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Question: Consortium Studying Railway

Member: Mr PALMER
To: MINISTER for TRANSPORT and WORKS

Status: Questions

Information:
Can the minister advise, in some detail, what impact there might be on cost estimates for the Darwin to Alice Springs railway following the revelation by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday that another international consortium is preparing a feasibility study on that very railway?

Mr Ede: Who released its name? You!

Mr Coulter: The consortium did, on about 3 occasions to my knowledge.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

ANSWER

To take up the interjection of the Leader of the Opposition as to who released its name, let me say that I have not released publicly the name of the consortium. I was being a little discreet about it yesterday, Mr Speaker.

Mr Ede: As was I.

Mr FINCH: The very first person to acknowledge publicly that the international consortium is, in fact, Morrison Knudson, a major American consortium, was none other than the Leader of the Opposition on radio this morning.

Mr EDE: A point of order, Mr Speaker! The honourable minister is alleging that I was the person who released this name when he knows full well that that is not the case. I believe that he should try to put some degree of truth into his answer. He should move a substantive motion if that is what he wishes to talk about.

Mr SPEAKER: There is no point of order. The Leader of the Opposition will have the opportunity after question time to make a personal explanation.

Mr FINCH: Mr Speaker, I will explain why I suggested the Leader of the Opposition was the first to acknowledge publicly that the international consortium, that he discussed in the House yesterday, is Morrison-Knudson. Quite incorrectly, on this morning's ABC program, the announcer suggested that it was I who revealed the name. That was totally untrue. By now, that interviewer realises that suggestion was incorrect. I was only being discreet because I was not certain whether Morrison-Knudson would have wished its name to be announced publicly. Certainly, I am aware, from my own contact of about a year ago, that the construction industry well knows that Morrison-Knudson has been studying proposals relating to the railway for a year or more. In fact, some 6 to 9 months ago, Morrison-Knudson indicated that, among many other things in Australia, it was looking at the railway. It said that publicly. I was being discreet. However, in response to the interviewer's assumptions, the Leader of the Opposition was a little castigating in the presumption that I was the one who revealed it publicly. It was not true. However, by his acknowledgement in the same interview, he himself fell into the trap of assuming everything that a journalist says is correct.

Let us come back to the basic question. Would construction prices be at all affected? What a load of hogwash! There is not a consultant, contractor or supplier of any note who is not trying to clamber on
board and is not aware of who is here. There are also the others who have examined the proposal previously. We have a term for what the Leader of the Opposition has done: ‘premature release’. He became a little excited when his buddies from South Australia let him know that Morrison-Knudson was pursuing this matter. It is not the first group to do that. We hope that, before too long, we will have a group that is successful in putting together a package that will work. The Opposition Leader became a little excited and

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could not let the chance go by to become the champion of an integrated system that involves ports and rail.

Mr Ede: I wish you would.

Mr FINCH: Mr Speaker, many years ago, this government realised that, for the rail to succeed properly, we would need the new port on 70 ha at East Arm that we have now designated. We have now done that and we announced that publicly. Why would we allocate 70 ha of land if we did not think a railway would eventuate at some time, and preferably soon? Not only that, but we also recognise, as I tried to point out to the honourable member yesterday, that a little more is required than simply a brand, spanning new port with you-beaut equipment, and a new you-beaut loop that will handle 1.8 km trains, double-stacked etc. We have spoken about all this for years now. There is nothing new in it.

More importantly, if he had listened yesterday, the Opposition Leader would have realised that there is rather more to it that is, getting the waterfront and the national rail system right. If he really wants to contribute to this debate, he could use a little lateral thinking. Morrison-Knudson do not want this issue blown sky high at all, nor do we. All that Morrison-Knudson has done to date is prepare a preliminary report. This morning, the same interviewer suggested that I reveal details of that report. I have not seen the report, other than its cover, and I saw that yesterday. I do not imagine that it does more than provide preliminary advice, preliminary assessment and draft proposals that they will work towards a final solution.

I suggest to the Leader of the Opposition that he keep his cool. If he wants to do something constructive, he will go to Canberra and ensure that the federal Treasurer, the Prime Minister, and the Minister for Transport and Communications acknowledge that this is a project in the community interest nationally - in commercial terms, in defence terms and in equity terms. He ought to go down there and ensure that we receive a part of the road fuel tax, the $6500m that slips through the Treasurer's hands every year and is spent on welfare and all kinds of other things. Let us put that money back into infrastructure in this country, or at least let us ensure that the federal government adopts an appropriate taxation regime. It has nothing to do with the VFT that he was alluding to this morning. The 2 projects are not tied together, as ought to be very clear to the Opposition Leader. When talking about rail freight infrastructure, it is a totally different question in terms of community interest, and he ought to recognise it.

Mr Ede: Go and convince Kerin. Go and convince Beazley that it is different, and you might get somewhere.

Mr FINCH: I suggest the Leader of the Opposition sit himself down quietly, instead of trying to grandstand and jump onto somebody else's wheelbarrow, because he will end up getting hurt over matters that he does not understand.

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