



Speech by

Hon. J. ELDER

MEMBER FOR CAPALABA

Hansard 30 July 1998

MOTION OF CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

Hon. J. P. ELDER (Capalaba—ALP) (Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development and Minister for Trade) (10.50 a.m.): It is with a great sense of honour that I second the motion moved by the Premier. In the time immediately following the election on 13 June, we saw a very bitter and divisive period in Queensland's history. It was a time when instability reigned, not just with members of this House and not just with members of the broader community; all members of the community were worried about the election outcome. It was a time when people looked backwards rather than forward. It was a time when many people throughout the State questioned just how much security and certainty they had in their lives and how much security and how much certainty there was in this State. In short, the level of confidence felt by Queenslanders in their State, the way it was then and the way it could be in the future, was at an all-time low.

The catalyst for the return of stability to the State was the indication by the Independent member for Nicklin of his future voting patterns. At this point, I might say that even people who did not vote for the Government and who even campaigned actively for our electoral opponents welcomed the stability offered by the member for Nicklin once he made his decision to support the Labor Government. Even people such as the former Liberal member for Barron River said that the Labor Government, backed by an Independent, was the best choice for the State.

Since then, the actions of the Government, in which I am privileged to be the Deputy Premier, have led to a return not just to stability but also to confidence in this State. It is a confidence not just in the political institutions of this State but also throughout the wider community. In particular, the business community has responded positively. For example, as the Premier outlined earlier this week, Stellar Communications announced that it would be establishing a call centre with 400 employees in south-east Queensland to service the Asia-Pacific region. This is a joint venture involving Telstra and Excell Systems, a US company with international connections that sees Queensland as its base for expansion in the Asia-Pacific region. Stellar Communications is just one company that has shown that it has confidence in Queensland.

This Government has also taken steps to restore confidence in the image of Queensland overseas, which in recent months has taken a battering and has the potential to affect dramatically our export income from trade. What is particularly at risk is our image as a tolerant, friendly society where diversity is encouraged and people from overseas and, for that matter interstate, are welcome either as migrants or as tourists. In particular, I took steps to make public the fact that in Queensland there was now a stable Government—one which did welcome interaction with the rest of the world.

Queensland's Trade Commissioner in Hong Kong, Simon Lee, who is known to many people on both sides of this House, reported back to me that in June some Hong Kong students had shown a reluctance to consider Queensland as a place in which to study because they did not feel safe in coming here. We have taken action to ensure that overseas students and tourists in particular feel safe in Queensland. So Queensland is now back on the map as a destination for overseas tourists. The Minister for Tourism has also taken action in that regard. We have also taken steps to make sure that overseas students—

Mr Gibbs interjected.

Mr ELDER: As the Minister says, following on from similar action that I took within the business and broader community, 200 letters were sent internationally to reinforce the point that Queensland is now a stable and safe destination. We looked at the difficulties facing that industry sector and we will offer support for it. As I said, the same goes for overseas students who are looking to study in Queensland. That will lift confidence in Queensland. That will generate export income that otherwise would have been lost. In turn, that will lift our standard of living. Again, confidence in Queensland has been lifted.

Within Queensland itself there are several projects that were—I might loosely use the phrase—left over from the previous Government. Some work had been done but the projects were not finalised. I am very keen to see those projects through to completion. One such project is the gas pipeline from Papua New Guinea to Gladstone. Members opposite who were members of the previous Government would or should realise the value of that project to Queensland. However, I have to say that they took their eyes right off the ball and this project was left in limbo. When I came to office I took action to get all of the proponents of those projects together so that we could advance them further.

I was disappointed to see the gas pipeline project being opposed, in particular by the Federal member for Wide Bay, the Minister for Customs and Excise, Warren Truss. When the previous Government was in office he was silent, but now when there is a Labor Government not just in office but actively and openly progressing this particular project, he finds problems with it. In reality, nothing has changed in the concept of that project, just its likelihood. Opposing this project because of a desire to score cheap points is old politics. It is the kind of politics that the broader community finds difficult to understand. Actions like that will not engender confidence in the community.

As well as progressing several projects already in place, in the past few weeks this Government has also been approached by proponents of several other potentially major projects for this State. Not all of those people are local business people; some of them are from interstate and overseas. They, too, have confidence in Queensland and they all see Queensland as once again a good place in which to invest, to do business, and to create jobs. As Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development and Trade, my focus is unashamedly on creating jobs in this State. As a Labor Government, we see the creation of jobs as a priority because that is the best way in which people can improve their own quality of life. The major reason behind Queensland's growth over the past 15 years has been that people have come here, generally from southern States but sometimes from overseas, in search of a better life. Some of those people are at retirement age and want to wind down their lives in sunshine, but the vast majority want to come here to work and create a better life for themselves and for their families. Most of them come with a dream for a better life and they are quite prepared to work and work hard. At the weekend, they like to work on their gardens, they like to watch football, they like to go fishing; they like Queensland's beautiful weather. It is what a lot of people see as a good life and, I might say, so do I. That is what we are about as a Labor Government. It is about allowing people to achieve a better life. In terms of achieving those goals, what people want more than anything else is a job.

