

that the Russian Federation had recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, often known as the separatist region of Georgia. Australia does not support such recognition. That is Australia's longstanding position. Australia recognises the territorial sovereignty of Georgia over the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The declaration by the Russian Federation is not a helpful contribution to tensions in that area of the world and not a helpful contribution to international relations. Indeed, some might say that such a declaration was provocative. It does not help the standing of the Russian Federation. In the Australian government's view, it diminishes and lowers its standing.

Members would recall that earlier this month, following the incursion of Georgian forces into South Ossetia, the Russian Federation deployed a large-scale military offensive in Georgia, not restricted to South Ossetia. That large-scale military offensive implemented and effected large-scale devastation upon parts of Georgia, including military and economic points. We saw, regrettably, civilian casualties and a large number of displaced persons, as a consequence of which the Australian government announced humanitarian assistance of a million dollars through relevant international agencies.

The actions of the Russian Federation in this respect were clearly disproportionate. We welcomed very much the efforts of President Sarkozy, the President of France, in his position as European Union chair, and the Finnish Foreign Minister, my counterpart from Finland, in his position as chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in effecting a ceasefire agreement between Georgia and the Russian Federation. Regrettably, Russia has not abided by that ceasefire and, as we have done publicly and through officials in both Canberra and Moscow, we again call upon the Russian Federation to return its troops to the positions they occupied prior to the commencement of hostilities on 6 and 7 August.

The Russian Federation is a significant and influential player in world affairs. It is essential that it engages in dialogue and peaceful conduct. We urge the Russian Federation to abide by the ceasefire brokered by President Sarkozy and return its forces to those positions, and to engage fully in international affairs through the relevant regional multilateral forums—through discussion, not through the disproportionate use of military force of arms.

Mr Rudd—Mr Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the *Notice Paper*.

3.33 pm

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Questions in Writing

Dr SOUTHCOTT (3.33 pm)—Mr Speaker, under standing order 105(b), could you write to the Minister

for Employment Participation and ask him to respond to the following questions in writing, which have not been answered within 60 days: Nos 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 199, 200, 201, 202. Could you also write to the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government and ask him to respond to questions Nos 172 and 204. Could you also write to the Minister for Education about question in writing No. 193 and, in her capacity as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, question No. 203.

The SPEAKER—I will take action as required under standing order 105(b).

Questions in Writing

Mr PEARCE (3.34 pm)—Mr Speaker, could I also seek your assistance under standing order 105(b). Could you please write to the Treasurer and ask him to respond to question in writing No. 7. It is now over five months since I asked that question. There are also question No. 14 to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and a question to the Prime Minister, which is now over three months old, question No. 90.

The SPEAKER—I will take action as required under standing order 105(b).

DOCUMENTS

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.35 pm)—Documents are presented as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the documents will be recorded in the *Votes and Proceedings*.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Nursing Homes

Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond—Minister for Ageing) (3.35 pm)—by leave—The Rudd government is committed to tackling the challenges of the 21st century. And one of those major challenges is our ageing population. Australians have the second longest life expectancy in the world, at 81.4 years, after the Japanese. In addition, women on Queensland's Sunshine Coast and in Western Australia's wheat belt have among the longest life expectancies in the world. By mid-century most Australians can expect, on average, to reach the mid- to late 80s. Currently, there are 2,800 Australians aged 100 years or over, and that is expected to grow to 78,000 by 2055.

An ageing population and record life expectancy is to be celebrated. The previous government neglected older Australians; we plan to change that. That is why, over the next four years, we are investing a record \$40 billion into aged and community care; of that, \$28.6 billion on nursing homes alone. In 2008-09, \$2.2 billion will be spent on community care programs to help people remain independent and in their homes.

Last year nearly 56,000 people received help at home through community care packages. The 56,000 community care packages complement the nearly 170,000 residential aged-care beds supported by the federal government. Meals on Wheels—an example of state and federal governments working together—is one of the many initiatives to help people remain within their homes.

