

Wednesday, 4 December 2013

## SENATE

### QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

#### **Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia**

**Senator McLUCAS** (Queensland) (14:07): My question is to the Assistant Minister for Health, Senator Nash. Did the Prime Minister write to the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia on 14 October? Did that letter say: 'I look forward to working with you in the years ahead'? Can the minister explain why, six weeks after the Prime Minister signed that letter, the government axed the council's funding and forced it into voluntary administration?

**Senator NASH** (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate and Assistant Minister for Health) (14:08): I thank the senator for her question. There is no doubt that, with this government taking office, the previous government left the country in such a situation that we are having to make some difficult decisions. I very recently made the decision—

*Opposition senators interjecting*— Wednesday, 4 December 2013 SENATE 45

CHAMBER

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Senator McLucas has asked the question. Senator Nash is entitled to be heard in silence.

**Senator NASH:** Thank you, Mr President. The ADCA, that I recently took the decision to discontinue funding for, is part of a number of organisations that provide advice to the government. I took the decision to cease that funding in the knowledge of two very carefully thought out processes. One is the fact that—

*Opposition senators interjecting*—

**Senator NASH:** If those opposite listened, they might learn something. One is the fact that there is a range of organisations that provide advice to the government, as those opposite would well know. One of the things that this government has undertaken is to ensure that we reduce duplication where we can. The other thing I took into consideration was the fact that the previous government left this government with a \$200 billion net debt. I can indicate to senators on the other side, if they are not already aware, that the Australian people expect this new government to appropriately consider organisations for their efficacy and their fiscal responsibility when it comes to appropriately spending taxpayers' money. Every single dollar of taxpayers' money—

*Honourable senators interjecting*—

**The PRESIDENT:** Just wait a minute, Senator Nash. You are entitled to be heard in silence.

**Senator NASH:** Thank you, Mr President. Every single taxpayer dollar that this government spends is a dollar that somebody has earned, and this government is going to ensure that we act appropriately. *(Time expired)*

**Senator McLUCAS** (Queensland) (14:10): Mr President, I ask a supplementary question. Is the minister aware of comments by council president, Mal Washer, who described the decision to axe the funding as 'a devastating blow'? Did the minister consult with Dr Washer, a former Liberal MP, prior to this decision?

**Senator NASH** (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate and Assistant Minister for Health) (14:11): A range of commentary has been seen since the decision was taken to discontinue the funding. I note that those on the other side had four months from the initial indication of further funding from the previous government to finalise the arrangements for the continuation of that funding. Within that four months absolutely nothing was done by those opposite to complete those arrangements. Subsequent to that, with us coming into government, there is a range of programs across portfolios for which we will be determining whether they are delivering appropriate and efficacious service, and we make no apologies for that. *(Time expired)*

**Senator McLUCAS** (Queensland) (14:12): Mr President, I ask a further supplementary question. Minister, I note that you did not answer the question about the consultation, so I invite you again to answer: did the minister consult with Dr Washer prior to the decision? Can you also explain why a council that was established in 1966 and has been an adviser to every government since Sir Robert Menzies was Prime Minister has been axed? Is it because the council criticised the Prime Minister?

**Senator NASH** (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate and Assistant Minister for Health) (14:13): I can indicate to those opposite that I did not speak to Dr Washer. I did, however, consider a range of very important aspects before I took my decision. Quite frankly, we would not be in the position of this government having to review so many ranges of things, programs across portfolios, if the

previous government had not left the economy in such a mess. We are looking at around \$200 billion of net debt and the Australian people expect this new government to act appropriately when we are considering the use of taxpayers' dollars. Every single dollar that is earned by a taxpayer is something that we on this side realise we have to spend responsibly. When we look at the track record of this government when it comes to health, it is extraordinary that they should be asking us a question on health. We saw a litany of disasters in the Health portfolio area of the previous government. *(Time expired)*

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## HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

### QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

#### **Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia**

**Ms KING** (Ballarat) (14:00): My question is to the Minister for Health, and I refer the minister to this letter I hold from the Prime Minister to the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council, dated 14 October this year, in which the Prime Minister stated, 'I look forward to working with you in the years ahead.' Can the minister explain why, just six weeks later, he cut the council's funding and forced them into voluntary administration? Hasn't the minister directly contradicted his Prime Minister?

**Mr DUTTON** (Dickson—Minister for Health and Minister for Sport) (14:00): The reason is that Labor left us with \$370 billion worth of debt. That is a problem, isn't it? The problem is that Labor spent money in the Health portfolio on building bureaucracies and on services that were not directly benefiting patients. And, yes, we have got tough decisions to make as a government. There is no secret about that. The argument that is being put forward by the opposition really tries to hide the fact that we have not only a Department of Health but also 21 outside agencies, many of them created by the previous government; and, if we want to make sure that we can get money to patients, get better health outcomes and deal with Labor's debt at the same time, then we have to make tough decisions.

**Ms King:** Madam Speaker, I seek leave to table the letter, in which the Prime Minister says, 'If you ever believe that the government can do better, please let me know.'

**The SPEAKER:** Leave is not granted.

**Mr Abbott:** I am happy to have it.

**Ms King:** The Prime Minister said yes.

**The SPEAKER:** The Prime Minister is happy to have it. Leave is granted.