

HANSARD

House of Representatives

16 November 2009

Mr Sullivan (Longman) I rise to support the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Bill 2009 [No. 2] as presented to the parliament by the minister, and also the nine related bills that are being debated simultaneously with the bill. It has been quite a moving chapter in this parliament this morning as we have dealt with a very important issue in a way that is much more than just mere symbolism or a gesture. I am enormously proud to have been part of a government to have moved in this way.

To move on to the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, let me lay my cards on the table straight away: I am one of those many Australians who are convinced by the weight of scientific evidence and by the opinion brought forward that this planet and its oceans are warming. I know that the permafrost is defrosting and that large amounts of methane are expected to be emitted into the atmosphere as a consequence—methane being one of the greenhouse gases around four times more potent than carbon dioxide.

In saying that I am convinced of that view, I accept the point of view of others who are convinced by those who may be entitled to be regarded as eminent scientists who express a different view. In that context, it is important for us as a parliament and as a people to examine the consequences of our actions in relation to two very strongly held points of view, although, as I said, I feel the weight of evidence comes down on the side of the beliefs that I hold. What happens if we take action and discover in 50 years time that we did not need to take action? We have rejigged the economy of the world, and that has happened previously. But what happens if we do not act and we find out in 50 years time we should have? That is when the legacy of this parliament will be most felt by the people that we most care about: our children and our children's children, and even their children. Future generations of not only Australians but also children from every nation on this planet require us, as a part of governments around the world, to act in unison and to act now.

In thinking about this issue, I am reminded of a young girl who I saw at what was a nuclear bomb protest in Cairns in the early eighties. Her mother had made a T-shirt for her and she wore it proudly at that march. The slogan on the T-shirt was 'When I grow up I want the world to be here'. I think we should require that for our children and our children's children. When they grow up, let us make sure that there is a world here for them.

There is absolutely no wonder that people in the broader community are disillusioned with politics and with those of us who practise that profession. What are we doing here in relation to this bill? This bill has been through the parliament once, went to the Senate and came back. It is being debated here again preparatory to being considered once again in the Senate. What are we doing? We are quibbling over details that will change a dozen times in the next 40 years. If there is anybody who can point me to a piece of legislation that has stood the test of time, please do so. And if you want to talk about the Constitution, it really has not stood the test of time; it is just too bloody difficult to change. It does not suit us any more. This legislation ought to be seen for what it is, which is the foundation stone of what is going to be

one of the most important pieces of legislation that is passed by this government or any government in this part of the century.

Ross Garnaut does not think that the legislation is perfect, but what is his comment? 'Just pass the thing'. That is what Ross Garnaut wants us to do, just past the thing, because he understands that what I am saying is right: we need to make the start. It is urgent to make the start—too right it is urgent that we make the start. It is unquestionably the most serious issue that the world has faced, and we need to face it together—rich nations and poor nations, side by side—and part of that is this parliament passing this bill.

Is it possible for us to walk down this low-carbon economy path without some pain being felt? Probably not. There will probably be a degree of pain as we restructure our economy for a low-carbon future. That will mean some difficulty for some people during the change phase. Does it mean permanent pain? I think it certainly does not. Our economy has undergone some radical changes in the past. The general services tax is one example where we made a fairly massive change to our economy. While I contend that the GST is an unfair tax, people and the economy have adapted. I understand it cost something like \$6 billion to \$8 billion to introduce, but the people have adapted to the new circumstances in our economy.

Obviously our job is to minimise sectoral pain, to minimise personal hardship and to create new opportunities—and renewable energy is a classic example of new opportunity. We are being urged by those opposite to wait until after the Copenhagen conference to pass our own laws. The question is: why? Why should we wait to be told what to do by the rest of the world? The Australia that I want for myself, my children and their children is one where we are a leader nation, not a follower nation. Why should we wait to see what everybody else is doing before we decide what we want to do? In passing our own law, we can go to Copenhagen with a very firm debating position. Whilst we are looking after those things that are necessary for the world, we need to make sure that our own national interests are protected. As a leader nation we can encourage others to join in; as a follower nation we join the others. Australia has a moral obligation to be a leader in carbon pollution reduction throughout the world. Although we are a small nation, on a per capita basis we are among the greatest emitters of carbon dioxide in the world. We also have a heavy reliance on coal exports. Exporting carbon emissions makes this country wealthy. The coal industry understand that. They are investing heavily in technology designed to reduce carbon pollution emissions. It is in their best interests; it is what they need to do to survive. Like others, they have some issues. They would like to feel the least pain possible, but they understand. For many years, including in the FutureGen project in the United States, the industry have been investing heavily to bring down carbon emissions from coal fired power stations.

