



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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MOTION OF CONFIDENCE

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (11.04 p.m.): I rise before this House to speak against the motion of confidence in this Labor Government. I support the amendment proposed by the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Surfers Paradise. Before outlining my reasons for opposing the motion, I take this opportunity to congratulate the Speaker on his election to the high and responsible office of Speaker and wish him every success for his time in the chair. I do not envy his task over the coming term of Government. I am sure that Mr Hollis, the honourable member for Redcliffe, will do the job to the best of his ability.

I make special mention of the previous Speaker, Mr Neil Turner. Neil Turner was not only a great mate to all members of the House who spent time with him but also known for his very fair controlling of parliamentary sessions. Former Premiers commended him, saying that he was the fairest Speaker that the House had had in their period, which covered about 10 or 12 years. I express my thanks to him for his support. As mentioned by previous members, Neil Turner seemed to take some of the new members under his wing and teach them a little bit about the parliamentary procedures in order to make them more comfortable and feel at home. That was Neil Turner's way and he was great at it. All of us who had met him could never really forget his vice-like grip.

Mr Palaszczuk: Don't remind us.

Mr MITCHELL: If one did not get a good grip on his hand when one met him, one could not write for a week, so one would not be doing too many speeches.

He will also be remembered for overseeing the refurbishment of the facilities in the complex. They were not brought up to the five-star standards that some certain media outlets have been advocating over the past 12 months or so, but I believe this is a more pleasurable place. As some of the new members will discover, one does spend a lot of time down here. When I first became a member, it was rather drab. Over the past two and a half years, many improvements have been made. I put that down to Neil Turner who got things moving. This is now a much more pleasurable place in which to be. That has all been Neil Turner's work.

Mr Lucas: He did a good job.

Mr MITCHELL: Yes, he did. In speaking against the motion, I do not do so flippantly but out of genuine concern for the State of Queensland, the people of Queensland and particularly my electorate of Charters Towers.

Mr McGrady: Get on to your speech.

Mr MITCHELL: The honourable member will hear it all in a moment. I am concerned because I know what damage Labor did to the State during its last term in office. I fear the damage it will do during this term in office. I know the disregard it held for the sound and responsible financial management of the Queensland finances. I know also the scant regard in which it held the provision of services for rural and regional Queenslanders. It has been mentioned many times tonight—and that is necessary, because it happened during Labor's six years of governance—that courthouses, police stations, railways and schools were shut down in rural and regional towns all over Queensland. That occurred not only in the remote north and the west in electorates such as Gregory, Charters Towers, Mount Isa and Warrego but also in electorates such as Cunningham, Warwick, Mirani, Callide, Fitzroy,

Burdekin, Tablelands and others that escaped Labor's city-focused attention. I agree totally with the constituents who said continually that all the money was spent in the south-east corner. That carried on until such times as we changed that around and started looking after all Queenslanders.

Despite the Premier's rhetoric on jobs, jobs, jobs, Labor actually stood for fewer jobs, fewer jobs, fewer jobs. It presided over continuing unemployment levels of over 10%. In fact, Labor contributed actively to the unemployment level by sacking some 6,000 railway workers in the six years.

Mr Johnson: Eight thousand.

Mr MITCHELL: I thank the member for Gregory. The figure is 8,000, which is worse than I originally thought.

Stock inspectors were not seen in our areas. They sacked court officials in areas they did not care about. I know Labor's disregard for providing infrastructure such as roads, rail and water to Queenslanders who live outside the south-east corner. I know the arrogant style of Labor in Government. Its disregard for real consultation was shown during the handling of Eastlink and the introduction of the tree-clearing guidelines. I know the disregard it held for our primary industries, one of our major wealth-generating industries, in its slash and burn management of the Department of Primary Industries. Nearly 700 jobs went from that department in Labor's six years.

I know of the maladministration of Government departments under Labor, as evidenced by the Department of Mines and Energy, which the coalition Government inherited from Minister McGrady. Clearly, the department had inadequate base funding and each year had to beg for special funding to underwrite its essential core activities. I know the neglect that people in distant and remote areas, such as my own electorate of Charters Towers, suffered under Labor. I know that nothing will change under this Labor Government.

It is clear also that Queenslanders know Labor's record and know that nothing will change this time because, as has been said previously in this House by many speakers, at the 13 June poll fewer than 40% of Queenslanders actually voted for Labor. It is also clear that over 60% of Queenslanders voted for members who sit on this side of the House—a clear rejection of Labor and its failed policies. However, where Labor failed, the Borbidge/Sheldon coalition Government succeeded. The Borbidge/Sheldon Government restored Queensland's financial position with sound and responsible management. Queensland regained its reputation as Australia's low-tax State and the State for business. Numerous major projects and major businesses were secured and facilitated, providing thousands of jobs and flow-on opportunities for Queensland—Century Zinc, the Stuart oil shale project and the Western Mining fertiliser project, to name just a few.

