



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

**Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2015-2016,
Appropriation Bill (No. 2) 2015-2016,
Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments)
Bill (No. 1) 2015-2016, Appropriation Bill (No. 5)
2014-2015, Appropriation Bill (No. 6) 2014-2015**

SPEECH

Wednesday, 27 May 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Wednesday, 27 May 2015
Page 4941
Questioner
Speaker Christensen, George, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr CHRISTENSEN (Dawson—The Nationals Deputy Whip) (17:16): I do respect the previous speaker, the member Gorton, who is probably one of the more capable frontbenchers in the Labor Party. It is not a high bar, I have to say, but he is one of the more capable members of the frontbench. But what we just heard was all praise for the spending that is in this budget and all criticism on the savings. That is so typical of the Labor approach—spending is good and savings is bad; completing neglecting the fact that the budget, even as it is right now, is unsustainable if we keep on having deficits.

We have restored a path to surplus, a path that just was not there under the previous Treasurer, the member for Lilley and the previous Treasurer, the member for McMahon. We have a restored a path to surplus, and that is most important in this budget. Either you believe that ongoing debt is a problem for this nation, or you do not. I have to say that most households around this nation understand that if every year your expenses are more than your income, if every year you are putting the extra spending that you are doing on the credit card, at some point in time there is going to come a day of reckoning and you are going to have to pare back some of the spending and you are going to have to do away with things that you may have become accustomed to that may have been necessary. We do not want to reach that point, which is why the savings measures in our budget are vitally important—the savings measures that we just heard criticism on.

I am pleased to hear that Labor Party are going to support our small business measures. This has been the best budget for small business probably ever, and we have heard that the Labor Party are going to support that. Well, there is a first for everything! What I am surprised about—but I probably should not be so surprised—is that, on the one hand, Labor giveth some support and on the other hand they are going over to the Fair Work body and saying to them, 'Ping small business more by putting up the minimum wage,' at a time, right now, when they cannot afford it. Small business, like most other businesses in this nation, are in transition, and they need to have costs kept low. Sure, people deserve a fair wage, but I get alarmed when I hear that they are going over to the Fair Work body and saying to them, 'Jack up the minimum wage.' The Labor Party say that they support small business but we hear today something every different.

I do have to give a lot of plaudits to the Treasurer. If I could have dreamt up a budget that would have been ideal for my budget, I probably could not have come up with something better than what we saw a week or so ago.

The two big things for the electorate of Dawson that I see in the budget is the Northern Australia concessional loan facility—and I will talk about that in a moment—and, most importantly, the small business and jobs package. The electorate of Dawson is made up of the communities of Mackay, the Whitsundays, Bowen, the Burdekin and some of the Townsville area—these communities, like so many others, are communities and economies that are in transition.

We have had a resources boom. The construction phase of that boom, the investment phase, has tailed off. We have had a slowdown in global commodity prices—coal prices—and, as a result, we are seeing a fall-off in employment in the resources sector. We are seeing that filter through to the resource servicing sector. We need assistance from the government to transition, and this small business package will enable so many small businesses in all these other fields of the economy rather than resources to actually go out and have a go as the Prime Minister and the Treasurer said.

It was good to have the Prime Minister in Mackay last week. We went and had a look at Steve Geiger's cabinet making, and Steve is one of those many people who have been dubbed 'Tony's tradies.' He is one of those many tradesmen around the nation having a go, wanting to expand their business. He was telling us about how he wants to move into a bigger shed, a better shed—a place where he can expand. He wants to be able to purchase new equipment to replace some of the tired equipment that he has. He is wanting to do this and he sees the small business package, particularly, the instant asset write-off that we have brought forward, as a way of doing that.

He will grow his business, I am sure, and there will be so many other small businesses across the Mackay region that will do exactly that right throughout the Dawson electorate.

Cane-farming families are also small businesses, so they get the benefits of this small business package as well with items that they want to purchase and will be able to write them off in a single year. I am sure there is a lot of investment happening out there now. The Prime Minister told me one of the ads he saw up in Townsville was all these utes and vehicles that had dropped to \$19,999. I wonder why that is the case? Good on them. That is going to be money flowing through the economy that was previously tucked away in an account, because people were probably a little reticent to spend. Now they are going to be out there, and that money is going to be flowing through the economy, churning through, and ultimately somewhere it will be creating a job. That is what we want. That is what we need.

I am so pleased with this small business package. The returns that it is going to provide to my electorate will be immense as we are one of those economies that is in transition. As I said, for the farmers—this applies to them as well—and, more importantly, we have also got a range of measures such as fencing. There is not too much fencing on cane farms but, on some of the cattle properties, that will apply. Water infrastructure—there is the ability to accelerate the depreciation on water infrastructure on farms. I am sure there are going to be a few of the cockies thinking about putting in a turkey nest dam or some other type of water infrastructure to prepare ahead. That is what we want them to do, because we could essentially have a lot of farms self drought-proofed, if we get this water infrastructure onto farms. They can do that with assistance through accelerated depreciation. I think there are a lot of opportunities that are going to flow through to job creation, and job creation is pivotal in my community.

