



## **Ending the Blame Game? No, just a State-Federal Labor Conspiracy of Silence**

**By Senator Mathias Cormann on 2 September 2008**

**Senator CORMANN** (Western Australia) (4.10 p.m.)—Ending the blame game has turned out to be nothing more and nothing less than a huge comprehensive state and federal Labor cover-up. It is nothing more and nothing less than a politically motivated conspiracy of silence where the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, says to the Labor premiers, such as Alan Carpenter, 'I won't blame you if you won't blame me.' That is exactly what we have witnessed under this new policy of supposedly ending the blame game.

The reality is that the best way to ensure good government for the people across Australia is a strong federal system. We need a system with both strong and competent state and federal governments. And right now we have got neither. We need a system with all of its important checks and balances hard at work; a system in which premiers stand up to Canberra whenever Canberra pursues bad public policy — particularly when it relates to areas of state responsibility. Whenever the Commonwealth pursues policies that will have a bad impact on the state of Western Australia, I would expect the Premier of Western Australia to have a view and to stand up for Western Australia. But nothing of the sort has happened.

We have a fine tradition in Western Australia where in the past strong premiers have stood up to Canberra, irrespective of political persuasion. Strong premiers like Sir David Brand, Sir Charles Court and Richard Court stood up to Canberra and were guided solely by what was in the best interests of their state, irrespective of whether there was a Liberal government in power in Canberra or not. But these days, we have Alan Carpenter, who was quite happy as Premier of Western Australia to be critical of John Howard as Prime Minister and of policies pursued by the Howard government.

**Senator Sterle**—He was not alone. There were quite a few million of them.

**Senator CORMANN**—And Alan Carpenter was particularly unsuccessful in convincing the people of Western Australia of the merits of his arguments in the lead-up to the last federal election. As you well know, we were able to return 11 out of 15 federal members of parliament from Western Australian on behalf of the Liberal Party.

**The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Moore)**—Senator Cormann, I remind you to make your comments through the chair.

**Senator CORMANN**—Yes, Madam Acting Deputy President. The reality is this: since the election of the Rudd government, our Premier in Western Australia has gone quiet. He has stopped standing up for Western Australia. He has started to put political opportunism and his political interests ahead of the best interests of

the people of Western Australia. On the scrapping of the highly successful Regional Partnerships program and of the Investing in our Schools program—which has helped school communities across Western Australia to improve their schools—silence is what we have had from the Premier of Western Australia.

When it came to the imposition of a new \$2.5 billion tax, which is going to push up the price of gas in Western Australia, Alan Carpenter condoned it explicitly. He waved Kevin Rudd through and said, 'No worries.' When Woodside came out and made public statements telling the people of Western Australia the absolute bleeding obvious—that they as a business would seek to pass on the additional cost imposed on them by the Commonwealth—Alan Carpenter, as Premier of Western Australia, shot the messenger instead of standing up for Western Australia.

Then we had this disastrous decision to increase the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds. In our federation, in some policy areas there is obviously an overlap between state and federal responsibilities. Clearly, health is one of those areas. If you have a bad public policy decision at one level of government, that will necessarily flow through and have an impact on the other level of government.

The impacts of the decision to increase the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds have been very clearly identified through the Senate inquiry. It will have an impact in pushing up the price of health insurance premiums. It will see at least 644,000 people leave private health insurance, according to Treasury evidence. It will see 57,000 people over the age of 65 leave private health insurance, according to Treasury evidence. It will put huge additional pressure on public hospitals in Western Australia.

Have we heard anything from the government in Western Australia standing up for WA, standing up for the patients in Western Australia that need timely access to quality hospital care? No, we have not. There was some token resistance from Jim McGinty, the Minister for Health in Western Australia, straight after the budget. As reported in the *West Australian* on 16 May:

... WA Health Minister Jim McGinty said the State was entitled to more Commonwealth funding for hospitals after changes to the Medicare surcharge.

