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**CORONAVIRUS ECONOMIC RESPONSE PACKAGE (PAYMENTS AND  
BENEFITS) BILL 2020**

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA  
WEDNESDAY, 8 APRIL 2020**

**\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY \*\*\***

We were in this place just 16 days ago, and it is as if time has compressed, because that feels like a lifetime ago in terms of the spread of this virus around the world, in terms of the way in which we are now living our lives, in terms of the decisions that have been made by governments around this country and around the world.

As we meet here today, there are 1,200,000 confirmed cases of the virus around the world.

The death toll is approaching 73,000.

In the United States alone, 333,000 people are infected by this disease, and the death toll approaches 10,000. By the end of March we had seen the death toll exceed the number of lives lost on September 11. And, of those near 10,000 who've lost their lives in the United States, 1,207 of them died yesterday.

The speed of this virus and what it is doing around the world is truly stunning.

Here in Australia, we have 5,956 cases confirmed. Our death toll is currently at 45. We are not immune from what is being experienced around the world, but the social-distancing measures that have been put in place are making an enormous difference. They represent a huge sacrifice that is being made by Australians across our nation. Sacrifices in respect of being unable to visit their loved ones in nursing homes, which, by and large, have shut their doors and I think about all of those who are working in nursing homes around Australia, looking after the people who we care about the most. Babies are being born without their grandparents and their extended families turning up to hospital to welcome them into this extraordinary world. People, heartbreakingly, are being restricted from attending funerals and saying farewell to those who they love.

At a moment in time when the rhythm of life in Australia would be punctuated by the opening chapters of various football codes around the country and netball seasons, they all stand in abeyance.

Our kids are at home, working out how they're going to continue their learning through Skype over the computer, through the internet. That is a challenge for all of us.

But all of these sacrifices represent a magnificent effort on the part of all Australians.

Because of what they are doing, the number of new cases in Australia is declining. There is a long way to go, but there is promising news in the official reports, and that is a testament to the sacrifice of every Australian around this country, and I want to thank them today.

I particularly want to thank those who work in the health sector: health workers, nurses, doctors, cleaners, support staff and everyone who keeps the lights on in hospitals around our country. Sadly, in the last 24 hours we've seen the first of those health workers confirmed to have caught this disease—a doctor in Liverpool and a nurse in Brisbane—and it highlights the fact that every health worker is putting their own health on the line by going to work every day to maintain our health. That is an act of enormous bravery.

The thanks we saw given to health workers in Britain last Thursday, and the kind of expressions of support that we've seen for health workers around the world, we echo here today for our own health workers who are acting in a completely selfless way to keep every Australian safe. We should remember the 9 per cent of the cases of this disease that have been recorded in Italy are people who worked in the health sector. In China, 3,300 health workers have been infected with this disease, including Dr Li Wenliang, who was the first

person to alert the world to the deadly nature of the COVID-19 virus.

With the enormous health crisis has come a literal economic earthquake which is being felt around the world and around our country. There are so many Australians who face an uncertain future and who are doing it really tough.

When we were last here we put forward a very important package which provided relief to many Australians. But at that time, Labor made clear we were concerned about the absence of there being an employee subsidy as part of that package.

At the time, the Prime Minister was opposed to an employee subsidy. He said:

“... one of the weaknesses of the system that you're advocating for is that it has to build an entirely new payment system for that to be achieved, which is never done quickly and is never done well.”

I am so glad that the Prime Minister has done a U-turn in his thinking. It is a difficult thing in this business to admit when a wrong has occurred.

But, in the package that is being put forward today, with the JobKeeper payments, that is what has occurred and we acknowledge what the government has done in accepting this.

Because the long queues that we saw outside Centrelink offices in the aftermath of the last time we met speaks to how important it is that we maintain the relationship between employers and their workforce, which cannot be done unless an employee subsidy is put in place. And that is why the package of bills that are being put forward today is so important, and we are so pleased that the government has changed its tune in this regard.

But it is not perfect, and we as an Opposition will continue to advocate for improvements in this package.

One of the areas which remain a concern is the failure of this package to address casuals who have been in their place of employment for less than 12 months. That is almost a million people in our workforce who fit within that category.

Right now, about a quarter of our workforce is casualised. That represents a really significant increase in the casualisation rate in Australia over the last few decades, and places Australia amongst the highest countries in the OECD in terms of levels of casualisation. It means that risk within our workplaces is shifted to, in many cases, the

most vulnerable and people who earn the least amount. There's something about that which is deeply unfair, and that unfairness is given expression in the package which we are considering today. That is why Labor is moving an amendment to include casuals who have not been in a place of employment for more than 12 months, to receive the benefit of the JobKeeper payments. It is really important that their relationship with their employers is also maintained.

Another group of workers who are left out by this package are those who are temporary working visa holders in this country. There are a million of those as well. Now, we have a large population of temporary work visa holders in Australia—our Pacific neighbours working in the Seasonal Workers Program, backpackers, international students, temporary protection visa holders, some skilled visa holders and people on bridging visas. Many of these people will lose their jobs; many already have. It is very important that they are protected in this moment as well.

Now, we agree with the government that people who are here on temporary work visas, who are able to return home should do so. But the state of international travel and the way in which countries have isolated themselves means that, for a lot of these people, that will be an impossibility. So long as this population remains in Australia, than they need to be supported, which is why we have put forward the amendments that we have today.

Finally, I want to say that this is a package which requires an enormous amount of prudence. Almost 10 per cent of GDP—perhaps more than 10 per cent of GDP—is being spent in the three stimulus packages – the three relief packages which have been put forward by the government.

This is not done lightly.

We will see our country now head into a trillion dollars of debt. Public money needs to be spent prudently.

It's one thing to talk about having a brand of strong fiscal management, to give words to another to give expression to those words by actions in this place. It's why we believe that there should be parliamentary scrutiny of this package of bills and what is going on in terms of the relief packages, and more parliamentary scrutiny would be better. But, in the absence of that, Labor has pursued a Senate Select Committee, which will be chaired by Senator Katy Gallagher, and that will do really important work in making sure that there is

prudent oversight of these packages.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these bills are critically important to enabling our country to move through this crisis. But to the extent that they speak to the collective spirit of Australians which is characterising our nation right now and is burning so brightly, and stands to the credit of every Australian.

And it is that collective spirit that I know will be the guiding light which sees our nation prevail through this unprecedented crisis.

***ENDS***

**Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.**