



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

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Questions without notice
Gaming—conflict of interest

MR COE: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Regulatory Services. Minister, the Victorian gaming minister has ruled out any meeting with Stephen Conroy, because there is “a clear conflict of interest between his job as a gaming lobbyist and his party activity”. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd called the conflict “unacceptable and unethical”. Minister, why is this government not applying the same standard for conflict of interest that is being applied in Victoria and federally?

MR RAMSAY: I thank the member for his question. The government is particularly attuned to issues of conflict of interest and is particularly attuned to transparency. The government will continue to meet with organisations. We are already a particularly compliant jurisdiction here in relation to the register of lobbyists. I note that there are a number of areas in which we have a very transparent way. There is a select committee that is working at the moment in terms of matters around integrity. We will work with those and we will continue to consult broadly and appropriately.

MR COE: Minister, have you assessed who within the ACT government is conflicted by being a beneficiary of gaming activity and having a role in government?

MR RAMSAY: I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, will you, like your Victorian and federal counterparts, rule out any meeting with a person involved in both party activities and the gaming industry due to the “clear conflict of interest”?

MR RAMSAY: I will continue to work within the legislation, as is appropriate, and the compliance regime that we have at the moment.

Parliamentarians—legal fees

MS LE COUTEUR: My question is to the Attorney-General. It relates to the government covering the legal costs of Mr Jeremy Hanson being sued for defamation by Dean Hall from the CFMEU. Minister, has the government agreed to pay Mr Hanson’s legal fees for this case? If so, is there a cost estimate and expenditure cap for these costs?

MR RAMSAY: As has been my practice in the past with a matter that is before the courts, I do not think that it is appropriate to discuss in any way a matter before the courts or a matter regarding an individual.

MS LE COUTEUR: Attorney, has the government got a policy about the payment of legal fees for MLAs, and has the government previously covered legal fees for MLAs?

MR RAMSAY: There is provision within the guidelines for the provision of legal assistance to ACT ministers and members in relation to legal proceedings. There are also other ways in which matters can be covered under territory insurance

arrangements if a liability does arise out of the performance of a member's official duties. That has occurred in the past and it may well occur again in the future.

The amounts and the terms of assistance are determined as appropriate in the circumstances, and my approval for the assistance in relation to those is fundamentally about ensuring there is good access to justice that is appropriate in the particular circumstances.

MR STEEL: Minister, you mentioned access to justice. How does the government ensure access to justice for the whole community?

MR RAMSAY: I thank the member for his question and his concern about access to justice. Obviously, legal help in any context is fundamentally about good access to justice. Justice, as I have said before, is only truly justice when it is accessible, when it is transparent and when it is timely. This year's budget certainly reflects a focus on access to the legal system and ensuring especially that access for vulnerable members of our community.

As just one example, I can proudly say that the budget provides an extra \$1.239 million over four years towards the base funding cost for the Legal Aid Commission. That will help them to meet the demand for services that exist there. Resourcing for legal aid ensures that people who need legal representation and who are not able to afford a lawyer have help when they are before the courts.

In addition, this particular budget also delivers for the community legal centres, which we have spoken about, and that I have advocated strongly for. The CLCs will get an additional \$2.477 million over the coming four years to continue providing help to those people who need it most. That help might be when there is a dispute with Centrelink, when there is a letter sent and Centrelink does not get the information right, as has been the case. It is important to be able to write a letter back, and the community legal centres can help with that. It might be about negotiating a payment plan with a landlord in relation to settling unpaid rent. There is a range of legal remedies, and it is important for people to be able to have access to justice.

This budget helps to create and develop a justice system that is more accessible to those who need the protection of our justice system. It is yet another way that the government is delivering on its commitments and ensuring that we have a community that is protected, that is safe and is secure.

Budget—employment

MR STEEL: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, how will the 2017 budget strengthen Canberra's economy and help create more good, local jobs?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Steel for the question. The government continues its efforts to support economic growth and jobs growth in the city, and we are delighted that our economic growth in this financial year is expected to hit 3¼ per cent. This is much stronger than has been experienced across the rest of the nation, where growth is expected to be, at a national level, around 1¾ per cent in 2016-17.

