



## **Speech to the Senate 'Cooperative Federalism just a sham'**

**By Senator Mathias Cormann on 26 November 2008**

[Senator CORMANN](#) (Western Australia) (3.29 pm)—If there was any further proof required, today we got the conclusive evidence that cooperative federalism is nothing more than a political slogan. There is no substance to it. There is no commitment to it. That became very clear if you listened to the partisan political response by the Leader of the Government in the Senate, when he attacked the Treasurer of the state of Western Australia.

I asked the Leader of the Government in the Senate today whether there have been any discussions or any representations to the Commonwealth in preparation for the COAG meeting on Saturday as a result of the pre-COAG strategy meeting of Labor state and territory Treasurers. The answer he gave me was, 'Of course; I don't really understand the question—that is what normally happens.' And when I asked him, 'What is the Commonwealth's view? Does the Commonwealth believe that it was appropriate that the Treasurer of Western Australia was excluded just because he is a Liberal?' – what did the minister say? The minister essentially said, 'He probably wasn't excluded because he was a Liberal', and in not so many words—I know we are going to get a ruling from the President—the minister essentially said that the Treasurer of Western Australia was excluded not because he is a Liberal but because he is a bad bloke. I happen to think Troy Buswell is a good bloke, but that is not why he should be invited to a pre-COAG strategy meeting. Troy Buswell is the duly elected member for Vaase in Western Australia. He is the duly appointed Treasurer of the state of Western Australia. If there was any substance to 'the spirit of cooperative federalism', if the Prime Minister was serious in his commitment to cooperative federalism, he would discipline and reprimand his minister in this chamber for the statements he has made today.

This is what Kevin Rudd had to say shortly after the election on 6 September:

The dream of cooperative federalism will not be diminished when Liberal leader Colin Barnett is sworn in as Western Australia's new Premier.

...  
Fixing a federation goes well beyond party politics and therefore I'm looking forward to working with the new WA premier and his government ...

That was a good start, but a month later all of the state and territory Labor treasurers met for a secret little meeting. The Treasurer of Victoria, John Lenders, gives Troy Buswell a call and says, 'By the way, we are having this meeting, but don't you dare turn up, because you are not welcome.' The state of Western Australia, the people of Western Australia, are not allowed to be part of a meeting that is going to essentially set the scene, organise strategies and plan for what is going to be discussed at the COAG meeting this Saturday. Is that the new spirit of cooperative federalism? Is cooperative federalism only applicable if you are part of the Labor Party? Is it cooperative federalism as long as the people across various jurisdictions do not dare to elect a Liberal-National Party government? I am sure that is not what the people of Australia understood before the election

about how the Prime Minister would proceed. Quite frankly, I would urge the Prime Minister to have a very close look at, firstly, what the minister said in this chamber today in trying to justify why the Treasurer of Western Australia has not been invited to this meeting—trying to justify the unjustifiable, quite frankly—and, secondly, the reflection by this minister on the Treasurer of the state of Western Australia.

Look at the way the Commonwealth has approached its relations with states and territories over the last 12 months. We had the episode of the Medicare levy surcharge, putting huge pressure on state and territory budgets and not even consulting with the states and territories. We had the issue of the government saying, 'We want to take over public hospitals if the states don't perform, but we won't tell the states and territories the targets that they have to meet'—even though the deadline that the Prime Minister put out there is only six months away. Remember before the last election, when Kevin Rudd had this love-in with all the state and territory premiers, who were then all Labor, commissioning the Garnaut climate change review? He said:

Federal Labor and the states and territories have today commissioned the Garnaut Climate Change Review—

A review that was funded by state and territory governments. Taxpayers across Australia funded what was essentially a party political exercise at the time.

We had a committee inquiry hearing in Perth last week, and what did Treasury in Western Australia tell us? They now want to get access to Treasury modelling to be able to reach some conclusions about the impact of the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme on the state of Western Australia, but no access has been provided beyond what is publicly available.

Essentially, to sum up, this slogan of cooperative federalism has been exposed again and again as nothing more than a political exercise before the last election. It was there to minimise and manage the risk of wall-to-wall Labor in terms of how it was going to be perceived by the people across Australia.

Question agreed to.



## Questions to the Leader of the Government in the Senate

### Western Australia & the Council of Australian Governments

By Senator Mathias Cormann on 26 November 2008

**Senator CORMANN** (Western Australia) (2.49 pm)—My question is to the Minister representing the Prime Minister, Senator Evans. Has the government received any representations or had any discussions on issues relating to this Saturday's COAG meeting as a result of the pre-COAG strategy meeting held by Labor state and territory treasurers?

