



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 30 July 1998

MOTION OF CONFIDENCE

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (10.09 p.m.): Earlier, the member for Southport mentioned that the recent election had been his fifth. I inform the House that, obviously, it was also my fifth election. I take this opportunity to congratulate those who have been returned after being elected for the first time.

This, my fifth election, was one of the most unusual elections I have been involved in. Of course, it was also one of the most interesting because the outcome was not predicted. That outcome is the reason we are here tonight debating this motion.

The previous speaker mentioned the contributions made by many of the members who are no longer here. I wish to support and endorse those remarks. There are many members from both sides of the House who genuinely made a contribution to the welfare of Queensland and who worked very hard as members of the Parliament. In many instances they did not deserve not to be here. That is not taking anything away from the congratulations I gave to the 25 new members, but the fact remains that this was one of the most unpredictable elections that we have faced, with outcomes across-the-board that were not predicted.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity to ask you to pass on to the Speaker my congratulations on his election to the office he now holds. Obviously it will be a challenging position for him, with the Parliament being made up the way it is.

One of the things that struck me during the last election—and the member for Nicklin referred to it earlier—was the crystallisation of the lack of appreciation of members of Parliament. I deliberately say "members of Parliament" and not "politicians". It is disturbing. I felt that, of any election I have been through, that was the lowest esteem in which we had been held. Out of that there is a responsibility on all of us to attempt to reverse that perception that the public in general has of us. It is sad, because we are the law-making body of the State and it is imperative that we are held in better public esteem than we are.

I want to refer to the speech made this morning by the mover of this motion, the Premier. He and the Deputy Premier spoke of the confidence in them and the confidence in this Government. The reality is, of course, that the outcome of the election was not clear. There were two options—either a Government formed by members from this side of the House or a Government formed by Labor members. The member for Nicklin made his decision, and we respect that decision, but it is not in order for the Premier or the Deputy Premier to claim that business necessarily supports the policies of the Labor Party or the performance of the previous Labor Government. I did not read that into the support that Labor received.

What the electorate in general, and business in particular, was looking for out of this election was a clear decision, which did not eventuate. Despite the fact that a clear decision was not arrived at, the Premier and Deputy Premier claimed that the fact that the Labor Party had attained the greater number of members, although they were short of the one member necessary to form a Government, meant that this was the best way of getting stability. I assure members of the Government that they will have to earn the confidence and respect of business, and that is not going to happen overnight.

It is a retrograde step to come in here claiming credit for many of the things that have occurred in the past month, which were really the result of policies that had been implemented or work that had

been done by the coalition when in Government. As honourable members can appreciate, there is a lead time involved when business makes a decision to locate in Queensland or overseas powers make a decision to hold a games here. Quite often, decisions are made well before the announcements are made. So much of what has been done and much of what the Labor Government will benefit from has been at the instigation of and is a result of the hard work and commitment of the coalition when in Government.

I believe that I, the Leader of the Opposition and the members of the previous Cabinet have every reason to be proud of what was achieved when the coalition was in Government, in that short two and a quarter years. I felt, as many people do, that our term in Government was cut short. Many of those policies and much of that work we had done did not come to fruition and we were not given the recognition that we deserved.

It concerns me that the new Minister for State Development has been quick to criticise the contribution made by us when we were in Government, particularly in relation to trade and investment. There is no doubt that the future for jobs and prosperity in this State is very much linked to trade and investment—the trade out of this State and the investment from not only the people of Australia and the people of Queensland in their own State but also from overseas investors. We were able to achieve much in that particular area during our term of office.

It disturbs me that this Government is now seeking to review and shake up the trade and investment strategies that were introduced by this Government and which have shown results that have been to the benefit of all Queenslanders and have resulted in jobs for Queenslanders. I refer to a Courier-Mail article of 28 July 1998. The headline reads "Labor plans major shakeup for trade and business strategies". I also refer to the comments made by the Deputy Premier this morning. I find them amazing when I compare the outcomes from Labor's previous term in office with the outcomes from just two and a quarter years of coalition administration.

