



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE**

**Gillard Government**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 7 February 2012**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** McKenzie, Sen Bridget

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**Senator McKENZIE** (Victoria) (16:57): I rise to speak on this matter of public importance. As Senator Thistlethwaite lauds the Gillard government's apparent capacity for managing the Australian economy, the workers in food bowls such as the Goulburn Valley, those in power stations down in the Latrobe Valley and the farmers and the irrigators of regional Australia would beg to differ.

To govern you need a plan. It can be a grand plan, but if that is beyond you then just stick to the basics. For a government to be successful it needs a vision. It knows where it wants to take people, it needs the capacity to inspire confidence by maintaining order and security, and it must have the commitment to get the job done in an orderly manner. Get this mix right and you will take the people with you to great heights, to success and to prosperity, which is what Australia needs and deserves. People look to governments and community leaders to protect and guide them, especially in times of tragedy. Look at what is happening in flood affected areas of Queensland and New South Wales: local communities are being ably led by locally elected councillors and staff, by emergency workers and community volunteers and even by senators, as is the case in St George, where my colleague Senator Joyce is working alongside his local community leaders to minimise damage where possible to property.

The leadership in towns and rural communities throughout the Murray-Darling Basin and beyond will inspire ordinary people to return to homes that have been flooded, some of them for the third time in three years, and to begin the long process of rebuilding. Whole communities pitch in and help those who need it—it is the Australian way—and on this anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires we remember that these are the same people who inspired communities to face the devastating trauma of bushfires and to rebuild shattered towns, villages and lives. One hundred and seventy-three people died and more than 2,000 homes were destroyed. But, while the pain and memories never disappear, people are beginning to recover.

Australians are resilient, and on a national level they want people to pull together in times of need and help their fellow citizens. They want the same commitment to excellence from their leaders. They want to be inspired to do their best—like the dairy farmer who gets up early to milk their herd; they do it day after

day to provide the freshest product for their fellow Australians. This government should lead by example, with a steady hand, if it is to inspire people to invest in a business and have the confidence that it will support them and their families. But the Australian people have been lumbered with a ratbag mob that vacillates between broken policy promises and cheap political stunts—designed, if there is any degree of thought in them at all, to capture a headline.

The Labor Party claims Ben Chifley's 1949 'Light on the Hill' speech as its beacon, but at present there is not even a glimmer on a mound. Where is the vision that Chifley spoke of, the 'movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people'? It is nowhere in the Gillard government. There is no leadership in breaking promises. Saying one thing and then signing worthless agreements to form government—agreements that can be torn up on a whim, and just ask Andrew Wilkie about that one over the summer break—does not inspire confidence. It looks mean and tricky. It shows that there is no long-term plan to lead this nation anywhere, other than in ever-decreasing circles of ineptitude.

On a national scale, the Gillard government is a policy failure—and on so many fronts. The greatest of all is the insidious carbon tax. This was the Prime Minister's greatest about-face: that she would never introduce a carbon tax under the government she led. Regional Australians and the owners of small businesses will be hit so hard by this tax. Modelling from the Victorian government shows that dairy farmers, for instance, will have to pay an extra \$6,000 a year in a very energy-intensive agriculture pursuit—and for no environmental gain.

I have given these examples before, but obviously the government needs to be reminded—because another of its failures is that it does not listen. It does not focus on the core functions of government. Health is bogged down in so-called reforms that are adding yet another layer of bureaucracy. Education is gripped by the wasteful spending on the Building the Education Revolution. Regional infrastructure—which Senator Thistlethwaite mentioned earlier—is an absolute joke under this government. Last year the government announced \$200 million in regional development funding. Two-thirds of that went to the one-third

of regional seats held by Labor and Independents. From 500 worthy applications developed by local and regional governments around this nation, fewer than 10 per cent were funded. I hope we get a better deal out of round two.

This government focus only on short-term political gain. So I will remind them that a pizza shop will pay up to an extra \$1,000 for electricity under the carbon tax, as will the hairdresser, and a country pub will pay close to \$1,000. These are the same businesses in the same towns facing the impact on their local communities of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan—another Gillard government inspired source of uncertainty.

The world's population reached six billion in 1999 and in October 2011 it passed seven billion. The ability to feed ourselves and to feed other nations is part of Australia's prosperity and part of our future. The Goulburn Valley in Victoria provides nearly 20 per cent of our state's agricultural production and 80 per cent of that is reliant on irrigated agriculture. To work the land to produce food is one of the most honest forms of labour and one that is vital to life. But this government wants to keep its grip on power, however tenuous, for as long as it can. The Murray-Darling Basin Plan—revised—still takes water from food production areas.

Today the vast inland is awash with floodwater, but where will it be going? Where will the Commonwealth Water Holder store its H<sub>2</sub>O? Australia produces enough food for 60 million people. But, as the head of the coalition's task force on dams, Andrew Robb, has explained, a mosaic of agricultural opportunities across the north could double this production within two to three decades. The government only turned its attention to food security when the coalition reported on its inspections. The core function of governing Australia, to provide security and certainty, to give the framework for people to achieve their hopes and the capacity to earn a living, is at stake.

Yet another example of the Gillard government's inability to focus on these core aspects of living in a civil society is the live cattle export fiasco. The Gillard government has done its best to kill off exports, with the banning of live cattle exports to Indonesia in response—get it; wait for it—to a TV program, of which it had had advance notice but only acted when it was broadcast. It acted without consulting Indonesia. Our northern neighbour has understandably cut live export permits from 520,000 cattle to 280,000. In January we learned that boxed meat permits were reduced as well—from 99,000 tonnes to 20,000 tonnes. How could this government possibly have thought that boxed meat could replace live meat exports in Indonesia when most buyers of the meat are in villages

and small communities without access to reliable power supplies for refrigeration?

The government have departments and advisers to explain this to them, but they must not be listening. If they do not listen to their own departments and their advisers, is it any wonder that they are not listening to the Australian people? The government change their direction faster than a rabbit stuck in headlights. They are not focused on governing, on leading the people. They are caught up in a whirlwind of speculation about which MPs support the Prime Minister and which MPs may jump sides to back the foreign minister in a coup against his leader.

This is what the Gillard Labor government does. Its faceless men and women plot late-night coups to keep themselves in jobs—yes, Senator Thistlethwaite, it does depend on the numbers—whilst the average Australian is concerned about keeping their job in the current economic climate, especially those in the regions and those in manufacturing, as Australian businesses struggle to absorb the additional costs of the coming carbon tax and the uncertain economic times globally.

There are so many examples of how this Gillard government takes its eye off the ball—and a growing majority of Australians, particularly in the regions, are sick and tired of it. This focus on internal machinations rather than the very real and growing challenges to our great nation is clear evidence of this government's absolute inability to focus on the core functions of executive leadership. The government is, in its own words, 'a rabble'. Australians deserve so much more than the blurred, insipid and uncertain governance of the current Gillard government.