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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Economy

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Owens, Julie, MP

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Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (16:21): Listening to the previous two opposition speakers, one would not know we were talking about a matter of public importance involving consistency and confidence. In fact, I do not think the mover of the motion mentioned either of those two words. Instead, we got a rather low-level comedy routine from a man who pretends he is capable of being the Treasurer of this country. It is not surprising, because this is not an opposition that cares about confidence; it is an opposition that takes every opportunity to run scare campaigns to damage confidence.

This motion today on rebuilding confidence in the Australian economy is hypocrisy writ large. It is yet another stunt from an opposition without a single idea, an opposition that takes every opportunity to claim that the world will end at any moment. If that were right, the world would have ended several times in the last few months alone. The opposition exaggerates; it misinforms on a daily basis. The Leader of the Opposition goes on national tours to promote fear in any way he can to anyone he can, to weaken confidence and to provoke doubt.

And then they come in here and move a motion about consistency and confidence and, true to form, do not even bother to talk about it. The truth is that they do not want confidence in the Australian economy because it does not suit their political self-interest. Fear is the method they use. They undermine confidence. That is the game they play, and they play that game with the lives and welfare of Australians.

Then there is the word 'consistency' from this opposition—a motion about consistency from an opposition with a leader who is a self-proclaimed weathervane. He gets up every morning and decides his policy position based on which way the wind is blowing—the political wind, that is. They are consistent about one thing, and that is that they oppose everything and anything every single day. No matter what it is, they oppose it. Recently we even saw, when it came to the alternative fuels bill, that they opposed their own policy. It is opposition at all costs. From the masters of the scare campaign, from the masters of confusion and doubt, suddenly we have a motion about consistency and confidence. That, quite frankly, is a joke, and it is not surprising that they did not bother to speak on it.

The opposition has one more speaker to go. Maybe you can actually do it. Maybe you can actually address the motion you have moved in this House as a matter of such importance that we are spending an hour and a half debating it. The opposition has another 10 minutes to actually speak to it. It would take a serious change in the behaviour of the opposition and the attitudes of those opposite for anyone to take this motion seriously.

I would actually like to speak to this motion, because confidence and consistency are extremely important, and the government has been delivering sound, consistent policy. It has resulted in the positive economic outcomes that the shadow Treasurer referred to in his speech—in one of his more lucid moments. We have been delivering sound policy, but there is no doubt a sense of uncertainty out there and we do need to acknowledge that. The opposition are not causing it, but they are thrashing about in every way they can to try to find a way to exploit it for their own political benefit.

Let us acknowledge some of that uncertainty and what the most likely causes are. There was a global financial crisis a few years ago. I know the opposition try to pretend it did not happen—they do that every day—but it did happen. It was not the making of the government, but we weathered the storm as a nation better than did just about any developed country in the world. There is consistent talk still about problems in Europe—again, not a problem of the government's making and not related to Australian circumstances. There is unrest in the Middle East—again, something that makes people feel uneasy. We have had earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones and fires around the world, among our neighbours and in our own backyard, which have resulted in short-term increases in prices, particularly for food. But we are already, as a nation, rebuilding after those disasters. We are already out there rebuilding the roads, the rail, the schools, the public buildings and the homes.

There is a growing need to act on climate change. A new resources boom is on its way. Economic power around the world is changing. We have a strong dollar, putting pressure on manufacturing. These are times of change and readjustment and they can cause unease among people in our communities and around the country. What you do not do in times like this is run fake scare campaigns. You do not come out every day finding a way to exploit that uncertainty for your own political gain. You do not do that, members of the opposition. It is not the right thing to do, particularly when you know in your heart of hearts how well the economy is travelling. Again, we had acknowledgement from the shadow Treasurer just 20 minutes ago about that.

We are in an excellent position as a nation to respond to the challenges that face us. We have the capacity within us as a people and we are in a very, very strong economic position. Australians can be confident about the future. We have strong jobs growth and business investment, and our public finances are the envy of the world. That shows that we are continuing to get the policy settings right. You do not get the policy settings right through times like this because you are incompetent, as the opposition would say, or because of inconsistency. In fact, it is quite the opposite. No other developed country in the world has steered its economy through the present financial times as well as this one has. That is acknowledged broadly.

Let me refer to a couple of other organisations and people around the world who confirm that. The IMF, the Reserve Bank of Australia and the global rating agencies have all backed the strength of our budget position and the strategy to return the budget to surplus. S&P said recently that Australia has exceptionally strong public sector finances, underpinned by low public debt and strong fiscal discipline. In response to the recent budget, S&P noted:

... the sound profile of Australia's public finances, which remain among the strongest of our peer group.

Moody's said that the budget demonstrates the government's determination to return to fiscal surplus and that our government debt remains among the lowest of all AAA-rated governments. So it seems that many respected agencies around the world will confirm that the Australian economy is travelling incredibly well, particularly given the extraordinary circumstances the world has faced in the last three years.

We saw the national accounts delivered on Wednesday. We saw a slight contraction in the quarter of about 1.2 per cent but one per cent growth across the year. It was encouraging to see the components of GDP, such as consumption, dwelling investment and business investment, growing in the first three months of this year. We have already seen a strong rebound in the economy in the monthly figures. Trade data shows that coal exports were up by almost 16 per cent over the past two months. Iron ore and metal shipments have gained 23 per cent. We saw a solid gain in retail sales in April, and we know from our own retail sector how important that is. In fact, it was the biggest monthly increase in 17 months. Australians can be confident about our strong fundamentals. Our economy is forecast to create around 500,000 jobs in the next couple of years, and an unprecedented pipeline of mining investment is on its way. In the last 12 months, prior to the budget, 258,000 Australians gained jobs.

We are consistent on this side of the chamber about the need to put a price on carbon. We went to the 2007 election committed to putting a price on carbon; we attempted to do that. If there is any inconsistency in this House about this it is from the opposition, who also went to the 2007 election promising to put a price on carbon, contrary to their calls now for a plebiscite to gauge public opinion. In spite of public opinion and public views at that stage, their own commitment to do it and our clear mandate to do it, they voted against it. There was no commitment then to the will of the people. There was no commitment at all when they voted against what was their policy position and something that we had a clear mandate to do.

We also went to the 2010 election with a commitment to pricing carbon. If members of the opposition who do not believe that do a little googling, in the last weeks of the campaign they will find copious newspaper articles where our commitment to price carbon in this term is made very clear. We have been consistent about that and we will deliver on that. We will deliver on pricing carbon because that is the only way to provide consistency—again, what this motion is about—and certainty to business in Australia so that they can move forward, make the investment decisions that they need to, set themselves up and begin the process of exploiting what is a worldwide move to a clean economy. That is consistency, and we could well do with the opposition finding a single position to stand on this for the good of the whole nation.

This is a motion about consistency and confidence, and I am proud to stand up here as part of a government that has delivered consistency in its policies. I am proud to stand up here as part of a government that has delivered a strong economy in what are some very difficult international conditions.