



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 5 August 1998

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): Firstly, I take this opportunity to thank the electors of Surfers Paradise, who on this seventh occasion have returned me to this place. I thank also those people who worked very hard for me. The reality is that when one is a political leader one is inevitably away from home and one's electorate. I appreciate very much, despite quite extraordinary circumstances, the overwhelming vote of support that I received from the electors of Surfers Paradise at the recent State election.

I wish also to take this opportunity to commend and reaffirm my support for His Excellency the Governor, Major General Peter Arnison, and indeed Mrs Arnison for the very important role that she plays in support of the Governor. We should perhaps reflect on the recent smooth change of Government—something that we all take for granted. It reminds us of one of the great and tremendous benefits of the present system of Government that we have in Queensland and in Australia: Governments can come and go and we can have a smooth transition presided over by someone of the standard of the Governor, who serves this State and who is continuing to serve this State in such a distinguished manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity also to congratulate you on your election to the position of Chairman of Committees and the Deputy Speakership of the House.

The composition of the 49th Parliament is a novel one in Australian politics and for Queensland. The electors have given themselves a House that is as evenly divided as the 49th Parliament, but with a significant new factor in play. On Friday morning the Government won the confidence of this House by a majority of two. It won that majority on the basis of some rather heroic assumptions about its program and its potential for delivery of that program, given that it cannot pay for it. Nonetheless, it has the confidence of the House formally expressed. The Opposition recognises that achievement. We will work constructively in the Parliament and in the community to ensure that Queenslanders are not as disadvantaged by the conduct of the Labor Party in office as they would be in the absence of constructive Opposition.

Can I also say that we will not be intimidated away from the task. We will ensure that the questions that need to be asked continue to be asked, particularly in respect of issues of due process, integrity, conflict of interest and the transparency of the decision-making process. Today in this place we have already seen the rather foul response of the Premier and the Deputy Premier when the Opposition did not criticise a project—a project that we championed in office—but in respect of which merely asked some simple questions about what could be a prima facie case of conflict of interest. The response of the Premier and the Deputy Premier to the legitimate and reasonable questions of the Opposition this morning, in my view, was a disgrace. We will not be intimidated from pursuing such issues. I hope that the sycophants of the current Government who sometimes report in the Courier-Mail from time to time do not take our legitimate questioning of the processes of Government to be criticism of the project itself, which I in the Government that I led, along with my Ministers, championed and worked tirelessly to bring about, but on an even playing field where other companies and Queenslanders were not disadvantaged.

The new Government is making much of the new deal that it says it offers Queenslanders. It has discovered that there is an Asian crisis, that is, an Asian financial and political crisis, not the

manufactured crisis of conscience they have been going on about for months, and that this, in the words of the Premier, will create difficulties for the Government in implementing its program. We can therefore expect to see the first broken promise fairly swiftly. It will not, of course, be because the Government's promises were unwise or inept; it will be because global conditions have dented the Government's capacity to perform. Labor has always been adept at finding someone other than itself to blame for the impossibility of implementing implausible promises.

We are informed that the Government's immediate focus is the introduction into Parliament of the Appropriation Bills on 15 September. The Budget that the Treasurer—the abacas from Ipswich—will bring down will, we are further informed, deliver a surplus without the introduction of new taxes or charges. It will maintain the State's reputation for economic responsibility, including the AAA credit rating, while delivering commitments to Queensland's social infrastructure and services. My friend the member for Moggill will have more to say about the Government's electoral and fiscal irresponsibility and about Labor's \$1.7 billion black hole later in these proceedings.

However, I would draw to the attention of honourable members that the Governor's Speech promises that the Budget will deliver a surplus without the introduction of new taxes or charges. Labor's election commitment to do so without raising existing taxes and charges has disappeared into the ether. We knew that it would. We warned that it would. It gives us no pleasure to make the observation that in fact it has. The fact is that Labor's election platform was an unfunded disaster in waiting. It is now about to become for the Premier and Treasurer, who designed this electoral sham, for the Labor Party which promoted it and, sadly, for the Queensland people, some of whom voted for it, the "Nightmare on George Street".

