

## Legislative Council

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### HEALTH CARE (COUNTRY HEALTH) AMENDMENT BILL

**The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON** (00:21): I rise to indicate my support for the second reading of the bill. Obviously, it has arisen from the government's extremely unpopular health care plan and, with that in mind, I feel compelled to first make some comments about this. Along with the majority of members in this place, I supported the government's bill in February. Although I have since changed my position, I make no apology for my original vote. My office consulted extensively on that bill and, whilst I had reservations, which I expressed very clearly in my second reading contribution, there was simply not enough negative community feedback at the time we debated the bill to convince me to vote against it.

I note that, in the initial stages of consultation after a draft bill was issued in August 2007, community leaders, hospital board members and others treated the bill with a high level of suspicion, and it certainly elicited some passionate reactions. There exists a strong sentiment of distrust in our regions over the centralisation policies of this government, and not just those in relation to health. This sentiment continues to this day and is one of which I am well aware.

However, over time, strong feelings about the government's plan seemed greatly to diminish and, by the start of this year, the vast majority of people I spoke to said pretty much the same thing—that, although they were not exactly thrilled about the bill, they had accepted it and moved on. It was then passed and all hell literally broke loose. Not even the government's \$400,000 spin campaign could prevent a landslide of criticism across the state, and we can all speculate about the reasons for that.

First and foremost, I realise that our role in this place is to represent the people, and it is in the light of the public's reaction once the country plan was announced that my position changed. The message from South Australians was loud and clear: they wanted the satisfactory provision of health services in regions, and they wanted legislation that guaranteed that. In his second reading contribution, the Hon. Robert Brokenshire stated that this bill proposes to put into legislation the guarantee the Premier made in a press release to rural and regional people in South Australia, that is, that we do not see hospitals and health services further downsized or closed.

In fact, both the Premier and the health minister have stated in a number of press releases, as well as frequently in the media, that this will be the case. In particular, they have commented on 'no closures of country hospitals' and the provision of emergency services in those hospitals. Incidentally, the government has also publicly committed to proceeding with the improved infrastructure and service commitments that were outlined in its original plan, including capital infrastructure for Ceduna, Port Pirie, Berri and Whyalla.

As the Hon. Robert Brokenshire said, until something is encoded in legislation, regional and rural South Australians will not have the certainty they demand.

I really think that we in this place should listen to their concerns and provide that certainty to them. We cannot focus solely on the economic benefits of a plan: we must give equal consideration to the social costs of leaving things the way they are. Of course, the government is currently having public consultation meetings about its revised Country Health Care Plan, and the first of a series of public meetings on the country health strategy was held in Cleve on 17 November. These meetings are continuing over the next few weeks.

There is no doubt that the government's original plan was highly unpopular and a far cry from what regional South Australians expected from a country health service. The government has said that it has heard this voice, and that it requested that Country Health SA, with the support of the country health task force, develop a strategy to address these issues. However, can we in this place afford to wait and trust this government, given its track record—not to mention its disregarding information that continues to filter down to all of us?

For all the positive press releases put out by the Premier's 'Ministry of Truth' (as I like to call it), reports have emerged that the government is trying to discourage people from attending public consultation meetings on its revised Country Health Care Plan. Last week I heard the member for Flinders say on ABC Radio that the Eyre Peninsula meetings were a farce. The member said that three of the meetings were scheduled for the middle of the day during harvest, meaning that farmers and working people could not attend. The member for Flinders said that many people were not being given the opportunity to give feedback on this critical issue. She said:

I am quite sure the government wants to have a minimum number of people possible because I think they have their agenda and they don't really want to upset it. So instead of getting 200 or more like we did at other consultations, we'll be lucky if we get 10 or 20. It will only be the retired people who can get there to the consultation.

This was hotly disputed by Peter Blacker, chair of the Country Health Plan task force, who said that it had been scheduled in order to meet timelines.

The Hon. R.L. Brokenshire interjecting:

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Exactly. The Hon. Robert Brokenshire asks whose timelines, and I would like to make that point. Quite often in this place we express concerns about the consultation processes of this government. Consultation means that you actually consult and compromise and make sure that the people you are consulting with are available for input.

An honourable member interjecting:

**The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON:** That's exactly right; make sure they can turn up. I am not sure whether or not that is true but, given past comments that have come to this place, it is more than likely. As members in this place will know, I am a strong critic of the way this government consults. It usually means either making no real effort to engage stakeholders or meet up with them or going into those meetings with no real intention of taking the feedback into account. Last Thursday there was also more criticism on ABC Radio that community consultation sessions were not being

advertised enough. Several Jamestown residents told the meeting on Wednesday that they found out about it just hours before it began.

There are differences of opinion on this matter but, given the overwhelming public reaction to the original plan and the fact that the government has stated on its own website that hospitals and health services will not be further downsized or closed, why would we not support this bill? In his second reading speech the honourable member spoke about issues facing rural and regional South Australians—issues such as transport and the drought. He also noted that there was widespread support in metropolitan Adelaide to ensure that adequate health services were provided in country areas because many people living in Adelaide have family who live in the country. I think it is also worth noting that a lot of people, South Australians as well as those from other places, holiday in some of these regions, which is another reason we need an adequate level of services.

I will play it straight on this one. I support this bill because it may just give rural and regional South Australians some peace of mind, and it may just reverse some of the damage done. The bill is straightforward, sensible and, as I have said, highly warranted. Given the public's overwhelming negative response to the government's original plan, I think we in this place have a duty to act on their behalf and pass this legislation. It is clearly what people want, and that is who we are meant to represent. Rural and regional people play a vital role in the social and economic vibrancy of our state, and that is why they deserve our support. It is in all our interests, even those of us who live in Adelaide, that rural communities—particularly in the present climate—are given the opportunity to flourish. I congratulate the Hon. Robert Brokenshire for introducing this bill and I have appreciated hearing the contributions of other members.