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I am not sure that I fully understand the question from the senator. What I do know is that a lot of preparation goes into COAG meetings. There is a great deal of work conducted by officials from state and Commonwealth governments on the agenda, to try and reach agreed positions and to do the necessary research work and exploratory work that will facilitate the ministers, the Prime Minister and premiers to reach conclusions on their deliberations. So, obviously, a great deal of work goes into those meetings. Former ministers of the Howard government would be well aware of that. In many ways, the COAG meeting is a culmination of a lot of work that has been done by officials in the lead-up. Certainly there would have been preparations done.

In terms of my own portfolio, I am not involved in the COAG, so I have no personal knowledge of that arrangement, but it stands to reason that there has been very serious engagement with the states and territories in the lead-up to COAG. The agenda has been prepared and no doubt that will be considered at the meeting. If there is anything further I can help the senator with, I will see whether the Prime Minister has got anything to add. But, as I said, I think it is self-evident that there is a lot of preparation before the meeting. No doubt that will be used to assist the deliberations of the ministers at the COAG meeting.

**Senator CORMANN**—Mr President, I ask a supplementary question. Given that the minister confirmed that there were such preparations for the COAG meeting, does the Commonwealth believe that it was appropriate that the Western Australian Treasurer was excluded from the pre-COAG strategy meeting just because he is a Liberal?

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I can think of a lot of reasons why you would not invite Troy Buswell to a meeting—a lot of reasons—because his behaviour has been of less than the required standard. I certainly would think twice about meeting with him.

*Honourable senators interjecting—*

**The PRESIDENT**—Order! Senator Evans, resume your seat. On both sides, order! It is completely disorderly to be shouting across the chamber from both sides. The minister has 33 seconds remaining to answer the question.

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I would regard it as quite prudent not to invite Mr Buswell to certain meetings— not because he is from WA, not because he is a Liberal but because of his own personal characteristics that many of us find offensive.

*Honourable senators interjecting—*

**The PRESIDENT**—Order! On my right! People shouting across the chamber is not going to allow question time to proceed. Senator Macdonald is rightly standing on his feet. I believe he wants to take a point of order. He is entitled to be recognised.

**Senator Ian Macdonald**—Mr President, I do raise a point of order. I refer the President to the provisions of the standing orders which prevent ministers from referring disrespectfully to other members of parliament.

*Honourable senators interjecting—*

**The PRESIDENT**—Order! When senators come to order I will proceed. I have Senator Macdonald, who has taken a point of order, and I have Senator Ludwig waiting to get to his feet. I call Senator Ludwig.

**Senator Ludwig**—Mr President, on the point of order: I would submit to you that there is no point of order. There was no imputation that was related to another member of a chamber. Senator Evans was simply stating a factual response to a question that was put by the senator on the other side. I would ask you to have a look at the record to confirm that.

**The PRESIDENT**—There is no point of order, but, Senator Evans, I would draw your attention to the fact that there are 18 seconds left to answer the question, and you should be careful about not imputing any other motives to a person in another parliament.

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I have completed my answer, Mr President.

**Senator CORMANN**—Mr President, I ask a further supplementary question. Doesn't the minister's partisan answer prove that cooperative federalism is nothing more than a political slogan without any substance? Has the Prime Minister taken any action to reprimand state and territory Labor governments or at least reminded them of the need to work cooperatively, including with the state of Western Australia? If the Prime Minister has been too busy since this became public, given his international commitments, will he do so at the meeting on Saturday?

*Honourable senators interjecting—*

**The PRESIDENT**—Order!

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—Can I say first of all—

*Honourable senators interjecting—*

**The PRESIDENT**—Senator Evans, resume your seat. I no sooner called 'order' than two people, one from either side, started up again. It is not fair to the person trying to answer the question. I understand that there will be interjections from time to time, but Senator Evans and other senators are entitled to be heard in silence.

**Senator CHRIS EVANS**—I actually think that the Premier of Western Australia, Mr Barnett, has indicated his support for cooperative federalism. The Prime Minister had a very positive meeting with the premier about that, and I hope that the WA government continues to provide support for that approach. Mr Barnett is a person of strong reputation and he is a very reputable person. I think he and the Prime Minister had a good first meeting on working together in a cooperative way.

I am sure that that relationship will continue and I hope WA provides a strong input into the COAG discussions on the weekend.