



Speech by

Mr S. SANTORO

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Hansard 3 March 1999

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr SANTORO (Clayfield—LP) (12.18 p.m.): It gives me great pleasure to join in this debate because it enables me to do several things. Firstly, I wish to sincerely thank the electors of Clayfield for the honour of re-electing me to this Parliament. I have represented Clayfield since it was created at the 1991 redistribution and, pending the final boundaries of new electorates which will be released later this year, I hope to represent the redrawn electorate of Clayfield.

It is no secret that the coalition, thanks to the rise and, I suppose, the intervention of One Nation and optional preferential voting, suffered a two-party preferred swing against it at the last State election. This swing was especially large in the metropolitan area, and the electorate of Clayfield was no exception. However, I wish to thank my voters of Clayfield for giving me an absolute majority of votes before preferences were distributed. I share the honour of securing an absolute majority of first preference votes with only two other coalition members, and for that vote of confidence I am very proud.

I say to my constituents that I will continue to do my very best for them, irrespective of what other responsibilities I may need to fulfil within this Parliament and outside of it. To pledge otherwise would not be wise as it has become increasingly apparent to all parliamentarians that the electorate wants and expects a high standard of representation from their members. Whatever may have been the case in the past, every single member of this House, if he or she wishes to remain in it, must hear that message and act upon it. For myself, I have always striven to give my all to the people whom I have been entrusted to represent. I will continue to do my best as long as I am in this House.

In that regard, I will not forget that it is the ordinary men and women and families in my electorate who have supported me. It is to those ordinary Australians that I give my assurance that

the real issues in my electorate, such as the Nundah bottleneck, the Leckie Road connection, the City/Valley Bypass, the Eagle Junction-Doomben passenger rail service, the Clayfield police district headquarters and others will always be at the top of my agenda. Irrespective of what local issue is of concern to my constituents, I will always seek to represent them in this place to the Ministers and the bureaucracy to the very best of my ability.

My electors know that as a shadow Minister I have many important issues that I will be advancing, including industrial relations, workers compensation, workplace health and safety, trading hours, TAFE, employment and multicultural affairs. Many of these issues are of a high priority to various members and electors within my constituency. However, I have recognised from the day that I was elected to this House that it is critical to balance out one's wider policy role in Government and in Opposition with the fundamental role that each one of us has as an effective and approachable member of Parliament.

Second, it is customary and proper during a speech of this kind to acknowledge the person, and the institution, to which we are now replying. I place on record my appreciation for the fine and diligent service provided to our community by His Excellency, Major General Peter Arnison, the Governor of this State. He is a fine example of how a Governor should carry out his or her duties, and demonstrates exemplary non-partisan leadership.

With a referendum later this year on the issue of whether Australia should become a republic, let me just say in passing that I am not convinced that a fundamental change to our system of government is needed or warranted. I recognise that many people feel at this stage of our nationhood that we need to evolve and go to the next phase of our independence. I have

some sympathy with that sentiment, but when I think of the enormous change in the constitutional fabric of our Commonwealth and the risks that would flow from changing to a republic, my view is that we should stick with our present system. It works, it is fair, it is democratic and we know what we have. In my respectful opinion, we must put sentiment and emotion to one side and evaluate whether there is anything to be gained by changing the status quo, and at the same time think about the risks of changing. I am sure that, at the end of the day, when the people have had a chance to evaluate the options, they will quite rightly opt for our current system of government.

Finally, it is both customary and necessary, as a member of the Opposition, to put forward an alternative view to that espoused by members of the Labor Government. When I listened to the various contributions by Labor members, there was the constant claim that the coalition was responsible for all of the economic and social failings of our society and that Labor was the source of all wisdom and would remedy those alleged social and economic problems that the coalition allegedly created. During the many contributions of members of the Beattie Labor Government, I heard very little credit extended to the coalition, which worked so hard in Government and left behind a great legacy of achievement. It is that lack of recognition which brings a lot of discredit on members of the Beattie Labor Government, who are so patently cynical and one-eyed about the way they conduct themselves in this House.