I remind the Minister that it was the coalition Government that recognised the importance of and placed the emphasis on investment in trade when it established the stand-alone department and the regional offices. It was the coalition Government that established the regional international trade support branch of the Department of Economic Development and Trade. Many of the things the Minister is talking about are what the coalition has done, what we put in place, and he is not prepared to recognise them.

I remind the Minister that when Labor went out of office Queensland's trade performance was declining. Under the coalition, our exports as a percentage of overall Australian exports was improving. When Labor left Government two and a quarter years ago, Queensland's percentage of Australian exports was actually declining. It had fallen from just over 20% to around 19%—approximately 2%. In other words, we were declining in terms of overall exports. That continued for a period but then in the past 10 months, due to our policies that were coming to fruition, that trend was reversed and the overall trade from this State was increasing as a percentage of Australian trade figures. It is on record that the figure for every month of that past 10 months exceeds that for the corresponding month of the previous year. The figures for March were up 20.6% and the overall figures for the 10 months were up by 18.6%.

I also remind the Deputy Premier that when Labor went out of office our economic growth was 2.2%—honourable members should remember that figure—and there was no Asian crisis being talked about. In just two and a quarter years of coalition administration our economic growth had improved to 4.5% in round figures—double what Labor achieved. It is with a little bit of scepticism that I listen to the Deputy Premier when he talks about Labor's plans, because it is rhetoric. The facts are not there to support his argument.

I should remind the Deputy Premier that a quarter of all major projects in Australia—some \$15 billion worth in the Department of Economic Development and Trade—are in Queensland, and that last year 40% of Australia's job growth occurred in Queensland. Talk about jobs! Unemployment was declining under the coalition administration. It is now much lower than when Labor was in Government. I should also remind the Deputy Premier of the number of major companies that have decided to re-establish their Australian headquarters in Queensland. Of course, there has been a lead time. I mentioned Boeing, and there are many others. Those decisions to establish here are not made overnight. Often, as I said, they are made well in advance of the announcement.

That the coalition Government achieved all of this in just two and a quarter years illustrates that it was a proactive Government, not a reactive one. It was the coalition Government that introduced a diversified trade and investment strategy. It was the coalition Government that reopened the offices in Los Angeles, Shanghai, Jakarta and Semarang. Whilst on the subject of overseas relationships, I suggest that the Premier, the Deputy Premier or both visit Indonesia as quickly as they possibly can. Indonesia has been a close friend of ours and we should appreciate that it would be feeling a little lost and lonely at this time. As we have a very close link with Central Java in a Sister State relationship, it is imperative that a high priority be placed on a senior representative from this State undertaking a visit.

It was the coalition Government that established the Bilateral Trade Assistance Scheme, formed the Education Advisory Council and coordinated the marketing of education overseas. Education brings over \$500m into Queensland a year. It was the coalition Government that brought together departments to coordinate our international marketing for education, not a Labor Government. That occurred over the past two and a quarter years. We did that for the benefit of Queenslanders. This Government speaks about the potential for exporting education. However, it was in Government for over six years. It had the opportunity to do something, but it did nothing.

We formed the Education Advisory Council. We encouraged and supported business missions overseas, many of which were led by me. I took a limited number of bureaucrats and staff and published my full itinerary. I must mention that I did not travel first class, and on occasions I travelled economy class. The results are there for all to see. Under Labor's previous six-year administration, visits were conducted overseas, but on most occasions business people were not taken and the benefits of that overseas travel were not realised. In addition, it did not publish any of its itineraries. My itineraries were available for all to see—every day, every meal, the whole lot.

It was a coalition Government that revamped the Trade Assistance Scheme and established a close working relationship with Austrade. It was the coalition Government's proactive approach that led to Mack Trucks establishing its right-hand drive international manufacturing headquarters here. I have previously mentioned Boeing and the many other companies that have shifted to Queensland.

