



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 23 November 1999

DEPARTMENT OF STATE DEVELOPMENT

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House, noting the failure of the Minister for State Development and Trade to—

- maintain and improve morale within the Department; and
- progress important infrastructure and investment projects;

calls on the Minister to account for—

- an expensive restructuring of his Department that has not delivered tangible benefits in terms of project facilitation or administrative improvement; and
- the loss of experienced senior personnel."

Last month, in answer to Estimates committee questioning about ongoing insecurity and low morale within the State Development Department, the Deputy Premier said—

"I have no major plans at the moment for any significant restructuring within the department."

He then asked his director-general to back him up. Mr Rolfe told the committee that they would continue to set up particular task forces to address emergent Government priorities, but "no wholesale adjustments are planned".

I think the Minister and the director-general made their positions very clear on 5 October. Yet if we believe what the Deputy Premier told this Parliament this morning, both he and Mr Rolfe were very well aware of plans to restructure the department and terminate at least four senior staff, including the deputy director-general, at the time they offered these platitudes to me at the Estimates committee. After all, if we believe what the Deputy Premier told us this morning, this departmental restructure was a well-thought-out and premeditated event—not a "night of the long knives", as he attempted to spin with Carolyn Tucker on ABC Radio the next morning. Well, if this is the Deputy Premier's idea of a well-organised and executed departmental restructure, then I can understand what went wrong with APEC Technomart. This Government is always trying to put the cart before the horse. It has yet to learn, apparently, that if it does this and attempts to drive it, it is not going to be covering itself with glory but with the after-processing residue of horse fuel.

When news of the "not the night of the long knives" hit the deck, neither the Premier, Peter Beattie, nor the Deputy Premier would give reasons for the sackings to the media. But a spokesman for the Deputy Premier did say that Mr Rolfe had told the Minister of his intentions about midafternoon, as a courtesy to Mr Elder, and before the sackings took place.

Who is running the State Development Department? Is it Mr Rolfe? Is it the Deputy Premier? Or is it the Premier's Department which is pulling the strings to protect the ego of Mr Beattie? Someone gave the order for deputy director-general John Carroll's five-year contract to be terminated. I do not think anyone is convinced that the manner of his termination was the result of a carefully managed plan resulting from a consultant's report.

These sorts of knee-jerk responses are symptomatic of a long period of destabilising upheavals in what is now the Department of State Development. When will it end? How can staff believe the assurances of the Minister about their job security when highly experienced staff on long-term contracts have been treated in this way? All this ongoing restructuring is having a negative impact on staff morale, and that can only translate into poor productivity.

I would like to put on record that this Government lost a very dedicated, lifelong public servant when it chose to make John Carroll a scapegoat for its own shortcomings. As my director-general, I found him to be someone who operated with the utmost of professionalism and who remained properly and honourably apolitical at all times. I repeat: he remained honourably apolitical at all times.

The member for Capalaba can defend his right to make changes for the good of Government effectiveness until he is blue in the face, but that is certainly not what transpired here. Considering the seniority of the positions terminated and the voluntary early redundancies offered, I would estimate that this move will cost the Government about \$1m in termination payouts. And we cannot count the real cost to the Government of that senior executive whose contacts and knowledge helped bring in millions of dollars worth of investment to Queensland.

The other senior person who was removed in this purge was Alan Davies, who was instrumental in the introduction of SmartLicences to Queensland, which has brought immeasurable relief to small businesses everywhere. Does this sound to members like a move that will be for the good of the department and Queensland?

Mr Davidson: The only public servant in Australia to achieve that.

Mr SLACK: Exactly.

No, it does not. I think the Deputy Premier has a lot of explaining to do if he expects us to swallow this whopper. These are natural questions that reasonably arise from the poor handling of this whole situation. For the benefit of the public and this Parliament, the Minister should answer them. The answers so far, as reported in the press and this morning's statement, lacked all credibility. The Minister also failed—and I believe this failure is especially telling—to answer this question: when did he first become aware of the plans to terminate Mr Carroll, with whom he was, I understand, at lunch shortly before his director-general did that dirty deed? When was the Minister made aware of those plans? This pattern of deceit—because that is what it is: craven deceit—came into play in another earlier incident.

Mr Elder interjected.

Mr SLACK: The Minister talked about the review being put in train in April. Yet here we are, further down the track, and nothing has happened.

In that incident, another highly respected departmental officer—one of the few officers with real international experience, as he had worked as an economic adviser to a senior Government figure in the Middle East—did not have his contract renewed. This morning, the Deputy Premier talked about letters sent to staff, but I understand that that gentleman had the fateful letter delivered to his home address while he was assisting the Minister overseas in the UAE. Can the Minister explain that one? All this reshuffling begs the question: what sort of value for money are we getting for the mounting cost of Mr Rolfe's—I mean the Deputy Premier's—departmental restructure?

Mr Elder: You tell porkies, that's your problem

Mr SLACK: The Minister can explain later. He will have his turn. It has already cost us \$2.5m in rearranging and renaming divisions of the department, and now another \$1m in this little cover-up exercise.

This Government came to power indicating that the new "grunt department" was going to deliver Comalco and the Chevron gas pipeline. So far, all we have seen is the Deputy Premier coast on the coat-tails of projects that were initiated under the coalition Government—a Government, I might add, which left this State in a very healthy economic position, with Queensland's annual employment growth in early 1998 at almost three times the national average. There had been solid growth in business investment, merchandise exports were consistently up by 15% to 17%, and the above-average economic growth rates were forecast by Access Economics to continue. During our time, companies such as Boeing, Comalco, Shell Coal, DHL, Dascom, John Deere, Qantas, Filtronic Comtek, Silicon Graphics and Mack Trucks—to name just a few—relocated or extended their operations to Queensland. All we have seen from the Minister's department is restructuring on restructuring, with the resulting—and wholly understandable—low morale and the delivery of some of the projects which originated in the coalition's time in the former Department of Economic Development and Trade and the Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry. The Minister himself admitted as much in an answer to a question on notice in May this year. I would bet that he did not read that answer. He said—

"Major projects usually take at least two years in gestation through the securing of all necessary Government approvals and infrastructure provision."

Two years! That has not stopped the Minister from claiming all the credit for any project that has reached fruition in the first 18 months of Labor's term. But he is never to blame for projects that have stalled. On that at least we know he is at one with his leader, who attempts to emulate Houdini every time there is any blame going around.

I call on the Deputy Premier to direct his efforts towards moving the Department of State Development forward, to forget the rhetoric and concentrate on the real issues rather than the politics, and the real issues are jobs for Queensland. Never mind the rhetoric! It is time the Minister settled his department down and made an effort to improve the morale within that department to ensure that it delivers what it is capable of delivering. There were some very good staff within that department whose qualities the Minister, unfortunately, did not recognise. And in respect to John Carroll, never at any time were politics discussed. He was always prepared to brief members opposite on any issue.

Time expired.
