



Speech by

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MEDICARE

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (12.26 p.m.): Under the Howard government, Medicare has become 'credit care'. Our Medicare cards will be of little use and the majority of Australians will be pulling out their credit card to pay for health care. Each week many families in my area speak to me because they are very worried about the cost of health care. They are paying up-front fees to GPs. Many of them are paying \$1,200 or more a year for private health insurance. Many are paying gap fees when they have hospital treatments of hundreds or thousands of dollars and, as well, many of them are already paying for health care through the Medicare levy. Many people who speak to me are paying this on their credit card already.

What does the Howard government offer? John Howard is offering insurance for the gap fees. He is looking at more private ways of responding to something that should be a public response. As well in my area, even working families in suburbs such as Parkinson, Forest Lake and others, who could be regarded as more affluent than people in other areas around Acacia Ridge, are struggling to pay the cost of health care. It seems to me that John Howard and his colleagues have no real idea of what it is like for people after they have paid the costs of housing, food, electricity, school fees and so on. Some of them have \$20 to \$50 a week left for incidentals such as entertainment and all the other costs of life. John Howard has no understanding of how limited the budget is for lots of families.

A government member: He doesn't care.

Ms STRUTHERS: He does not really care at all. That is a very clear difference between Labor and the conservative parties. It is very evident in the work that we do on health policy. In 1973—a great year—Bill Hayden introduced the white paper on the Australian health insurance program that later became Medibank and then formed into Medicare. That is tremendous policy. It is the sort of stuff that people in Australia can be proud of. It is the sort of policy that Labor members are very proud of, and it is why I am in the Labor Party and I am not sitting on the other side of this parliament.

Two principles were enshrined in that initial Medibank scheme. One of them was that the Australian government believed that all people, irrespective of their means, should have access to a high standard of health care. A further principle was that an individual's contribution to the cost of health services should be based on his or her capacity to pay. Hence that government introduced a system where people paid, through their tax, on their taxable income. These were important principles. They are the sorts of principles that we are now seeing the Howard government savage. It was a simple, fair, affordable, quality system, and it has been for many, many years. Every Australian paid a Medicare levy and, in return, received free access to their GP and other essential health care services.

Medicare has become, in a way, an Australian icon. As I said, people are very proud of the Medicare system. It was built on Australian concepts of giving everybody a fair go. The scheme itself is one that Labor is absolutely committed to. We introduced it and we are absolutely committed to restoring bulkbilling. It is one of our single biggest priorities in health. Bulkbilling is part of our lives, but John Howard has never believed in it. What did he say on Radio 2GB in June 1987? He said—

We will be proposing changes to Medicare which amount to its de facto dismantling ... we'll pull it right apart.

He said that in 1987. He has been trying to do it since then. Now he has a clear run to do it. Now that more doctors are dropping out of bulkbilling, John Howard is beginning to achieve what he said in 1987 he would do. Today he has introduced a package of reforms which do not go anywhere near offering

any fairness. He is cloaking them under the guise of fairness. There is nothing fair about what has been introduced today. People will have to rack up more bills on their credit cards.

This is not a system Labor supports. We will be doing everything we can to fight it. I commend the Australian Pensioners and Superannuants League, which hosted a forum in City Hall yesterday to save Medicare. I commend the Medicare Alliance and all of the other groups that are working hard to save Medicare. What is the opposition doing about Medicare? Nothing! Have we heard anything from opposition members in this parliament on Medicare and bulkbilling? No. No-one in Queensland can put their faith in the opposition parties to do anything to improve public access to health care in this state. They have not said a word about Medicare. John Howard will go down in history as the man who took from the poor and gave to the rich. He will go down in history as one of the most mean-spirited leaders this country has ever had. It is a damned shame.