




Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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QUEENSLAND RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY BILL

 **Ms SIMPSON** (Maroochydore—LNP) (3.49 pm): In the sombre aftermath of the condolence motion we stand with a weighty responsibility, to ensure the rebuilding of Queensland does not suffer the mistakes of previous infrastructure programs flowing from crises. A voice of reason is not a silent voice. It is about being willing to ask the questions and demand the answers in the search for better solutions and improved delivery. With the mammoth task at hand, it is clear that rebuilding Queensland requires a far smarter approach than the disastrous execution of the South-East Queensland drought response, with its bungled \$9 billion water grid. No-one wants to see repeated the mistakes that still burden this state economically. The salesmanship of the water grid was slick but the delivery and the cost blowouts were not. That is one of the reasons Queenslanders are paying the price today through our water bills and the state of the budget.

There are lessons to be learned from the crisis Brisbane faced of the threat, ironically, of running out of water. At that time this parliament enacted powers in order to urgently build drought response infrastructure. The then Premier, as Treasurer and infrastructure minister, presided over most of these powers and infrastructure delivery. The powers were sold to the public as being urgent and necessary due to the short time frame and the need for coordination. The principles were correct; the execution was not.

There were some significant powers in relation to acquisition of land and approvals for construction. They were accompanied, though, by very poor strategic planning of the projects, scoping and cost management issues. The result was the bungled water grid, a \$9 billion network of assets built without a business plan—except for a very small section—and cost blowouts of hundreds of millions of dollars. There is a pattern here that we do not want to see repeated now that Queensland faces the aftermath of yet more crises and this parliament is being asked to pass laws with very strong powers and another government body to respond and implement. We are supporting this bill because we want to see the promised outcomes of better coordination and delivery so that affected Queenslanders can get on with their lives, but we rightly do it with reservations as it has to be done differently to the government's track record in recent years. Queenslanders deserve that.

It is a cruel irony that Queenslanders answered the call to prepare their houses as they faced floods and cyclones, but the government of Queensland failed to do the same for this state when it came to its own economic preparedness. The poor execution and cost control of the water grid and other infrastructure projects, as well as the overall mismanagement of the budget, combined to ironically leave this state in the worst situation in the face of natural disasters. To lose a AAA credit rating off the back of the best years of prosperity and record income is inexcusable. It meant that when the flooding rains and stormy weather came there was no money saved for a rainy day, only an \$84 billion anchor around our collective feet. Our beautiful Queensland, of vibrant resources and enviable lifestyle, had been left economically exposed and vulnerable, like a cardboard house on a flood plain.

A new Centre for Independent Studies analysis rates the Queensland Labor government's financial management as the worst in the country. LNP shadow Treasurer Tim Nicholls rightly quoted this analysis today because it needs to be said. Queensland is last of all of the states in terms of spending, taxation and debt management. As he said, this report highlights a history of Labor mismanagement and incompetence

which left Queensland in a vulnerable financial position before the floods and cyclone hit. Queensland, once the state that had the strongest budget position in Australia, once a state that carried no net debt, has seen this all change as a result of substantial deterioration in recent years which led to us being the only state to lose its AAA credit rating in the global financial crisis. That is worth hundreds of millions of dollars in additional interest payments. Thus, I do not want to hear government members feigning indignation if we demand accountability in the delivery of the rebuild. We support the rebuild. We want to see it done right. We want this to be about building the future for Queensland, not leaving a legacy that is a burden for future Queenslanders.

In the lead-up to this bill being tabled this week, I sought advice from the Department of Transport and Main Roads about how the proposed authority would interact with that department, what the operational relationship would be and how they envisaged this would work. They were still to be briefed at that stage and could not answer that specific question. However, hopefully it will be clear within the corridors of power by now how these operational arrangements will be worked out. It is absolutely vital that there is clear role definition and empowerment for timely and wise decision making. It is vital that any new structure aids, not hinders, the work that needs to be undertaken.

There is opportunity as well to tackle some of the big issues, not just put a bandaid on the big issues. There is an opportunity also, as natural disaster relief and recovery funding becomes available, to ensure that major issues with road networks, and freight networks in particular, in relation to flood immunity are addressed. It was somewhat disturbing to hear that the federal government was looking at rolling back projects that would have given greater flood immunity here in Queensland. I am calling on the federal and state governments to revisit the decision to re-order their priorities. We need to see a state network of roads that has greater flood immunity, not less flood immunity.

There is a very powerful lesson to be learned from the state being cut in half at Rockhampton recently. That is devastating not just for a handful of businesses but for all of North Queensland which is cut off from the south by road. Then, of course, the rail was cut at different times. That impacted on a wide range of businesses and people. That is still being felt, even though the floodwaters have receded.

