



APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2005-2006
APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2005-2006
Second Reading

[Ms GRIERSON](#) (Newcastle) (6.46 p.m.)—I rise today to speak on [Appropriation Bill \(No. 3\) 2005-2006](#) and [Appropriation Bill \(No. 4\) 2005-2006](#) and to support the amendments moved by my colleague the shadow minister for finance. I support the amendments because, while the government likes to talk up its economic management credentials, its lack of real investment in our community is beginning to show. Just this week the Reserve Bank said:

Australia's export performance over recent years has been disappointing, despite the generally favourable international conditions.

Export prices are booming due to high commodity prices; however, export volumes are stagnant. The government's neglect of infrastructure over the past 10 years has meant we cannot fully take advantage of the international commodities boom. Of course, part of that infrastructure is knowledge and skills. Our trade deficit in December 2005 was \$1.7 billion, the 45th deficit in a row. The current account deficit remains one of the highest in the OECD, at around six per cent of GDP. No other large commodity-exporting country runs a deficit as large as Australia's.

An examination of these appropriation bills can tell us a lot about our economy and the effect it is having on the services to our communities. Obviously, there will be many people out there who demonstrate to us every day in our jobs that our services are not as strong as they should be. When savings measures are deducted, these bills combined allow the government to spend an additional \$3.5 billion. A lot of that spending, though, is for fixes that the Howard government has had to conjure up to offset the neglect and complacency—or just incompetency—that has built up after 10 long years in power.

For example, in these bills there is an extra \$110.7 million for industrial relations programs. But why the need for this additional money? I do not remember that from the election. What happened between May, when the budget was delivered, and now? Just a couple of weeks after the budget, the Howard government released its six-page plan for a modern workplace. This document proposed a whole range of fine-sounding measures to simplify and modernise our industrial relations system. They were fine sounding until the Australian people in the subsequent weeks and months actually worked out

that behind all the cheery headings was the most extreme, unfair and regressive workplace legislation ever proposed in this country.

We found that the new Fair Pay Commission had no legislated need to consider fairness when setting the minimum wage and no legislated need to raise the minimum wage each year. We found that there would now be only five guaranteed minimum conditions. We found that the no-disadvantage test was being abolished, meaning that collective and individual agreements no longer had to be at least as good as the relevant award. We found that the Australian Industrial Relations Commission was being gutted of pretty much all of its functions. And we found that unfair dismissal protection was being abolished for four million Australians. Forever mean and tricky! I do not remember any of that in the election campaign.

The Australian people did not think any of this sounded quite so good to them once they had had a look at it. So the government, apparently shocked that the Australian people did not share their vision for dismantling workplace rights, went into damage control—always a very costly process. This is where we come to the extra \$110 million. They called in the spin doctors, the PR gurus and the advertisers. They thought up a great new name: Work Choices. That must have cost a bit. They printed pamphlets and pulped them when they forgot to put the word 'fairness' on the front. They set up call centres where the operators read back to callers the information printed in the pamphlets. It was a classic, and inept, propaganda blitz. It was classic damage control, and it cost the taxpayer \$55 million. Almost half of the extra money the Howard government sought for their industrial relations programs was actually spent on covering the cost of advertising those programs.

Meanwhile, these bills also seek \$52.4 million for the Job Network, to assist highly disadvantaged job seekers. Again, the government has failed to get its policies right in the first place. Instead of focusing on the existing shortcomings of the Job Network, the Howard government decided to embark upon its so-called Welfare to Work reforms last year. In my electorate of Newcastle last year, 10½ thousand people were receiving either disability or single parent payments. We are a regional capital. That is 11.6 per cent of the population. Thankfully, though, this group have been spared the worst excesses of this government because they are already receiving these benefits. But the government should not be cutting anyone's disability or parenting payments. It should instead be providing the right incentives and support for all people to move into meaningful work. For women, particularly, child care is always an issue.

The Job Network is a terribly complex system for both the people out of work and the providers within the system who are supposed to be helping them to locate jobs. In a recent example, a constituent came to my office and reported how he was trying to access vocational training through his Job Network provider. He was a mature aged job-seeker, over 45, and his Job Network provider apparently did not know he was entitled to access a training

account to allow him to pay for books, equipment and course fees. Instead, he was advised that he would need to go out and do six months worth of Work for the Dole to earn training credits first. It is absolutely ridiculous that a Job Network provider, let alone the job seeker himself, had not been informed or did not know that he could access these training accounts.

Another complex area is the Personal Support Program within the Job Network system, which is for people with multiple and extreme barriers to employment, such as drug dependency, mental illness or extreme disadvantage. The aim of the PSP is not to get these people a job in the short term. Rather, it runs over 24 months and is designed to address the barriers to employment that they face. However, a constituent on the PSP recently came to my office, thrilled that they had finally obtained a job offer and requesting assistance to buy the boots and blues required on the work site the following day. Under the PSP, his provider could not access the money to buy him the equipment that he needed to take up his job. Any person on the Newstart allowance would be able to access that money, but this person could not because he was on PSP.