One of the reasons the ACT economy is growing so strongly is that it is more diverse and export oriented than ever before. I am pleased to advise the Assembly that between 2010-11 and 2015-16, the territory's service exports grew by over 65 per cent. This is far and away the fastest rate of growth of service exports of any state or territory in Australia. Our city represents 1.6 per cent of Australia's national population, but we are now generating 2.5 per cent of Australia's service exports. This is a tremendous result. Exports have grown from \$1 billion to \$1.7 billion over the period I referred to earlier, driven particularly by growth in our higher education sector, in tourism, in technical and professional services, in research and development and in the export of government services.

We continue our focus on an export led economic growth strategy for the territory by further investments in this budget to back our local exporters. We are continuing to expand the ACT's high impact innovation programs, supporting key industry sectors to develop their strengths, their trade and their investment facilitation opportunities. The programs to connect Canberra companies with the world and to bring more business to our city will help maintain these very high levels of growth into the future.

MR STEEL: How will the 2017 budget back the 26,000 Canberra based businesses that employ local workers and contribute to the ongoing diversification of our economy?

MR BARR: Again, it is a very simple proposition that a city of our size, 400,000 people, will not grow rich and add to our wealth by buying and selling from ourselves. That is why we simply must be more nationally and internationally engaged. We seek to support our exporters. We seek to support the growth of those service industries where we have a comparative advantage.

Higher education is a very good example of this. Service exports have increased. Nearly one in three of the dollars we earn in this city from exports come from our higher education sector. This sector is poised for rapid growth into the future. The ACT government is making a series of strategic investments in the higher education sector—through our partnerships particularly with the University of Canberra but also with the ANU, the University of New South Wales Canberra, the Australian Catholic University and our own Canberra Institute of Technology—to further develop the higher education sector for our city. It is a priority. We want to see more international students in our city. We want to see more Australian students coming to Canberra to study.

One in nine Canberrans either work or study at one of our city's higher education institutions. There are 16,000 people employed. It is a real growth engine for the ACT economy and one that the territory government will continue to support over the coming years. I look forward to making a range of further announcements in the coming 12 months that will further demonstrate our commitment to growing higher education in Canberra.

MS CODY: Chief Minister, how is the ACT government continuing to make the territory's tax base fairer, more stable and more efficient through stage 2 of the government's significant tax reform program?

MR BARR: The government's first stage of tax reforms involved the abolition of all tax on insurance in the ACT, with the ACT becoming the first state or territory to completely abolish tax on all insurance products. We are also now significantly advanced in our program of stamp duty reductions, focusing particularly on the affordable end of the housing market.

We increased the territory's payroll tax-free threshold to \$2 million. This is the highest threshold of any state or territory in Australia. This means that 23,500 of the 26,000 businesses that operate in this territory pay no payroll tax at all. This is a distinct advantage for ACT small and medium-size enterprises.

It demonstrates our commitment to simpler, fairer and more efficient taxation arrangements, as recommended by about 40 different reviews of the Australian taxation system over the past five decades, most recently the Henry tax review. It again recommended that state and territory governments move away from inefficient taxes like stamp duty and insurance taxes and move towards the simplest, fairest and least distortive tax available to any government in this country.

That is a broad-based land tax. It has the least impact on economic activity; it is impossible to avoid; and it is the fairest tax available to any government in this country. Anyone who looks objectively at taxation reform can only conclude that inefficient transaction taxes that disrupt economic activity, that result in a dead weight loss, a loss of hundreds of millions of dollars of economic activity, should be avoided. We should move away from those taxes and we should move to broad-based land taxes.

This government is the one government in this country making a serious effort to do this. Even Prime Minister Turnbull acknowledged that it was the right reform. He also acknowledged the political difficulty of it but applauded our efforts. (*Time expired.*)

Crime—parole review

MR HANSON: My question is to the Attorney-General. The Prime Minister has called for "serious reforms of parole laws" as a "high priority" for state and territory governments. Attorney-General, will you review parole laws in the ACT, and if you will, when will you do so?

MADAM SPEAKER: The question will be taken by the justice minister.

MR RATTENBURY: I have obviously been apprised of the Prime Minister's comments this week and have been reflecting on the circumstances. What I can say is that the ACT over recent years has undertaken a number of reviews of our bail laws. It is something we are constantly aware of and, certainly in light of a number of high-profile incidents in recent years, bail issues in the ACT have been reflected on and reconsidered by my directorate. I am happy to provide particulars to Mr Hanson on notice if he wishes, but I cannot think of the dates to provide off the top of my head.

MR HANSON: I am not sure whether it is to the Attorney-General or Mr Rattenbury, but I will ask the question anyway. Will you now review the operation of bail laws in

the ACT, following the Prime Minister's call, which was for a review of parole laws?

