



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Public Works Committee

Report

SPEECH

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Wednesday, 25 May 2005 Page 99 Questioner Speaker OÖÇÖConnor, Brendan, MP	Source House Proof No Responder Question No.
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Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton) (4.10 pm)—by leave—I think it is important that I comment on the two reports that have been introduced to the House by the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Public Works. Clearly, the new housing for the Defence Housing Authority at McDowall in Brisbane in Queensland is a rather non-controversial proposal by what is, I have to say, a very good department generally in the way in which it manages its proposals and the way in which it deals with the Public Works Committee. As you would know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there are particular provisions of the Public Works Committee Act 1969 that must be fulfilled; not to fulfil them would be a breach of law. It is clear from my experience of approximately four years on the committee that there are some departments that handle such matters very well and that there may be some departments that need a little assistance with improving the way in which they manage these matters.

I will turn now to perhaps the more substantive matter that is before us today; that is, the provision of facilities—additional accommodation and related works—for Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre in Maribyrnong, Victoria. Firstly, I commend the comments made by the member for Pearce, the Chair of the Public Works Committee. It is fair to say—and members of the committee are very mindful of this—that the committee, certainly in my time and, I am told, in the past, works in a consensual, cooperative and collaborative way to try to get through what is effectively a very heavy workload. There is a lot of travel involved. Some of the constructions and proposals are not always the most exciting things. But what we are doing is an important duty. We are discharging our function as members of this House and indeed as members of the Senate in order to properly ensure that the department's objectives are fulfilled and that money is not wasted by the Commonwealth. That is our role.

This report is somewhat exceptional in that all members of the committee have found themselves in a position to substantially recommend to the department that it reconsider its proposal in relation to a particular refurbishment and construction. I say it is exceptional because it is a rare event when such substantial recommendations are made that they would, if accepted by the department and the government, fundamentally alter the original proposal. I make the point that it is exceptional not to play politics so much but to highlight the fact that the committee does work on a consensus basis and seeks to properly consider the matters before it. In this instance we have found the need to say to the department, 'You have got it wrong in some areas and we ask you to reconsider those.'

As the member for Pearce mentioned in her address, the objective of the construction as outlined by the department was an intention to provide 'humane and non-punitive detention infrastructure'. I know that all committee members present believe that that was a substantial objective of the department, and it was that and some other considerations that led us to have to ask the department to reconsider its proposal. The proposal, which was originally put before the inquiry that the committee conducted, was not in fact going to fulfil that objective. There were too many places being recommended for a very confined area. There were certain proposals put to us that would not have provided a more 'humane and non-punitive detention infrastructure'.

With all respect to the department and the minister responsible, I think there were recommendations that would fundamentally contradict the contention that we were seeking to ensure humane and non-punitive detention infrastructure. It is clear that there are different views in this House about detention, and I do not want to go to that; it is not for me to reflect upon at this point. But I do not think anyone in this House wants to see people detained in an inhumane or punitive way.

I think members of the committee relied heavily on the provisions of the Public Works Act and the objectives of the department to come to the unanimous view that we need to ensure the department considers the proposal in light of its own objectives. We fundamentally believe that it has failed to do so to date. We do not take this position lightly, but it is unanimous. All five government members and the four Labor members—nine members in total—have come to this view. We hope that the government, the department and the minister responsible accede to these requests. If they do not, in my view and I think in the view of committee members in general, they would be in breach of that objective to make humane and non-punitive this construction and these refurbishments.

I commend the comprehensive statement that was made by the chair. I particularly thank the members for Scullin, Mallee and Grey and Senator Troeth and Senator Forshaw, who sat through all of the public hearings and were looking at a constructive way to get around what is a significant problem. I thank the chair, the member for Pearce, who in her statement properly reflected the views of committee members. I hope, as I am sure all members hope, that this matter will be taken seriously by the department and by the minister responsible so we can ensure, in doing our job, that the detainees in that centre are looked after in a humane and non-punitive way.