



## Speech by

# Mr DOUG SLACK

## MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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Hansard 4 August 1998

### ADDRESS IN REPLY

**Mr SLACK** (Burnett—NPA) (4.06 p.m.): Firstly, I take this opportunity to pledge my loyalty to the Crown and my commitment to the people of Queensland and to the people of my electorate of Burnett. I listened with interest to the maiden speech of the member for Ferny Grove. Many of the problems outlined by the honourable member in relation to his constituents are problems experienced by people in all electorates, and particularly in the electorate of Burnett. It will be a major challenge to this Government to address many of the problems that have been enunciated here in the Parliament today in the address in reply to the Governor's Speech.

In mentioning the Governor, I would like to take this opportunity to compliment him on the contribution he has made, in the very short time that he has been in office, to trade, investment and to the welfare of the people of Queensland. He has approached his duties in an impartial and enthusiastic way. He has taken the opportunity to travel to promote Queensland, to promote trade and to promote investment in Queensland. At the same time, he has welcomed and hosted delegations from overseas.

The electorate of Burnett has close to 30,000 voters and is one of the fastest growing electorates in this State. It is one of the lowest socio-economic electorates in the State. As the member for Bundaberg correctly instanced in relation to her city—and Burnett surrounds Bundaberg—we have very high unemployment. There is much frustration and insecurity in relation to jobs. This is a challenge for any Government. It was a challenge for the coalition Government and it will be a challenge for the Labor Government. It is incorrect to imply that the coalition Government was any less caring or any less sympathetic towards the problems that have been enunciated in this Chamber today.

The reality is that we are living in changing times and many of the problems mentioned are synonymous with the times and are very difficult to address. Much has been said about globalisation. Much has been said about multinational companies. Much has been said about the problems of the individual and the insecurity of the individual. Heart-rending examples have been given. These problems are not easy to address in this age. Mention has been made of the power of the multinational companies. Mention has also been made of the unfairness of the National Competition Policy. The reality is that these things are part of the changing times. We cannot duck them. We have to face these things and we have to evolve policies that can deal with these matters.

Along with everyone else, I recognise the commitment that this Government has made towards an unemployment rate of 5%. If this aim were achieved it would overcome many of the insecurity problems in the community. Having said that, this Government's commitment to unemployment is no stronger than was the commitment by the coalition Government to unemployment. In the Budget the Treasury announcement indicated a slight rise in unemployment. Those figures were based on the reality of the Asian experience and the reality of what is taking place in the workplace. It pointed out the necessity for growth and investment. That was Treasury's assessment. That was not an ideological outlook; it was just a factual outlook.

Sure, we would all like to see 5% unemployment. We would like to see 2% unemployment, or no unemployment, if it could be achieved. But it is a matter of achieving it. Many members will be looking at the Appropriation Bill that will be introduced in September. It will be interesting to see just how this Government is going to address these problems. As I said last week during the debate on the motion of confidence in the Government, two and a quarter years ago growth under the former Labor

Government was 2.2%, and the figure was 4.5% when the coalition Government left office. One of the key ingredients to solving unemployment is to have growth, as well as investment and exports. At the end of the day, all levels of government must be involved with that. However, it really gets back to individuals and private industry.

Private industry is the major employer in this State, in Australia and in most parts of the world. Private industry must have confidence to invest before it will employ people. That is when the records of various Governments and figures like 2.2% compared to 4.5% are taken into consideration. And in relation to measures that are taken to address these issues, events such as the Asian crisis are out of the control of this Government and the former Government, and the decisions of the Commonwealth are largely out of the control of this Government and the former Government.

In my electorate, as in other electorates, the insecurity and frustration of people was brought home at the last election. Most people out there are not interested in party politics; they are really interested in their own welfare and security. As was demonstrated at the last election, they are sick and tired of party sniping between the major parties. Although that was the case—with a little bit of irony—with Burnett and Bundaberg, some people had a bob each way, to put it politely; if the coalition was in Government, they would have me in Burnett, and if Labor was in Government they would have the member for Bundaberg, Mrs Cunningham, to canvass and champion some of the issues that are important to both electorates. The issues that concern Bundaberg also concern Burnett. In her maiden speech this morning, the member for Bundaberg mentioned a couple of those issues.

One of the issues raised by the honourable member was water. The keys to jobs in my electorate are obviously cheap power and the availability of water. As the member for Bundaberg said, our area has a decided lack of water. When in Government, the coalition made a commitment to do several things to increase the supply of water in the area. One initiative was to add to the water level by putting inflated bags on weirs, provided that the environmental studies were favourable. We were doing that as quickly as possible on the Bucca Weir, which is near Bundaberg, on the nearly completed Walla Weir and on the Jones Weir further up the Burnett. I hope that this Government upholds the commitment that we made and endeavours to expedite that as quickly as possible, because that will provide over 20,000 megalitres of additional water for the area.