Let me just point out to members opposite that they are in Government not because the electorate voted them in, but because of the anomalies of our current optional preferential voting system, and by default. In 1998, Labor received its third-lowest primary vote since 1912. The Premier's only hollow boast is that he is the third least successful Labor vote winner since World War I. With the exception of the Labor split election of 1957, he and the late Perc Tucker have been the most unsuccessful Labor vote winners since Henry Ford first sold model T Fords. Labor stood in all 89 electorates at the last election. In 69 of those seats, its primary vote dropped. I think it is a telling statistic that Labor's primary vote dropped most significantly in a band of blue collar outer suburban seats on the south side—Logan, Woodridge and Waterford. There was a revolt in Labor's true heartland. If it were not for the fact that many traditional conservative voters who changed to One Nation did not exercise their right to extend preferences, we would still have a coalition Government in place.

My point is that Labor got into Government with no mandate, with no overwhelming vote of confidence. It tripped over the line by virtue of outdated and unfair electoral boundaries, a voting system that rewards cynicism and a freak set of

circumstances. The Premier may say that he will rule as if he has a majority of 10, but he knows that he rules despite the fact that he was preferred as Premier by a minority of Queensland voters, and until the recent Mulgrave by-election did not even have a majority on the floor of this House.

It would be true to say that one of the main reasons, if not the major reason, that the Labor Party is in Government today is as a result of the Premier's repeated claims that he would set a target of 5% unemployment. This was to be the Government of job creation, of getting things done, of spending the capital works budget. It set up a "grunt" department of State Development and said that it would drive projects forward. As the Premier has said repeatedly, his Government is all about "jobs, jobs, jobs". On the campaign trail the Premier condemned the coalition's job creation record and instead put forward a Labor Party plan to create jobs. It is now more than eight months since the election and we have seen precious little of Labor's job creation claims. Instead, we see constantly the evidence of projects abandoned, half started or destroyed. We see all the evidence of a can't do and won't do Government—of an administration which, sadly, is not up to the task.

Before I go into the specifics, I say to the Government: what has its Department of State Development actually achieved? In eight months, apart from nursing projects that the coalition initiated, precious little has been achieved. Is it not a little sad, and perhaps pathetic, that the biggest project that this Government and this Premier can trumpet is the filming on the Gold Coast of some episodes of Baywatch? Does the Premier really think that he will achieve a 5% jobless rate with a bikini-led recovery? Unfortunately, that is just a symptom of the superficiality of this administration. It is all about trying to get some press, some column inches, rather than tackle the real issues and create the economic and policy parameters for the ongoing creation of sustainable jobs.

In the critical area of hospital rebuilding, a report issued last month by an economic forecaster pointed out that only \$77m in new Health capital works was commenced in the 1998 September quarter. That equates to just 12% of the Health capital works budget and compares woefully with the \$594m spent by the coalition in the last quarter that we were in Government. That indicates either that Labor is deliberately slowing down hospital spending because it has wasted money elsewhere—possibly on expensive ministerial office fit-outs—and does not have the money to spend, or it is just plain incompetent and cannot manage the capital works budget properly. Whatever the reason, the public is suffering because Labor simply cannot produce the goods. If one asks the many people on the ever-lengthening hospital waiting lists—many of

whom are constituents of mine—what they think of the competence of this Government, one will get a very negative response. The last six months have seen a litany of job-creating capital works projects deferred, cancelled or modified out of existence by the Beattie Labor Government.

In the critical area of water infrastructure, this Government has already cancelled the construction of three dams—the Finch Hatton dam, St Helens Creek and the Flinders River dam. It has frozen a decision on the Nathan dam, reneged on a commitment to have the Paradise dam near Bundaberg built within five years, and delayed a final decision on whether or not to raise the Walla Weir. All of those projects were essential for local economies and would have created many much-needed local jobs.