I welcome the fact that the Yeppen flood study and the Fitzroy study have been released today. We look forward to looking at those options that are on the table. It is vital that there is a cost-effective way of improving the flood immunity of that highway and other critical networks. The freight network of this state is our economic lifeline. When people start to run out of milk and food and cannot do business, they start to realise how vital it is that freight networks operate. I take this opportunity to say that it is time for that freight network to be given proper status. It must have priority in regard to upgrades and flood immunity.

I understand that there is still quite an amount of money not yet spent out of the natural disaster relief and recovery fund from last year's floods. A couple of weeks ago it was estimated that \$2.5 billion had been allocated and there was still a residual amount to be spent before Cyclone Yasi came along. As I understand from the last briefing, there is \$4.5 billion in total for the road and rail network, though no doubt those figures will be updated as more information becomes available.

I pay tribute to the hardworking transport crews who are out there in the thick of the crisis but also in the immediate aftermath. I drove between Bundaberg and Rocky recently. It is always quite an experience seeing the Bruce Highway after a lot of rain, but one would have to say that the potholes were caverns. What we hear complained about most in regard to the National Highway being a national disgrace is correct. It is time that this National Highway was finally properly funded. There is no doubt that basic maintenance funds have not been provided. There has to be urgent attention to ensure we see proper maintenance and upgrades of many critical sections of this road. What a shame that so much money was spent on pink batts which could have instead been spent on nation-building infrastructure. This is such a project and one that I would urge this state government and the federal government to pay attention to. I hear a lot about it as I am moving about the state.

I pay tribute to those crews that I saw undertaking the immediate repair work that had to be done as I was getting out on the road. It is hot and hard work. As we know, the weather has been steamy. It has not been pleasant weather in which to do a hard labouring job. However, they were among the many crews who were out there trying to restore our road network to allow people to get on with their lives.

There are some issues that we need to raise with regard to communication during the height of the various disasters. We appreciate that the extent of the flooding throughout the state meant that some of the systems in place were overwhelmed. There is an opportunity to review this. It needs to be done with rigour and honesty to ensure that the communication networks, particularly for motorists, are as accurate as possible and that appropriate signage is put in place in those areas where floodwaters cross roads. For example, I heard a number of cases where B-doubles found themselves on particular routes and the 'road closed' signs were situated at locations where they had no hope in hell of turning their trucks around safely. We need to take heed of those learnings from quite a number of communities where this issue of communication, of improved signage and getting accurate information out to people in a timely way is so

vital. We also know there was a meltdown with the phone lines and the website and that this was an issue. Certainly we support there being an appropriate review of these systems so that they can be more robust in future.

As I said, we have heard many reports of outstanding work done by volunteers and also state agents and state public servants. However, a complaint was circulated to me and many other members of parliament, which I will table. I note that in the heat of these issues there can be things that break down and do not go as well. I table the email from Gary Briggs from the Darling Downs. He has some quite heated feelings that there were examples where more consideration needed to be given to local knowledge. He speaks of cases where motorists were not seeking to drive in flooded waters and were not seeking to take risks but simply needed to look after their stock, and authorities need to take some consideration of their needs. I will table that. I have written to the minister on that issue as I understand this was quite a serious complaint.

Tabled paper: Email, dated 23 January 2011, from Mr Gary Briggs with subject title 'Plea for help to stop idiots in uniform' [\[3967\]](#).

Overall, as we know, this is a big state. Most people did the right thing and they worked cooperatively. Where there are problems, they need to be worked through to ensure that people are not only able to safely and reasonably get on with their lives but also be protected where there are real and very present dangers on our roads.

There are many lessons to be learnt from the infrastructure that needs to be upgraded, the maintenance task and certainly cooperation with local government, which has a significant part of that rebuild on its plate. Local governments have a very small rate base but, in fact, have a very significant task at hand. We support any moves to assist them in the rollout of the timely provision of funds so that they can get their communities moving again. The issues with day labour and including that within the natural disaster relief funding has already been mentioned. If councils do not have contracting arrangements with external groups they currently are penalised because they have to use their own local labour who would be pulled off work they otherwise have to do.

We will certainly be keen to work with communities on the many and vast issues that will arise across the state and provide our support for the rebuild. However, as I said, it must be a rebuild that is done with accountability. Where there is red tape that does not serve the purpose and it needs to be cut, let it be cut. If that red tape is a process that does not serve the general systems of government, then there is an opportunity to say that other systems that might be bogging down the normal processes need to also be overhauled. There must be clarity about the relationships of how this new authority operates.

We support the legislation but we want to ensure that Queensland does not experience once again the failure of timely and appropriate spending with good scoping of projects which has left such a burden of debt. There is an opportunity to get it right this time. We want to see that Queenslanders do have a rebuild where the right decisions are made and that they are involved in the rebuild of their lives and livelihoods.