Another issue that I want to mention is the fast-tracking of a major water storage on the Burnett River. During the election campaign, when he was the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Beattie visited Bundaberg and said that the dam evaluation appeared to be dragging on because one consultative process began as the previous one finished. He said that, if possible, the processes should run simultaneously. For the information of the now Premier, I point out that they were running simultaneously. One of the initiatives of our Government was to fast-track the provision of additional water storage on the Burnett River. I remember the discussions that I had with Natural Resources, which fast-tracked it to the extent that we gave a commitment that, provided that the numbers stacked up—and they look as if they are doing that—and provided the environmental studies were favourable, that dam on the Burnett River could be up and running in five years. Because of the way in which the system operated previously, a figure of 10 years was mooted. However, we were able to get that figure down to possibly five years. I look forward with interest and anticipation to the Government meeting the Premier's commitment that was given to the press in Bundaberg on that day. I know that I have the full support of the member for Bundaberg in that endeavour.

Because of the prospect of jobs that would come from it, the prospect of more prosperity for the area and the prospect of addressing the high unemployment problem in my electorate, another big issue for the people of my electorate is the proposed Surat Dawson development and its implications for Bundaberg. The proposal of the approved proponent is to take coal to Bundaberg and to export it through a new port development at Coonar. That proponent is spending \$10m on the assessment process to assess the economics of that development. It has been said to me all along that it is its most favoured position, without having done the in-depth economic studies and, at that stage, the environmental studies. I am fully supportive of the Surat Dawson development and the Bundaberg option—if it stacks up both environmentally and economically.

During the debate on the motion of confidence in the Government, when I was speaking about the coal development component, which is vital for the Surat Dawson development because of the estimated 4.1 billion tonnes of coal reserves in that area, one Government member interjected and expressed concern about jobs.

**Mr Pearce:** It was probably me.

**Mr SLACK:** It could have been the member for Fitzroy. For the member's information, I point out that the reality is—and this covers the environmental issues as well—that that is judged to be some of the most environmentally friendly, if not the most environmentally friendly, coal in the world. So it is not a competitive coal to coking coal. It is a steaming coal—a thermal coal—which the world is increasingly looking for because of its environmental qualities. It has a low sulphur content, it is a very hard coal, it has low carbon dioxide emissions, it is usually a low ash producing coal, and it comes within

the emission requirements. That is why SUDAW and the Raytheon Group are so confident that, when they are marketing in 2001, there will be a ready market for that coal. So it is not regarded as a competitor to the other coals in the sense that it would take jobs. The market will determine that. If other coals cannot find export markets, unfortunately jobs will be shed, or producers will become more efficient to try to meet the price that the export market is paying. If this does not meet the requirements, unfortunately it will not get up. But if the preferred proponent is prepared to spend \$10m on investigation, it must be very confident that the proposal will get up.

The group also believes that the environmental questions that relate to Coonar can be overcome. At the end of the day, that has to be done according to proper studies, which I was assured would be done. The group did not want to do things any other way. We are supportive of that and want to see it resolved as quickly as possible. The former Government was instrumental in achieving today's outcomes in relation to the development of the Surat/Dawson Valley. If the rail line goes through to the Bundaberg area, and if the coal is exported through Bundaberg, this will create opportunities for other produce. I notice that the member for Bundaberg is shaking her head. I wonder what she disagrees with, because that will bring job opportunities to the Bundaberg/Burnett area.

This development is very finely tuned. Members would appreciate that, when I talk about low coal prices and the viability of coal in the future, it is very finely tuned. So any interference in the marketplace in relation to the development of electricity output could place that exercise in jeopardy. I warn the Government and, particularly, the Minister for State Development that, when he wishes to load the dice in favour of Chevron—and bear in mind that Chevron has always known that it is a competitive market and that it needs to compete with other electricity producers—this could be putting other development in this State in jeopardy.

Honourable members should bear in mind that the electricity market was opened up by the former Government to provide cheaper power and, in so doing, provide for more industry and more jobs in this State. If Chevron is to be successful it should be able to compete with power generators in the southern end of the State. It is recognised that they will lose some of their viability through the loss of power during transmission. If power from southern Queensland were cheaper than from Chevron, industry up and down the coast would decide whether it wanted to use that power. It is to industry's advantage and to the advantage of jobs in Townsville if power can be delivered cheaper from Wandoan, Tarong—

**Mr Littleproud:** Kogan.

**Mr SLACK:**—and Kogan than it can be delivered from Papua New Guinea. It gets back to a matter of economics. Private enterprise will decide where to establish industry based on the competitive cost of power. That is what it is all about.

In conclusion, I recognise that we are all here because of the support of our friends, our families and our organisations.

**A Government member:** And the Labor Party.

**Mr SLACK:** In the case of the honourable member, it would have to be the Labor Party. I take the point. The people of Burnett made that judgment quite sensibly.

I offer my commitment to the people of Burnett. All members who have spoken to this motion have mentioned their staff. We all have loyal staff, otherwise we would not be here. I pay tribute to my secretary. As the honourable member mentioned, it is true that Labor Party preferences returned me to this establishment. I pay tribute to my electorate council chairman, Ernie Jobson, and his wife, who worked tirelessly for my return, and the people who manned the booths and did the scrutineering. Were it not for them and the campaign committee, I would not be here today. I wish members and the Government well in their endeavours to meet the problems that have been enunciated in the House.

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