Eighth Assembly First Session 01/06/99 Parliament Record No.16

Date : 03/06/99

Question : AustralAsia Railway

Question Date : 03/06/99

Member : Ms MARTIN

To : CHIEF MINISTER

Status : Questions

Information :
On Tuesday the Chief Minister told Territorians he would walk out of his meeting with the Prime Minister with the money to build the railway. My question to the Chief Minister is why did you create such a build-up only to deliver such a fizzer?

ANSWER

Mr Speaker, yesterday's meeting with the Prime Minister was an important, vital and productive meeting in terms of progressing the railway for the Northern Territory. Might I add that it is disappointing, particularly disappointing, that the Leader of the Opposition not only makes up statements that I'm supposed to have made, but also takes the opportunity to trivialise what is a critically important project, not only for Australia, not only for the South Australian government and its people, but also for Territorians.

Members interjecting.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr BURKE: The Leader of the Opposition and the members opposite need to understand that we are not buying some toy train set. This is a very important project and it involves very, very complicated negotiations. I said before I went to Canberra that in a perfect world I expected to be able to walk out of that meeting and announce who would be the preferred bidder to progress to the next stage. That is what I said.

Ms Martin interjecting.

Mr BURKE: I can tell you that has been achieved. I will pick up on the interjections. The issue...

Mr Stirling: No, it hasn't. They haven't announced that either.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr BURKE: The issue for Territorians is that we are going to build a railway.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mr BURKE: And we are not going to be steam rolled into some sort of political exercise to score cheap political points by this media junkie that sits opposite whose only contribution to this parliament is to trivialise issues and invent issues, such as, State Square has some impact on our budget.

The Leader of the Opposition holds up the information paper that was produced to accompany a very complicated and detailed statement I made with regards to Planning for Growth, and a classic example of the way this person operates is that her whole response to that detailed plan, in terms of laying the foundations for growth for the Northern Territory for the future - which, I might add, gave her boundless opportunity to lay down some sort of plan of her own - was to refer to that particular information sheet as the whole substance of her response. It is an absolute disgrace, Mr Speaker, and Territorians will see clearly what this person is all about. They will see that she is no more than what Mr Ian Fraser on 4 August 1998 - I might add, the endorsed Labor Candidate for the seat of Port
Darwin - said about the members opposite.

He said in 1998: 'With the exception of Clare Martin, and I say Maggie too - she's done all right, and John Bailey - the rest of them, I think, are just oxygen thieves. That's my best bet. And, if they all went away and took a holiday and let someone else have a go at it, we'd be better off. And he went on to say: 'They're really very undisciplined in parliament. They're, you know, they need to do a lot of work. I am saying that as a local politician, and I guess they know what the feelings are from the rank and file and they know what the feelings are from the general public, and the business community'.

Ms Martin interjecting.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr BURKE: Take heed of the comments and opinions of your endorsed candidate for the seat of Port Darwin and you might get the message.

This is the sort of trivialised, petty politics that the Leader of the Opposition is now trying to play with the railway, similar to the triviality she played with our budget, when her whole response to the Territory budget was to invent some sort of $20m cash allocation to State Square. That's the way of this, the best of oxygen thieves, the media junkie who's whole response to this parliament is to go for the 15-second grab on the media, and you will be found out.

I'll tell you what happened in Canberra, and it's a bit more complicated than buying a train set.

Mr Stirling: You found his office, met the Prime Minister.

Ms Martin interjecting.

Mr Ah Kit interjecting.

Mr BURKE: They can interject because, frankly, the members opposite are out of this whole process. You're totally irrelevant to the whole business. For the sake of those Territorians who are relevant and who are interested I will explain exactly what happened in our meeting yesterday with the Prime Minister. Mr Rick Allert, the Chairman of the Australasian Railway Corporation, Mr Paul Tyrell the Chief Executive Officer and Secretary of Chief Minister's, the CEO of the Australasian Railway Corporation, Premier of South Australia, Mr John Olsen, myself and the Prime Minister met for the best part of 1 hour.