Between 1989 and 1996 under Labor, the unemployment rate shot up to 11%. In the short period of two years, the coalition slashed 3% from that rate and, in the last 12 months of its term in Government, led the way nationally, creating more than one in every two jobs created in Australia. Services were returned throughout Queensland, including the courthouses, schools and police stations that were closed down by the previous Labor Government. The Borbidge/Sheldon coalition Government set about providing major infrastructure throughout Queensland, including much-needed major road projects throughout the State, refurbishing hospitals and building new hospitals. My electorate of Charters Towers benefited greatly from those infrastructure projects, which were well and truly needed. The coalition Government introduced real community and industry consultation at all levels and in all portfolios. It restored the Department of Primary Industries by appointing 600 staff on the ground where they were needed throughout Queensland. In my electorate alone, a clearing dip was established in Charters Towers to service the live cattle export trade instead of farmers having to take their cattle miles away into Townsville to get them cleared. Also, funding was allocated for the new Primary Industries office and research building at Charters Towers. I certainly hope that that allocation is forthcoming when the Labor Government delivers its Budget, because it is well and truly needed. For about the past 10 years, those officers have worked out of dongas.

The Borbidge/Sheldon Government recognised the needs of all Queenslanders, including those living in remote areas. I would like to list some of the initiatives that came to fruition under the coalition Government: maintaining and strengthening social, cultural and economic infrastructure in regional and rural communities by redirecting services and resources; providing relevant and accurate data to support decision making about regional and rural development; providing better access to markets, particularly in the Asian and Pacific regions, and upgrading the progression of alternative sustainable economic options such as tourism, communications and transport infrastructure; encouraging the use of modern technology to improve communication across the State; providing cost-effective energy sources and infrastructure to make water supplies available; encouraging decentralisation to some industries to provide closer links between primary industries and other sectors of the State's economy, including the processing of rural commodities and natural resources; supporting rural and regional Queenslanders to identify opportunities and constraints to develop community-based solutions to rural and regional problems; and, one of the main ones, focusing on education as a key element in empowering rural and regional communities to bring about sustainable development by providing

options for the young to stay and succeed in their own communities, strengthening TAFE centres to expand education options and opening local schools for use by the community for educational purposes.

I turn now to my shadow portfolio of Mines and Energy. I look forward to that challenge and also to my involvement in these two industries, because I believe that they are two of the most important industries in Queensland, maybe in Australia. In this respect, the Borbidge/Sheldon coalition Government also succeeded in delivering for all Queenslanders. It cancelled the ill-placed, irrationally justified Eastlink and replaced it with a properly researched and justified interconnector to be built in a suitable corridor. It also concluded a formal agreement for Queensland to become a member of the national electricity market.

The Borbidge/Sheldon Government developed a blueprint for the future of the Queensland electricity industry. It guaranteed no increases in costs in real terms for domestic consumers; delivered significant savings for industry through the retention of the State's seven existing distributing boards; split the State's major generator, AUSTA Electric, into at least three independent and competing Government owned generators; created three new trading corporations to buy and sell electricity; and reaffirmed the interconnection with New South Wales. The coalition fully implemented all the recommendations arising from the official inquiry into the Moura mine disaster. It also increased the number of mines inspectors from 33 to 44 across the State. The coalition Government finalised details that will result in legislative changes to the Petroleum and Mineral Resources Acts to resolve coal seam methane rights and extraction issues. The Borbidge/Sheldon Government facilitated new mining developments at Ernest Henry, Cannington and Osborne and the expansion of existing activities elsewhere in Queensland.

The agreement to pipe gas to the north west is an economic milestone for the State. It will help to facilitate investment of up to about \$4 billion and export income of up to \$2 billion a year. Supply of natural gas to Mount Isa will enable the conversion of Mount Isa Mine's Mica Creek power station from coal to gas-fired operation and for the expansion of that facility to supply the existing proposed projects at Ernest Henry, Century, Osborne and Cannington mines up in the North West Shelf. Construction of the \$52m north-west Queensland water pipeline project from Lake Julius to the Ernest Henry mine will cater for increased water demand from potential mineral developments in the Mount Isa and Cloncurry regions.

The coalition Government also joined with Ernest Henry Mining and ATSIC to ensure that Aborigines in the north west can participate in the region's major new mining developments. Also, there was the completion of the Epic gas pipeline linking Ballera with an existing pipeline to Wallumbilla, giving security of supply to south-east Queensland. Additionally, connection of the gas reserves in south-west Queensland to the east coast markets has stimulated growth in those markets, with new gas franchises being granted for the Sunshine Coast and Gympie. Franchises were also awarded to the Gas Corporation of Queensland for Maryborough, Hervey Bay and Bundaberg, with gas being supplied by the pipeline to be constructed from Gladstone South. The Chalumbin-Woree power transmission line near Cairns was constructed. The coalition Government also completed the sale of the State gas pipeline from Wallumbilla to Gladstone to a private operator.