Some 80,000 volunteers and workers deliver about 15 million meals a year from 750 kitchens to the frail, the aged and people with disabilities right across Australia. Indeed, today is National Meals on Wheels Day. I was very pleased to deliver a meal to John and Ruth Perryman right here in the ACT. They are both 85 years of age. Later on today, I look forward to launching the Meals on Wheels Parliamentary Friends Group. It will be chaired by the member for Hindmarsh and the member for Parkes. I commend them on their initiative.

In Australia there are almost 3,000 nursing homes. They are world-class services with thousands of hard-working, dedicated staff. Of those nursing homes, only nine of them are under sanction. Three of those nine were identified through the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency's unannounced visits program. The record 3,000 unannounced visits began on 1 July. We make no apologies for protecting our nation's frail and aged. Indeed, unannounced visits are commonplace in Australia. For example, last year ACT Health alone conducted 1,984 food business inspections and 225 cooling tower inspections in Canberra. I can tell you, as a former police officer, I certainly know the element of surprise was a major factor in effective investigations.

Also, in the commercial area, McDonalds has a strict regime of testing, unannounced visits and so-called 'mystery shoppers'. They evaluate cleanliness, quality and service. Unannounced visits are even more important in aged care where frail, elderly residents are cared for 24 hours a day and are often unable to speak out if they have concerns about their care. Unannounced visits give an accurate picture of a facility's day-to-day operation.

From 1 July to 14 August, the accreditation agency and the Department of Health and Ageing have conducted 501 and 178 unannounced visits respectively. In the case of a nursing home where serious risk has been identified, the accreditation agency visits daily until the serious risk has been removed. The Department of Health and Ageing will also send Commonwealth nursing officers to monitor the quality of care being given to residents.

The accreditation agency has a set of at-risk factors to identify nursing homes for further unannounced visits. They include:

- existing non-compliance problems in any of the areas of the 44 standards, including nutrition and hydration;
- the number of complaints against a facility;
- the known financial difficulties or business restructuring;
- a change of approved provider;
- major changes in key personnel and senior staff;
- ambitious building programs; and
- a sudden change in resident population and mix of residents.

The accreditation agency will undertake a program of unannounced visits across entire groups of homes where they need to determine if problems are localised and site specific or systemic across the group. This recently occurred with the Japara Group after the Kirralee facility in East Ballarat was identified in an unannounced visit. At Kirralee, the accreditation agency assessors identified five areas of serious risk, including nutrition and hydration. The Department of Health and Ageing advised that the measures were 'among the strongest ever taken against a care provider' by this government.

After the agency found significant noncompliance at Kirralee, it conducted a program of unannounced visits to all other homes in the 32-member group. As a result, the agency uncovered significant concerns in relation to another home in the group—Brighton Aged Care in Adelaide. On Monday night, 25 August, the agency acted. The agency reduced the accreditation period of Brighton Aged Care in Adelaide as an outcome of a review audit conducted in early August.

The accreditation agency has formally identified 17 areas of noncompliance out of 44 accreditation outcomes arising from the review audit. This, indeed, is a staggering figure. Previously, on 15 August, the department issued a notice setting out the actions that the home must take to address the original 14 areas of noncompliance and the timeline in which this must be done. The department will now consider whether additional compliance action is required given the agency's decision of 25 August.

These unannounced visits are all about the health, safety and wellbeing of residents, and I make no apologies for these tough measures. I also urge the opposition to give their bipartisan support to unannounced visits. I am confident that the aged-care industry and the many older Australians it serves will see the longer-term benefits of a more transparent and accountable aged-care industry. I will continue to work in partnership with older Australians, aged-care providers, unions and consumer groups to improve the quality in residential aged care and ensure the long-term viability of the sector.

I ask leave of the House to move a motion to enable the member for McPherson to speak for seven minutes.

Leave granted.

Mrs ELLIOT—I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the member for McPherson speaking for a period not exceeding seven minutes.

