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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Urban Planning

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP

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Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (9.20 pm)—I rise to support the motion and the sentiment that has been put forward by the member for Kingston and acknowledge her interest in this area. I do say, though, that sentiment is no substitute for hard work and that words are no substitute for even harder work. And this area of public policy requires not only a lot of hard work but very extensive collaboration, because so many of the influences on successful cities are dispersed right across multiple levels of government—and, more importantly, across all the consumers, home purchasers, developers and investors, all looking at their interests as we in this national parliament look at the national interest.

This is not something new, though. This issue has been with us for some time. The previous government certainly did more than apprise itself of these concerns. It set about doing something about them. In fact, in the 2003-04 budget there was an urban environment initiative around sustainable cities. It touched on a number of issues concerning water quality, the information available within the community, air quality, renewable energy, waste management, the Year of the Built Environment, green buildings, a green car rating scheme, cycling facilities, air quality research, photovoltaic rebate schemes, chemical monitoring database, the National Pollutant Inventory—just to name a few. So this is not something that is particularly new.

But it went further. I was pleased to chair the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage and undertake what was then viewed as a very seminal piece of research and a piece of important national leadership with the sustainable cities inquiry. This committee report was born out of my conviction, and that of the coalition government's side of the parliament, that the cities that we have may not be directly a consequence of federal government policy but, when they do not work well, it lands on the federal government to provide the remedies. The social hardship, the economic dislocation, the enormous commuter times, the cost in terms of environment and in terms of family pressure, the economic concerns and the vulnerability of people to movement in petrol prices and the like all come home to the federal government.

With that in mind we thought, 'What can we do now to outline a template for more sustainable cities into the future,' and this report did that. We led that debate and it was welcomed unanimously right across the community and in a bipartisan sense. I was promoted into the ministry and did not have the privilege of finishing the final few paragraphs—my friend and colleague Dr Mal Washer had that honour and distinction—but the report is still very much true to the work that we undertook. It talked about the key things that we need to look at in terms of sustainability: to recognise that more than three-quarters of GDP—the economic activity in Australia—happens in our cities; that the vast proportion of the population lives in our cities; and to recognise the pressure on our environment, our consumption of resources and our future living standards. All these are interwoven in our cities.

The report identified a range of areas of action about urban development and the role that the federal government could play in urban policy in trying to make sure that all decision making and funding was aligned to sustainability and better city objectives. It also looked at settlement patterns: what was happening in terms of dwelling sizes; the size of households; and the different models that were developing around the place and how they could be handled in a development assessment process that did not seek to tell people how and where they should live—because that would be destined to fail—but would at least make it easier and more convenient for people to live with amenity and lifestyle and with ready access to those important elements of their lives that they wanted to be near to, and if they were not they would commute.

A long time ago I drove a Mazda 808 super deluxe coupe, burnt orange—a great vehicle for its time—and at around 19 I stopped driving for pleasure and for the fun of it and started driving because I had to travel somewhere. I had a transport task. The mobility requirement was to move from where I lived, to where I worked, to where I studied, to where I played sport and to where I undertook leisure activities. The key about more sustainable cities is not just better planning and better urban land use but it is also about integrating all of those areas of policy so that those key elements of people's lives are more within reach. We outlined an agenda for that in the sustainability report, but I do not have the time to go through that.

I was pleased that our leader, Malcolm Turnbull, was a part of that committee in its later incarnations and continues to highlight the importance of these issues. But I am drawn to something that Victorian senator Kim Carr said. He said that if you do not have a minister for cities and a minister for urban development you are not for real. Labor does not have a minister for cities and it does not have a minister for urban development. The opposition has a shadow minister for sustainable development and cities and, on the Kim Carr benchmark, the opposition is far more serious about taking the important action, not just recognising the problems and the challenges but putting in place the sound public policy. I fear that this will again be an area where Labor quickly identifies and secures the political opportunities and the sound bytes and leaves the sound public policy and hard work to others. The coalition is up to that task; we have the policies and they will be revealed—(*Time expired*)