The record of Labor's job destruction is not limited to water infrastructure or, indeed, public hospital/public health infrastructure. The totally incompetent way in which this Government handled the acquisition of the International Flower Festival and Expo 2002 are cases in point. In both instances, the Beattie Labor Government sacrificed these projects. In the past four months alone, more than 20,000 jobs have been lost by this Government due to its failure to properly progress these projects.

The Briztram project is another case in point. When the election was held, this project of the coalition's was on track to be completed by 2001. The Beattie Labor Party said that it would scrap the project despite the fact that almost all the funding for it was to come from the Federal Government and the private sector. It said that it would scrap it despite the fact that many thousands of jobs were at stake. So when Labor got in, first it said that the project was deferred, then it changed its mind and went on bended knee to the Federal Government begging for the money which already had been pledged. Eventually in January the Federal Government said that it would give the \$65m to the project, which had already been promised in April last year. In the meantime, more than six months of uncertainty intervened and to placate elements in the Labor Party the link from the city to the university was abandoned.

I do not want to rain on any parade, but the way in which the Beattie Labor Government has handled this project and the very political and unprofessional way in which it has approached route selection has now put a cloud over the project's ability to attract private sector equity. If this job-creating project is destroyed on the altar of Labor expediency and duplicity, it will be another tragedy for Brisbane and the fault of this Labor Party Government.

We all know that we cannot bring down unemployment without committing to significant job-creating projects. However, the Beattie Labor

Government has shown no such commitment. One only has to look at the Budget papers produced by this Government in its first Budget to see what a sham the 5% jobs target was. In the Beattie Labor Government's first Budget, economic growth in the next three years to five years is predicted to be between 3.5% and 4.5%. Yet unemployment in this State had not fallen in any sustainable way over the past decade when growth was less than 4.75%. On Labor's own figures, and very regrettably, it is more likely than not that unemployment will rise rather than fall over the next few years. Of course, nothing is ever constant, and hopefully things will improve. However, as I said, this Government is doing everything to stop job creation.

Apart from the litany of infrastructure projects halted or delayed and a drying up of capital works expenditure, we also are now seeing more systemic barriers being created to prevent job creation. In an endeavour to placate its union backers, Labor is now intent on winding back the clock on the industrial relations reforms that the coalition put in place. This Government wants to shackle small business—the major job-creating sector in this State—with unfair dismissal laws and a range of other imposts. Just a few days ago in Brisbane, the Federal Workplace Relations Minister, Peter Reith, said that he would be writing to the Premier about these reforms outlining his objections. He pointed out that this Government was going to add red tape, additional duplication and additional regulation to the Queensland system and queried who was going to pay for it. We all know who will pay for it—the struggling small business sector. If ever there was a dead hand on job creation, this is it—the policy of this Labor Government.

So what this Government has managed to achieve in just over six months is to harm business and investor confidence by failing to advance infrastructure projects and by moving to put in place regressive job-destroying, red-tape creating laws. It is a tragedy that we have a Government attempting to drive forward the economy when it still has its learner's plates on and shows all the signs of failing dismally.

It is instructional to compare this Government's record with the coalition's record. I think it is important to compare the record of the Beattie Labor Government with that of the coalition, because this Government was elected on the basis that it could do so much better. In terms of employment creation, the coalition's record in Government speaks for itself. The statistics—and, of course, I am speaking about official ABS statistics—illustrate clearly that, during the Borbidge/Sheldon coalition term of Government, 97,700 new jobs were created in Queensland, overwhelmingly in the private sector. They were created not by the Government, but by the private sector. The figures also show that in the 12 months between May 1997 and May

1998, the coalition had reduced the absolute unemployment numbers by 19,600.

