



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 17 October 2000

EAST TIMOR

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (11.50 a.m.): I do not believe there would be one Queenslander who would not wish the people of East Timor the very best of good fortune in their quest for independent nationhood or any who would deny them the helping hand they deserve towards that goal. There is certainly no-one on the coalition benches who would be found in the empty, visionless vacuum of such a position. I am equally sure there is no-one on the Government benches who fails to understand the imperatives that drive Australia's policies towards the emerging nation of East Timor. I would find it hard to believe there is anyone in this House who would put forward such unfathomable views.

I take this opportunity to place on the record the determination of Queenslanders everywhere throughout this State to contribute what they can to building East Timor and giving its administration—currently the United Nations, soon to be native East Timorese— everything they need to make the quantum leap from oppressed territory to independent nationhood. And Queensland is playing its part. I pay tribute to the effort, too, on the part of the business community, volunteers here at home and in East Timor, and to the Australian servicemen and women, many of them from Queensland or based here, who are still serving there, sometimes in harm's way. And the State Government deserves due credit and notice for its efforts on that score.

It is on that last point that I raise in the House today certain aspects of the Beattie Government's approach to East Timor that, I am sorry to say, are less than worthy. What worries us, and the people, is that the facility to be fanciful, at the people's expense, and to the direct cost of truth, is alive and well—thriving in fact—on the benches opposite. If the Premier wants to tell shaggy dog stories around his barbecue, that is between him and Rusty. I would have some advice for Rusty should he come to me seeking to put some balance into the rhetoric that must bounce around the walls of his otherwise pleasant suburban home. But from what I hear, Rusty seems to be a sensible dog. I am sure he has already made up his mind about the relative benefits of editorial over advertorial.

In my capacity as shadow Minister for State Development and Trade, I take a close interest in the business of exporting Queensland products and expertise, and in the benefits of increased bilateral and multilateral trade and investment that a proactive foreign presence can provide. There is no doubt about that. Therefore, I have watched with interest—and I am sorry to say, with increasing concern—the antics of the Premier in relation to Queensland's position in East Timor. That concern extends to the public positions the Deputy Premier has taken in the same area.

I was particularly interested in the response of the Deputy Premier to the energetic efforts made by north Queensland business groups, centred on Townsville—of all places; this might explain his lack of interest in coming to grips with actuality—when opportunities for mutual benefit arose in East Timor last year. There was no response, that is, there was no response other than a belated and thoroughly reprehensible attempt to characterise those energetic businesspeople as carpetbaggers out to take advantage and make a quick killing.

At the Estimates hearings in August he then attempted to justify this supine position by suggesting that he had advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs that those who were seeking to get in first were in fact getting in the way and should not be encouraged—in fact, by implication, that they should be actively discouraged. So far as I have been able to discover, no advice of that nature exists. I invite the Deputy Premier to table any such official advice he has received. And I do not think he can. I would be prepared to lay a small wager that he cannot. I am certainly willing, in the bipartisan

spirit in which Queensland's overseas relations have always been conducted, to stand corrected if he can pull a rabbit from his hat instead of the very dead chicken we have grown accustomed to. But we will leave the Deputy Premier there to cope as best he can with his feet of clay.

He has been gazumped by the Premier, who leapt at the chance in late September to jump into the Government jet and flit away to Dili. While he was there he was accommodated at the Paximus Lodge, a Queensland run establishment that, if his deputy is to be believed—as I am sure he would like to be—should really be named The Carpetbaggers' Inn. However, let us get to the real substance of the issue we on this side have with the Premier and his Government over East Timor in terms of Queensland's business presence there.

While he was on his fly-in, flop-out visit his office put out a number of media statements—the usual marvels of literary engineering. I lost count of how many, but one will do to illustrate the point. This one was issued with a Dili dateline on 29 September and headed "Queensland hatches East Timor market". It stated—

"Premier Peter Beattie has congratulated a Queensland company for establishing a joint-venture in East Timor which will help feed the population, provide 40 jobs and generate about \$6 million over the next three years.

'This is exactly the sort of initiative which the Queensland Government is encouraging,' said Mr Beattie, who is on a three-day trade and friendship mission to East Timor.

'Cairns-based Bingil Bay Poultry has entered into a joint agreement to establish a poultry farm in East Timor.

As far as we are aware, this is the first long-term business venture established between East Timor and Queensland.

I invite other Queensland companies involved in food production to investigate the opportunities that exist in East Timor.'

Bingil Bay has two Queensland farms with 86,000 birds and distributes eggs throughout Queensland through Coles, Woolworths and Franklins. It formed the joint venture with two Timorese businessmen who are residents of north Queensland and they were granted their permit to operate by the East Timor Transitional Administration this month. Bingil Bay will establish a locally producing poultry and egg laying farm to supply both the domestic East Timorese market and export to other countries.

Poultry will be sourced from both Australia and Indonesia. The operation will employ 40 farm staff and is expected to produce 70,000 eggs each day and 3,000 chickens each week.

Gough Plastics, based in Townsville, is an example of a Queensland firm securing opportunities in East Timor, including a \$250,000 order for its hybrid toilet system with the Australian Defence Force. The product was developed over five years as a joint project involving James Cook University and the National Capital District Commission of Port Moresby, PNG.

'This contract is further testimony to Queensland leading the way in providing much needed infrastructure to countries such as East Timor,' Mr Beattie said."

Everyone will want to congratulate these Queensland enterprises on their energy and activity and wish them well. Of course, the Premier, as head of Government, should do so, too. But Curtain Brothers has been operating successfully in East Timor since the beginning of the year. It has successfully completed two contracts with the Australian Defence Force and, by the time the Premier got around to raising even the hint of dust on the Dili airstrip, was involved with two long-term contracts. Paximus Lodge, where he stayed, is a joint venture that includes involvement with Curtain Brothers, Brice Engineering and Paxiquest. Gough Plastics, referred to in the press release, was one of those companies that entered East Timor as part of the Paximus business visits late last year—before the Premier's visit—without any Government assistance and, if we are to believe the Deputy Premier, in the teeth of active Queensland Government disapproval of carpetbagger activity. The Deputy Premier used that term to refer to those businesspeople who had earlier visited East Timor. He claimed that the advice from the Commonwealth Government was that they had entered early and should not have been there; that they should have been discouraged.

In my research into the Commonwealth Government's involvement in this issue I was unable to find any indication of that advice to the Deputy Premier. Ten months ago they did not want to know them. Last month the Premier was all over them like a rash. What a sorry example of the sad and self-serving model of politics this sorry excuse for a Government prefers.
