



Speech by

BRUCE DAVIDSON

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

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STATE HOUSING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr DAVIDSON (Noosa—LP) (2.43 p.m.): It is pleasing to note that the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing in presenting this amendment to the State Housing Act 1945 has recognised that the incidence of the great Australian dream, that of owning your own home, has for many Queenslanders become the impossible dream.

In 1996 the average ownership trend showed 64% of Queenslanders owned their own home, with north Queensland and the Mackay/Whitsunday areas showing the lowest rates of ownership of 54% and 58%. Whilst home building approval has remained steady and in some respects improved throughout the State, brought about by the impending impact of the GST, it is primarily the impact of the increase in the population of the State over the last decade that has accounted for much of this increase.

The building industry has predicted a decrease in house building activity of up to 16% or 18% after July this year, which when compared with the incidence of population increases, indicates that the level of home ownership will not be reflected in any increase of home ownership in those areas where such ownership has declined. It is highly probable that all that the recent home building activity has achieved is to house our new arrivals but done nothing to improve the relative levels of home ownership among those socioeconomic groups that are traditionally unable to afford to buy homes of their own, even with Government assistance.

This scenario is further entrenched when it is recognised that despite lower levels of interest rates available commercially, the level of personal savings has not improved across the State. This further suggests that those with the lowest incomes are further impeded in their quest for home ownership simply because they are unable to accumulate the most basic of deposits. There seems to be little use in restricting or controlling repayments of interest, as this amendment suggests, if those in the lower end of income scales are simply unable to take advantage of these amendments because they cannot meet the basic requirements to qualify for any form of housing assistance.

Whilst I appreciate the endeavours of the Minister in his attempt to keep interest rate charges and thus repayments to a manageable minimum, it is of little help to the dreams of home ownership to many who simply cannot get started down this path because of the lack of the initial funds necessary for a housing loan to be advanced. If this disincentive to start on a home ownership program is added to the tragic results of previous disastrous home loan schemes started by Labor Governments in the 1990s, it is not difficult to understand why home ownership figures are in overall decline, more so in Queensland than elsewhere, and especially in the lower socioeconomic groups.

Even with these proposed amendments, the Minister asserts that these changes will apply only to loans made after these amendments become law, thus providing no relief to those still enduring hardship under previously sponsored Government schemes which left 61% of the 4,607 borrowers under the disastrous HOME scheme with a loan balance significantly greater than the amount originally advanced. It is not my intention today to ridicule or demean the Minister's fine intentions to rectify in the future some of the mistake and oversights of past good intentions for future applicants. I am sure these amendments will be of immense solace to the many groups who have been identified by departmental research as suitable applicants for Department of Housing home ownership assistance.

Whilst I appreciate the immensity of the task, I commend to the Minister and his department to undertake programs in State housing assistance that will help the most underprivileged to even

consider the dream of home ownership. As the Minister has so precisely indicated in his second-reading speech, "There are some Queenslanders who are unable to access home ownership through the private sector." It is these very people who daily are on the increase that I suggest the Minister might consider in the department's future plans of making home ownership a realisable dream.

However, before the member for Rockhampton takes any pleasure in the probable acceptance of these amendments through the House, perhaps he will tell the House just how he proposes to help another and larger group of distraught Queenslanders for whom he has ministerial responsibility. These Queenslanders are the Minister's current tenants, those people currently trying to live in Department of Housing properties that are falling down around the Minister's ears. Housing Department homes cannot get the simplest of maintenance jobs done simply because the maintenance arm of the Department of Housing has run out of money.

The thousands of Queenslanders on Housing Department waiting lists who are crying out for assistance to achieve any sort of Housing Department home or unit which they can rent far exceed the number waiting on loans, especially those that will be subject to the Minister's new interest regime. Almost daily my office receives complaints from people on housing waiting lists who have been advised by relatives who are fortunate enough to have a Department of Housing home that Government properties in their streets are vacant but in need of attention. They want to know why houses that have been gutted by fire, such as the property at 5 Ernest Street, Deception Bay—one of many I am informed that are vacant—is still not repaired after six months of disrepair.

The house at 5 Ernest Street has been totally neglected. Someone has at least cut the front and back lawns, but this is the only interest that has been shown by the Minister's department in months. This property at Deception Bay has been left in its burnt-out state since fire ravaged it last November. Not one penny, other than boarding up the windows and placing some plastic fencing around the front gate, has since been spent on this home. Many Queensland families would be extremely pleased to have this brick home as a sanctuary for themselves, yet they are denied this privilege through the department's inability to spend enough money on the property to make it livable. How long will Queensland families have to spend on long waiting lists before the Minister gets his act together and fixes this and all of the other fire-gutted homes that have been left in the same condition as the property at 5 Ernest Street, Deception Bay?

