



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

Hansard 1 November 2001

FEDERAL ELECTION; DENTAL HEALTH

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (7.04 p.m.): In the lead-up to the federal election, Australians are being asked the question: are we better off? Are we better off than five years ago? The answer that I am hearing widely in my local area is no. I am seeing far too many middle-aged people who are casualties of companies in decline. I am seeing people desperately seeking early access to their superannuation because they are in financial strife. I am meeting numerous older people on low, fixed incomes who cannot afford to repair or paint their house. The evidence is clear that the cost of living has risen dramatically since the introduction of the GST. In the past year electricity, gas and other household fuel prices rose by more than 11 per cent; house maintenance costs rose by 12.5 per cent; and household services rose by more than 11 per cent.

One issue that may seem trivial but which is not trivial to hundreds of people in my local area is that the cost of living is leading people to neglect the care of their teeth. A survey this year found that extractions have increased by 20 per cent across all age groups except 18- to 24-year-olds. People cannot afford dental care, they are letting their teeth go and extractions are becoming more common. This problem has been exacerbated because one of the first mean-spirited acts of the Howard government in 1996 was to scrap the federal Dental Assistance Program.

Since 1996, queues for public dental services have resembled a line-up for tickets to a footy final. In my area, residents such as Gloria Wheeler have more than a two-year wait for dental services at QE II Hospital. The Queensland state government has tried desperately to fill the gap left by the Howard government with \$105 million allocated state wide to public dental services.

Sadly, until the federal Dental Assistance Program is reinstated, Gloria Wheeler will have to remain very patient. Gloria is not lying down, though. She raised her concern with the Labor candidate in Moreton, Kathleen Brookes. Kathleen Brookes has been lobbying the shadow Minister for Health, Jenny Macklin, for Labor to reinstate the federal Dental Assistance Scheme. This call has come from many Australians and has been heeded.

Jenny Macklin was at Mount Gravatt today with Kathleen Brookes. They had a very important message for local residents. That message was that there are three things that are good for your teeth: brushing, an apple and Kim Beazley's plan for dental health. A federal Labor government will invest \$100 million over four years to restore public dental health services. Federal Labor will also provide improved dental services to residents in nursing homes. I will be calling on local people to bight back and vote for Kim Beazley and Kim Beazley's dental plan.