MR RATTENBURY: I offer similar comments to my previous ones, which were that there has been effort put into these areas in recent years. I am happy to provide the details to members on notice.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, will you undertake to keep full and proper records of people who reoffend while on bail or parole, which has not happened to date, despite the calls by the Canberra Liberals to do so over more than five years?

MR RATTENBURY: As Mrs Dunne well knows—and I agree with her—the opportunity to extract records from our criminal justice system in recent years has not been what we would expect it to be. But, as Mrs Dunne also knows, the government has made an investment in recent budgets to upgrade the database system of ACT courts. I would certainly have an expectation that we would have a better level of data coming out of that to give us an ability to look more accurately at a range of measures. I am happy to take her request on board.

Sport—women's participation

MS CODY: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on how you are delivering on the government's commitment to support greater participation of women and girls at all levels of sport?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Cody for her question. We have had a great year for women's sport, both here in the ACT and nationally. But this has not happened by accident. The ACT government has set a goal to build more support and opportunities for women's and girls' participation in sport and recreation.

We have set this direction for a couple of key reasons. Participation data consistently shows that girls often move away from sport in their teens, and we need to turn this trend around as a means to better physical and mental health as they move into adult life and create a lifelong love of active living and sports participation. The second reason is that sport offers a vehicle to improve equity and culture around gender right across our community. There are so many great leaders and role models in our local sports community and the government know that with their help we can reach out and empower more people to understand and embrace the need for gender equity.

This has been a consistent priority of the ACT government and of mine. Some of the positive steps we have taken on this agenda include coordinating a big "women in sport" week leading into the Giants AFL women's game and Giants netball playing their first matches ever in the ACT. This year we have ensured that available funding within the national league team program was, for the first time, split evenly between male and female teams. Last week I was pleased to visit the recently completed Gowrie neighbourhood oval pavilion, along with Mr Gentleman, which included refurbishment with a focus on being female friendly through the provision of individual cubicles for showers and toilets within the change rooms.

MS CODY: Minister, what new initiatives is the government doing to continue this important work?

MS BERRY: The government took extensive commitments in this area to the election last October, and this week's budget puts those into motion.

The government will increase funding support for women's sport. Most notably, this includes establishing four-year funding agreements with both the Canberra Capitals basketball team and Canberra United women's football team. These agreements are a major change to the way the government approaches elite sport. They give both teams greater certainty around planning, recruiting and player development, closer to that of our elite men's teams; they offer a means for securing better sponsorship deals; and they will help grow both the Caps' and United's presence in the community and their prominence for junior players.

A further \$1 million is in the budget for programs which will work to encourage and empower women and girls at all levels of sport over the next four years: \$500,000 for female-friendly sports infrastructure; \$400,000 in incentive funding for sports to lead on gender equity; and \$100,000 for a new female sport online hub at HerCanberra.

The buy-in of the Canberra sports community around this work has been great. I have no doubt that they will keep pushing ahead for positive change and the government looks forward to working with them as these initiatives are implemented.

MS CHEYNE: Minister, how do these initiatives further the government's commitment to gender equality?

MS BERRY: I have pointed to the fact that the government's work in the sport portfolio is part of a broader picture. The ACT government continues to lead reforms for gender equity and health, equal rights, and domestic and family violence. We have funded participation in sports broadly equitably but this is a new level of commitment in elite sport administration, infrastructure and online.

The government is committed to continuing its work on building the most inclusive and equitable city we can. As I said this morning in my ministerial statement on safer families, governments can provide the leadership and the funding but it takes the whole community to create real change. Just recently I launched the women's action plan, which outlines a range of actions the government will deliver on under the theme of health and wellbeing.

Clearly sport and recreation has a connection with this work. It contributes to the social inclusion, safety, health and wellbeing of ACT women. Its power as an enabler of these things is something that the government should always be looking to unleash. As you chat with people across different sports and different walks of life, there is a real understanding and an opportunity to embrace these opportunities.

The need to pursue gender equity will continue across the government's portfolios. It is good to be able to show such strong progress in sport and recreation.

Trade unions—memorandum of understanding

MR WALL: My question is to the Chief Minister. During estimates last year you

were asked a question regarding what benefits the MOU with UnionsACT has brought to workers. Your response stated:

It has ensured that dodgy businesses are not winning ACT government contracts.

