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Main Committee

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Second Reading

SPEECH

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Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt—Chief Opposition Whip) (12:17): I rise in this place today to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2011-2012 and the other appropriation bills. A short while ago I was quite excited to see that our Acting Prime Minister and Treasurer had decided to spend three days of his Easter holiday in Cairns on a fact-finding mission. I thought, 'Wow, this is a great opportunity for him to have a look at what is clearly one of the economically depressed regions of our country.' Forty-odd per cent of our economy relies on tourism, and we have had everything from floods and pestilence to cyclones—all the disasters you have seen in the media. Some people have decided, just on the basis of what they have seen in the news media, to cancel holidays they had booked to Cairns, even though the actual event might have occurred somewhere in the south-east corner of Queensland, which is probably closer to Melbourne than to Cairns. The impact on our businesses has been quite profound.

This is at the end of a couple of years of very, very difficult times in our region. We certainly got no benefit out of the stimulus package, given that governments were hell-bent on making sure that the primary contracts for any of the work that was done were provided to southern based contractors, leaving our own local builders and contractors to pick up the crumbs and putting them into very significant economic difficulties.

But I thought, 'This is a great opportunity.' The Treasurer swanned into town, where he stayed in a five-star hotel on his fact-finding mission—and I do not suggest that people should not do that. Afterwards, he left. On budget night I listened to his speech and I really got excited. I thought there was going to be something for our city from this government. Right at the beginning of his speech, he acknowledged that we have a patchwork economy and that it is growing unevenly across the nation. We talk about 'patchwork', but in my region there are gaping black holes. The patches to fill in those holes have not even been manufactured yet!

The Treasurer talked about the natural disasters devastating families, cities and towns—and at the height of Yasi and at the start of the floods he could not have been more accurate. I thought this guy has seriously listened. Then he talked about the high dollar and, for the first and only time in his entire budget speech, he mentioned tourism, plus many manufacturing industries and especially small business—again, how true that is. In the last two years in my region, over 400 small businesses have folded and there are a hell of a lot more at the precipice; they are ready to go. He acknowledged that not every region prospers. He did not mention my region specifically but I thought that acknowledgement suggested that he was going to do something about it.

He also said that not every health service was as good as it could be, particularly for the mentally ill. Again, I got excited because at the last election he had promised a headspace facility in Cairns. I thought, 'We're going to get that announcement today.' But I was very disappointed. As I sat there and listened to him go through his rhetoric—go through his speech—he never mentioned tourism again. He did say that Cyclone Yasi was going to cost the economy about \$9 billion in lost output and reduced real GDP. But then he decided to talk about solutions. He was going to put 50,000 single parents back into the work queues. He was going to get the long-term unemployed and, of course, people with disabilities back to work. I thought to myself, 'This is not quite right'—and he is getting further into the speech. The problem we have up in Cairns is close to 14 per cent unemployment. So we are going to get these guys back into a job; but they are not long-termers. These people lost their jobs last week or the week before. So what is the point of training long-term unemployed people for jobs that do not exist? So I thought maybe we were being sold a bit of pup here.

Then he started talking about infrastructure, and I thought 'wow'. Four years ago the government announced \$150 million for an overpass on Ray Jones Drive. They had announced it three times over the four years prior to that announcement by Minister Albanese when he was up our way recently. He also confirmed the government's commitment to the region by announcing that a southern based contractor would be doing the work. He made that announcement about a week before the last standing civil constructor, who had employed up to 600 people in Cairns, went into liquidation. They had not even been considered.

Then I thought, 'What is he going to announce now?' He said, 'We're going to build the National Broadband Network and invest \$36 billion in vital roads, railways and ports, like the Moreton Bay Rail Link in Queensland, the Gateway project in Western Australia, the Western Ring Road upgrade in Victoria and, with the additional funds, duplicate the Pacific Highway.' I thought, 'Anything he's going to say in that speech is not worth a cupful of cold water,' because he did not even mention the Bruce Highway and the fact that in the last 12 months it has been closed close to 200 times because of floods and other issues. There was no commitment there. He did not re-announce the fact that he was still going to build a \$150 million overpass on Ray Jones Drive; it has not started yet. I came away feeling very, very disillusioned. I thought to myself: 400 businesses have closed. The CEC Group, with over 34 years of operation, has just shut down. Other businesses are Glenwood Homes, with over 20 years of operation; Winfield's Electrical, with 58 years of operation; CMC Constructions; the Hedley Group; Cocoa Cola; Northpower Electrical; and Smithfield Electrics. And today I heard that *CityLife* magazine announced yesterday that it is intending to close as well. The list goes on and on. I have to tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is very, very depressing.

Every day people are coming into the office about this. We have had meeting after meeting to try to get our local builders and suppliers involved in the rebuild after Yasi. It is almost impossible to get the government to listen to us. Most of the contracts continue to go to their mates in the southern part of the state, leaving only the subcontractors in our areas to pick up the bits and pieces, which are really not quite enough to keep them alive. We had unemployment of close to 14 per cent. It has dropped recently, but the reason it has dropped recently is because people are leaving town. That is the main reason. People are leaving town or going into part-time employment because full-time employment is not there. So I am pleading with the Treasurer: for goodness sake, whatever you do, do not start training the long-term unemployed or those with disabilities or the single mums. Give the people who lost their jobs today and yesterday an opportunity to get their job first.

