# Reply to the Budget reply

Federal Labor Leader, the Hon. Anthony Albanese MP, replied to the Treasurer’s Budget 2020 speech in the House. <https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/anthony-albanese-speech-budget-in-reply-parliament-house-canberra-thursday-8-october-2020>

The reply noted difficulties faced by Australians and criticised the Government for leaving groups of them behind. The problem identified was: these groups were not given adequate Commonwealth financial support - yet there was extraordinary largesse for a grab bag of lesser needs.

The reply outlined several priorities for Labor: further subsidisation of child-care; spending on social housing; support for skills development and for manufacturing; reconstruction of electricity grids; a Commonwealth integrity Commission etc.

It was fair as far as it went. But it overlooked fundamental concerns.

The proposed priorities might be individually reasonable yet they lack a coherent thread. They too are a grab-bag of wishes from various ‘progressive’ – rather than Conservative – causes.

Hence, the reply made the central failure of the Government a failure of the Opposition.

That failure was cast into sharp relief by extraordinary circumstances in 2020; a pandemic and Governments’ responses to it. In these circumstances, statements limited to fiscal items overlook the key issues facing Australians through the Commonwealth.

Those issues arise from attempted usurpation of parts of rule of Australian law by Governments, most recently under the guise of ‘emergency’. This degrades the Commonwealth’s authority, exposes Australians to illegal and capricious actions of Ministers and officials and undermines society’s institutions and order. Whatever the merit of an Integrity Commission, it will not go near addressing the challenges now facing the Commonwealth and Australians.

The central duty of the Commonwealth Government is to assert, and enforce, rule of law. The Budget reply should have started with a statement that the Government was ignoring this.

The reply should have denounced various Ministers for encouraging the flouting of Australian laws and court orders.

It should have said it will not proceed with emergency legislation now being considered by Parliament. It should have said it will revoke legislation enabling secret trials.

It should have rejected ‘emergency’ actions of NSW, Queensland and Victorian Ministers and officials that lacked visible legal authority. These include the illegal issuing of fines in NSW, notorious serial failures of Queensland to grant exemptions to its border closure and the Melbourne curfew.

It should have said it will publish all legal advice it receives on proposals directly impacting freedom of individuals, including regulations related to Covid, national security and ‘emergencies’.

It should have mentioned that cases of Commonwealth waste such as: paying $30m for a $3m block of land; exorbitant board, executive and consultant remuneration and gratuities; skewed grants schemes – are merely examples of lack of Government respect for Australia’s laws, institutions and therefore ordinary people. And that unless respect is restored in all levels of Government such examples will proliferate and become more egregious in all Governments.

It should have said a Labor Commonwealth Government will reverse the growing arrogance of Governments, starting with instructing the Director of Public Prosecutions to consider laying charges for illegalities incidental to recent actions irrespective of the Government or political allegiance of those involved.

It should have said Labor will institute High Court proceedings to clarify the validity of all border closures prior to its election. Further, subject to the Court’s decision, it should have said when it is elected to Government it will propose by referendum that internal borders cannot be closed except by the joint resolution of the Commonwealth Parliament and all State Parliaments.

It should have said Labor understands the dislocation to personal, work and business lives, and to livelihoods arising from Commonwealth and State responses to ‘emergencies’ such as Covid, bushfires and cyber etc. threats. And that it will ensure every emergency action that impacts Australians will be publicly justified as being lawful, absolutely necessary and proportionate.

It should have remarked on the shared interest of the Commonwealth with Australians in preventing Government and bureaucratic arrogance and excesses. It should have said Labor, as a Commonwealth Government, will shield people from the impacts of such emergencies – not merely by handing out money - but by also ensuring ‘emergencies’ are not used as a subterfuge for laziness, grabs for political or bureaucratic power, or malfeasance.

In present circumstances, before a Budget reply starts talking about rewarding tribes and interest groups, it should lay down markers for Commonwealth activities in areas of State responsibility and say that Commonwealth programs will not be driven by parochial trivia. For example, in transport, it should say the Commonwealth will establish a properly defined national network – e.g. that extends to places like Newcastle and Wollongong – and will not waste money and time sucking-up to Premiers, or in funding random suburban car parks and rural pothole fixing.

Such a reply would require Labor to sort out its addled thinking, deal with issues rather than media amusements and ‘gotcha moments’ in Parliamentary proceedings, stop substituting slogans, hype and populism for analysis and come up with a proper reform program like that of Whitlam or Hawke. It would apply real pressure to improve the behaviour of Ministers and officials.

Yet, the Opposition’s 2020 Budget reply, like the Government itself, fell far short of what should be expected.

J Austen

24 October 2020