We took the opportunity to bring the Prime Minister up to date on what exactly has happened with this exercise, and let's not forget, this has been an extremely complicated and difficult exercise. We are now moving to Stage 3. But let's not forget what Stage 1 and Stage 2 have been about.

Stage 1 has been about seeing if we can even begin the process and getting a commitment from the Commonwealth and the South Australian and Northern Territory governments to put money on the table to really restart this whole project. Right through Stage 2 we've gone to the market, we've short-listed bidders, we've established 3 short listed consortia. Those consortia have presented their bids, bankable bids I might add are on the table, and the critical decision was whether we would not move to Stage 3, because Stage 3 is the beginning of the most sensitive and difficult part of the processes. This is when one selected consortia is nominated as the preferred bidder.

There will be a secondary consortia, I imagine, who will follow on, but all of the effort will now be put into the preferred bidder.

The decision to move to that stage involved the 3 stakeholders. Let us not forget that apart from the private enterprise consortiums that are involved, there are 3 major stakeholders in this exercise: the Commonwealth Government, the South Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government. It was appropriate that at this stage we sat down together, analysed exactly where we were with the project, and made a decision that we would or would not go to stage 3. I was confident, as I said before I left, that we would go to stage 3. We took that opportunity to explain what the bids were on the table, to analyse and explain to the Prime Minister the substance of the preferred bidder's
bid, and to decide together the parameters within which these 3 stakeholders would move forward to the next phase.

It would be very easy for me to stand up in this parliament and give details in terms of dollars and other details as to how this next stage would be progressed. I won't do that, and I won't do that for a number of reasons. Because the end result is to get ourselves a project, to get ourselves a railway, and this is too important to play petty politics and give some sort of answer that might suit certain people's opinion at this stage of the game.

The parameters have been agreed. The consortia negotiators will now nominate the preferred bidder. In a perfect world, as I said, the preferred bidder could have been nominated by this Northern Territory Government as early as last Tuesday. In a spirit of good will and in partnership with the South Australian Government we waited. Their Cabinet does not meet until next Monday. I expect no difficulty in both governments confirming the name of the preferred bidder officially on, I would imagine, next Tuesday. From that point, the negotiators will then deal with the preferred bidder in getting absolutely established what is the substance of that bid. When that is absolutely in concrete the 3 stakeholders will then meet again to decide whether the project goes ahead or not. This is the critical third stage.

The Leader of the Opposition made some statements about 'Burke fell flat on his face. Burke's a goose.' I notice that David English in a column in the NT News today said that the Chief Minister has hitched himself very clearly to this railway project. I have. This project is critically important for the Northern Territory. It's critically important for the South Australian and Commonwealth governments. In fact, on some of the analysis that's been done by Access Economics, the reality is that the overall benefit to the South Australian economy and to the Commonwealth economy is far greater than the net benefit to the Northern Territory economy. It is a fundamental project in terms of establishing within those Foundations For Our Growth the way that this Northern Territory can become a hub into the region. It's a critical infrastructure project. That's why it is so clearly enunciated in the Foundations For Our Growth.

In terms of this Chief Minister's ownership of this project, let me say something absolutely clearly. This project I am confident will succeed, and when it succeeds, as the member for Blain on my left has said, success has many fathers and failure is an orphan. This railway will succeed. We will build it for Territorians and there will be many claimants to its success.

Can I say that for my part the role I would play as Chief Minister will be the part that falls to me at this time. But at the end of the day, when this project succeeds, let everyone be very clear that it is the tenacity and effort of the member for Blain over 10 years that has driven this project from its start to its fruition. And when all the fathers of success stand up and claim some sort of success, I can tell you that I will be the first to say it then, and I say it now, that success belongs to this gentleman on my left, the member for Blain, the Minister for AustralAsia Railway to which Territorians and South Australians, and Australians generally, will owe a great indebtedness for the way he's developed this country into the future.