



Speech by

Hon. Robert Swarten

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Wednesday, 11 February 2009

MOTION: ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGE

Hon. RE SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton—ALP) (Minister for Public Works, Housing and Information and Communication Technology) (2.30 pm): I found the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition so extraordinary that I thought I would debunk some of the things that he had to say. He accused people from this side of the House of sponging on the taxpayer, basically since birth. I found that an extraordinary statement, especially as it came from somebody who came into this parliament at the age of 21 and, as far as I know, has never had any other sort of job since that time. The Premier has had 14-odd jobs. I started my working life with a hammer and nail bag, working in a family business. The notion that Labor people are spongers is repugnant. It is typical of the Tories to stoop to that level when they have nothing better to say.

The opposition leader put forth the notion that we are spending John Howard's great money, which has to blow out of the water any credibility that this bloke might have had on the economic front. The federal government is taking on a \$22 billion deficit. It is going to bring forward that money from future earnings in this country. How in the name of fortune could the accusation be made that somehow we are spending money that John Howard saved? I cannot understand the logic behind that notion. If he were to say that in front of a group of economists, accountants or anybody who had an inkling into these things, immediately he would be laughed down.

I notice that the Leader of the Opposition has been unable to explain who he is representing in this parliament. In this portfolio the organisations with which I have links, such as the QMBA, the HIA, the subcontractors associations and the UDIA, tell me that they desperately need work for their members. They are saying, 'Bring forward budgets to help us spend our way out of this.' From our work in the BSA I know that plenty of builders are crying out for work. Therefore, I really do not know who the opposition thinks it is impressing with its strategy.

I was particularly fascinated by the opposition's notion that you can bank and build. No-one in Queensland would own a house if they did that. If they banked all their money, they would not have any money with which to build. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition thinks that builders work for charity; that the construction industry, which is worth about \$30 billion, works for charity. In the name of fortune, how could anyone with any modicum of commonsense or understanding of economics say that it is okay to bank money and build at the same time! I do not know how that concept works.

The opposition suggested that nothing has been built, yet we have a record budget in public works. When I came into this place there was a \$500 million capital works freeze. To get out of that we had to push for jobs as part of our jobs, jobs, jobs mantra. I remember those days well. Now we are undertaking something like \$8.5 billion worth of public works, and that is before we consider any of the money coming from the Commonwealth government stimulus package, which will provide another \$3 billion. We are undertaking over \$8 billion worth of work. Therefore, the suggestion by the Leader of the Opposition—followed closely by that of the economic genius who would be the Treasurer—that in Queensland nothing has been built holds no ground whatsoever in the community. It is a resort to the untruth, which is the haven of the coward and of people who are not cut out to look the electorate in the eye.

I have here a schedule of \$100 million worth of works that is ready to go today. That work will involve carpenters, plumbers, electricians and tilers. It will involve upgrading public housing across the state. It is worth \$100 million. Can members guess what we are spending on upgrades and maintenance on public housing at the moment? \$240 million this year, and \$260 million plus \$100 million. I know members opposite think that doing up people's houses is a joke. I know that toffee-nosed Tories like those opposite do not understand what it is like to go without, but the reality is that the people we will help with new bathrooms, kitchens and living amenities will really be grateful, as will the people in the building industry whom members opposite used to represent. They used to show some care for those people. What about the small businesspeople they claim to look after? This work is ready to go tomorrow. There are 15,000 subcontractors with Q-Build who are ready and willing to do this work. All we need to do is give them the go ahead.

However, who is holding this up? It is the Canberra colleagues of those opposite. In a couple of instances it is people whom this parliament has put into the Senate. What would happen if those people were Labor Party members? I would be on the phone to those senators saying, 'For heaven's sake, stop mucking about.' I would tell Barnaby Joyce to stop asking questions of the Australian Retailers Association. Fancy asking what value there is in an LCD! He is simply holding up the inquiry process for no good reason. It is no wonder that the head of the Retailers Association was tearing his hair out in exasperation, trying to get to the bottom of what Joyce was saying. It is a disgrace that he represents this state asking questions like that. Believe me, I will make sure that every one of the 70,000-odd licensed builders hears what you have to say about them as a result of—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Please refer to the member by his title.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I will make sure that they know what the opposition has to say about them. It can bank on that. I will make sure that the Master Builders Association, HIA and all the other organisations know what is being said by Barnaby Joyce, other National Party members and all the accumulated Tories who are sitting in the Senate and holding this up at the moment. There is no good reason to hold this up.

I turn to the amendment proposed by the opposition. The amendment takes out the words '\$42 billion'. The opposition is saying, 'We don't want \$42 billion, no thank you. Let them go away and make up their mind about what they want.' In other words, it does not want the full \$2 billion for education and it does not want the full \$1 billion for housing. It is saying, 'Go away and make up your own mind on that.' I could not support that. The other thing the opposition is saying is, 'Just take your time and consider it.' How many more inquiries does it want to have? How much longer does it want to hold it up? How long does it think is reasonable? Talk about open-ended, wishy-washy, lettuce-leaf limp, embarrassing nonsense!

The other point that we need to hammer home with the opposition is this: it is saying no to \$8.2 billion worth of jobs in Queensland. It is saying, 'We don't want the \$42 billion. Let's have some other amount.' Believe me, wherever I go I will hang that around the necks of those opposite like a dead albatross. Their claim that they care about people who are unemployed falls straight to the ground on that one. The reality is that these public works are ready to go. This will be on the Prime Minister's desk within 24 hours. There is no excuse whatsoever for the Senate to be holding up that very necessary work. Five developers have already contacted the Department of Public Works and they are ready to provide housing.

Mr Nicholls interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Clayfield, you have had your opportunity.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Yesterday I met with a developer who I believe is a constituent of yours. He is ready to roll out a number of projects. It shows how bereft of contact with the building industry and the development industry you are, because you do not understand the dire straits in which they find themselves.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Please direct your comments through the chair.

Mr SCHWARTEN: What about the number of job losses that the opposition is condoning by its weak, limp-wristed attempt to amend this motion? Say to the Senate yes or no. Does the opposition want these jobs in Queensland—yes or no? Those opposite cannot answer that. They cannot show any leadership on it. All they did was get up and bucket this side of the parliament. That is all their contribution to this debate has been. They have not looked to the future. They have no determination of how to get out of this. We intend to build our way out of trouble in this state. We will build our way out of recession.

Mr Nicholls: Whose money are you spending, Rob?

Mr SCHWARTEN: Whose money are we going to use? I am quite happy to answer that question. We are going to use \$8 billion of taxpayers' money in Queensland.

Time expired.