On the other hand, under the Labor Party in Government, between December 1989 and February 1996, 58,000 Queenslanders lost their jobs and unemployment increased by 65%. It is also worth noting that in March 1998 under the coalition Government, Queensland experienced its lowest unemployment rate of 8.3% in nearly eight years while on the other hand the Goss Labor Government gave Queensland its highest unemployment rate of 11.1% in July 1992—this being the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression. It is also worth noting that the ABS statistics in June 1998 showed that employment under the coalition Government reached an all-time record of 1,616,100 people and that in the 12 months between May 1997 and May 1998, Queensland accounted for 33.2% of the nation's full-time employment growth and 41% of part-time growth—this despite the fact that Queensland has only 18% of Australia's total population.

So the record of the coalition Government stands alone and stands undisputed. The coalition Government adopted an across-Government approach to the issue of job creation and the results I have just mentioned speak for themselves. Of course, the coalition Government was not content to rest on its laurels and bask in the glory of the achievements I have just mentioned. Many specific policies were put into the third coalition Budget, to create even more employment incentives within the Queensland economy and, in particular, within the private sector of the Queensland economy.

For example, the coalition's job creation package within the State Budget contained payroll tax relief for businesses hiring unemployed people—something which, I am pleased to see, this Government is beginning to move towards. However, it was the coalition's policy. There was also a policy to restructure the workers compensation premium payment system. I was particularly proud to have been the Minister who recommended this initiative to the Government, for such an initiative would have lifted a burden on small business cash flows by scrapping the current system of payment in advance for annual workers compensation payments so that those small businesses would be able to make payments in arrears on a monthly basis using actual wages figures. A third step was a further cut of 25% in business compliance costs over the next three years to be implemented under the auspices of the Red Tape Reduction Task Force. This initiative is something about which my colleague and former Minister the honourable member for Noosa can be very proud and should be forever boasting.

They are just three of the many positive policies that would have created real jobs, not like many of Labor's anti-small business policies that

will, I believe, if implemented stifle employment growth and lead to the growth of the unemployment queues. The coalition was getting on with the job of encouraging job creation, particularly within the private sector of the economy, and no amount of distortions and untruths uttered by members opposite can gloss over or, indeed, cloud this achievement.

Of course, we now have a Labor Premier who basically is saying that he may not achieve his 5% unemployment target because of the Asian economic melt-down. I suspect that the Premier, when he was the Leader of the Opposition, refused very deliberately to take into consideration the impact of the Asian financial melt-down. At the time he was making his 5% unemployment promise, the Asian financial melt-down was occurring in a very dramatic way. These days, the Premier claims that he and the then shadow Treasurer and all of his now ministerial colleagues did not realise the significance of the impact of the very obvious Asian financial melt-down. Of course, he missed some very definite signposts of that melt-down, including the overthrow of the 25-year-old Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia, which was overwhelmingly precipitated by the financial crisis that engulfed that country—one of our most significant trading partners. So we have a Premier and a Government trying to distance themselves from that promise of 5% unemployment by claiming that they had no knowledge of things which, of course, they had knowledge of and should have taken into consideration when announcing that irresponsible policy, raising expectations and creating a lot of misconception within the minds of voters.

Within my contribution to the Address in Reply debate, I have been talking about the way in which we act in this place. Basically, it is an attempt to say to the Labor Party that it is important that credit is given where credit is due and that we behave in this place in a way and in a manner that lifts the standard of parliamentary debate—of contributions—which will again help restore faith in this Parliament within the minds of the people. It is the type of political behaviour that we have been witnessing from the Labor Party Government since it was elected last year that I believe leads to much cynicism. It is really incumbent on the Premier to make sure that the standards which he espoused in Opposition and which, unfortunately, are falling away in Government, do not lead to further erosion of public confidence in the institution of Parliament. The Premier has a very real responsibility to live up to his promises of accountability and decency and honesty in this place because, if he does not, the political retribution that will be inflicted on him by the people of Queensland at the next election will be very severe indeed.