



Speech by

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### **FIRST HOME OWNER GRANT AMENDMENT BILL**

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algester—ALP) (12.15 p.m.): Our mean-spirited Prime Minister, John Howard, is blind to the reality that many millions of people in this country are struggling to put a decent roof over their heads. In a radio interview several months ago, he dismissed the housing affordability problem raised by a member of the public in saying that he is not hearing concerns from people whose property values are rising. Well, why would he? Those of us who own property are doing very well out of this overheated market. It simply showed his lack of regard for the person who rang into the radio station to express concern that money is not buying the same sorts of properties that it used to buy. People need hundreds of thousands of dollars to put a decent roof over their heads. He is simply not understanding the problem and he simply does not care.

The difference between Labor governments and conservative governments is that we do understand the needs of a whole range of people. We do have regard to the needs of a whole range of people and we do show leadership. Our concern is about all people having access to affordable housing—all people in this country and in this state having the opportunity to put a decent roof over their head. On numerous occasions in this House we have heard the Minister for Housing, Robert Schwarten, pleading with the federal government to reinstate the level of capital funding that we need in order to have a decent public housing system continue in this state. We have heard the Treasurer, Terry Mackenroth—a man of his word—say in this House that he would fix the flaw in this First Home Owner Grant Scheme, and he has done that. Within a couple of weeks he has brought this bill to the House, and I certainly rise to support the bill today.

The First Home Owner Grant Amendment Bill limits the application of the first home owner grant so that youths under 18 years of age will be eligible only in very exceptional circumstances. This is a very fair and sensible move. We cannot have a scheme that millionaires and minors benefit from. The scheme has to be in place in order to benefit people who have difficulty getting into the market. It needs to be a scheme that has some sort of cap on it so that it is not the luxury properties that people are buying with these taxpayer funds. If it is to be a scheme that continues into the future, it has to be targeted to those people who are at the lower end of the housing market, not people in search of investment or luxury properties. The bill also introduces a six-month residency period which applicants must satisfy for entitlement to the grant. Again, there have to be some provisions governing who can get access to these millions and millions of dollars in government grants.

The Howard federal government is the highest taxing government this country has ever seen. This is something that people need to understand, because what we are seeing is a government that is taking the most money out of Australians' pockets of any government in the history of this country, and therefore they can rightly expect that the services will match that level of tax take. But what are we seeing? We are seeing a government that is making health costs escalate. We are seeing a government in which housing costs have escalated. We are seeing a government that is making the cost of education higher than at any other time in Australian history.

We want to see a government that will use these taxes to build better roads and transport services and assist people into affordable housing. The Howard federal government is intent on buying votes with this money rather than supporting people who really need the support. Private investors are reaping more benefit from the rent assistance scheme that the federal government is funding than struggling families. Housing costs are excessive at the moment and it is certainly something that people

must be feeling. I think many people are feeling that the government is putting the boot in as it is also driving up the other costs of living. So it is not only housing that people are struggling with but health, education and all those costs. The Labor Party stands apart from these conservative parties in the way that we are standing up for affordable housing. We are standing up for a First Home Owner Grant Scheme that targets those people most in need. Otherwise it is not a scheme that should be in place.

We are standing up for people who do need support. As a sweetener to voters, the first home buyers grant was increased to \$14,000 in March 2001 when the median house prices for a new dwelling in Brisbane was around \$252,000. By September 2001 this had risen to \$254,000, climbing to \$264,000 by March 2002. For established dwellings the median price in Brisbane at March 2001 was \$190,000. By September 2001 the price had risen to \$195,000, jumping to \$240,000 by March 2002.

We are seeing a market that is rising. Housing costs are escalating. This scheme is not touching the edge of that. People are falsely believing that this scheme is in place to help make access to housing more affordable. In fact, it has been one of the triggers that has probably escalated the costs of housing, not only in this state but around Australia.

Housing affordability is a national problem and we need national leadership on this issue. We need a national affordable housing action plan to tackle the many factors that have led to the overheating of the housing market and the severe shortage of low cost housing. Housing affordability for all people has to be a focus of this national action plan, not simply a focus on first home buyers. It is short-sighted of the Howard government to direct the Productivity Commission to look solely at issues for the first home buyers and to blame the state stamp duty tax for the problem.

I have said in this House on many occasions that people in a suburb such as Acacia Ridge, which is in my local area—in fact, 30 per cent of people in Acacia Ridge, according to the 2001 ABS figures—were living on a little more than \$200 per week. How can we expect people living on little more than \$200 a week to pay the sorts of rents or mortgages that we are seeing at the moment? That will not even touch the surface of some of the rents and some of the mortgage costs that people are having to pay.

That is the type of people we are talking about. We are talking about a third of the people in Acacia Ridge, so we are talking about 700 people or so. If we multiply that by the many suburbs like Acacia Ridge around Queensland and around the nation, we are talking about hundreds of thousands of people who cannot afford to pay the costs of their weekly rents or their mortgages.

The standard is that people should not have to pay any more than 30 per cent of their income on housing costs. These people have nothing left out of \$200 a week. These are the sort of people our national leader should be addressing his attention to, not lining the pockets of people who are already well off in this system. That message cannot be more simply put. If people do not have the money they cannot put a roof over their heads. What should the highest taxing government ever in Australia do? That government should support those people. That is where the leadership needs to be directed to, not lining the pockets of the wealthy. Did everyone get that message?

**A government member:** Yes.

**Ms STRUTHERS:** Then why is Mr Howard not getting that message? It has been put to him in all sorts of ways. People have been raising this issue on radio talk-back programs. Members of parliament have been raising this issue. He is not getting it or he just does not care.

We are not talking about an issue that is just of importance to low income people. In fact, many people are saying to me, 'My son or daughter will never be able to own their own home. My son or daughter will never be able to pay the sort of rents that we are seeing at the moment.' We are talking about the next generation of home owners and renters. We are talking about an effect on all people in this country.

My plea is particularly for people who struggle and who have low incomes. However, I also acknowledge that this problem is going to affect all Australians, particularly young Australians, into the future. At the state level we are doing what we can to try to fill the gap. Some \$300 million has been taken out of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement contribution to Queensland.

**Mr Purcell:** Hear, hear! It's disgraceful!

**Mr STRUTHERS:** It is disgraceful. It is making it extremely difficult to supply the level of public housing that we need in this country. We need urgent action. We need a national affordable housing action plan. We need this Howard government to use some of their \$7 billion on affordable housing strategies and get serious about the housing problem in this country.