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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2010-2011

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2010-2011

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 1 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (7.12 pm)—I say to my friend and colleague the member for Hunter that I agree with him—but, first of all, in relation to the youth allowance. Yes of course we are trying again, but we are trying to get more kids in regional Australia access to youth allowance, and we will be persistent. Yes, I also have had the same positive feedback about the relationship that we have as whips. I intend to maintain that relationship because it helps to make the parliament work very effectively and efficiently, and I look forward to continuing that.

With regard to climate change, which the member discussed, there is always the prospect of changing a leader, but that goes for either side and I would suggest that there is always that prospect on his side of politics. Maybe somebody would like to step up to the plate and have a go at that as well, given that the Australian public clearly feel that they have been deceived by the commitments made prior to the election and what has happened since.

I also listened to the member for Hunter with a great deal of interest in relation to his comments about the value of investment in primary schools and public housing. It made me wonder whether there are two levels of members in the Labor Party, in the government: those who are privileged to have positive outcomes in relation to social housing and school halls and others who are possibly on a lower echelon, and that may well have been my predecessor. I can tell you that he had some serious problems and the community was severely damaged by decisions made in my electorate of Leichhardt in relation to investment in school halls and public housing.

In relation to investment in school halls, I know that, in one small school, the day that their brand new \$250,000 school hall was delivered on site was the day that the closure of the school was announced. That was not great value for that school, it was not great value for the community and it certainly was not value for money for the Leichhardt community.

The state minister decided, in taking federal money, to build public housing with waterfront views on a marina in a place where there was no public transport and no facilities whatsoever. The entire communities of Bluewater, Palm Cove and the inner suburb of Earlville rallied against it and said: 'This is just not the appropriate place. We have no issue with it, but it is totally inappropriate for the price that was paid and for the type of structure intended to be built.' There was a huge outcry at the enormous amount of waste in Bluewater and Palm Cove, but the state government pushed ahead with it and forced it on. Interestingly enough, the Department of Communities is still struggling to find people to put out there. These places, at the end of the day, for what has been done are absolutely appalling. They have not been, and will not be, accepted by the community; yet here is a time when the state and federal governments are trying to push into areas where there is no need for this particular type of housing. It is being pushed onto the community, yet we have a desperate need within our community for supported accommodation for people with intellectual and physical disabilities. There is a chronic shortage of over 80 units of supported accommodation. That was ignored while the state government tried to drive a point in what it seems to regard as the prestige suburbs in the northern beaches of Cairns where there is clearly no need for it. Even the local managers of the Department of Communities really did not want this housing—they tried to walk away from it. Obviously there are two levels of membership in the government and the Labor Party because those particular decisions played a significant role in having me here in this place today. I will certainly continue to raise it and remind them of the dreadful waste of money in those areas.

I move onto something else. We recently had Cyclone Yasi—and we have spoken about it in this place. I appreciated the contributions from all sides when members spoke on the condolence motion about their support for the victims of these dreadful events that we have had. I will be a little parochial and talk about Queensland—the floods and, more recently, the cyclone damage. We have a Premier in Queensland, Anna Bligh, who was starting to languish in the polls, but I have to say that she did an outstanding job. The underpants came on the outside, the blue cape was put on, she flew up there and she was a supergirl. She elbowed her way into emergency services and the only spokesperson was the Premier. To all intents and purposes, she kept the profile and she did a very good job. But, at the end of the day, the job is not about presenting yourself to the media and showing that you care in the midst of a particular event—because we all care about that—but about getting the focus on you as a result of your position, and she did a good job in maintaining that focus. However, she is going to be judged on

how she performs after the event with the recovery. Already, we are seeing some very serious issues emerging. For example, it is my view that a community has the right to rebuild itself. When you talk about rebuilding a community after the devastation of Cyclone Yasi, rebuilding the bricks and mortar is only a small part of it.

A community is not just bricks and mortar. There is the social infrastructure and the economic infrastructure. If you do not give the community the economic opportunity to rebuild its own bricks and mortar, there is no capacity to rebuild the social infrastructure. Only a week and a half ago we had a meeting with over 400 local contractors pleading with the Premier to give them the opportunity to rebuild their own community. Unfortunately, as we have seen in recent times with things like the stimulus package, with the school hall fiasco and with the public housing—with all of these other things—it always goes to southern based national contractors while our local people end up being fed the crumbs. We are the bottom feeders, if you like.

We have been on our knees as a community now for about three or four years. We need the opportunity to get on our feet and we are only going to do that if we are given the primary contracts. There has been rhetoric and there have been promises and we had the Premier up there last week throwing out bits of money like confetti. But it is \$30,000 for a business study, so much money for a feasibility study—all of these sorts of thing. It does not do anything to rebuild our community.

