



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Monday, 24 February 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 24 February 2014
Page 592
Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (17:01): I rise this afternoon to take the opportunity of speaking on this address-in-reply in the breadth in which I am able to cover issues in my electorate. Over the past seven-odd years, I have been very much saddened by what I have seen as a decline in the Cairns region. This has very much been as a direct result of poor policy decisions by the two previous Labor governments.

Initially, going back to 2007, we saw the loss of NQEA and the majority of our shipbuilding and maintenance industry as a result of the government at that time cancelling a \$300 million contract to build a section of the air warfare destroyers. What was particularly galling about that was that they had allocated the contract. They then cancelled it and reissued it to a southern based firm, but, after a couple of years of not being able to deliver what was necessary and a whole lot of stuff-ups, they actually came back to the original contractor and asked if they were in a position to, in effect, re-establish their firm again to do the contract because it was not being delivered where they had sent it. Of course, unfortunately, after a couple of years, the company were no longer able to do that.

We then had the pink batts scheme, which not only caused the death of a young local electrician, 22-year-old Mitchell Sweeney, but affected many small businesses. A lot of these businesses were insulation businesses in my electorate. I remember talking to businesses which had been long established and had actually bought in stock to carry out the requirements of the scheme. Unfortunately, there were a lot of what I call carpetbaggers that came into the business and basically took all the low-hanging fruit. When the decision was made, without any consultation with the legitimate businesses in the area, they had leasing arrangements on vehicles; they had staff; and they had a whole lot of other stock, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of stock, which they could not give away, let alone sell. We saw some very long established businesses in our area close down as a direct result of that.

Of course, we saw the school halls debacle, where it seemed that the only businesses that won the contracts were the large multinationals. I recall talking to one of our bigger local businesses up there which had survived over a very difficult period in business in construction. I asked him what the secret of his longevity was. He said to me that one of the greatest blessings he had was that he had never, ever got a contract for the school halls, because he said they were subcontracted out to the multinationals and in many cases they were having to provide goods and services well under the actual cost of provision. Unfortunately, in that particular case, he did not survive. He eventually succumbed to a lot of these bad policies, and that business, along with hundreds of employees, was basically shut down.

We then had the live cattle debacle and the Labor Party's knee-jerk reaction, which certainly affected graziers in my electorate around the Cape York area and into the western gulf. The sad part about it, these years later, is that that impact is still being seen quite profoundly. As we go into a drought situation now, there are many cattle out on those areas that should have gone out on those boats a few years ago, but unfortunately, because they had to be retained because of that decision, they became too heavy and could not be shipped. Of course, that had flow-on effects in too much overgrazing. They could not sell them locally, and we are still seeing those flow-on effects now.

The closure of the Coral Sea was a direct result of the Labor Party promoting the lock-up mentality being pushed by the American gas company called the Pew foundation. Instead of promoting sustainable multiple use, this has pushed long-term, long-suffering family owned businesses to the edge. At the moment, while we have made a decision to reverse that decision, there is still a family there, the Lamasons, of Great Barrier Reef Tuna, who have basically been pushed over that edge and desperately need some support. Even though we have reversed it, that is still not going to save that family business, and we need to do something to make sure that they are able to retire from their industry with a level of dignity.

The proposal for the blanket World Heritage listing of Cape York was another one of those initiatives that was pushed by the Labor-Greens agenda. It has created a huge amount of uncertainty for Cape York residents and for businesses, who feared the locking up of any future economic potential. The larger landholders in the area are, of course, Indigenous people, who have campaigned for decades to recover a lot of their land and who were faced with the prospect of having no say in their future direction.

Thankfully, with the support of the state government, we are now starting to move away from that mentality and looking at conservation based on merit, accepting that landholders have a legitimate role in working on their landholdings. But the results of all these decisions that I have just explained, and many more, are very sobering. Small businesses have for years been struggling to stay afloat. Four hundred small businesses in the Far North have closed their doors in the previous two-year period. We have record unemployment levels and, at one point, they were the highest in Australia. Even today, I note, we have the second highest youth unemployment rates in the country. You have to be worried about that. Those numbers have doubled since 2007. As I say, all of these issues have had a profound impact on our region.

