'No, we didn't do that, because there's going to be no impact.' Can you believe that we've changed the way child care is funded but we don't have an impact statement? Long story short: exactly as we expected, in my community over Christmas the funding for the childcare centres was stopped. I'm really grateful to the Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, the member for Wannon, for coming to the rescue, but it should never have happened.

Why do we need an office for regional Australia? We need an office for regional Australia because the regions are different to the cities. We have a really good model, in the Productivity Commission, for doing inquiries, and we could do so much good work.

I want to bring to the attention of the House another bit of legislation that will be before the House this week. It is about the government setting up a drought fund. It's great to have infrastructure money in the system to build dams—and I know my colleague the member for Kennedy really wants more dams—but the whole thing about regional Australia, why we absolutely need infrastructure, is that we've got people living there, and those people need to be supported because so many of them work in a voluntary capacity. While it's great to build a dam, if you don't put money into committees, into resilience programs, into RDAs—into planning—that money just gets washed away. Invest in the people. That is what we're saying this office should do.

I will finish with my call to action to whichever party wins at the next election, whichever party that gets to sit on these really important benches here: this report needs to be acted on. I ask my colleagues in the Labor Party: will Labor commit to acting on the recommendations in *Regions at the ready*? Will Labor commit to an office of regional Australia? And where are the National Party in developing and promoting comprehensive regional policies? The comment was that they're already doing a good job. Well, there are not many people in rural and regional Australia who think that the current way of operating—ad hoc competitive grants—is actually working.

Not many of us think it's working, and I call on the National Party to actually step up and give us a policy, give us a strategy. Show us how, if you're investing \$100 million in drought, it's actually linked to a strategy. Show us that you are going to have transparency, that you're going to engage with your communities and that you're going to bring the people with you—that you don't just do a slush fund that the cattle industry can access; that you are going to actually look at communities and businesses and develop a way for the whole nation to work together.

In finishing my comments I want to say that this is a plea from the heart. This will be my last private member's bill to this parliament, because I'm stepping down—though I'm going to continue to do my work. I'm absolutely delighted that in Indi we have a fantastic candidate who's going to run. Helen Haines, welcome to the House today as you learn your way around. I know you'll pick up the need for a strong independent voice for rural and regional Australia. I know you'll call out the National Party. I know you'll call out the regional Liberals. I know you're

going to continue this work. You're such an articulate, clever, intelligent and wonderful representative for north-east Victoria, and I wish you luck. It's no accident that my last private member's bill is about an office for regional Australia. This is the issue that I've championed through all my six years. I have to say how fundamentally underwhelmed I am that the best the government can do is say, 'Oh, we're going to set up another committee and we'll report on 31 March.' Oh, come on! What's 31 March? It's the day almost before the budget comes out. It is just a pathetic response.

I want to finish with a comment from Amanda Walsh, who wrote an article for *The Conversation* in June 2018. She described the *Regions at the ready* report as a 'far-reaching and highly practical work program for regional development'. I urge the government to recognise that we need to have a strategy, that we need to have a plan, and that, for the nation's good, we need to put rural and regional Australia at the forefront of our national policy. I commend this bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Rob Mitchell): Is the motion seconded?

Ms Sharkie: It is my great pleasure to second this motion, and I congratulate the member for Indi on her work over the last six years with respect to rural communities across Australia. I reserve my right to speak.

Debate adjourned.