I recently had a look at what one of our Independents, Mr Windsor, got out of the budget: BAE Flying Systems, \$120 million; \$20 million for a new medical training facility; \$10 million for a Sports Dome in Tamworth; \$120 million allocated for the redevelopment of the Tamworth Hospital; and \$31.6 million for a regional cancer centre.

We have had a community up there that has been raising money now for a number of years to set up a cancer facility. On my side of politics we had committed to build a wellbeing centre for this organisation—not a cent out of this government to support that, and I think that is very, very disappointing when you stop and think about the amount of money and commitment that has been put in by the community to establish this themselves. Yet this government can go down to an Independent and give \$31 million to his electorate. We were only looking for \$12 million. The members for COUCH that set up this organisation would have to feel very much cheated.

We did get \$12 million for the continued redevelopment of our public hospital on a site that has to be evacuated every time there is a storm. It is not capable of withstanding storm surges or cyclones so they evacuate the whole hospital and the community is without a hospital. They gave \$12 million. I see there is \$120 million for the Tamworth Hospital, plus another \$20 million for funding for new medical training facilities. In Cairns we were looking to set up the Australian National Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine. The JCU is a wonderful institution and it would have been a great addendum to it as a national institute. But of course they did not see fit to put any money into that either.

You have to be very cynical and very sceptical when you talk about commitments by this government in relation to what they are able to do. I go through the election commitments. As I said, there is the \$150 million for stage 1 of the Bruce Highway—nothing has happened; \$40 million for performing arts—not a cracker has been spent. They got a coordinator in for fly in, fly out jobs for Cairns, but there have been absolutely no direct results from that at this point in time. You have got Cazalys—they are still spending the money, \$3 million, on that, and there was another one for remote housing, \$4.5 million, which is still to be delivered, and the list goes on. There was \$9.37 million for the Daintree Rainforest Observatory—it still has not been done. There was a commitment to Headspace, but it still has not been done. There was \$3.5 million for development of the rugby league, which still has not been delivered—not a cracker. You have to ask yourself: when are they going to start being serious?

I say to the Treasurer that he needs to start being serious. He needs to match his rhetoric with action. Cairns in the far northern region is in desperate need of support. We have people up there who, from 30 June, will be paying an increased Medicare levy, who are expected to support people in the area affected by Cyclone Yasi. Nobody in my region and north of my region can access any support. They cannot access any of the loans or any of the grants because it is just impossible for them to do so. First of all, their buildings may not have been

blown away but their businesses certainly were. But because they might have had a dollar in their credit card or they had some level of insurance or they had gone out and got a second job to feed their families, they were automatically disqualified. It is an absolute disgrace that these people continue to desperately need this help and there is nothing available for them. Alan Jones was up recently in our region and started to highlight some of these plights, and I desperately hope that he continues to raise these issues on a national level.

Peninsula Development Road was shut down through this event, and none of the businesses up there are entitled to support. Mulley's Market and Fuel, at Coen, and the Exchange Hotel up there have had very little custom since December. The roads have been closed. Again, they are not entitled to support, as are none of the roadhouses up there. Also, the Bloomfield River causeway got washed away. It only opened up a week or so ago, and the Lions Den Hotel on that road, which is totally reliant on traffic coming through, is not entitled to a cracker out of this, as are all the other businesses reliant on that. You have people like Peter and Rosie Johnson, who have a little roadhouse up there, who have been doing it really, really tough. It is just so unfair—and there is nothing at all in this budget.

If we want to start fixing the problems, I can start giving a few ideas for the Treasurer to consider. First of all, he can extend the entitlements of the Cyclone Yasi natural disaster area to include businesses affected in the event in Cairns, the Daintree coast, Cooktown and Cape York and review the eligibility criteria so that businesses can access the support. That will make a huge difference. He can also commit to immediately start on the Bruce Highway, not reannounce it in another 12 months, and change his view to allow somebody local, one of our local contractors, to do the job rather than have the job done by southern based contractors.

A third thing he could do is make a commitment to establish the seed funding for the sports, performing arts and cultural initiative that will see the development of a tropical campus for the Australian Institute of Sport in Far North Queensland. That will get shovel-ready projects started immediately, get jobs and give opportunities there.

The government could also commit to the first stage of the Australian National Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine. They could commit to an all-weather bridge over the Bloomfield crossing. A lagoon for Port Douglas would be wonderful to assist them in revitalising that community, and do not forget the \$22 million required to rebuild the sea walls in the outer arm of Torres Strait. And, if they really want to start talking about economic opportunities, they can get rid of that insidious wild rivers legislation that is going to lock up any opportunity for future development in Cape York, along with the proposed blanket World Heritage listing in the area.

These are some initiatives that they can consider. These things can be done immediately. They will give opportunities and give hope to our region rather than the absolute, total, blatant disregard that we have seen in our community now for far too long. I call on the Prime Minister and I call on the Treasurer to get up there and start to make things happen rather than continue to talk about it.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper): The time allocated to the honourable Chief Opposition Whip has now well and truly expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.