Second Reading

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER [11.20 a.m.]: I move:

> That this bill be now read a second time.

I have pleasure in introducing the Liberals and Nationals Carers Recognition Bill 2010, which aims to give carers the recognition they deserve and a direct voice to the Government. In so doing I congratulate and acknowledge the shadow Minister for Ageing and Disability Services and member for Bega, Andrew Constance, on his persistence with this issue and his representation and advocacy on behalf of carers in New South Wales. I also acknowledge the shadow Minister for Healthy Lifestyles, and mental health, Kevin Humphries, who with Mr Constance has brought to Parliament the bill that I present today. We do so on behalf of about 750,000 carers in New South Wales. They make an enormous social and economic contribution to society and this legislation focuses on their interests, needs and choices. It is about giving them a voice and also about advocacy on behalf of those carers. I am delighted to have the opportunity to explain briefly to honourable members why the bill is important.

According to Access Economics, carers nationally save the Federal Government $30.5 billion annually, which is the cost of replacing carers providing informal care with paid care workers and assisting people to remain in the community for longer. There are also substantial savings on early admission to costly supported accommodation. We know how hard carers work. This legislation is about acknowledging their work, which saves taxpayers so much money. Carers are not just an extension of those they care for; they are individuals and they should have rights as well as acknowledgement of the job they do. If carers did not do this work, the impost on the public purse would be enormous and incalculable.

The bill will give a powerful voice to some of the most under-recognised and hardworking members of our community. Many carers suffer the challenges they face in silence. Often they are the sole full-time carer of an elderly disabled or chronically ill relative, spouse or friend. Western Australia, South Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory already have a similar legislative framework in place, which only demonstrates the failure of this Government to show the support for carers that is needed. Other States have already demonstrated that support. Indeed, the Rudd Government introduced similar legislation just a week after the New South Wales Liberals and Nationals introduced this bill in the lower House earlier this year.

The bill will enact a New South Wales carers charter and establish the New South Wales ministerial advisory council for carers, which will have an important and relevant role to play. It will be co-chaired by the relevant Ministers responsible for carers. It is quite staggering when one considers the numbers of carers in New South Wales that for so long they have not had the recognition and support they deserve from a New South Wales Labor Government that tells us it has the mortgage on care and that it is the caring Government. That is not the reality when it comes to carers. Eleven per cent of the New South Wales population are carers—almost 750,000 people. More than 12 per cent of the New South Wales indigenous population are carers, and 7.2 per cent of carers are over 75 while 6.6 per cent are aged under 18 years. Those statistics are quite amazing when one considers the pressures on people over 75 who are still performing a caring role. People who should be cared for by the community and the Government are providing care for others. The more than 6 per cent of people under 18 who are in the carer category should also get the support they need as individuals without the responsibility of caring for others.

Carers provide care with love and responsibility. In many instances they do not begrudge the care they provide and they do it willingly and honourably. However, they want some acknowledgement and in some cases they want recognition of their role and assistance in terms of assessment if the point is reached that they cannot continue to provide the care. Most carers have low incomes and many drop out of full-time employment to become a carer. They have little or no ability to save or accumulate superannuation. Because carers provide their own time, money and resources to look after others they often miss out on building social relationships, such as those that are formed at work, recreation and leisure. They are more likely to have little face-to-face contact with people. They feel isolated. This legislation is about bridging some of those gaps and dealing with that isolation by letting carers know they are acknowledged and not on their own.

The average income for a carer is more than 25 per cent lower than for non-carers and it is estimated that carers lose earnings in excess of $4.9 billion every year. In fact, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, 44 per cent of all carers who are of workforce age are not in the workforce, which can make things extremely tough for them when one considers the equipment, transport costs and medical supplies they pay for as a carer. The average cost of caring for a person with a disability is estimated to be $118, and $162 for an elderly person. The Deakin national survey of the health and wellbeing of carers found that carers have the lowest levels of wellbeing of any Australia group. More than half reported some level of depression and one-third were found to be depressed or extremely depressed. More than a third of carers are experiencing severe or extreme stress, and caring does not get easier with time. Caring compounds the effect of any other factor that leads to reduced wellbeing.

Any level of consistent, daily immediate caring responsibility is sufficient to severely damage wellbeing. Wellbeing decreases as the number of hours spent caring increases. The pressure on carers and the presence of a person in the household who requires care compromise the wellbeing of other family members, whether they are the primary carer. In other words, in a household where there is a child with a disability the other children's lives, health and wellbeing are impacted by the caring relationship, which is outside the normal family relationship. Carers of adult children with a disability and who are ageing themselves face an enormous impact on their lives. When one adds to that the inability to get respite, even for a day, night or weekend, one sees that the stress and pressure on carers is compounded. When one considers the seriousness of the survey's findings it is an overwhelming concept to think of what life will be like in the future.