It was the coalition Government's proactive approach that led to the proposed Surat/Dawson Basin development being at the stage it is at today. I am very concerned about the Minister's statements of late in relation to the future of that extremely important development for Queensland. We are talking about a \$3 billion development that has the potential to create thousands of flow-on jobs and lead to major exports of 20 million tonnes of coal a year. That coal would be environmentally friendly, which is what the market wants at this time and which is so important to the environmentalists—something for which we are not given credit. I point out to the Minister that it is a very finely tuned exercise that will potentially bring many benefits, as the member for Callide mentioned so eloquently in his maiden speech, not only for his area but also for the whole of the State of Queensland and Australia.

We have heard for years about the 4.1 billion tonnes of steaming thermal coal. It was this Government that, in only two and a quarter years, got it off the ground and got it to the stage it is at today. Twenty major consortia were involved in the selection process. At the end of the day, after the successful consortium was selected, none of the other companies involved found fault with the selection process for the preferred developer.

There is no doubt that if it gets off the ground it will help to reverse the drift away from country areas. In the Courier-Mail the Deputy Premier questioned the seriousness of the companies involved and the viability of the whole exercise. Is the Deputy Premier setting himself above the senior people in those companies who are prepared to spend millions of dollars to enter into the process? Would SUDAW Developments, which got the nod at the end of the day, be prepared to spend \$10m on investigations if it did not think that the coal would be marketable by about 2001, when there would be some orders?

SUDAW is made up of the Raytheon Group, which has overseas contacts for the sale of the coal. There is no question about its viability. However, at the end of the day it is up to SUDAW to make that judgment. Everybody knows that. I am saying to this House quite openly that there is no way that it would be spending \$10m on its assessment process unless it thought, with all of its international connections, that it would be a goer. So it is not for the Minister to say that he does not think the coal market will be there. Surely the company would know what it was talking about if it is prepared to enter into this project.

The Deputy Premier has also mentioned Chevron and Comalco. We have been dealing with Comalco and Chevron for some time. There is no doubt that they are very tough and skilled negotiators. This Government has signed off with Comalco. In relation to the Chevron deal, it knew the rules. It knew that Tarong was out there and that it could be expanded. It knew that the Surat/Dawson Basin project was under way. It knew that we had an open electricity market and that we wanted the cheapest power for industry in this State. To have industry and jobs in this State we have to have cheap power. That is the No. 1 requirement. For example, if we were to talk to industry at Pinkenba, Ipswich or Townsville about their future and jobs, they would mention cheap power.

If Chevron is so worried about the Tarong power, it and this Government have to bear in mind that there is a load loss between Tarong and Wandoan, if it comes on stream—and that is back to open policy. They have to bear in mind that there is load loss and an economic cost in getting the power from there to Townsville. Chevron knew that under our administration. It knew that and it was prepared to go ahead with it. In those circumstances, it put out to tender the construction of the pipeline.

The Deputy Premier has obviously been lobbied by those companies. Of course they will lobby, as they all will. At the end of the day, we have to look after the taxpayer's dollar. Surely the Government is not proposing to rush in and accept what some company will put forward to it as being viable? Companies will put forward projects and will look for a financial benefit. If members opposite are soft and silly enough—because these companies play Governments against Governments and industry against industry—to say, "Yes, we'll go along with what you are doing", they are doing the taxpayers of Queensland a major disservice. I suggest that the Deputy Premier reassess where he is coming from in respect of those issues.

In conclusion, I wish to refer to the overhaul of the bureaucracy. The Department of Economic Development and Trade was absolutely apolitical. I did not care what the politics of any individual in that department were, as long as everyone did their job. The people appointed there were appointed on merit by a selection panel. They had my full support. It is a disrespect to them to suggest in any way that they have not been doing their job properly; that they are political. In relation to any changes in personnel or reappointments of DGs, I suggest that that would be political.

Time expired.