The Borbidge/Sheldon Government fully supported the \$1 billion Century Zinc project and approved the \$30m infrastructure package for gulf communities for the Century mine negotiations. It ordered the Department of Mines and Energy to ensure an enhanced focus on its core functions and responsibilities.

As a Government, the coalition made substantial progress towards the national deregulation of the gas industry and the development of a gas code. The completion of the \$1.65 billion power station at Stanwell provides more power to Queenslanders.

An amount of \$3m has been committed over three years to identify and cap the old abandoned mine shafts in the historic goldmining centre of Charters Towers.

Mr McGrady: Who started the scheme?

Mr MITCHELL: The coalition Government also commenced the \$250m Stage 1 of the Stuart oil shale project. The coalition Government further enhanced the mine capping project. The previous Labor Government may have started the program, but the money was not forthcoming for the next year. The coalition Government put up the \$3m that actually got the project running. I certainly hope the funding is there for next year because the Minister would know the value in capping all of these mines.

Mr McGrady: We are going to start on Charters Towers, too.

Mr MITCHELL: That is what I was saying, but towards the last year of the previous Labor Government, the money drifted away. The coalition Government had to prop up the program with \$3m to actually see it come to fruition.

In principle approval has been given for the extension of mains power to freehold properties north of the Daintree River with an environmental impact study to be carried out. In conjunction with the Department of Environment, a discussion paper was issued and a steering and consultative committee was formed to develop an environmental protection policy for the mining and petroleum industries. The coalition Government also oversaw the significant development of coal seam gas in the Bowen Basin. The Borbidge coalition Government made major gains in resolution of the land management issues between property owners and the coal seam developers. We also have conducted a health study in the mining industries.

All of these things were implemented in just two and a half years whereas in the preceding six years very little was accomplished by the previous Labor Government. There was a lot of rhetoric and a lot of talk, but there were no bricks and mortar and these things did not get up and running. It was not until we came to power that things started moving. I certainly hope that, now that we have given this Government a start, it might consider—

Mr Johnson: \$6m for a new transmission line between Barcaldine and Longreach.

Mr MITCHELL: That is another one I did not mention. I thank the member for Gregory. I believe, as do a lot of people in the north west, that water and tourism are the future of rural Queensland, especially in my area. I urge this Government to take on board—the Minister is not in the House—the Water Infrastructure Task Force that was set up under our Government about two and a half years ago. I urge the Government to note the categories that it outlined for water projects to develop north and north-west Queensland.

I hear Mr Beattie talking about jobs, jobs, jobs. The feasibility study for Hells Gate dam is actually being carried out now. The site for that project is about 200 kilometres north of Charters Towers. We believe that the employment base that can be generated from this water storage in the areas of horticulture, agriculture or other industry could be anywhere between 3,000 and 10,000 over a period of time. That is just one of the projects.

The feasibility study has already been done on the Richmond dam project, which is a \$128m project. For an area just the size of Richmond we are looking at the potential employment of somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 people. When and if the money is made available, these projects could be put in place. I urge this Government not to let these projects go, because I think they offer a future for Queensland for many reasons. The produce that would be grown as a result of these projects would benefit Queensland's export industry. They would also be useful for drought proofing on a local level. These are the sorts of projects that we would put in place.

Many checks have been made by all departments of the area, and many things can be grown, even sugar. Whether that would be one I do not know, but it is also suitable for cotton, peanuts and potatoes. You name it; everything can be grown. It is ideal. I think these sorts of projects have to be kept rolling along, because if they are dropped as a result of any Government strategy or Government mismanagement along the way, they lose track and it could take another six or seven years even to get to the stage we are at now. I urge the Government, the Premier and the Minister to take some of these initiatives on board. This Government has to govern for all of Queensland, and my area really needs this sort of boost.

Tourism in remote areas is definitely growing. The Minister for Mines and Energy, Mr McGrady, will mention a lot of the developments that have taken place over the past, say, six years in Mount Isa. Tourists are now starting to leave the coastal areas and travel along our northern highway and our central highways.

Mr McGrady: Good camel races in Boulia.

Mr MITCHELL: The honourable member did not get a place, but I heard that the member for Gregory got third. I congratulate both members on having a go. I have been to a camel race, but I was not game to get on one.

I know that a lot of money has been spent on promoting tourism in country areas. As I said before, this is the future for a lot of the areas in the north, north west and central west. The roads have improved a great deal and more traffic is actually travelling on those highways these days. We just need a hand to promote what we have to offer tourists, and there is certainly a lot to offer them. There are the fossil fields and the cattle stations where the tourists can stay. There is so much out there to see that I believe it would be of interest to the people of Brisbane, too. However, we tend to target people from places such as Melbourne who may come up to Queensland in the winter months. We have to get our tourism message across to those people.
