

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Budget Estimates

31 May – 2 June 2011

Question No: BET 265

Topic: In relation to 2010 BET 211

Hansard Page: 2 June 2011 P7

Senator Abetz asked:

Senator ABETZ: Just a quick question about a question that was taken on notice—BET 211—at estimates 12 months ago, the answer to which was conveniently provided to us just after the February estimates so that it could not be pursued at the February estimates. I asked, in relation to a particular minute dealing with the impact of alternative company tax policies, if the minute was officially released to the public and, if so, by whom. The answer I was given was that there was an authorised release of the minute. So that is fine—it was authorised. But it conveniently does not answer the question of if so by whom. Can I please have that answered and an explanation provided as to why we were not told by whom this leak or authorised release was made?

Senator Wong: Can we see a copy of that, Senator?

Senator ABETZ: I have given you the reference—question BET 211. Nobody has it? All right.

Senator Wong: If someone either from Treasury or from the committee could give me a copy of the answer, I would appreciate it.

Senator CAMERON: I am sure it was sitting on the desk of the secretary while he was dealing with the global financial crisis, just waiting for him to deal with this.

Senator ABETZ: The next answer was:

... The Treasury advises the government and will undertake any costing of a policy that the government asks it to examine.

So if you could tell us who or what person within government actually asked you to examine that particular opposition policy—if you could take that on notice. I assume that you will not have the answers to this, but if we can have an explanation as to why that information, which was so specifically sought, was quite frankly deliberately denied. If you could answer that I would be much obliged. I understand that the secretariat is arranging for that question and answer to be provided. I want to actually put on the record and in *Hansard* the obfuscation in relation to the information that was sought, which I think is quite material because it would indicate a manipulation of Treasury minutes being publicly released. And if it is such a good thing to publicly release the information and it is authorised, why hide the name of the person who actually did the authorisation?

Senator Wong: I don't think that that was a question. That was another Senator Abetz special, Madam Chair, of giving us a long lecture which probably would have been better served in a press conference or in the parliamentary chamber. Is there a question?

Senator ABETZ: I want an answer, Minister.

Senator Wong: I do not believe that there was a question.

It was the usual Senator Abetz diatribe asserting a whole range of things which are not—

Senator EGGLESTON: Point of order, Madam Chair: there was clearly a question.

Senator Wong: Deputy Chair, where is the question?

Senator ABETZ: Who authorised the release, Minister? If you can't read the question, if you can't understand it, so be it.

Senator CAMERON: Calm down!

Senator ABETZ: Coming from you, Senator Cameron, please!

Senator Wong: Settle down, Senator.

Senator ABETZ: I am accused of engaging in a diatribe when I am seeking an answer to a specific and deliberate question. Unless Treasury and the Treasurer could not comprehend the question, then I think I am entitled to assume—

Senator CAMERON: Now you are being condescending and stupid.

Senator ABETZ: that there was obfuscation.

Senator Wong: I was enjoying the sweetness and light with which we started, but 16 minutes in—

CHAIR: It never lasts long.

Senator Wong: It didn't last.

Senator ABETZ: Well, Minister, the problem always arises when you try to hide the secretary of the department from the committee or when you do not provide us with information. That is the problem.

CHAIR: Senator Abetz, Dr Parkinson made himself available yesterday and today.

Senator ABETZ: There is no criticism of Dr Parkinson in this.

CHAIR: Good.

Senator Wong: I am afraid I have to respond to that assertion. This is the problem when Senator Abetz chooses to put things on the public record which are disputed. No-one was trying to hide Dr Parkinson yesterday, and I am surprised that the opposition would want to return to that debate today. The position that I have put on the table is that historically the Treasury secretary has not been required for the entirety of the portfolio estimates—that is under both governments. Historically, the practice has been that the time for the Treasury secretary to attend has been agreed. It has generally been in the macroeconomic group. Dr Parkinson had indicated that he would attend then and he would also be prepared to take fiscal policy questions at that time. So no-one was intending to hide him. Coalition senators chose yesterday to have an argument about him coming at a different time.

Senator EGGLESTON: As is their right.

Senator Wong: I do want to put that on the public record because Senator Abetz is making a range of assertions that are not correct.

Senator ABETZ: Can I just have an answer please: by whom?

CHAIR: I think the minister was about to get to the second part.

Senator ABETZ: Oh, good!

Senator Wong: I would have to take that on notice, Senator.

Senator ABETZ: As I thought.

Senator Wong: Well, genuinely, Senator, I think this refers to something that occurred prior to the election. Is that correct?

Senator ABETZ: When you leave answers for over 12 months chances are that is right.

Senator Wong: I was not actually trying to be difficult. But obviously this precedes my position in this portfolio—in Finance in any event. So I do not have any knowledge that I can provide to you at this point.

Senator ABETZ: Of course, I accept that you are a representative minister here. But these were very specific questions, the answers to which were provided at a time that meant I could not pursue them at the next estimates, which was February. Then when this answer was provided it was clearly deficient. So if we can have an explanation as to why it was deficient and an actual answer, please.

Senator Wong: I will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Treasury advises the government and will undertake any costing of a policy that the government asks it to examine. The minute referred to above was sent to the Treasurer's Office on the 21st of May 2010. Treasury did not release this document publicly.