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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Truss, Warren, MP

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Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of The Nationals) (15:55): Now more than ever Australia needs a steady hand at the wheel, and they do not have one. Our economy, business and families alike, crave surety and a logical, consistent and predictable government that they can rely on, and they do not have one. Even this week's Labor infighting, as it gathered pace amongst the backbenchers, as they rolled the Prime Minister's control over vital resource sectors, just showed once again how this government has completely lost its way. It has no idea what kind of direction and course to set for our country. They follow the demands of the Greens. They follow the demands of the union heavies, knowing that they are already circling around the Prime Minister for the next time a leadership challenge happens.

The political intrigue that is paralysing Labor, though, not just has a cost for Labor; sadly, it has a cost for the whole of the country. It is a real cost. This instability at the top and the crisis of confidence in the Prime Minister's decision-making comes at a precarious time for all businesses, big and small across all sectors. Labor has pushed Australia to another economic crossroads, one we do not need to be facing. It has come at a time so soon after they inherited a strong and robust economy. They inherited surpluses, they inherited savings—savings that could be used for the future. All that has been squandered, all of that has been lost, and this government continues on its endless path of destruction.

This government has eroded Australia's great natural competitive advantages—the things that have made us great over the years, the reasons why companies and investors wanted to come to Australia, the reasons why Australians worked so hard to build their own country. All of these things now are being eroded by a government that has completely lost its way and lost a vision for our future. We have seen in the last couple of days practical evidence of that, as Australia has slid down the index of competitiveness, slid down the index of ease of doing business. This is an embarrassment and a humiliation to a once great country.

Let us look at some of those competitive advantages and what Labor has done to them. We once had low-cost electricity. That attracted mineral processors—smelters and refineries for aluminium, gold and copper. Energy-intensive manufacturers actually wanted to come to Australia because we had this natural advantage. But now what has Labor done to destroy this great advantage? They are buying Australia's low-cost power stations and closing them down. They are closing down our big competitive assets. What they are doing is introducing a carbon tax that is going to massively add to the cost of electricity and make it so much less attractive to come to this country.

The Business Council of Australia has identified 240 federal and state energy and climate change policies which are adding to energy costs and eroding our competitive advantage. Is it any wonder that no new low-cost power stations are being built in this country? This government does not want them and therefore it does not want the jobs and the industries that would be attracted—and it does not want the jobs in the industries and factories that are currently closing. They have indeed lost their way and squandered one of our competitive advantages.

We as a nation have abundant resources of high quality that have been relatively accessible. Under this government the ease of doing business in Australia, according to the World Bank index, has slipped from eighth to 15th. These abundant resources are no longer easy to access. This government has made it harder to get there. They have done it through endless bureaucracy—bureaucracy that guarantees now it takes years to get an approval for any project. In question time yesterday we even heard the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Tony Burke, trying to make a virtue out of taking years and years to make decisions about environmental approvals. He was embarrassed that the new Newman government, after only a few weeks in office, was able to give approval to projects, whereas he still has years of work to do to get through his environmental assessments. This is the kind of thing that discourages people from investing in this country. Then we have inadequate ports and railways, because the government has been unable to initiate the key projects that are necessary to service these industries.

One of the other major reasons industries came to Australia was that this was a country with low sovereign risk. The governments have traditionally been stable. They have been trustworthy, they have honoured their promises, they did not change the rules every second day. Now we have a government that does not control its own agenda. The Greens run the country and the unions run Labor. The reality is they cannot make the decisions that are necessary to deliver the kind of stable environment that would encourage investment. They cannot manage themselves, let alone manage a successful economy. They stumble from one political disaster to another. There is no stability in the investment climate either. Remember the words, 'There will be no carbon tax under the government I lead.' That was a clear statement, a clear signal to the world's business community that you could come here and not get a carbon tax, you would not get this extra cost burden. The promise lasted just a matter of days and it was dishonoured.

Then we have the mining super tax. People invest in this country in mining schemes on the basis of an economic environment that has been passed into law through the legislation of the parliament, and Labor just simply changes it as though it has no substance. Their super tax on mining has damaged industry confidence to ever make an investment because they know the rules will be changed yet again. Labor has changed the withholding tax for investors on numerous occasions. There can be no certainty for an investment when this sort of thing is happening. The promised tax cuts have been abandoned altogether. Labor never cuts taxes; Labor only puts them up. That is just the kind of environment that sends investors to other parts of the world.

Then the Prime Minister promised everybody that they could have an EMA so they could get some of the workforce that they needed. She was quite happy to tell the mining companies that she supported EMAs, but then she told the unions precisely the opposite. She wants to walk away.

An opposition member: She is furious.

Mr TRUSS: Yes, she is furious about the idea that this might happen. Then there are the changes to the shipping industry. Legislation has gone through this House this morning on the transport industry, which gives control to the unions in key sectors of the industry and guarantees that the sovereign risk in coming to a country like Australia will continue to grow.

Another major advantage that we had in this country was the productive, skilled and reliable workforce. Once we were skilled with a reputation for productivity, even if our wages were a bit higher than those of other parts of the world. But that is also being lost. On the world competitive index Australia has slipped from fifth to 15th, and industrial lawlessness is one of the issues that is raising its head again and again. Jac Nasser, the head of BHP, reported just recently that the BMA consortium had experienced 3,200 industrial incidents in just one year in the Bowen Basin.

How can a company invest or make decisions for the future when it has to put up with 3,200 industrial incidents in a year? In many of these instances they use the Qantas strategy, where the unions call a strike and then call it off just at the last minute so they can keep their wages but the maximum disadvantage is done to their employer. Where are these unions coming from that believe they can actually achieve things for their members by destroying their employer? What is the sense of destroying the company, destroying the industry and destroying the competitiveness of our nation just in the name of some kind of industrial power and industrial lawlessness? Many of these unions now want to take control of the decision-making in their companies. How is anybody going to invest in those circumstances?

Labor is fond of boasting that there is \$500 billion worth of projects in the pipeline. Yes, they are in the pipeline and they are stuck there. The pipeline is choked. It is blocked up by government red tape and green tape and black tape and it needs a good decent flush out. A clean-out is what is desperately needed and it is going to have to go right to the top. This government must go if we are going to restore confidence in our country and restore our competitiveness so that we can deliver a decent lifestyle for all Australians.