Question agreed to.

Mrs MAY (McPherson) (3.43 pm)—Unfortunately, there is nothing new in what the minister has put on the record today that she has not said on previous occasions. In fact, the content of the ministerial statement today condemns the minister. There appears to be a belief in her office that generating a flurry of media releases and ministerial statements that say nothing new will fix the aged-care system. It is a dangerous approach because the aged-care system is at crisis point.

Today the minister has talked about unannounced visits to aged-care facilities, but let us set the record straight. Unannounced visits were initiated under the Howard government, along with a number of other initiatives, such as accreditation and certification, to ensure that Australia had a world-class aged-care system. That system is being eroded because of the performance of the Rudd government and the minister. The minister continuously attacks the industry at every opportunity and overlooks the fact that it is her approach, her penchant for announcing reviews and her inaction, that is doing serious damage to older Australians.

I remind the minister that people in the aged care industry, the dedicated workers and care providers, have the welfare of residents as a priority; otherwise, they would not be in the business. A large percentage of providers are charities whose vision is to provide a strong, sustainable aged and community care industry providing people with high-quality, accessible services that meet their needs. Yet the minister undermines them and aged care workers at every opportunity.

This ministerial statement is a typical example of the Rudd government. It is an empty ministerial statement. It contains nothing new. As mentioned previously, unannounced visits were initiated by the Howard government. In March of this year the minister said she was going to increase the number of visits from 4,000 to 7,000 visits. But that is where the minister is misleading. The 7,000 visits are a combination of announced and unannounced visits, so it is not an increase of 3,000 unannounced visits. When the department was asked in Senate estimates whether more staff would be employed to undertake the increased visits, the reply that came back was that no extra staff would be put on to undertake the increased number of visits. I ask the minister to explain how the number of visits can almost double and yet the staff members stay the

same. Is this part of the new productivity push or a push to burn workers out? It just does not add up.

I believe the media releases that the minister puts out are an attempt to disguise numerous failings and are a reflection of the chaotic way the Rudd government is running the country. The sooner it sinks in that our ageing population is the biggest social challenge that Australia and the world faces, the better. The sooner people grasp the enormity of the challenges we face, the better, because I think people will live their own lives in a more sustainable way.

The Governor-General said at his farewell dinner last night that his vision for Australia is for a caring Australia—first and foremost taking care of one's health and wellbeing and caring for others. We all need to take better care of ourselves because, with demographic change, increased life expectancy, declining fertility rates and such things as costly technological advances and a reduced workforce, living standards will fall quite dramatically and Australians are not prepared for that. The aged care system is unravelling, and this slow disintegration will gain momentum as pressure on the system increases. We are hearing more and more about long waiting lists, difficulties in facilities finding staff, underfunding and undersubscription of places.

The minister says the Rudd government is committed to tackling the challenges of the 21st century and goes on about 12 years of Howard government neglect. I have got news for the minister: constantly repeating something does not make it true. The Howard government did not neglect aged care; we gave priority to the care of older Australians. It does not seem to have registered that it is now up to the Rudd government to meet the challenges of our ageing population. Excuse after excuse, press release after press release, while the system is falling down, does not cut it and will not address the issues facing the aged care sector in the 21st century.

Aged care is at a crisis point. I use those extreme words with caution, but it is at crisis point. Over 40 per cent of our providers are operating in the red. For the first time beds have been undersubscribed in Tasmania and Western Australia. Beds are being closed down, and decisions are being made at a board level not to make application for beds. Waiting lists are getting longer, more and more compliance is being heaped on providers, and the system is buckling under the strain. How can older Australians receive the care they deserve if facilities are understaffed and underfunded? It is about time the Rudd government woke up to the seriousness of the situation and started governing in the best interests of all Australians, including older Australians, not just working families—whatever that means. Going by what comes out of the minister's office, I suspect her office reflects the dysfunction of the Prime

Minister's office, and this dysfunction is affecting the welfare of older Australians.