That is just ridiculous. That is the sort of incompetence we see every day in our office—that sort of anomaly. I hope the additional funding for disadvantaged job seekers helps to ensure that situations like this do not continue to arise. The Job Network has always been overly complex and overly expensive. It has been bailed out over and over and it has never delivered optimal outcomes for job seekers. Again, the Howard government is seeking money to fix up bad policy.

Another big ticket item covered by these bills is the extra money for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, now aptly titled DIMA. There is an additional \$41.2 million for DIMA, of which almost half, \$16.2 million, is to implement its response to the Palmer and Comrie reports into the wrongful incarceration of Cornelia Rau and the wrongful deportation of Vivian Alvarez. So, again, we have half the extra expenditure for a program being taken up to fix the mistakes that this government could have avoided by having a half-decent program in place in the first place.

I do not begrudge the spending of this money if it really does improve detention arrangements and is not just wasted on DIMA's new corporate culture change—their coffee mugs, their screen savers and their brand new mission statement on everything. But it is money that needs to be spent correctly to improve the situation. It is a serious, systemic, institutional problem that the Howard government has bred into the department. Do not spend any more on spin.

I note that Minister Vanstone has now admitted that DIMA is looking at another case of wrongful detention of a person with mental illness—one of about 200 cases of wrongful detention currently being examined by the ombudsman. I sincerely hope we are not here again this time next year

passing additional appropriations to fund the government's poor response to these cases born of their own incompetence. The government should be able to get it right in the first place.

I would also look at airport security, for which around \$132.7 million is being appropriated. Again, I welcome additional funding to keep our travelling public safe. But again, you have to question how the Howard government keeps letting these issues slide until finally public outrage forces them to act. As Deputy Chair of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, which is inquiring into airport security for the second time in three years, I have seen the inside of a great number of airports—as has the member for Dobell opposite. It did not take me long to realise that something needed to be done about airport security. It is worrying that it took the Howard government until it was finally publicly embarrassed by the baggage handler wearing that infamous camel outfit at Sydney airport to call in an outside expert, Sir John Wheeler, to investigate. It is also worrying that, in the rush to cover up its lack of cohesive policy, even the fixes it is forced into are rarely comprehensive.

On the issue of airport security, I am pleased that it has committed \$18.2 million to provide a first response counter-terrorism capability at relevant airports. But I would rather have continuous on-the-ground programs that actually build a security culture. These relevant airports unfortunately and inexplicably exclude the fastest-growing regional airport in the country—Newcastle airport. Indeed, I am surprised that the member for Paterson, in whose electorate it is actually located and who was until very recently the Chair of the JCPAA investigating airport security, has apparently never publicly raised this issue. I suppose, along with the neglect of the Williamstown Boeing workers who have been locked out for 260 days without a pay cheque, it is just another example of that local member, Mr Baldwin, failing to go in to bat for the people in the electorate of Paterson. There were 757,450 passengers who passed through Newcastle airport last year, an increase of 65 per cent on the previous year. It is a vitally important piece of infrastructure for our region and for our state. Yet the Howard government has not seen fit to provide it with the same amount of protection afforded to other regional airports.

There are other areas in these appropriation bills where, with a little prodding of his good friend the Prime Minister, the member for Paterson could have secured much better outcomes for the region that he is part of and that I am part of. Newcastle's port is the largest coal exporting port in the world. It is the final link in the chain that sees our minerals shipped out to markets around the world. There are some in the community who are concerned about the contribution of greenhouse gasses to global warming, and in July last year the Greenpeace ship, *Rainbow Warrior*, blocked access to the port of Newcastle and to the coal loaders.

This situation was resolved quickly and peacefully, to the credit of the Newcastle Port Corporation and the state government. And this in itself tells a tale about the Howard government's commitment to port security. This is an issue of national importance, but the federal government has consistently failed to implement a comprehensive protection regime. The government legislated for a national port security regime in 2003, but this legislation still sits before the parliament as we speak. Currently, around eight different federal agencies have some responsibility for port security, but there remains significant concern that no-one is really in charge. We need Labor's department of homeland security, with its own dedicated minister, to better coordinate these agencies and work closely with the states and port operators.

Each year around 1,300 overseas ships arrive in Newcastle port, and for more than 75 per cent of these Newcastle is the first port of call. Some of these do carry dangerous cargoes such as ammonium nitrate. We need proper security checks on foreign flagged vessels arriving at our ports to ensure they identify their crew and cargo accurately 48 hours before arrival so the required checks can be carried out. We also need a sensible approach from the government on the issuing of maritime security cards for people working in our ports. Unfortunately, the Howard government has not seen fit to prioritise this aspect of transport security in either its 2005-06 budget or in these appropriations bills before us today.