Did he follow through on that? No, he did not. Did he put in a formal request to the federal government: 'We need some additional funding to deal with the additional demand that is now going to be faced by our public hospitals?' No, he did not. That has been evidenced by answers provided to questions on notice by the Department of Health and Ageing. Again today the minister was ducking and weaving when I asked him whether the Carpenter government had submitted a formal request for additional funding to deal with the additional pressures faced by public hospitals. He was giving me the Labor Party rhetoric that could well be campaigning rhetoric, but he was not answering my question: 'Yes or no—did Alan Carpenter, Jim McGinty or anybody in the state government in Western Australia ask for additional funding for our public hospitals?' No, they did not.

This is actually a really interesting case study when it comes to the conspiracy of silence and the huge cover-up that is currently taking place. I will give you a bit of a flavour of what the current situation in Western Australia is like when it comes to public hospitals. After eight years of Labor mismanagement, our public hospitals in Western Australia are very much under pressure. They are in a mess. I will read a couple of newspaper quotes to the Senate. An article in the *Sunday Times* on 4 May 2008 headlined 'Hospitals stretched' states:

A special investigation by the *Sunday Times* reveals that the state's health system is bursting with a record number of people requiring hospital care.

The *West Australian* of 3 June 2008, in an article entitled "Children 'waiting too long for surgery'", states:

More than one in three children needing elective surgery at Princess Margaret Hospital have been waiting longer than medically advisable, a Health Department report reveals.

An article in the *West Australian* on 25 June 2008 headlined 'Public hospitals had to turn away babies' states:

Thirty newborns were among almost 900 public hospital patients transferred to private hospitals at taxpayers' expense because a bed or appropriate service was unavailable, documents released under Freedom of Information laws reveal.

The *Sunday Times* of 29 June 2008, in an article entitled '300 deaths in waiting', states:

UP TO 300 patients could die unnecessarily in WA emergency departments this year because of chronic overcrowding, the Australian Medical Association of WA has warned.

Of course, hospitals in WA then were hit by the gas crisis. Theatres had to be shut down because of a shortage of gas. Last weekend, a front-page article in the *West Australian* of 30 August entitled "Hospital ED risk 'worst in nation'" stated:

Perth's big hospital emergency departments are the worst in Australia for overcrowding, with the latest national figures revealing they have the highest rate of patients waiting dangerously long periods of time to be admitted to a ward.

The first part of a national snapshot of tertiary hospital emergency departments by the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine shows that 47 per cent of WA patients waiting for a bed faced access block, the term used to describe the proportion of patients waiting more than eight hours to be admitted to a ward bed.

The point is this: this is before the changes to the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds will come into effect. This is the situation today. The reality is this: these changes that the government has proposed and that are quietly being condoned by state Labor governments around Australia, which initially put up some token resistance but then fell into line, will put huge additional pressure on public hospitals across Australia and in particular in Western Australia, when we already have the worst possible situation.

We were promised cooperative federalism in health. What happened? What did the Rudd government actually do when they decided to introduce this particular policy measure? Did they cost, model or assess the flow-on consequences, the flow-on impact, on public hospitals, a state responsibility? No, they did not. Do you know what they called it? The bureaucrats at Senate estimates said, 'These are second-round effects. We don't worry about second-round effects.' Never mind that it was going to be the patients in public hospitals in Western Australia that would end up suffering because they will have to wait longer, and they will have to wait for dangerous lengths of time moving forward.

Did the state government in Western Australia ask for access to the federal government's modelling? No. Did the federal government, in the spirit of cooperative federalism, volunteer access to its modelling for state and federal governments so that they could at least have the best information in front of

them when they were assessing the impact on their public hospitals? No, they did not.

Only one state health department across Australia actually made themselves available to answer questions at the inquiry. Do you know where the information came from on which they based their assessment of the impact on public hospitals? It came out of the *West Australian*. Nobody, not one single state government, has made any serious assessment of the impact of this Medicare levy surcharge threshold change on their public hospitals. Do you think that would have been the situation 12 months ago? Twelve months ago they would have commissioned their own research, they would have commissioned their own modelling, they would have ensured that they had had an informed basis on which to put a claim to the federal government for additional funding. This time around it is politically convenient just to stay silent: 'Let's have one big, huge cover-up.' The people of Western Australia are going to be worse off as a result. *(Time expired)*