I believe it is important that the Government's program be assessed in the light of the demography in which it, like every aspect of politics in Queensland, now has to operate. This House is primarily concerned with Queensland and its administration. I mention that not to state the obvious, but as a measure intended to assist some among us whose targets are apparently somewhat further afield. And we deal with Queensland issues, in my view, as a Parliament, whoever is in Government, predominantly in an effective way.

It is a matter of pride to us on this side of the House that Queenslanders are the best off among Australians. That is to everyone's benefit. It is also a matter of pride to us as the former Government. Even though growth expectations are now falling back because of the impact on the global economy of the financial and political crises in east Asia—and I note that this impact is at last being felt in America—whereas up to now many have thought themselves immune, we retain an edge here in Queensland.

The Opposition will be pleased and proud to help the Government promote and progress Queensland's trade and investment. We are confident that we have the very best future of any of Australia's States. We are confident that the global reach of our trade and investment service created by the coalition in Government will stand our great State in good stead through the difficult times to come. We are convinced that our unique presence in the giant NAFTA market—we are the only State directly represented in North America—and our energetic European headquarters in London allied with dedicated business advisers throughout the European Union not only serve the interests of high policy and direct investment very well; they complement the essential emphasis that we must also place on the great trading nations to our north in our own region.

It is very unlikely that the Government will achieve anything near the performance outcome we achieved in delivering record capital works programs. We face the process hiatus that the business community is now reporting. The hold-ups that inevitably flow from changeovers in Government are being exacerbated by the rabbit-in-the-spotlight response of the bureaucracy to the reappearance of the Labor apparatus and the Labor apparatchiks.

We face the Government's misplaced action-man determination to inquire into, review or order a task force report on a range of matters that seem to be lengthening daily on any scale of mathematics. This urgency to review, to inquire into or to assess anything that moves and a heck of a lot that does not—and I make the point that the Opposition has no quarrel with genuinely warranted inquiries—is strange. It is coming from a party and a leadership that spent the best part of the past two and a half years wrongly criticising the coalition Government for a devotion to inquiry. I can only assume that the Labor Party must have been playing politics. The new Premier has broken the world land speed record for task force reports. We have task force reports being announced in plural daily. I think we had two more in question time today. There is a task force for this and a task force for that.

As I said, I can only assume that Labor in Opposition must have been playing politics, but it does this quite a lot. The member for Brisbane Central has been saying a lot lately about Labor's mandate to govern. I repeat that the Opposition acknowledges that a majority of this House has voted confidence in the Beattie Government and that we on this side are content to work within the parameters thereby set. But let us not hear any more pious claptrap from the Premier and others about Labor's ascension to power.

At the 13 June election the coalition, with 31.26% of the primary vote, won 36% of seats and 18,917 votes were required to elect each coalition MP. Labor obtained 38.8% of primary votes and won 49% of the seats, and only 17,099 votes were required to elect each Labor MP. For the record—and it is important that members opposite acknowledge this—One Nation obtained 22.68% of primary votes and won only 12.35% of seats, but 39,920 votes were required to elect each One Nation MP.

Let us look back at the 1995 State election. In July 1995, 48.99% of the primary vote was required for the coalition to win 43 seats. Labor, with 42.89% of the primary vote, won 45 seats. Clearly, by any analysis Labor is the advantaged party under the existing electoral distribution. It is not the battler that it would like everyone to believe it to be, and there are three election results to show this. We heard these pitiful people opposite when they were in Opposition for a long, long time talk about the so-called gerrymander. The reality is that the 1989 election was the first time that Labor has won the majority of the votes since 1957, and it won Government. Back in 1995, we got 54% on a two-party preferred basis compared with the Labor Party's 46%, but it formed the Government.