Perhaps the biggest and best thing that I saw in this budget—the thing that is really visionary, that inspires a lot of hope in Northern Australia—is the Northern Australia concessional loan facility of \$5 billion. I wonder whether the Treasurer was reading my mind, because in the weeks leading up to the budget, I was actually out there saying to people that we needed some serious coin on the table for this Northern Australia plan. I was on the parliamentary committee that went around Northern Australia talking to people and I could see this level of disbelief of 'Here we go again,' because they had heard it before.

Many governments have talked the talk when it comes to developing northern Australia. No government has done this: chucked \$5 billion on the table and said, 'Here you go; go and have a go. Do these big projects that you need to do to develop northern Australia.' I can tell you, one straight off the bat is going to be the Urannah Dam. I talked about it earlier in the chamber today. Urannah Dam is going to be a major job-creating project. More importantly, it is going to open up 30,000 hectares of new land to cropping. That is unbelievable. That will create a whole new agricultural district to the west of Bowen, where they already have the runs on the board. Right now, every tomato you buy in Coles or Woolworths comes from Bowen. They supply just about the entirety of Australia's winter tomato crop, and also capsicums, lettuce, beans—it goes on and on. We are going to expand on that if we can get the Urannah Dam up, and I am sure that with this \$5 billion loan facility we will be able to do that.

In the flow-on from that, jobs will be created from new agricultural industry. There will be the possibility of bulk cargo shipping through the Mackay port to other domestic ports. Coastal shipping will develop. We do not have bulk cargo out of Mackay at the moment; we will have if we can get a bigger agricultural sector in the fruit and vegetable area, and we could probably even look at doing direct exports out of the Whitsunday Coast airport perhaps, or through the port of Mackay or the port of Townsville, and maybe even, eventually, through Abbott Point if there is a bulk cargo facility placed there. Further opportunities spring to mind—as I outlined earlier, perhaps a distribution centre for local supermarkets within the region and, again, the jobs that would flow from that. The potential that this budget unlocks in northern Australia is absolutely immense.

I will talk about some of the local infrastructure projects for a minute or two. I particularly want to refer to the Mackay Ring Road. It is a project I am determined to see through to completion—the biggest infrastructure project in the Mackay region at over half a billion dollars. It is a road that is a bypass of the Mackay city area, taking the heavy vehicles that go from our port out to the mines or to the mining service area in Paget. It takes them around the outskirts of the city, and there will be something like 14 bridges constructed, including a massive one over the Pioneer River. On top of providing the benefit to the city of getting the trucks out of town, it will enable that extra crossing of the Pioneer River to alleviate some of the traffic congestion we have at peak hours.

I am very pleased that an extra \$34.8 million has been allocated to that project in this financial year. As we move into future financial years, the construction of the project starts. Right now, they are doing the detailed design work. I am disappointed that we have not got further than this, but the reality is that in Labor's last year in office they did not fund one extra cent towards this project. Effectively, they delayed it by a year. Right now, if it was not for that fact, we probably could have been out there in the coming financial year building the thing. Instead, we are still designing it because of a lack of funding under the leadership—or lack of leadership, I should say—of the then Treasurer, the member for Lilley, and the then infrastructure minister, the member for Grayndler.

But we are getting on with the job, and we are doing it. Over the coming years, \$448 million will be allocated for the Mackay Ring Road. There are many other projects that we do have currently underway. There is \$30 million being allocated to the Peak Downs Highway safety works, which involves a total project cost of \$166 million over the next few years. Sandy Gully Bridge, an area which floods fairly regularly, cutting off the Bruce Highway—our national highway—is going to be fixed. We have \$5 million allocated this coming financial year for a total project cost of \$46 million. Yellow Gin Creek, another area which floods fairly regularly, on the National Highway, will be fixed this year, with \$25 million allocated in the 2015-16 financial year. We have some road widening up near Ayr, with \$5 million allocated there for a total project cost of \$66.4 million.

Other ongoing projects that are being funded in the budget include a Bruce Highway safety package, with \$20 million being allocated in the next financial year. Overtaking lanes will receive \$22.1 million. Road widening between St Lawrence and Bowen will receive an extra \$3 million this coming financial year. The Burdekin Bridge upgrade will receive \$25 million in total. Sarina to Cairns black spots have \$19.7 million allocated in the coming financial year. Four bridges on the Peak Downs Highway will begin being built, at a cost of \$35 million. There are many other local infrastructure projects: the Milton Street-Shakespeare Street upgrade, Old Clare Road near Ayr, Roads to Recovery funding to the Mackay Regional Council of nearly \$2.9 million, the junior soccer grounds relocation and the civic centre public realm improvement project—all job-creating projects. That is what the budget is all about. (*Time expired*)