



Speech by
Mike Horan

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH

Hansard Wednesday, 19 August 2009

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—LNP) (8.41 pm): Some four months ago we had all the pomp and ceremony of the opening of this parliament and the Governor presented her address. I think it is an insult to the Governor that it has taken four months to get to some of these address-in-reply speeches. It shows a government that is in chaos, a government that is disorganised and a government that was paying back some of the grubby little deals it did with the Greens during the election campaign. Instead of having the address-in-reply debate, the government rushed through the vegetation management bill with a moratorium on regrowth. That was the payback. That was the kickback. Who suffers from that? Hardworking, honest, decent Queensland families who create the exports and create the jobs. It was their pioneering forebears who have developed central and western Queensland and other parts of the state. They have produced the wealth, the jobs and the exports, and they are the ones who suffer for these grubby little deals that happen behind the scenes.

So busy were they doing deals that the economy has slipped, and at the same time they absolutely deceived the people of Queensland. People have good memories. They will not forget the gross deceit that occurred last time. No sooner had the Governor provided her address-in-reply speech than we were back into the parliamentary system and we suddenly found out that this was going to be the payback for the people of Queensland. This is the thanks the people of Queensland have got from this elected government. They have got a petrol tax. They have got massive debt they cannot jump over and which will probably never be paid off during the time of most members in this parliament. They also have got a sell-off of assets. All of these things are against the principles of the grassroots people of the ALP, let alone other Queenslanders who believe in having income-earning assets.

The government drove us into debt, drowned us into debt, and now what have we got? We have the financial mess that this state is in. People around Australia colloquially say that New South Wales is a rust-bucket state. Well, New South Wales owes \$67 billion. Guess what we owe? About another \$20 billion more—we owe about \$86 billion. Talk about a rust-bucket state next door! What has happened here? And how quickly has it happened? Have a look at the graph and you will see that it all came about from the time the member for South Brisbane was Treasurer and infrastructure minister. That is when the debt went up like that—nearly vertical. When you put someone in charge of finances who does not have the capacity or the ability, then a state can be driven into debt—debt which it has never seen before.

Honourable members should do some multiplication. Multiply the debt by six or seven per cent—and interest rates could go up into the future—and see what that comes to. See how much you have to take out before you start allowing 25 per cent of the budget for health, 25 per cent for education, and the rest for the police, roads and capital works. No wonder this state is drowning in debt. We have lost our AAA rating. We are down there with little old Tasmania. That is the financial mess we are in. Tasmania and ourselves are the only ones who lost the AAA rating. As a result, we are paying interest rates of anywhere from 0.4 to 0.8 per cent higher. Local governments are paying more because they are tied to Queensland Treasury Corporation loans. So the people of Queensland are not only paying massive paybacks in interest but they are also paying a higher percentage of interest because this government does not even

have a plan for repayment—a proper planned repayment like people would have if they had a debt on their own home. As a result, we have lost our AAA rating.

Queensland has never seen a situation like this before. We have always been the strongest state. We have always prided ourselves on being the low-tax state. We are now the highest tax state. We have never had a petrol tax and now we have a petrol tax.

Mr Wettenhall: It's not a petrol tax.

Mr HORAN: Of course it's a petrol tax! We have never had a petrol tax in this state ever before. In the mid-1990s, when the government changed the excise arrangements, we had to bring in the subsidy system so we remained a state that did not pay petrol tax. But now we pay a petrol tax like everybody else.

For the next term of government we now face a debt of about \$86 billion. The government is now branded with deceit, and the public know it. We are now faced with a government where there are two or three people over there all lining up to be the leader. You only have to look at the performance of the last couple of days to know the shambles that exists over there. They are unable to properly manage their own ethics systems. We have a government that right from the very start of its term is crumbling. If only we could have another election now, the people of Queensland would love to throw them out. But they will remember, and they will throw them out in 2½ years time.

Assets that are being sold off in Queensland include the motorway tolls, Forestry Plantations, some of the coal rail systems in Central Queensland and the Port of Brisbane. How important are these assets? Only about 18 months ago we saw three airports sold off in Queensland—Cairns, Mackay and a share of the Brisbane airport. The income from that is gone forever because this is a state that is selling off assets. The income is gone. The money is spent because the government simply did not manage it properly. It also did not have the surplus each year that it should have had to build things like the Mackay Hospital, the Cairns Hospital or the Mount Isa Hospital. It had to sell off income-earning assets to build social infrastructure that should have been paid for by a properly managed budget with a proper surplus.

In this state there are many hardworking people and many outstanding industries that are generating great export income and job opportunities. They include the new development of the Surat Basin to the west of Toowoomba with coal seam methane and other energy products, and proposals to build a rail line from Wandoan to Banana to take some of these products to Gladstone and so forth.