The Premier needs to insist that her own departments give primary contracts locally. It was very disappointing to see the shortlist for NDRRA contracts for the restoration of works of \$30 million and above selected by the state government bureaucracy, the Department of Transport and Main Roads. None of the three companies—Leightons, Seymour Whyte or Downer EDI—even have an office in Cairns. Yet there are other civil construction companies in Cairns, employing 200 or 300 people, that were not even given a look-in. That is disgusting and the Premier should hang her head in shame.

The other problem in Cairns is that, while we did not suffer the loss of our buildings, we did lose the economy of our area—because people stopped coming. Tourism is 40 per cent of our economy. People stopped coming. We have been pleading with this government to give support to our tourism industry to try to get it back on its feet after suffering one disaster after another. For example, we have been trying to get support from this government to allow the industry to participate in missions and trade shows. Nothing has been confirmed at this point in time, yet this is critical. We need to ensure that the tourism trade can get out there—they are the ones best able to push their own product, to get things going.

After seven years, businesses are no longer able to claim Export Market Development Grants. Therefore, since the tourism industry in Cairns is mature, many of the businesses can no longer access the EMDG. But the market has changed and there are special circumstances. We need access to the EMDG scheme to be reinstated to allow businesses to get out there and market around the world. Why is it that inbound tourism, which is clearly an export, cannot get the same level of tax offsets that other export industries receive? And why is it that our overseas marketing activity is subject to the GST? It is absolute nonsense when a mission to Europe to sell Australia and the region is subject to GST. As a consequence, many of our operators cannot participate because of the cost. So there are a whole lot of issues there.

For too long the tourism industry has been very much taken for granted. The industry itself is saying, 'Enough is enough.' People in the industry are tired of visits by politicians, like the Premier and federal members, who simply want to create spin and photo opportunities in a beautiful part of our world. All they do is repackage previous commitments and announcements, providing no more real support for the industry. Some of the media campaigns they have announced in recent times are classic examples of that. It is about time they started to take the industry seriously and put serious money into our tourism industry, to get it back on its feet and doing what it does very well—presenting a beautiful part of Australia.

For four years now this Labor government has committed to a \$150 overpass for Ray Jones Drive in Cairns. Four years ago, at the 2007 election, that commitment was made. I am sure that helped my predecessor get elected. I can tell you that by 2010 there was a lot of cynicism about the fact that the government had not delivered on this commitment, which probably helped me to get re-elected. Here we are in 2011 and this commitment still has not been delivered.

In closing, I would like to make the point that businesses generally—not just the tourism industry—did not have to be blown away to be impacted by Cyclone Yasi. I have here an email dated 28 February 2011 from Rosie Johnson, who has a small family business located two kilometres from Bloomfield, on the coastal road between Cape Tribulation and Cooktown. The email reads:

My name is Rosie Johnson, I run a roadhouse in Bloomfield less than 2 kms from Wujal Wujal, in between Cairns and Cooktown, the only shop north of Wujal Wujal itself that sells fuel on the coast road to Cooktown.

Rosie Johnson is seeking assistance. Her email continues:

... we have been told by DEEDI and QRAA we are located outside the disaster declared zone (and therefore can receive zero assistance) although we back onto the river which is the cut off zone for Wujal Wujal ...

That town is getting some level of assistance. The email further states:

We have only just been able to return to our business yesterday.

... ..

We have found out that we are not covered by insurance and have returned to a very distressing situation. Although the Cyclone Yasi has not hit us directly ... the resulting storms have caused our business severe hardship.

... ..

The Bloomfield Track ... Causeway has been completely washed away. ... it might be mid-April before the Cook Shire Council can put the bridge in.

This means we have no customers ... we rely on the trade from the community of Wujal Wujal and the tourist industry. ...

Due to power outages we have lost refrigerated and frozen stock both as groceries and stock to serve take away food etc. This means that when customers do start to return to the store we have nothing to serve them.

... ..

We have equipment such as tractors and mowers and vehicles that wont run or start. As a result we have no vehicle ...

We cannot travel to Cooktown to get more stock. ...

Our 3 children can not attend Rossville State School ...

We have a son with Di George Syndrome which can be life threatening in the wrong circumstances and we cannot get him to either the Wujal Wujal Health Service ... or the Cooktown Hospital.

... ..

Ms Johnson says that they need the government to ramp up its efforts to support people like them. They need to get the bridge built in a hurry. They need grants to support their business, which has been affected by Yasi. They seriously need support. I plead with the government to extend their benefits to people like Rosie Johnson who have been affected by this cyclone. (*Time expired*)