We hear from those opposite: why should we be the only ones to put in place a carbon pollution reduction scheme? The reality is we are not. Around the world there are already some 60-odd schemes in operation. We would by no means be the only kid on the block. We would in no way be going it alone on this issue. In taking this step we would be joining a rather large group of nations. People talk about the prospect that the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme will impact radically on jobs. It is quite clear there will be some impact, just as the introduction of the GST impacted on some businesses. I have made many representations on behalf of a fellow who is still trying to get some recognition that the introduction of the GST destroyed his business in the earlier part of this century.

I believe that at this point permits are to be set at \$10 per tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent, and we are told that will destroy jobs. As I look across the chamber, I see people who unwittingly brought me into this chamber by supporting the introduction of nuclear power in this country, something that I am totally opposed to.

Mr Albanese —Hear, hear!

Mr Sullivan — Thank you very much. I say to those opposite: just go back and look at what you were doing then, because, in all the documentation that was produced on nuclear power, nuclear power was only seen as economically viable if the tax on coal fired power stations was set at \$40 per tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent—four times what we are proposing now. And you think we are job destroyers and you guys are not. But the nuclear power debate is for another day—and it is interesting to note that it may be a debate sooner rather than later, because Mr Switkowski is going on his merry way at the moment.

In this package of bills, the government proposes a number of things to assist industry and to support jobs, including permits for emissions-intensive trade-exposed industries, the Electricity Sector Adjustment Scheme and the Climate Change Action Fund. Treasury, the experts, tell us that the longer we wait before we do this the more it is going to cost. That is what Treasury say; that is what Professor Stern says; that is what Professor Garnaut says; but members opposite say, ‘Let’s wait.’

Carbon capture and storage is possible—it is happening now. Carbon reuse is possible. We have been doing that with sulphur for years. Members opposite would remember the acid rainfall in North America and Europe. It does not happen anymore because we have been able to remove the sulphur emissions from the smokestacks and still create saleable products. My colleague the member for Deakin, Mike Symon, told me that on a recent trip to China he visited a plant that is removing the carbon dioxide from the emissions and using that carbon in the manufacture of soft drinks—though I hope there are one or two processes in between! It is happening now in China. It has happened before. The world signed up to the Montreal agreement in relation to ozone-depleting gases and we now no longer have those gases entering the atmosphere.

The SPEAKER —Order! It being 2 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 97. The debate may be resumed at a later hour and the member for Longman will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

- Break -

Mr Sullivan (Longman) (3:40 PM) — Earlier today I commented that the world had dealt with ozone-depleting gases and sulfur and neither of those had led to any catastrophe. I believe that we can do the same with the capture and reuse, or sequestration as required, of carbon dioxide.

I want to conclude my comments by talking a little bit about the weather. I think people are aware that the weather events that we are experiencing these days are unusual. In my own electorate quite recently we had a hot spell that occurred during winter, which decimated the

strawberry industry. I do not know to what extent the strawberry industry was able to operate, but it normally contributes about \$100 million annually to our local economy, and that has gone. Cyclones are becoming more frequent in Queensland and are moving south, and it is not just in Australia that the weather patterns are unusual. Throughout Australia we expect to have an increased frequency of heatwaves, which have tragic consequences for elderly people. Drought conditions are expected to be extended, particularly in the south-west of the country. We also have hail. These things are changing the way we are able to manage our country. They are changing the way that agriculture operates. They are changing what we can anticipate for our future, irrespective of the broader issues of global warming which spread out over a much larger time frame.

In question time the Prime Minister spoke of the effects on tourism. I will not repeat those comments so soon after they have been made. But this issue is something that this government, this parliament, this nation and this world need to deal with and deal with now. We cannot afford to continue to dilly-dally. I note that the Prime Minister has set a timetable for the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Bill 2009 [No. 2] to be considered in the other place. I encourage those in the other place to listen to Ross Garnaut and just pass the thing.