



Speech by

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APPROPRIATION BILL Estimates Committee C Report

Mr LAMING (Mooloolah—Labor Party) (4.12 p.m.): It gives me pleasure to rise to speak to the report of Estimates Committee C. I thank the other members of the committee and the chairman, and the two relevant Ministers and their respective staff for their attention to questions on notice, questions during the hearing and questions taken on notice. I also acknowledge the assistance of the parliamentary staff, particularly Mr Rob Hansen.

I have expressed some concerns. I am particularly concerned in relation to the time it is now taking to reallocate public housing. A number of reasons have been put forward to explain what appears to be a considerable increase in vacancy turnaround times. Firstly, we had the changeover in computer systems from the former ISIP system to the new SAP/R3 system. I am advised that part of this changeover included the vacancy times being expressed in calendar days rather than working days. In an endeavour to clarify the real situation, I recalibrated the figures to indicate the approximate situation in working days. This exercise indicated a leap in vacancy turnarounds from 17.6 average working days for the last six months of 1998 to 25.3 average working days for the first six months of 1999. That is nearly a 44% increase.

Then at the Estimates Committee hearing we were advised that there was an additional reason, that is, that the vacancy lists included untenable houses that accounted for as much as 60% of the total vacancies. We were advised that this particular problem had since been rectified by removing the untenable houses from the list, ensuring a consistent approach in relation to recording data about vacant property. The Government might have achieved a consistent approach, but the vacancy figures as at 31 August this year, with the untenable houses removed, show little change at all in the current vacancy turnaround. According to answer to question on notice No. 1283, which was tabled on 18 October, the vacancies total was slashed from 1,623 to 540 by removing the untenable houses. However, the vacancy turnaround was little different from the previous month at 32.4 calendar days. The first excuse that the blow-out in turnaround was due to the change from working days to calendar days was debunked by the blow-out from March this year onwards.

The second excuse offered at the Estimates hearing, that it was the fault of the inclusion of untenable houses, has similarly now been found to be spurious as little improvement has been effected by their removal. The real reason lies elsewhere, of course: the rolling back of the coalition's housing reforms. It is the change from zonal wait lists back to suburbs.

Mr Schwarten: They made it worse.

Mr LAMING: The figures did not indicate that last year. The question remains whether it is acceptable that tenable houses should be allowed to be empty for such a period—over a month on average, in fact. Obviously, the answer is: no. Not only does it represent a wasted asset, it also represents a loss of rental income and increases the vulnerability of housing to vandalism.

I now address another associated matter, that of untenable houses. Answers to questions on notice would indicate that over 1,000 houses, or over 65% of vacants, are untenable. This could, in fact, represent about 2% of the total stock. I would like to know what the make-up of this housing is, how many are in towns with little demand, how many are in less popular suburbs, how many are of the

wrong type, how many are simply worn out and how many are damaged beyond reasonable repair? The most important question of all is: what is the Minister doing about that stock? I will be seeking further information on this point.

The associated matter of references for public housing was also discussed during the Estimates hearing and the Minister made it clear that they would never be reintroduced. For the Minister to say that requesting a reference prejudices people is ridiculous. It is actually prejudging people to assume that they do not have the capacity to generate a reference from private or public housing occupancy in the past. Due to the current wait list, most applicants are in private rental housing while awaiting allocation. That would seem to provide a perfect opportunity for them to arrange a reference.

Another concern that I have relates to the maintenance of public housing. I have questioned the intention of the Minister to trial a Q-Build only approach to regions. On a couple of occasions I have suggested that, in another two regions, the Housing Department be asked to trial a system whereby it can contract work directly to Q-Build or private contractors. The Minister's response that he did not want a half-and-half system or one where the checker was checking on the checker may have some validity, but those problems would have been better addressed if housing area officers were able to arrange the maintenance themselves. The single line of accountability that the Minister seeks would, in my opinion, have been better provided in this way. It must be borne in mind that Q-Build outsources about 70% of its work to private contractors anyway.

Time expired.
