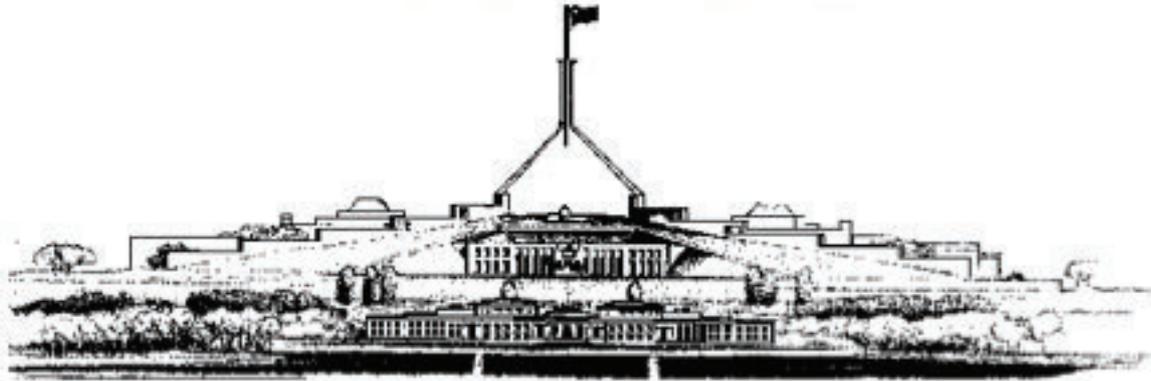




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE:  
TAKE NOTE OF ANSWERS**

**Answers to Questions**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 8 April 2020**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

<b>Date</b> Wednesday, 8 April 2020	<b>Source</b> Senate
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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Kitching, Sen Kimberley	<b>Question No.</b>

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**Senator KITCHING** (Victoria) (15:49): I move:

That the Senate take note of answers given by ministers to questions asked by Labor senators.

It was only a fortnight ago that we witnessed scenes no one thought imaginable in modern First World Australia. The images beamed to us from Centrelink offices across the nation, where lines of people snaked around the block, evenly distanced at 1.5 metres apart, were more reminiscent of wartime bread lines or depression job queues than what we would expect to see in the major cities of one of the richest countries in the world. We have been blessed with almost three decades of uninterrupted economic growth. But for Labor's swift and decisive go-hard, go-early and go-households response to the GFC, this uninterrupted economic growth would have ended a decade ago. But here we are.

In just a few weeks, a localised coronavirus outbreak in China has morphed into a global pandemic that threatens not only the lives of potentially thousands of Australians but also the social and political order that is the bedrock of our proud democracy. Economists are positing a question that is no longer about whether there will be a surplus, the size of a surplus or whether the surplus will be wafer thin, but rather: will we avoid a depression? To avoid that worst-case scenario is why we are here today.

Like many governments around the world, we have had to act quickly and decisively to stop the spread of the virus and protect our health systems from collapse. But, in tandem with this, we've also had to scramble together plans to save the economy, and with it the nation's workforce, from falling off a cliff. Just like the GFC, that response has been to implement some good old-fashioned Keynesian economics—get the money to households and get the money to businesses, and get it done quickly.

If we allowed a sustained break between employees and their employer, once the job is lost it may never exist again. This is the theory underpinning the JobKeeper package we are here to consider. Labor supports the government on this, because Labor supports the Australian worker. We are the party of the Australian worker. It is in our DNA. Indeed, it is in our very name.

The Prime Minister has said that everyone who has a job in this economy is an essential worker, and of course that is true; there is no hierarchy of importance of how we pay to put food on the table. This is why we on this side have been dismayed by, firstly, the Minister for Government Services and member for Fadden, Stuart Robert, claiming a distributed denial-of-service attack on the myGov website and then having to reverse it and admit that the system had been overwhelmed, only to actually worsen that by saying, 'My bad.'

Secondly, of course, we have been dismayed by the government's unwillingness to include various groups in the JobKeeper package: casuals who have been employed for under a year, workers in industries where short contracts are the norm, local government workers, and various other groups, including teachers, one of the most precious cohorts in this country. Across the country, casual teachers are being told that they don't have any shifts for the foreseeable future. If you're a casual teacher, you may well miss out on the JobKeeper package. Those teachers have been here for us throughout the spread of this virus, so we should be there for them at this time. The government have the discretion to include these Australian workers in today's package—and we heard in some of the answers given by government senators today that that is the case. The government have the discretion to offer these workers the support needed to get over this unprecedented health and economic emergency. We hope that they use this discretion and put into practice a plan to uphold the words of the Prime Minister on 24 March:

Everyone who has a job in this economy is an essential worker.

Another group at the coalface of vulnerability are our older Australians, and this horrible virus has shown us that they are disproportionately affected. We will also need to have a conversation about why our native capability

to manufacture equipment such as PPE in this country has been so severely diminished, but perhaps that is a conversation for tomorrow. We are, of course, a country before we are an economy.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Thank you, Senator Kitching, your time has expired. Senator Paterson.