We also have agriculture, which has been forgotten in the past years because of the drought, but it is contributing massively to our state. In Toowoomba we have unemployment of about 2.4 per cent in the midst of a so-called global recession. Why? It is because not only are there mining developments to the west of our city but we have had two good summer crops and one good winter crop. Once again, the headers are out and the tractors are out, and the grain is flowing through our city, down to the Port of Brisbane and bringing export dollars into Queensland. It is also bringing jobs to the local communities, particularly Toowoomba and the Darling Downs.

All of this leads me to bring up again the issue I have brought up many times—the Toowoomba bypass. It is these exports from the Darling Downs area that are making up about 70 per cent of what flows over the wharves at the Brisbane port. It is a Commonwealth road that runs through Toowoomba—the Warrego Highway, or James Street. There are 16 sets of traffic lights. We have probably the heaviest freight-carrying road in Australia connecting South-East Queensland to the southern states of Australia and to Darwin.

Mr Wilson: Why didn't Howard fund it?

Mr HORAN: The Howard government provided \$700 million in the budget that was due after the election. That was wiped out immediately by the Rudd government. So our dream of a Toowoomba bypass was gone.

Let me explain again to the House the importance of this bypass and the necessity for the Queensland government to make it its No. 1 priority and not just in the top 10. Making it the No. 1 priority is the only way it will get done. All the exports that I have talked about that have contributed so much to the low unemployment and to the prosperity of the area in the midst of a financial crisis are coming through Toowoomba—through 16 sets of traffic lights. It is a totally clogged and jammed system. Parents trying to take their kids to school are jammed in between B-doubles. Somewhere in the order of 4,000 B-doubles a day come through the city. On some days there are more because of the concentration of trucks during the week.

There is about 10,000 tonnes of extra grain coming through the city at the moment. That means in the order of 250 to 300 extra B-doubles going through the city every day. That is just for grain. Queensland Rail under this mismanaged state government cannot carry the grain to port. If anything should be carried to port by rail it is grain and coal. Let us look at the coal at Acland. Around about 40 per cent of the coal is

carted by train down to the Swanbank Power Station and to the port for export. All the rest comes straight through Toowoomba and the 16 sets of traffic lights 24/7. B-doubles go back and forth all the time.

The cattle industry is struggling to get trains to move cattle. One company wanted 111 decks the other day and could not get them from Queensland Rail. Instead, what is happening? More and more cattle trucks are coming through Toowoomba. We are not just getting the normal ones that come from the saleyards but road trains as well. They have to be broken down outside the city so that they are an acceptable dimension to come through the city. They go down to the meatworks at Dinmore, Beenleigh and parts of Brisbane. That all provides employment.

Our city has the social plight of these trucks. No other city in Australia has to withstand it. It is about time that we received a bit of consideration from the Queensland government in return for the prosperity and the wealth that is funnelled through the main east-west street of our city. This provides exports and jobs for this state.

I will make one more point about this road. I will give an example of the social plight I refer to. The Police Citizens Youth Club is a wonderful organisation that looks after people and is located in the centre of the city. We have serious problems because the B-doubles are lined up at lights after lights after lights. People cannot get into the PCYC. It is going to cost something like \$130,000 to build a slip lane into the PCYC. That is just one example. People cannot get to businesses. They cannot get into service stations. People cannot get through the town. There might be eight, nine or 10 B-doubles in a line and they take off from the lights and do not get through the next set. If they do get through that set of lights they get caught at the next set or they get caught at the traffic lights on the hill. The bitumen road then crumbles and breaks down as they try to take off with their heavy loads.

It is about time that this government came forward and recognised that this great inland city of Toowoomba deserves a bypass, deserves to be No. 1 when it comes to seeking funds from the federal government's Infrastructure Australia fund; otherwise we will never get the bypass. The money always goes to something else that is needed because there are a lot of people living there and a lot of cars. This is not just about cars and people but trucks as well. It is about the lifeblood of the nation. It is about the lifeblood of the state. It is about industry and jobs and that should be recognised.

Other parts of the state get convention centres, new waterfront developments, foreshore developments—all those sorts of things—for free. They get water pipes connecting from the north to the south and the east to the west, but Toowoomba still has to pay for its water pipeline. It will cost \$112 million to bring precious water up from Wivenhoe. There is a government contribution of \$87 million but the people of Toowoomba still have to pay the balance of \$112 million. The rest of South-East Queensland has a water grid and people have not had to pay for it.

There are a lot of people who are very worried about the treated sewage water from the South-East Queensland pipeline that the government said is supposed to go into Wivenhoe Dam and be diluted. A lot of people are very concerned that that pipeline is going to be hooked directly via some sort of T-junction into the Wivenhoe-Toowoomba pipeline. That recycled treated sewage system in the south-east has been a multibillion dollar flop. There have been burst valves and waste has leaked into creeks. Hospital waste, industrial waste and everything else has been found in creeks. That was the sort of thing that the wise people of Toowoomba knew would happen if they voted to drink treated sewage in their water. I want a reassurance that that treated sewage will not go directly to the line from Wivenhoe to Toowoomba.