This Minister represents a Government that claims and is supposed to be the battler's true friend; the light on the hill that guides the workers to salvation in the arms of the Minister's beloved Labor Party. It would appear that the only light on the hill these days is a burning housing commission home and that Minister Schwarten is not the least bit interested in the message.

I am informed by department staff that they are sick and tired of being abused by housing commission tenants who have waited months for the simplest of maintenance jobs only to be told by department staff that they are currently unable to assist them. Those staff do not deserve to be abused by the tenants, and the tenants should be able to expect that satisfactory repairs are able to be carried out, particularly when they read almost daily of some grandiose scheme that the Beattie Government has launched itself into with seemingly an abundance of funding available. This entire disaster has been brought about by only one component or the lack of it—money.

The maintenance division of the Department of Housing operates its maintenance programs on three budgets. They include the response maintenance budget which, as its name suggests, is designed to take care of the everyday problems of jammed doors, taps that drip and all of those problems that beset every home owner. The upgrade budget, as its name suggests, is in place to upgrade normal wear and tear on property, such as upgrades to kitchens or bathrooms that are beyond their use-by dates—again, a normal household occurrence.

The third budget is the planned budget. This budget is set aside for all major works and renewals on Department of Housing property. When a property needs to be repainted or needs a new roof or other such major projects, this is the budget from which those funds are drawn. This is a very sensible means of administering department funds and allows tight control. The most important aspect of the administration those funds was that each budget was sacrosanct to its own needs basis. In other words, those budgets should under no circumstances be interlocked to cover any other needs. But, of course, until last week they were so used.

Such has been the paucity of funds available in the member for Rockhampton's domain that last week all budgets were recalled to headquarters. The entire maintenance program for the Department of Housing has run out of money and the advice to staff is that the only money that will be available between now and the end of June will be for absolute necessities, that is, work that has to be completed to satisfy health and safety concerns only. No dripping taps or broken windows will be repaired. There will be no work of substance or absolute necessity anywhere at any time, save for health and safety precautions.

Today we have the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing, the Minister responsible for maintaining and managing millions of dollars worth of Government property, promoting a warm, cuddly, touchy Government initiative on the one hand in announcing repayment controls for future loan receivers and, on the other hand, he has run out of money on which the maintenance of property currently under his control and, with this loss of maintenance funding, the living conditions of his tenants are utterly dependent. What hypocrisy!

We have people all over the State waiting for the opportunity to be granted a Department of Housing home. People all over the State are waiting to get the simplest of repair jobs done and people all over the State are at a loss to know why they cannot be accommodated with a roof over their head when so many Government properties are lying idle and untenanted for the want of maintenance. Instead of regaling us with propositions that of themselves are of excellent expectation, the Minister should be telling this House how many burnt-out homes are in need of urgent funding, how many homes cannot get their roofs fixed and, most importantly, telling this House how he will cope with this disaster; in other words, doing what he is paid to do, that is, put roofs over the heads of Queensland families.

This intolerable situation is absolutely unacceptable to the many Queensland families who rely on this Minister and his department for the right to live in comfort and safety and who pay their rent to be assured that this will be the case. It is unacceptable that department staff should have to be put in the position of being abused by frustrated tenants who cannot be satisfied by department maintenance budgets, or the lack thereof, because this Government has run out of money.

Another aspect of this absolute farce which no doubt has escaped the attention of the Minister is the effect this money run-out has and will have on the many contractors and their staff who are solely occupied with department maintenance work. In every district of this State there are building contractors whose sole income and operational basis is centred on maintenance of Housing Department properties. Most employ staff to cover their commitment to the Department of Housing and in fact are set up to do nothing else but this form of work. Perhaps the Minister can tell us just how this large task force will exist between now and the end of June without work of any description. I do not imagine that work designated only by health and safety concerns will keep them all satisfactorily employed between now and July. These days the Premier is always promoting his jobs, jobs, jobs mantra—his base electoral promise, or should that be deception, to the voters of this State. It is appropriate that we inquire of Mr Beattie what he intends to do about these contractors, who should be gainfully employed by his colleague the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing but who will now be twiddling their thumbs waiting for a repair job from Minister Schwarten between now and July.

This House and the people of Queensland are continually bombarded by this Government about how they—this mismatch of teachers, lawyers and union hacks—are turning this State of ours into the Smart State. I ask: how smart can we be when we cannot manage to look after people's assets, the many properties the Minister for Housing is obliged to keep in safe and comfortable order for the department's many tenants? How smart do we have to be to restore burnt-out houses that have continued to deteriorate and thus become devalued, because this Minister and this Government cannot manage their budgets and obligations to the people of this State?

The people waiting on Minister Schwarten to do something positive about the maintenance of their homes know how smart we need to be to get this job done. Whilst it is all very nice, warm, cuddly and caring to be promoting schemes that will benefit few in the future, it is not only essential but a requirement of his office that the member for Rockhampton get his department and the money supply in order immediately and attend to what is not only an urgent need but also an absolute disgrace in terms of Government management.