This Government sees room for improvement, I might say after being in Government only a short time, in all three industry sectors—primary, secondary and tertiary—to help create those jobs. Traditionally, Queensland has been a primary industry State depending, I guess in the first half of this century particularly, on agriculture and in the second half of this century on mining. Those industries will always be important pillars of the Queensland economy. I am confident that my colleagues the Minister for Primary Industries and the Minister for Mines and Energy will continue to improve those sectors. As Minister for State Development, I intend to work closely with them to do just that. I also intend to work closely with my colleague the member for Chatsworth, whose ministerial responsibilities include communication and information. He will be concentrating on developing tertiary industries, in particular the all-important information industry, which has been responsible for the creation of so many of the well-paid jobs that we now see in the United States and is one of the reasons why that country's unemployment rate is at 4.5%. Just as importantly, I see the development of tertiary industries as having the potential to make our primary and secondary industries more efficient and competitive on the world stage and thus more likely to supply real, long-term, skilled and well-paid jobs. Building on information infrastructure is a priority of this Government.

One area in which I will be particularly concerned as Minister for State Development and Minister for Trade is the development of our secondary industries. The previous Labor Government made great strides in helping Queensland industry value add—add value to our raw materials so that we got maximum value out of them. I intend to drive the same broad agenda, only more so, this time around.

Unlike other States, Queensland has never had a strong manufacturing base. In the past we had to be content to grow raw food, such as wheat, and sell it as raw material. We have simply dug up our minerals and sold them overseas in an unprocessed state. We have never got best value out of what we have, that is, plentiful raw materials. Manufacturing has a bad name in some circles, where it is associated with polluting smokestacks, but modern manufacturing practices are far more

environmentally friendly and far more conducive to employment. This Government will encourage manufacturing industries of this kind.

The record of the previous Labor Government in this area is a solid one which bears comparison with the stewardship of those opposite. I cite figures from the Federal Department of Trade and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. When Labor gained Government at the start of this decade, 150,000 people were employed in the manufacturing sector in this State. When Labor left office, 182,000 people were employed in that sector. That represents an increase of over 20%. Under the tenure of the coalition Government, the number of people—

Mr Slack: What was the unemployment rate?

Mr ELDER: I will come to the record of the Minister who had responsibility in this area. Under the tenure of the coalition Government, the number of people working in jobs in the manufacturing sector—that is, in the value add sector, in the sector that provides long-term, skilled employment—slipped to 172,000 in 1996-97 and was 175,000 in 1997-98. Given the platform left to the coalition, that was a poor effort indeed.

This Labor Government comes into office with fewer people employed in manufacturing than when Labor was last in office. That situation came about at a time when Queensland's population was growing. This record of employment in value adding industries is a sorry one which this Government is committed to reversing.

Possibly one of the worst spin-offs of this state of affairs was that not only were fewer people employed in manufacturing jobs but also Queensland gained less export income. When Labor came to Government at the start of the decade, the value of manufactured exports was \$5 billion. When it left office, manufactured exports were at \$6.7 billion, a rise of 34% over six years—all job generators. In 1996-97 the value of manufactured exports in Queensland dropped to \$6.2 billion—a drop of \$500m in less than one year after six years of healthy growth.

I want to be quite clear about the intention of this Government. Generally, incoming Governments aim to do better than their predecessor. In this case it is hardly a difficult act to follow. We aim for nothing less than the revitalisation of Queensland's industry and the extension of that industry so that more people are in jobs in Queensland. That means that we will be employing every effort as a Government to get more people employed.

One of our major initiatives is the establishment of State development centres. Right throughout the State, from the far north right through to the coast, we will implement regional development plans that we have devised for each particular region. These plans will not result in the sort of centralised bureaucratic rigidity characterised by public administration in the State over the past couple of years, where the industry portfolio was essentially there to drive job opportunities and drive those employment opportunities for Queenslanders. A report from KPMG on the portfolio's own activity found it to be moribund and lacking leadership. This reinforces the point I made about the direction of industry policy in this State over the past two years.

Public administration over the past two years was centralised, bureaucratic and rigid in the way it dealt with Queensland's regions. We will do it differently. We will do it in conjunction with local communities so that they have ownership of the plans we outline and ownership of the development of their regions.

Each region in Queensland has different strengths. For example, the strength of the Cairns region in north Queensland is in tourism and in other service industries, while the strength of Townsville lies in its industrial development and, notably, the large mineral deposits in the north west that it can drive off. While each of these regions has other assets, these strengths can be maximised so that more jobs are created. The creation of those State development centres is a central component of our plans to increase employment opportunities through the regions.

The involvement of local communities in the development of these plans is another action which encourages confidence in local communities, because they have ownership of that development and of driving those opportunities in their own regions. We have seen in the past few weeks the return of confidence in all sectors in this State and a willingness on the part of those sectors to get on with the job.

The journey ahead will not be easy. All members in this House would be familiar with the situation that many of our trading partners find themselves in. We would be naive if we expected that none of that would rub off on us in terms of an impact on our economies. In short, the world in which we now live is a lot different and more competitive than it was a few years ago and we cannot pretend that we are isolated from the rest of the world. It is important to recognise that, while there will always be differences amongst us, what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

As a Parliament and as a community we need to face the future with confidence. That is why I am delighted today to be able to second the motion of confidence in this Labor Government which was moved by the Premier.