Another piece of infrastructure for the people of Newcastle and the people of the Hunter region long neglected by the Howard government is the upgrade to our Energy Australia Stadium. The New South Wales Labor government put in \$30 million towards the stadium upgrade. At the 2004 election, federal Labor promised to put in \$20 million. The Howard government has never offered a cent. The tourism and leisure industries are growing in our region, and bringing employment and investment opportunities with them. Our stadium is a big part of that economic opportunity. People from all over our region support the sporting teams which play out of Energy Australia Stadium. All Labor members in the Hunter have committed to funding for its upgrade. Has the member for Paterson prevailed upon his Prime Minister to do the same? It does not seem so. As he is now the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources it is time he pulled his finger out for the Hunter!

Similarly, why hasn't he forced the government to provide Medicare funding for the positron emission tomography, PET, scanner at the Mater Hospital? We do have one—it is funded through a special fund set up by doctors themselves. This PET scanner is vital in the diagnosis and staging of many cancers. There is mounting scientific evidence that PET scans save lives and spare very ill people from unnecessary surgery and other radical treatment. The PET scanner at the Mater serves an area from Newcastle to the Queensland border. It would cost \$11 million a year to fund. Without funding, people needing a Medicare funded scan have to travel to Sydney. I have

asked the Minister for Health and Ageing repeatedly to provide this funding. The two bills before us add \$3.5 billion to the budget. There is a surplus of \$13 billion. Why can't the Howard government find \$11 million to provide this life-saving technology to the people of the Hunter and northern New South Wales? The member for Paterson says he has lobbied the health minister for a Medicare licence. That is good. I just wish he would hurry up and get an answer for those people who are ill and who need this technology. The minister's standard response has been that PET scans are 'under review'. I have heard that before! The last deadline for the completion of that review passed in July last year. It is long overdue and it is time for action.

It is also time for action on long-term funding for the Hunter's General Practice Access After Hours scheme. This program provides vital access to general practice services to our community outside of normal surgery hours. It is acknowledged around the country as the leading model for providing these kinds of GP services. However, since its inception, the Howard government has consistently declined to provide it with the secure, long-term funding it needs and deserves. Each year it seems the member for Paterson makes a big show of stepping in to 'save' the service by securing another year or so of funding. In August 2004, following Labor's announcement that it would provide ongoing funding to the service, assuring it of continuous funding, the member for Paterson announced that the Howard government would provide two years trial funding. I suppose this got good headlines—'Lease of life for doctors scheme' was one of them—but one year later, late last year, the member for Paterson was able to announce that he has stepped in to once again save the service. Again, good headlines: 'Abbott saves five GP clinics'. The problem is it is only another two years funding, not the certainty of a five-year agreement that doctors' groups, Labor and the community have been asking for. I may sound cynical, but it seems the member for Paterson is more interested in a yearly good-news media announcement than long-term funding for an essential service.

Similarly, respite care in our region does not receive the secure ongoing funding it deserves. Respite care is funded quarterly, leaving people who are caring for sick or elderly loved ones unsure as to whether they will have access to respite services in the future. One of my constituents, Tom Potter, was so fed up with these arrangements that late last year he made his concerns public via the media, and his distress was obvious. He also put his concerns to me on numerous occasions. Tom was the carer for his wife, Beryl. Tragically, just over a week after Tom had talked to the media, I was attending his funeral. He is a great loss to our community, to his family and particularly to his wife. The care he gave was a great example to us all—absolute devotion. There are carers like Tom Potter in all our communities around Australia and they need more support. There is none in the bills we are debating.

Also in my electorate, Newcastle University still faces a challenging future. A good start could be to match Labor's promise to create an additional 80

medical places at the university. This would assist both the university and the community through the training of doctors who will be more likely to stay and work in their own community. My region, like many around Australia, is also suffering a chronic shortage of child-care places, particularly for people doing shiftwork or those doing extra hours. With more shiftwork and longer hours set to be the norm under the government's industrial relations changes, we need to start sorting this out now. The Bureau of Statistics says families are paying 62 per cent more for child care than they were four years ago. This skyrocketing cost only adds to the problems people are having in accessing this essential family service.

So what is happening with these appropriations bills it is quite stark. We have the Howard government looking for more money to patch up its mistakes in areas like industrial relations, the Job Network, immigration and airport security. Meanwhile, without a coherent policy approach to things like child care, education and health care, these areas continue to be neglected. This neglect is not acceptable for the people of Newcastle; it is not acceptable for the people of this country. Similarly, with our economy showing such imbalance at the moment in a time of great prosperity and opportunity it also reflects very badly on this government that it has not invested in knowledge and research and development. It has not invested in supply chains and infrastructure and it certainly has not invested in its people in terms of skills and training. That neglect is showing very clearly with no change in those economic imbalances. That is unbelievable for Australians. We know we are capable of much more. The Howard government stands condemned. These bills just expose more neglect, more incompetence and certainly more disregard for the basic needs of Australian people and their communities.