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SPEECH

February 11, 2020

FEDERATION CHAMBER

**Helen Haines calls out 'sports rorts' in grievance debate**

Indi (18:30): Like most Australians, I've been tremendously disappointed by the recent revelations regarding the Community Sport Infrastructure Grant Program—or, sadly, as most now know it, 'sports rorts'. As if that isn't bad enough, it's becoming apparent that there are other grant programs that are now under a similar cloud—pools that weren't asked for and grants with no guidelines at all flung unabashedly towards marginal seats. Each day seems to bring a new scandal.

If my voice sounds tired, it is because I am tired of hearing about these things. At the centre of sports rorts is an ugly reality—that is, that our government perpetrated a considered and planned abuse of power. These are grants that were applied for in good faith by good people all over the nation—good people who had high hopes for good things in their local clubs. Those same people have now found out that they were wasting their time.

They've also found out that this was no mistake. Scoring high according to the guidelines but being overlooked was no accident; it was design. They've found out that this wasn't a computing error or a bureaucratic bungle. It was, in fact, a deliberate use of ministerial discretion not for public good but for political gain—an abuse that the minister, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and other government members are completely happy to defend. 'Let it go,' you might say. 'The train has moved on.' But we mustn't just let this go through to the keeper. We need to ask ourselves what will stop this practice from happening again.

I want to dwell for a minute on what this whole tawdry episode says about this place and how it's seen from the outside—that is, by the people it serves. I was listening recently to a former minister in the current government who stepped down at the last election. He reflected on his time here and said: 'It's been quite interesting since I left. When I hear my former colleagues answering questions, I often think, "Oh, for God's sake, answer the question."'

He went on to say, 'When you're inside that bubble, group-think becomes the norm and you don't really step outside it. Now that I'm not there, when I listen to them talking, I think: it's obvious you're not answering the question.' This came from a former minister. When I think about the scandal over the sport grants and some of the things that members of the government have said in its defence, I think about these comments, because this is the thing: good people across the nation know when they're being ripped off and they know when they're being fed a line.

No-one believes the spin. Everyone knows that the real question is not answered here. Claiming that rules were not broken, when the ANAO's unequivocal report is that rules were manifestly broken; claiming that there's 'nothing to see here', when people all over the nation know that the emperor has no clothes; and claiming that this program is unimpeachable because it funded girls' changing rooms, when it's plain to see that this was about political self-interest, not about girls and changing rooms, is not answering the question. Novelty cheques were handed out by unelected candidates while the elected and respected local MP was left on the sidelines. People aren't fooled by this



nonsense. They're embarrassed to watch it. It's embarrassing because good people of sound character know that it's wrong.

When the truth emerged about sports rorts, most fair-minded people rightfully expected a bit of embarrassment in return. Perhaps they hoped for that now rare and old-fashioned hallmark of a true leader: an admission of fault and a genuine show of remorse. But, no, there has been no acknowledgment from anyone in the government that any part of this was wrong—notwithstanding, weeks on from the Auditor-General's scathing report, a concession of the failure to register membership of a shooting club and thus a conflict of interest for which the minister took responsibility and subsequently stood down. But, even then, the minister not only defended the practice of determining grants' success by marginal seat status; she said she would do it all again.

Australians have never felt less trust in politicians, and incidents such as this confirm those feelings. That's what truly disturbs me. Confirming to the nation that they cannot trust their leaders—by unapologetically spinning an alternative narrative on the Auditor-General's report—serves to further distance Australians from their government. That's a dangerous thing for our democracy. I feel pretty sure that, if someone—anyone—in the government just said, 'You know, this is wrong. The ANAO has found us wanting. This is not good enough. We are sorry. We assure you we are committed to remedying this', I reckon the public would say, 'Yep. Fair enough. Don't do it again.'

But 'sorry' simply is the hardest word in this place. That is really disturbing. We put the word 'honourable' at the fronts of ministers' names because we expect honour from them and we expect decency and humility. When things go wrong, we just expect a bit of contrition. But no-one moves on when they lose trust. They remain unsettled and cynical. When our citizens are cynical, how can we as their elected representatives possibly lead them on issues of real national importance? This is the real tragedy of all of this.

When the Prime Minister referred the saga to the head of his department to investigate a possible breach of ministerial standards, I was powerfully disappointed by that too. In fact, if we weren't in the midst of the worst bushfire crisis this nation has ever experienced, we might have felt a rush of air across this nation as we collectively shook our heads, not in disbelief but, sadly, in complete belief—complete belief that of course there was never going to be immediate action; there was going to be a new review.

Why, after the Audit Office has just submitted a meticulous research report, did we need another investigation to establish if the senator breached the ministerial code of conduct? The code says ministers 'must ensure disinterested exercise of statutory and other powers', and must 'observe fairness in making official decisions'. It's disturbing to me that the Prime Minister was unable to tell himself that the ANAO report demonstrated a clear breach of those standards. It is even more disturbing that this extra process cannot be seen outside of cabinet.

Thus, the Prime Minister creates an alternative reality where the former minister for sport did nothing wrong. The Deputy Prime Minister said he was choosing to believe this alternative reality. But the rest of the nation, I can tell you, in fact chose to believe the ANAO report, the one that we can all see and read. In episodes like this, people rightly lose faith in politicians. They think we're all rotten, that we're all in it for ourselves. The tragic thing is I don't believe either the senator or the Prime Minister or any one of us in this place is truly rotten or that we got into politics to dabble in corruption or to look out for ourselves. That's another tragedy of this.



So the need to introduce a federal integrity commission has never been clearer. Such a commission would not be a silver bullet, but it is an urgent and necessary intervention into this nation's spiralling crisis of trust in political institutions. I want something constructive to come out of all of this. My predecessor set the bar by introducing a private member's bill to establish a federal integrity commission. The government has since declared that they will introduce their own. They said they would do that by last December. Where is it? We haven't seen it yet. Indeed, today the government gagged debate on a motion that was brought forward from the Senate to discuss a federal integrity commission. We can't even talk about it.

I very much hope that the government is truly serious about the powers that a federal integrity commission needs, because the last draft of the model it has proposed would be completely useless in the face of the current scandal. That model would require 'reasonable suspicion' that the conduct in question constitutes a criminal offence for an investigation into a politician to be initiated. The government must understand that, when people demand an integrity commission, they don't mean one that looks purely into cases of criminal conduct but rather one that looks into corruption in the true sense of the word—the abuse of public power for private or political gain. Even if the case could be investigated, the government's proposed commission would not be able to hold public hearings or make findings of corrupt conduct in the case of politicians.

This scandal makes clear the inadequacies of the government's model, but the standard for this is incredibly clear: a federal integrity commission must have broad jurisdiction, covering all those involved in federal public administration. It must set common rules of integrity such that no-one is held to a lower standard than anybody else. It must give the commission appropriate powers to fulfil its purpose. It must hold fair hearings, meaning it must have the ability to hold hearings in public. Finally, it must be accountable to the people.

This is a character test for the government. If it chokes, the anger out there in the community will be white-hot. Faith in our democracy will decline even more, with all the consequences that will have for our country.

ENDS

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