However, it is not all doom and gloom at this point, because Far Northerners are an optimistic bunch. We are starting to see some serious signs of recovery. A number of big-ticket projects are sitting in the wings, waiting for a start. They just need a little support. The major one that was announced was the \$4.2 billion Aquis integrated resort-casino proposal for Yorkeys Knob. I congratulate Tony Fung, the proponent, for all the public information and consultation that has so far taken place. It is an unprecedented project for Far North Queensland; in fact, it is unprecedented for Australia. It is one of the largest of its kind in the world. I certainly look forward to the outcome of the EIS.

The same goes for the Mount Emerald Wind Farm project, which has been stalled for over five years. The latest storm over the delay was due to a \$1 million study in relation to the 60-odd towers that they are going to put on this site and the impacts they would have on the breeding habits of the northern quoll. That delayed the project last year. This \$500 million project will provide power for 75,000 homes a year. It is great to see that they are now starting to gain some momentum.

We also have the \$1 billion Etheridge Integrated Agricultural Project, the 20-year \$1 billion Cairns Airport redevelopment and the \$1.4 billion Ella Bay resort, near Innisfail. If projects like these stack up, they will be absolute game-changers for our economy. So, rather than making excuses as to why they cannot be done, let us find a way to make them happen. Let us start looking at building infrastructure and other complementary initiatives that will have a flow-on effect. The \$42 million investment in the Australian Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine at JCU is a case in point.

I am very passionate about the establishment of a tropical campus for the Australian Institute of Sport. Within that \$42 million investment for the tropical health and medicine faculty, there is a faculty for tropical sports medicine. So it provides an opportunity for us to grab that and go with it.

Mossman Botanical Gardens is a great project. It will cost a couple of million dollars in total to establish it, but all the prehistoric flowering trees of the Daintree rainforests of that area will be showcased. It will provide quite a unique opportunity for people to see them. The Mossman Botanical Gardens Committee have done an outstanding job in bringing this together. They have now identified a parcel of land, which they will be working on. I am hoping that they can start to turn the first sod on that sooner rather than later.

The government have also announced funding of \$700 million for an essential piece of road infrastructure: the Bruce Highway from Gordonvale to Cairns. We certainly need to ensure that we keep doing that. We will not be locking up the cape with a blanket World Heritage listing. Areas such as the Quinkan Reserve, near Laura, certainly need that listing and they should be judged on their merits. I have no doubt that they will proceed once all the consultation and consents go ahead. But we need to open that area for opportunities for landholders there. The government recently found the cash for a \$10 million infrastructure project in Cape York which will include a very significant amount for the Peninsula Development Road. That is the way we can start to open up opportunities for Cape York.

What the current government have done and what the previous government did not do was: firstly, speak to the state government; secondly, actually put money with the promise; and, thirdly, actually gone through a consultation process, talking to the elected leaders in the area so that we can prioritise it according to their needs.

At this point I congratulate David Kempton, who is the state member for Cook. Only the other day he announced a \$10 million addition to this project, for the ongoing sealing of the Peninsula Development Road.

In Cape York we also have the Scherger Air Force base, near Weipa, which I can assure will serve our community much better as an operational air base than as a 'prison farm'—which is how I refer to it. It has been used temporarily as a detention centre. Now that it is being closed down, I think we need to seriously look at the opportunities provided in the further recommendations of the defence white paper, to build its capacity as an operational base. At the same time I think we should be also looking at the expansion of HMAS *Cairns*, which, in my view, as we are looking at moving our defence assets north, is an absolute no-brainer. Again, we have to find ways to make these things happen and to encourage projects that will have flow-on effects in education, tropical health, tropical agriculture, tropical aquaculture and of course tropical medicine. These tie in perfectly with the coalition's Northern Australia plan.