We are already in August, and the 2008 aged care assessment round has not even commenced. The process is usually well under way by now. But the minister has dragged her feet, leaving thousands of Australians waiting for beds either in their home or in a hospital. One night in a hospital bed costs \$1,117, compared to \$100 in an aged care facility.

In closing, the welfare of older Australians is paramount. I applaud any initiative that protects older Australians. I detest, though, empty statements that have no relevance and do nothing to meet the challenges of our ageing population. There are no two ways about it; the ageing of our population is the biggest social challenge that Australia has ahead of it. We must address those challenges; otherwise the wellbeing of older Australians is at serious risk.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Economy

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—Mr Speaker has received letters from the honourable member for Wide Bay and the honourable member for Kennedy proposing that definite matters of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion today. As required by standing order 46(d) I have selected the matter which, in my opinion, is the most urgent and important; that is, that proposed by the honourable member for member for Wide Bay, namely:

The failure of the Government to take responsibility for the economy and to take action to help Australians who are worse off under its administration

I therefore call upon those members who approve of that proposed discussion to rise in their places.

More than the number of members required by the standing orders having risen in their places—

Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (3.50 pm)—I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your choice of matters of public importance today. This is a matter of grave importance to Australia. As recently as last November, nine months ago, Australia's economy was in very good shape. It was strong and vibrant and offered opportunity and prosperity. Our economy was—if I may dare say so—in ruddy good health. I am sorry to report to the House that most Australians now believe that their own personal finances and their country are in ruddy ill health.

We have had a remarkable turnaround in just nine months. Kevin Rudd, the Prime Minister, said today in question time that he would never say that working families have never been better off. Well, the Prime Minister cannot say that, because it is not true. Families are not better off; they are much worse off since the election of this government. We have a government that allegedly had a new economic approach, but it has

been a triumph of vacant symbolism and short-term stunts—an absolute blizzard of process, reviews and heavily promoted but always empty-headed speeches.

How many more revolutions are we going to have? How many more partnerships? How many more grand plans for the Asia-Pacific or intergalactic visions for the stratosphere? How many more five-point plans or 10-point plans? Today we are down to only a three-point plan or a three-pillar approach. These sorts of empty words, empty symbols, do nothing. They achieve nothing, and the Australian people are driven to despair.

You do not have to take my word for it. The Galaxy poll of Sydney families taken last week showed that 80 per cent of them believe that their personal finances have gone backwards since last November—80 per cent are worse off than they were when Labor was elected. That poll also found that 56 per cent of Sydney families are less confident than they were nine months ago. You heard also in question time today that Australians' decline in confidence is running at double the rate of the rest of the world. This country is going backwards at double the rate of the rest of the world.

While the Prime Minister tours the world, the people at home are struggling. The working families are not working, and the great Australian economy, which was able to withstand the Asian financial crisis, the US recession, September 11, bird flu and a host of other issues, is in serious decline. Thirty thousand jobs have been lost since the last budget; 630 more today. How many more people, how many more families, have to lose their jobs before this government starts to take some notice?

That serious lack of consumer confidence is fed primarily by the inane talking down of the economy by the Treasurer and the growing realisation that the Treasurer and his colleagues do not have the competence to manage our economy. This downward spiral over just nine months demonstrates monumental incompetence. There is an old saying: 'Give Labor something in good working order and it will soon be broke.' The record of the state Labor governments around the nation of wrecking successful economies is now being repeated at the national level. Labor have learned from what they have done at the state level and they are delivering the same results federally, inheriting a strong economy and pushing it into decline. Today there was the *Sunrise* poll, which found that almost 90 per cent of people believe they are worse off since last November. Of course, the Prime Minister himself admitted as much in question time yesterday. The people of Australia have suffered under this government for nine long, long, long, painful months.

Who is to blame for all this trouble? Who is to blame for all the problems that our country is facing? The Prime Minister chooses always to play the blame