Despite the MOU, the media has reported on a series of “dodgy businesses” engaged by the ACT government. Chief Minister, can you explain specifically how the MOU is preventing “dodgy businesses” from being awarded contracts by the ACT government?

MR BARR: During the procurement process, via early engagement with key stakeholders and examination of the history of various companies and the history of various individuals who are the principals of various companies, that greater exposure, particularly earlier on, acts as an important safeguard against phoenix companies, and those that have a very poor track record in other jurisdictions and here in the ACT, who close a particular business and then re-emerge with a new name but largely the same people behind the business.

Whilst no system is absolutely perfect, there is an added benefit of more sets of eyes on the procurement process through the early engagement with key stakeholders, and not just with unions but also with various industry association peak bodies. I note that those peak bodies seem to take up the opportunity of that engagement in the procurement process far more than their union counterparts, and I note also that from time to time those opposite take an interest in procurement policies and particular individual procurements; and sometimes I wonder why. Later, I find out.

MR WALL: Chief Minister, are you aware of any “dodgy businesses” that were prevented from being awarded a contract or contracting to do work for the ACT government because of the MOU?

MR BARR: I think that when this matter was canvassed, at great length I must say, during both estimates and annual reports hearings, the relevant procurement officials went through in some detail with Mr Wall and some of his other colleagues the process under which they engage with stakeholder groups and the outcomes of that engagement.

I certainly recall the head of procurement giving a definitive answer in relation to Mr Wall’s question. He should perhaps check the record in relation to what the official said because, as Mr Wall would be aware, I do not have a personal role in procurement decisions. Ministers do not and that is a very good public policy position.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, what are the performance measures used to determine whether the MOU is delivering its purported benefits?

MR BARR: The government seeks to work constructively with a range of stakeholders across a range of areas as they relate to procurement policy, to workplace safety issues and to other areas where the government is a procurer of goods and services. There are many different measures. Those are outlined in annual reports and in the budget papers each year. A key measure of recent great interest to the broader community has been significant improvement in policies that can ensure ongoing

significant improvement in the safety of our workplaces. That is something that one would hope would sit above politics. But nothing about this opposition surprises me in the context of their capacity to want to bash the union movement all the time. The serial offender there is the former leader, Mr Hanson, whose efforts mean that he finds himself right now in a somewhat tricky legal situation.

Environment—container deposit scheme

MS CHEYNE: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Minister, how is the government delivering better suburbs for Canberra? In particular, how will our environment and local community groups benefit from the introduction of a container deposit scheme in the ACT?

MS FITZHARRIS: I thank Ms Cheyne for her question and for her very strong and ongoing interest in, in particular, reducing waste in the territory. As we know, the Barr Labor government is delivering in this year's budget on its election commitments to deliver better suburbs for all Canberrans. Our \$23.3 million better suburbs package includes the government's commitment for a container deposit scheme in the territory to encourage more Canberrans to do the right thing with their leftover drinking containers. From early next year, Canberrans will be able to hand in their old containers for cash reimbursement.

Drink containers make up more than a quarter of the volume of all litter in the ACT, and this scheme will help protect the environment and improve the look and feel of our city.

Our government recognises the significant impact that litter has on the natural environment, on our local parks and playground and on the waterways of our bush capital. Litter from drink containers, particularly glass, can cause injuries to people, and the presence of litter can have flow-on effects to other antisocial behaviour, for example, graffiti. The container deposit scheme is expected to reduce litter in our public spaces and waterways.

The CDS works on littering behaviour in two important ways: firstly, by encouraging the person consuming the drink to hold on to the empty container for later redemption; and, secondly, by providing an incentive for other people to pick up litter containers to receive the refund.

The New South Wales government is implementing a CDS from 1 December this year, and the ACT government is working closely with New South Wales to ensure that the schemes are harmonised when ours starts early next year. The scheme will cover most beverage containers between 150 ml and three litres. Eligible containers will be able to be returned to collection points for a 10c refund. We will be working to facilitate the establishment of a network of container collection points right across the ACT, and the ACT will work with New South Wales to ensure that containers purchased in the ACT can also be returned to New South Wales collection points and vice versa.

I am sure there are many local community groups looking forward to the opportunity to raise funds. (*Time expired.*)

MADAM SPEAKER: It is getting very close to time.

Ms Cheyne: I am in your hands, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: I think, with the will of the Assembly, we may not take that supplementary. I know you are disappointed, Minister. My clock is saying 10 seconds before three. Is that acceptable to you, Leader of the Opposition?

Mr Coe: Yes.