The number of people aged over 85 will increase from 1.5 per cent to 5 per cent of the total population by 2044, and that increase will add greatly to the number of carers. The number of carers is expected to rise by 57 per cent over the next 30 years, while the number of people needing care will rise by 160 per cent. Recently Andrew Constance, the shadow Minister for Ageing and Disability Services, and I co-hosted a carers forum in Maitland, where around one in ten people are carers. The local carers and providers of support services who came to discuss the issues facing carers were enormously grateful to have an opportunity to tell us about their experiences.

The Liberal-Nationals Coalition acknowledges the role that is played by carers. At that forum we found that the informal network of carers was extensive. Many people let us know that they were not able to attend the forum because of time constraints—they were caring for others—but they appreciated the acknowledgement in this legislation of the role that they perform and were pleased to be part of that forum. These people were caring for mental health patients, for children with a disability, for adult children with disabilities and, in particular, for aged and infirm relatives.

The Hon. Trevor Khan: They just want somebody to listen to them, because Frank doesn't.

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER: As local member Hon. Trevor Khan reminded me, they certainly want someone to listen to them. This Government is not listening to carers; it has walked away from them and can no longer cope. It is defending the indefensible.

The Hon. Tony Catanzariti: You are always negative.

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER: I made a positive comment, not a negative one. This acknowledgement of carers is something positive that the Government can sign up to, acknowledge and support; it is not negative comment. I have listed all those State and Territory governments that have acknowledged carers, which is a positive step forward. We are saying to carers, "We know, appreciate and are grateful for the work that you do", which is not a negative comment at all. This Government is negative. The Hon. Tony Catanzariti must be embarrassed about the fact this Government, which is not implementing any carers legislation, is lagging behind even the Rudd Government.

Members should not forget that those health reforms that we have been hearing so much about where money is passed from one level of government to another do not acknowledge the role of carers, or the savings to the health system as a result of carers working in the mental health area and in all aspects of health care. Those health reforms do not acknowledge the impact and stress on the mental health of carers, let alone the people for whom they are providing.

The Hon. Trevor Khan: Labor just doesn't care.

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER: Labor does not have a mortgage on care, that is patently obvious, and it will pay the price for that at the next election. It should not be forgotten that carers also vote. At the next election we will soon see where their vote goes. The Liberal-Nationals Coalition has heeded the calls from carers that there should be a complete overhaul of respite services because of the limits on how often carers and people with disabilities can access these services. I am sure that the Hon. Mick Veitch would acknowledge that, because of the work that he has done, in particular, in the disability field. A huge amount of respite work has to be done—a task that the Liberal-Nationals Coalition will be glad to take on after March 2011 when it is in office.

These concerns have been expressed time and again. I heard them expressed at the hearings of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 in its inquiry into appliances for disabled people. For 12 years this Government has not increased funding for the Program of Appliances for Disabled People [PADP]. Funding for that program was topped up by the Federal Government to try to clear the backlog. People who attended that inquiry related heartbreaking stories about their inability to access basic human services. Society and governments are judged by how they treat the most vulnerable. This is yet another case of the Labor Government failing the most needy in our society.

The Hon. Tony Catanzariti, who was a member of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2, would be aware that it received representations from many people who were pleading for help—people who have to articulate and fight for their disabled children from the moment they are born. Those people have to fight and plead every inch of the way for basic human services—for appliances for their children and for basic respite services that most people could not even imagine. The PADP receives only $11 million a year—an appalling way to treat disabled people in this State. Heike Fabig attended the inquiry and outlined some of the costs related to looking after children with a disability. Heike's four-year-old daughter, who is severely physically affected, has the physical skills of a two-year-old, and no cognitive or social ability. Heike also has a seven-year-old son who is less physically affected but who also has developmental delays. Ms Fabig wrote in her submission:

> My kids are my responsibility—wherever I can, I will self-fund and have done so. I feel this is my job and allows me a more flexible approach to my children's needs. For most of my disability-related purchases I have no choice, no choice over the product, no choice over the price. There is a very limited range of paediatric electric wheelchairs designed for very young children available in Australia. There are only 3 cars that can hold a family of 5 and be converted to be wheelchair accessible. There is only 1 ramp that fits into a car. There is only 1 place, which offers Conductive Education, only 1 saddle seat company. And the local public school was very honest in admitting they would not cope as well with my child as the independent school we chose, who have an elaborate system of daily remedial lessons, which are partly funded by the Federal Government and the rest paid for by me.

