



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR COOK

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THURSDAY ISLAND, HOUSING SHORTAGE

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (10.10 pm): Like many places in Queensland, Thursday Island is suffering from a shortage of housing, particularly affordable housing. The shortage has occurred for a number of reasons. Firstly, despite going backwards for the first time last year, the population of the island has steadily increased over the years. Secondly, a number of government departments, at all three levels, have dramatically increased their far northern operations out of Thursday Island. These include customs, immigration, police, health and education to name a few.

Thursday Island is a small island and there are a limited number of freehold parcels of land. The growing interest of the various government departments in available land has driven the price of land through the roof, making it unaffordable for the many low-income people who inhabit the island. This is compounded by the general lack of experience in developing suburban subdivisions.

While land suitable for urban development on Thursday Island is becoming scarce, there is other suitable land on the nearby islands of Horn, Hammond and Prince of Wales. I am certainly not being critical of the Department of Housing and its efforts to provide affordable housing. In fact, the department is constantly constructing new housing on the island. As I said a moment ago, the problem is not a lack of government housing; the problem is a lack of private housing.

Torres Shire Mayor, Mr Pedro Stephen, is taking a very proactive stance on the issue and on 16 February pulled together the stakeholders to begin to find some answers. The forum discussed a range of issues from subdivisions, to Indigenous home ownership, to the possibility of needing to relocate those on some of the outer islands due to global warming and rising sea levels. I think that there are some solutions to this problem but none of them will come easily.

Government departments at all levels need to take greater effort to recruit locally and to house their staff. This will require effort by the state government to ensure that students graduating from the local high school are work ready. However, it will take a serious effort by departments to support and mentor their local staff to higher positions to make a dent in the housing situation. Departments at all levels must do more to support, develop, skill and promote local people into senior positions.

Mayor Pedro also needs the assistance of federal and state governments to deal with the issue of native title. Let me put on the record that I recognise the Kaurareg nation as the traditional owners of the land which I am speaking of tonight. I do not know what the aspirations of the Kaurareg people are for every piece of land they hold traditional ownership over; however, I do know that many Kaurareg people are among the residents who require housing in the region but do not know how they can upgrade their traditional rights to create housing subdivisions, economic development and a sustainable future for their children.

Yes, there needs to be further investment by government, especially the Commonwealth government which has simply walked away from the provision of public housing. The Commonwealth policy of supporting the private sector with rent assistance may be all right in the city; that is for others to determine. It certainly does not work in a place like Thursday Island where the private sector is small. I urge all levels of government across departments to get behind Mayor Pedro Stephen and address the housing situation in the Torres shire.