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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Torres Strait Flooding

SPEECH

Monday, 18 June 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt—Chief Opposition Whip) (11:00): It dismays me immensely that I have for the second time to move a motion of this nature in relation to the Torres Strait seawalls. Last year in March I had a motion prepared and I was ready to have it submitted to this place for debate. I was asked directly by the Minister Crean's office not to put it up, that the government had made a decision that they were inclined to support that motion but they needed more time. They could not take the money out of the RDA funds because it was totally inappropriate and the minister was looking for an opportunity to identify funds from another source. In the interest of bipartisan support, I agreed to delay putting the motion up until August to assist the minister in his endeavours to locate the money.

In August, I still had not heard from the minister and I advised him that it was my intention, as per our agreement, to put the motion up. The motion was put up and the government supported it. The motion asked that the issue of seawalls be addressed immediately, that infrastructure be put in place so that we do not start to lose existing infrastructure. We have \$1 billion worth of infrastructure that is being damaged every single year. We had lost over half the Saibai Island's cemetery which had been washed out to sea. I was pleased that the government supported the motion. In fact in August I wrote to the minister and congratulated him, thanking him on behalf of the Torres Strait Islands community because he was prepared to support us.

I then asked when the money could be expected to flow and where the money would come from. I had to wait until December, and, after many subsequent follow-ups was told by the minister that he was no longer going to support it, that it was not really a federal government issue but an issue for the state and for the local council. Why didn't he tell me that back in March when I was putting that motion up?

In that period, I have to say, more graves were lost; more graves were washed out to sea. I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker Georganas, how would anybody in this place, whose mother or father, brother or sister, grandparents or whomever was interred in a cemetery, feel when they went there the next day to visit them to find that they had been washed out to sea, never to be found. Anywhere else in the country it would be absolutely outrageous and the matter would be fixed immediately, but up there, it seems, from this minister's perspective, it really does not matter. Like many other things in Indigenous issues, it is all about the politics. It is not about finding real solutions.

But it is also a very, very stupid decision. There is \$1 billion worth of infrastructure on the six affected islands and every year there is a couple of million dollars worth of damage. Yet every year they are prepared to fix up that damage but not to fix the cause of the problem. It is not about climate change, it is not about rising sea levels, it is about failing, ageing, 50-year-old infrastructure. That is the problem, and it is easily fixed. It is a \$22 million to \$24 million fix. This government can find \$240 million to give to the UN to give to micro-Pacific nations to address issues pertaining to climate change. They can give that money—\$240 million; it is not much when you say it fast—to these countries to build their sea walls. But they will not give \$22 million to fix a small Pacific community that just happens to be in Australia. You have to pose the statement: maybe it is about buying a place on the UN for a thorn in this government's side, rather than trying to address the genuine issues that are facing this community every year. We are right on the front line of Papua New Guinea. A couple of kilometres away there is tuberculosis, HIV, meningitis, Japanese encephalitis, cholera. I recently came back from Daru, and when you walk past the cemetery you see grave after grave of people that have just died of cholera. You understand just how real it is, but this mob down here does not give a damn.

More recently the RDA funding came out—this is the second round we have had—and the only money to be given north of Mackay was \$5 million that was going to the sea walls in the Torres Strait. Lo and behold: \$5 million for a \$24-million fix. That is the only RDA money that was given over two rounds, and that \$5 million is for a \$24-million job. They go up there—Senator McLucas, Minister Macklin, Minister Crean—patting themselves on the back and saying: 'Hallelujah, we've found a solution, but there is a catch. We are going to put another \$7

million in, but we don't know where we are going to find that yet. But the whole lot—the whole \$12 million or so that we are going to put up—is conditional on the state government finding the money.'

Now we know that the Bligh government left the Campbell Newman state government with a debt that is going to rise to \$100 billion. Where are they going to suddenly draw \$12 million out to put in there for something that should have been fixed by this government several years ago? This is a problem that has been going on now for six years. It is all smoke and mirrors. You have people up there in the community thinking, 'Wow, it is going to happen.' I have news for them—it is not going to happen. The reason that they did it this way is that it is a guaranteed way that they do not spend a cracker. I was talking to Ron Enosa, the chairman of the Saibai community. He knows that it is a lie. He knows that it is not going to happen. He is bitterly disappointed.

I was talking to Fred Gela, the Chair of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, only yesterday. He said, 'I would love to give them the benefit of the doubt, but the more I speak to them, the more I realise that this is never going to be a reality, because \$5 million is not going to fix it and it is conditional on the state government putting \$12 million up that they do not have and they did not budget for, and another \$7 million that is going to materialise out of thin air; Simon Crean has not yet decided where it is going to come from.' It really made me wonder if the criteria for being a cabinet minister in this government is the ability to continue to mislead the Australian public, the same as the Prime Minister has done—

Mr Perrett: Mr Deputy Speaker, I would ask the member for Leichhardt to withdraw that suggestion about the cabinet. I find it unparliamentary and offensive.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas): The member for Leichhardt, to assist the chamber—

Mr Entsch: Mr Deputy Speaker, I also find it unparliamentary and offensive that—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Leichhardt will resume his seat. The member for Leichhardt will withdraw that statement for the resumption of the debate to take place.

Mr Entsch: I withdraw, but I find it offensive that I was promised—call it what you like—in March that Simon Crean, the minister, would support it. It took till August. I complied 100 percent and it took till August, and the government came out and voted and supported it. There was no argument about it. Now we find, almost a year later, that we are no closer to having it happen. What they have done is totally inappropriate. They have definitely misled me. There is no question about it. They have misled me and they have misled the Torres Strait people, who are sitting there waiting for the next king tide, which is in a couple of months time, when more of the cemetery is going to be washed away and more of their ancestors are going to disappear into the sea. More infrastructure is going to be destroyed, and it is going to raise the risk of cholera, dysentery, meningitis and Japanese encephalitis.

It is a cruel hoax. It is a disgusting trick on the Torres Strait people. The minister and this government should stand condemned for their appalling treatment of these people in their deliberate attempts to avoid, in any way they can, fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities. These people are Australians. They may live in the Torres Strait, but they are very, very proud Australians and they are entitled to have a government that steps up to its responsibilities and takes the appropriate action to ensure that they have security of their own communities.