These were major themes in a survey that was conducted by Carers NSW and released last year. That survey found key recurrent issues relating to the need for more respite services, accessible and adequate services in general, better financial assistance, more information and support for carers, and a greater awareness of carers in the community by health professionals and governments. The survey found that the main difficulties experienced by carers were time constraints, the lack of their own life, health conditions, the declining health of the care recipient, loneliness and financial strain. One response to that survey indicates how this is impacting on carers. A 49-year-old man who is caring for his spouse with a disability wrote:

> No superannuation, financial retirement fund ... at times I feel I have no say in my own life as a caring role ties me down and dictates what needs to be done.

A 37-year-old male caring for his disabled son wrote:

> Management where I work doesn't seem to understand the challenges faced being a carer, trying to focus for 40 hours per week. They have carers leave, but don't want to approve it.

A 61-year-old female carer looking after her spouse and a son with disabilities said:

> Feeling alone, afraid and at times like it's too much for caring on my own. Feeling like other people—relatives, friends really have no idea what it is like for me and my husband.

We have no idea, as we do not know what it is like to walk in the shoes of a carer. A 62-year-old carer who cares for her mother-in-law said:

> Services should be flexible and geared to the support needs of the person requiring care. That will in turn help the carers. Carers though should be able to ask for services that they need as well.

These issues were highlighted in the "Who Cares" report of the Better Support for Carers inquiry that was held in May 2009. I thank the shadow Minister for Disability Services for introducing this bill because he is listening to what carers in the sector are saying—a message to which this Government has failed to listen for the past 15 years. The Liberal-Nationals Coalition introduced the Carers Recognition Bill to enact a New South Wales carers charter and to recognise the contribution to society of those who care for other persons who have a disability, mental illness, chronic illness or who are frail, with the aim of enabling carers to achieve their maximum potential as members of the community.

Under the charter carers will be treated with respect and dignity; they will be recognised as having their own unique and individual needs; and their wellbeing will be given due consideration. Carers will be required to undergo an assessment—a critical part of this bill—with the aim of providing timely and appropriate support and assistance. Assessments will be made of aged carers who might not be able to continue to provide care to ensure that someone is taking on that responsibility, assessing the situation, and working out a path and a plan forward. Carers have told us that their biggest stress relates to what will happen in the future to their ageing and disabled children. The views and knowledge of carers must be recognised and included in the assessment, planning, delivery and review of services that impact on their role.

Service providers and government particularly must respect the relationship between carers and the people for whom they care. The diversity of individual carers' needs should be identified and acknowledged and must consider cultural differences, age, disability, religion, socioeconomic status, gender identification and place of residence. The responsibilities of children and young people as carers should be minimised. Due consideration must be given to carers in remote and rural areas as their isolation causes additional difficulties in service delivery. Programs to carers delivered by New South Wales government agencies must be provided in a responsive, timely, coordinated, innovative, flexible and appropriate manner. Carers' complaints about services must be given due attention and consideration. All services to carers must be culturally relevant and carers must be aware of their rights when they deal with New South Wales government agencies.

Agencies and their staff must be aware of and understand this charter, and the charter's principles must be reflected in the services provided. As I mentioned earlier, the bill also would establish a ministerial advisory council for carers comprising the Minister administering the Act, Ministers responsible for providing key support services and persons with experience in the sector. The crucial factor is that the council must be made up of a majority of primary carers. This council will work to advance the interests of carers and promote the compliance of New South Wales government agencies with the charter. After pressure from the Liberals and The Nationals the Government this week introduced its carers bill, which compares poorly with our bill. The Government's bill does not go far enough to recognise and support the role of carers. It is an attempt to water down the assessment process. Rather than support our bill, the Government has resorted to immature politics. For example, the Government's bill does not provide for a majority carer membership of a ministerial advisory council. Basically, the Government proposes to choose the panel members and the Minister will not chair the panel. The Government's proposal is watering down the process. It really is a slap in the face to the 750,000 carers in this State. Rather than play politics, the Government should support our bill.

The Hon. Tony Catanzariti: You are playing politics.

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER: I urge members, including the Hon. Tony Catanzariti, to do the right thing by the carers and their community and support the Opposition's bill and implement all measures in their entirety. The Government should step up to the plate and show it cares about this State's carers. I support this bill. I implore members to do the same so that it may speedily pass through this House to the lower House to enable us to join other States and the Federal Government in acknowledging carers in New South Wales and the role they perform.