

27 May 2008

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Fuel Prices

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (6.30 p.m.)—I am always pleased to speak on the issue of petrol prices because it is a matter of tremendous significance in my electorate of Lindsay. There has been much discussion today about the impact that petrol prices are having on residents in Western Sydney. I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate and to bring forward some of the views that I have picked up in my discussions with people throughout my local community. I was interested to see a bit earlier in the debate on the censure motion the member for Wentworth come forward and embark upon a discussion about how petrol prices and Fuelwatch would cripple the working families of Western Sydney. As I saw the member for Wentworth talking about the working families of Western Sydney, it almost sounded like a David Attenborough documentary—talking about some exotic species in a far and distant place that he had encountered once or twice before on his travels to the outer west. Unfortunately though, as brief as those encounters may have been, the member for Wentworth has very little understanding of the issues affecting families and all residents in parts of the world such as Western Sydney.

In the discussions I have had with local residents in my community over many years, when it comes to the issue of petrol prices one of the single biggest issues that they raise is the fluctuations in petrol price. The fact that you can leave home in the morning and the price of petrol is set at one price and on the way home that evening it can be 10c, 15c or 20c more expensive is a real issue for families. I know that those on the other side say, 'Cheap Tuesday. Cheap Tuesday is what you currently have access to, but if we had Fuelwatch then you would not get cheap Tuesday'. As much as people do flock towards service stations when prices are cheaper, the reality is that people do not only fill up their cars once a week, particularly in parts of the world such as Western Sydney where you are travelling many—and in some cases hundreds of—kilometres each week. The convenience of filling up on Tuesday is something that cannot always be accommodated within the daily lives of working people. If you do happen to need to fill up a little bit later in the week, it is not a matter of saying, 'We will just not go anywhere till Tuesday. Cancel the swimming lessons on Saturday. We are not going to the footy on Sunday. We are going to wait till Tuesday when we can fill the car up again.'

These are the realities of what is going on out there in the real world. This is a very artificial debate that we are hearing today. A lot has been said by those on the other side, but the one thing that these people have not said is where they stand. Do they support Fuelwatch or are they going to vote against it? They have not said that. They have had 25 minutes in this debate to articulate their position. We are still waiting. I am looking with some anticipation, in the hope that if it is the member for Stirling that is to follow then he may bring forward the pearls of wisdom that will enlighten us as to what the opposition's thinking is.

Government members interjecting—

Continue

Mr BRADBURY—Apparently he does not want to. In my local community, people have welcomed the prospect of Fuelwatch. I will quote from a local newspaper an opinion piece written by one of the local editors shortly after the Assistant Treasurer and the Prime Minister announced Fuelwatch in the Lindsay electorate. Mr Bernard Bratusa, the editor of the Western Weekender, on 17 April 2008—and I have to say that Mr Bratusa and I do not always agree—aply articulated the perspective of the residents of Western Sydney with these comments:

Assistant Treasurer Chris Bowen was on the money when he identified the ‘daily fluctuation’ frustration—

I will just pull that part of the quote out: ‘the daily fluctuation frustration’. I think Bernard Bratusa has actually hit the nail on the head. That is the source of so much anger and so much discontent in the community. That will be one of the evils that this particular proposal—Fuelwatch—will strike at the very heart of. That is why I support it. The quote continues:

... the daily fluctuation frustration shared by all motorists with pump prices increasing by upwards of 15cents a litre from the morning drive to the evening crawl. Clever really, in the morning we bust our butts to get to work showing little regard for the fuel tank needle thinking (more so hoping) the pump price will hold for the return trip. Never happens.

These are the comments of someone who lives in the real world, someone who lives in the outer suburbs of Sydney, someone who has a family, goes about the business of their daily lives and understands in a very real sense the impact that petrol prices are having on families throughout this country, but particularly in areas such as Western Sydney. These are the people who have embraced and endorsed our proposal for Fuelwatch. I am not receiving any complaints from those people, and I would be willing to bet that those on the other side are in the same boat. That is why, when there was a suggestion today that they had voted against Fuelwatch, so many of them were scrambling to try to deny that that had occurred—scrambling to deny that that is what they had just done. The reality is that they might be told what to do in this place but at some point they have to go back to their electorates. When they do, the people in their electorates will be telling them the same thing as the people in my electorate—that is, they want more competition. They want a government that is going to be prepared to give the ACCC the powers that we have granted it—the powers that those on the other side were afraid to give. They were afraid to give them because they are anti competition. They have never supported competition. The Labor Party has always been the party of competition. That is why we are extending that commitment to competition through Fuelwatch. Why is it that consumers in my electorate should have less information in the marketplace than the people setting the prices? That is something we intend to tackle. We want to give the consumer the power to know where the cheapest prices are. Having an informed consumer in an informed marketplace is how you will achieve competition.

The fuel companies may well not want to see that happen. But we are not here to represent sectional interests; we are here to represent the broadest cross-section of people in the community. There are people who are not being given that access and they are the people we are here to represent. They are the people for whom Fuelwatch provides some comfort and relief, because at least they will know where the cheapest prices are.

I have to say that the whole notion of Fuelwatch seems to be something that the Leader of the Opposition is struggling to come to terms with. I think that the reality of why that is the case is that

Fuelwatch is not a thing that is occupying his attention at the moment—it is actually ‘Malcolm watch’. In the same way that intense scrutiny of petrol prices is one way to keep them honest, he is looking over his shoulder on ‘Malcolm watch’. He is making sure he keeps a close eye on the one person in this place who is doing the best job of undermining his leadership.

When it comes to alternative proposals or alternative policies, the people on the other side know—the member for Higgins, who sits there for a few very brief moments throughout the day, and the member for Mayo know—that this is a fantasy and this 5c cut is illusory. It is illusory because it will be sucked up before they make the cut, but of course they never will.

Those on the other side were pretty good at spending money when they were in government but they seem even better at doing it when they are in opposition—raiding the surplus to get their greasy hands on that \$8 billion in order to achieve this so-called cut, which we all know will deliver no relief and no benefit in the long term and certainly not in the medium term. This is the sort of opportunism that we have come to see as being very much a part of the approach that the opposition, as they now are, have embraced. I can understand that the Leader of the Opposition needs to try to consolidate his leadership, but surely this sort of short-term, short-sighted policy, which will achieve no real benefits in the longer term, is not the way for him to be demonstrating to the residents of places like Western Sydney that he is a serious economic manager and someone who is capable of running this country. That is somewhere where this government has demonstrated that it is prepared to run this economy in a reasonable and sensible way and in a financially viable way.