This policy is the first I have seen in my lifetime that actually prioritises the opportunities for Northern Australia, and it will have ramifications that will last for generations. I was a member of the Northern Australia Water and Land Taskforce in 2005. We have been developing our policy since that time. The coalition government are already talking to communities. We have an extensive consultation process. We will be moving around most Northern Australia centres and talking to people about agriculture, about alternative energy opportunities, about water security and about a range of other initiatives.

We will also be looking at how to increase tourism, given that tourism is the largest industry in Cairns, my home town. We are looking to increase tourism to two million international visitors a year, and a key market for us is China. Chinese visitors to Australia grew nearly 16 per cent in 2012, to more than 626,000, and they spent \$4.2 billion. The Tourism 2020 Strategy estimates that China has the potential to grow to between \$7.4 billion and \$9 billion in real expenditure by 2020. Northern Australia will get a significant slice of that pie.

I applaud the coalition initiative in dealing with the root of problems in obtaining visas for Chinese tourists. It is all about a collaborative effort, and we have identified electronic visas, multi entry visas and urgent-processing visas as the things the Chinese market is looking for. There are many other countries competing for that market; many have already seen their opportunities and grabbed them. It is important that we do the same. That is the sort of initiative that will encourage Chinese airlines to commit to Australia. We also need to raise awareness about the value of pre-clearance in Cairns for PNG travel and goods. That is something else we need to organise, and I have been in discussions with the minister on that issue.

There is also a range of social issues I intend to keep focusing on. Mental Health is one that I have been raising for many years. Local organisations such as the Declan Crouch Foundation face an ongoing battle raising money for suicide prevention. They are trying to raise money for adolescent facilities in Cairns. They do an incredible job raising awareness. Ruth Crouch, whose family suffered the tragedy of losing her young son Declan through suicide, has been absolutely focused on getting adolescent beds at Cairns Hospital, but we have to expand it more than that. We have to make sure our existing mental health services, particularly in juvenile mental health, are not only safe but also adequately funded. I have been working with organisations including the Cairns Mental Health Carers' Hub and the Time Out House. They play an integral role for people with mental health issues, and it is vital that we do not lose these services. In fact, it is critical that we expand them.

In aged care the Mossman District Nursing Home project is extremely worthwhile but, under the current quota system, cannot get the bed allocations and funding grants it needs to get up and running. It has been going now for as long as I have been a member—that is, since 1996. I am told that the minister is currently working through issues with the department and the Prime Minister regarding an ACAR system, and I welcome any developments that arise.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Ageing owns the Star of the Sea facility on Thursday Island, which is an appalling facility. Over the past few years I have been raising this with the previous government to no avail. Fortunately I have been able to get Minister Fifield to affirm the commitment to better aged care in the Torres Strait. The coalition will develop a Torres Strait aged-care master plan, which will be produced in consultation with the state and local governments, the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the local community. The community itself will have the opportunity to have a say on the future of aged care in their region.

I also had the opportunity to get the funding for the sea walls—another of my long-time chestnuts. I managed to get the \$12 million that was committed by former minister Simon Crean about 18 months ago. We have that money now and they can now start work. It is great to see that we were able to find those funds.

Insurance, affordability and lack of insurance availability, is another major issue in my region. Senator Arthur Sinodinos is absolutely on board and doing some fabulous work. He is keenly aware that insurance affordability continues to cause financial and emotional strain, and he is also concerned about the impact of high insurance prices on the region's economic growth. I am hoping that over the next couple of months there will be some significant announcements made in relation to dealing with some of these problems. There are a lot of initiatives that we will be announcing shortly.

We are on the cusp of a prosperous and brilliant future for the first time in many years. You can feel it. There is confidence in the air, our tail is up and there is even a bit of a wag in it. But it will not happen unless we want it to. We need to be looking at ways that we can facilitate these initiatives in economically, socially and environmentally sustainable ways. We cannot revert to what has happened in the past. We cannot allow the naysayers to squander these opportunities by continuing to search for reasons that they should not be realised.

I am excited at the prospect of being able to work with my home community to make this a reality. This is our chance; let us grasp it.