



## Speech By **Robbie Katter**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA**

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### **MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST**

#### **Road Infrastructure**

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (11.51 am): I would like to use this opportunity to speak on strategic road infrastructure and the opportunities for North Queensland and the greater state. I would like to see a renewed push for an inland highway as an alternate and considerably faster route from Cairns to Melbourne which offers myriad benefits. This not only offers a strategic, cost-effective and common-sense solution to congestion on the Bruce Highway but delivers the type of infrastructure that is desperately needed to drive economic activity in the state. If we can move a small fraction of the money spent on office buildings and tunnels and road upgrades in the south-east corner we could deliver some very worthwhile projects of national significance.

Flinders Shire Council and Etheridge Shire Council are both suffering badly from the poor conditions in the cattle industry and from the removal of capital works funding for roads in their areas. I use these two councils as examples. There will undoubtedly be calls sometime soon from many other like councils to get financial assistance as their current situation is not sustainable.

Rural ratepayers make up the majority of their revenue and many of these residents simply will not have the money to pay rates over the next year or so. The Cloncurry Shire Council reported that approximately 90 per cent of their revenue comes from rural ratepayers. Flinders Shire Council gets approximately 60 per cent of its revenue from roadwork activity. There are, however, no capital works planned for that shire for the next four years. Thrown into the mix is that the town has just lost 30 rail jobs and the outlook is very dire indeed.

Councils are typically the largest employer in these towns and provide the majority of work for most of the larger local contractors. Last year the Boulia Shire Council had to lay off 15 people and numbers at the school are right down, threatening the loss of another teacher, due to the lack of opportunities around roadworks and the like.

These towns will need some sort of stimulus to keep them viable. I believe that roadworks would strategically contribute to Queensland's economy should they be used as a stimulus tool. I speak not of pink batts or school sheds but roadworks. Councils can employ more people and at the same time distribute the benefits of the revenue to residents. I believe roadworks could be one of the most effective tools for many of these councils to ride through this most difficult time.

As for strategic roads, there could be no better proposition than the inland highway via the Hann Highway and the Torrens Creek-Aramac Road to save some 13 hours of driving from Cairns to Melbourne. With the appropriate upgrades, triple road trains could use that route. Triple road trains have a 90-tonne capacity as opposed to B-doubles which have a 45-tonne capacity limit for the Bruce Highway. For every triple road train that uses the inland highway we would take two B-doubles off the Bruce Highway. There would be a considerable saving in terms of traffic along that highway.

What is the cost of a project of this nature? A lot less than the \$10 billion price tag to upgrade the Bruce Highway. To provide a fully bitumen sealed route from Melbourne to Cairns requires the bitumening of approximately 100 kilometres on the Hann Highway and 30 kilometres on the Torrens Creek-Aramac Road. The cost would be approximately \$100 million. That is less than 15 per cent of the commitment to the new office building in Brisbane.

This has the potential to take much of the heavy traffic off the Bruce Highway and deliver a cost-effective solution to this high-profile problem. Coupled with a new logistics distribution centre near Hughenden, this could provide a strategic logistical solution to bottlenecks in Townsville port as well. This is the opportunity to kill two birds with the one stone—that is, to stimulate rural activity and deliver strategic road infrastructure that will go some way to resolving issues on the Bruce Highway.

I have to throw in at this point that it is critical that councils are given the opportunity to provide some of these works. Let me elaborate on this. One side issue to this which illustrates the problem is that currently under federal funding local councils are not allowed to use their day labour for flood damage works. This is an abject failure of government policy. I appreciate that there has been dialogue between the local government minister and the federal government and they are looking to address this issue.

I want to highlight how bad this problem is. Flinders Shire Council put out a tender for flood damage works which they costed at \$7 million. They only had one response to tender which was for \$23 million. It is costing government an extra \$16 million to do a job the council could have done for \$7 million. They need the work, but they are not allowed to do it because they cannot use their day labour for the flood damage work. I know that there has been dialogue but that really needs to be addressed. I think it is a policy failure. It is something that is really needed to stimulate these councils. I strongly urge the state government to continue dialogue with the federal government.

In conclusion, Queensland needs positive signs that the government is willing to invest in strategic infrastructure. To that end, I table an article quoting Ken Henry, the former Treasury secretary.

*Tabled paper:* Article from the *Australian Financial Review* online, dated 30 September 2013, titled 'Governments fail on infrastructure analysis: Ken Henry' [4815].

He said that our problem is not that we spend too little but that we do not spend well. It says, 'Too much tunnelling. Stop building tunnels.' We need to build roads and strategic infrastructure that contributes to the economy of this state and not vote-buying exercises in the south-east corner.