Since the council amalgamations we have probably suffered more than anybody else. Eight councils were merged into one. It would probably take you as long to drive down Tasmania as it does to drive from the other side of Yarraman down almost to Inglewood. Eight councils have been joined together. There have been huge costs in changing computer systems, staffing arrangements and bringing the whole council together. It was an absolutely massive job. The result for the people of Toowoomba has been a very steep increase in rates. We all know that the councils are constrained in terms of what they can do with staffing for two years. There is no way they can make any type of savings.

Our city and the surrounding areas have faced a massive increase in rates and a massive increase in the cost of water because we have to pay for this water pipeline as well as put in bores. There are some 26 water systems that this council has to manage and look after. These rates are a huge impost on people, particularly average working-class people who cannot find the extra money to pay their rates. They have faced a 44 or 45 per cent increase in electricity costs over the past 2½ to three years. They are also facing a 350 per cent increase in gas prices. That is because this broke government sold off its gas arm and the private company put in access fees. The old pensioners try to cut back on their gas usage in the winter but it does not make any difference because they are paying an access fee.

Now we are paying access fees for the water pipeline. We are paying access fees for the gas pipelines. The next thing we know we will be paying access fees because a powerline runs past, even

though we are paying whopping prices for electricity. This is a direct result of the mismanagement of this deceitful government and the deceitful messages that it took to the last election.

If anything shows the way this government has mismanaged money and not looked after vulnerable and poor people, it is the case of a young man with cerebral palsy. His mother is a pensioner and cares for him. He is in his 20s. They waited three years to have his teeth removed. That is probably the norm. He is probably lucky to get in in three years. When they removed his teeth they found a quite serious deformity that does require surgery before he can have dentures fitted. Guess what the wait is with Queensland Health? It will be a six-year wait for this young man. He is about 29 years old. He will have to wait six years for surgery to get this deformity in his jaw fixed so that he can have some teeth put in his mouth and he can eat instead of sipping soup.

Surely we could look after people like that young man. Instead, his pensioner mother has to find \$5,000 for the surgery. It is \$3,000 to take him to a private specialist because she is not prepared to see him wait for six years. She has to borrow that money. She is desperately hoping—and I have made an approach to the health minister—that they might be able to allow the private surgeon to use the public hospital facilities, otherwise it will cost another \$2,000 for the hospital bed, the theatre and so forth.

That is the human side of debt. That is the human side of mismanagement. That is the human side of a government running around with glossy brochures and the other paraphernalia that it has instead of having hard-headed ministers who get down and say, 'We will do the basics. This is what people want. We will do that first.' This is a government spending money on getting itself elected, running around doing deals, getting itself into debt. Some \$4 billion or \$5 billion a year is going on interest that could be paying for people to do these operations and treat people who need it.

If ever there was a test of whether a government was worth its salt, it is this case of the young man in Toowoomba with cerebral palsy. If the government cannot look after someone who is disadvantaged and in that situation, there is something wrong. Here is a loving mother who wants to help her son and cannot bear to see him without teeth for six years. If a government cannot sort that out, then it deserves to be thrown out on its ear. It deserves to be thrown well and truly out of office.

I also want to talk about the future needs of Toowoomba in addition to the bypass. We need the development of the industrial estate because Toowoomba is becoming an industrial and service centre. It is time for the government to resolve the matters with teachers. We have some 14 high schools in the Toowoomba and Highfields area and more on the Darling Downs. We really are an education city. I know the hard work that the teachers put in in the public and private schools in our area. They take the kids for sport, music, culture and trips. They are dedicated. It has made education one of the jewels in the crown in Toowoomba.

I congratulate Mr Neville Stewart, the retiring president of the Toowoomba Turf Club. Neville has been president of the turf club for 21 years. In that time he has guided that club to be very successful, particularly in financial terms, resulting in prize money increases. In that time he has put in place on-course stables. He has brought about a lot of improvements. He spent 14 years as president of the Downs and South West Queensland Racing Association and saved clubs like Chinchilla and Clifton and obtained TAB coverage for Dalby and Toowoomba. Twenty-one years is a big chunk out of one's life. He and his wife, Kaylene, suffered a terrible tragedy with the loss of their son Alex. I do wish them well. Mr Col Zeller is taking over as president of the turf club and leads a committee of great experience and I wish him well.

The people of Toowoomba will not forget the deceit, the mismanagement, the petrol tax or the sell-off of assets. They are raring to go to the ballot box and throw Labor out.