Mr Mickel: Tell us about Wujal Wujal.

Mr BORBIDGE: The former Labor apparatchik who now sits in this place benefited from that very much. The figures speak for themselves.

The Government is honourably and properly determined to place tremendous emphasis on reducing the unacceptable level of unemployment in Queensland. The Opposition will support any real, meaningful attack on unemployment. Specifically, we will support any plans or programs that recognise the private sector as the chief generator of productive jobs and which are designed to help produce these jobs.

It was significant, however, that the Governor's Speech contained no direct reference to the Premier's obsession with achieving a 5% unemployment rate. Apparently the member for Brisbane Central is no longer obsessed. Perhaps it is that the Premier—who it now seems blue-tacked his colours to the mast for the election instead of nailing them there, the better to make a swift surrender—feels it is safe to strike those colours now that he has got his feet under the desk on the 15th floor.

We share the Premier's determination to create in Queensland the maximum practical number of job opportunities for Queenslanders. It is certainly true that, in a State such as ours, there needs to be a measure of strategic intervention by Government to create those job opportunities. It is also true that a regional focus is required so that, in Australia's most decentralised State, job opportunities are created where people most need them. All of these things, of course, were being done by the coalition in Government by innovative attraction of new industries and through Australia's first—and so far only—10-year plan, the State Strategic Plan. We never once pronounced ourselves—contrary to comments made by the member for Bundaberg in this place yesterday—as satisfied with the rate of job creation during our term in Government.

However, the reality was that this Government inherited an economy that was recording economic growth of 4.5%—more than twice the national average—which was one of the highest economic growth levels in Asia. We inherited a situation in which more new jobs were created in Queensland than every other State combined. We inherited a situation from the Government which the honourable member supported in which unemployment was in the 9s, 10s and 11s for most of the six years that it was in Government, and we got it down into the 8s for the last six months that we were on the Treasury benches. We were creating more new jobs than every other State in Australia combined.

That is my job record and I will debate it with the member opposite any time anywhere. That was the record of the previous Government. I believe that that is widely acknowledged across Australia. It is a fact that for much of the time—through Labor times and coalition times—the job creation rate was far in excess of the Australian rate and was a huge credit to Queensland business and industry, particularly small business, which we freed from the onerous constraints of Labor's over-regulation as the real engine of growth in an economy led as it must be by the private sector. In this context, the Opposition notes with concern the Government's rapidly developing attack on the future by beating a hasty retreat to the past in industrial relations and workers compensation. This represents much that was bad in the previous Labor Government and it indicates that this new Labor Government has not learned the lessons of history.

I remind honourable members opposite that the then Minister responsible for the Workers Compensation Fund told an Estimates committee of this House that there were modest problems in respect of the Workers Compensation Fund. He underestimated by hundreds of millions of dollars to the Estimates committee of this House the mess that we had to fix. To fix that mess, we brought in Jim Kennedy, who is well respected on both sides of this House. We implemented in large part the Kennedy reforms, which have returned the Workers Compensation Fund essentially to credit.

Now we have the pay-off to the ACTUQ—the pay-off to the financiers of the Labor Party where we are going to see a retreat to the bad old days of workers compensation, where the Labor Party is

going to repeat the mistakes of the past. It is not even prepared to acknowledge the reality of what we had to clean up. It is going to repeat the mistakes of the past. One does not have to go to Victoria or South Australia to learn the lessons; they were here. If Labor's policies had continued, there would have been a billion dollar hole in the Workers Compensation Fund.

This will be a defining moment for this Parliament, and the credibility of those members who support Labor's workers compensation reforms will be etched into the walls of history. This coalition is totally determined to make sure that, in terms of issues such as workers compensation, the major reforms that we put in place are not whittled away or destroyed by those who failed to learn the lessons of history or are too ignorant to contemplate reading about them.
