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Question: Alice Springs to Darwin Railway

Member: Mr PALMER
To: MINISTER for TRANSPORT and WORKS
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Information:
I preface my question by saying that, because of the complexity of the issues involved, I would appreciate a detailed response. Can the minister advise the House about the likelihood of funding that was made available under the One Nation package, and which remains unexpended in the various states, being made available to the Northern Territory to commence construction of the railway? If it were made available, to what purposes would it be put?

ANSWER

Mr Speaker, despite the fact that 250 000 t of sand has been deposited on the sandbar since 1987, I understand that fill for the railway will not be required from that source. Considerable investigation has been undertaken already in relation to sources for ballast along the route of the Darwin to Alice Springs railway. Whilst a little more work is required, it would not take very much to begin excavating and stockpiling ballast for this project, nor would it take very long to have the steel mills at Whyalla rolling rail for this much-needed national transport link. As was reported a year or more ago, the design survey for the first 200 km from Alice Springs has advanced to a stage where it would take only 3 months to call tenders and commence constructing the earthworks for the project.

Honourable members are aware that government decided to proceed this financial year with an EIS for a new port at East Arm, a facility of major importance to the rail as part of the integrated freight system. It is anticipated that a huge quantity of fill will be required for that project. Clearly, as is the case with Cullen Bay, an EIS will be very important to ensure that the environment is not affected adversely. We hope that the EIS will be completed with the hydrological and marine surveys to allow construction of the port to commence in about June next year.

The point is that the Territory is poised to proceed with this much-needed project which is of national and international importance. We heard last week that Victoria and other states were unable to spend their rail share of the One Nation program. That is understandable because, in respect of the Adelaide to Melbourne line in particular, no work has been done. The only feasibility studies that had been done previously had indicated that it was not viable to construct that rail. By providing well over $100m, the federal government thought that it would prop up a few marginal seats in Victoria and South Australia at the behest of the then Premier of South Australia, Mr Bannon, who put the Darwin to Alice Springs rail third or fourth on his list of priorities. Ironically, the rail component of the One Nation package would be well on the way to success if ex-Premier Bannon had thought a little more about the future of the country instead of the future of his federal colleagues' forthcoming election.

The expenditure of some $100m on the Adelaide to Melbourne rail would mean that the 14½-hour rail journey to shift freight from Port Adelaide to Melbourne would be shortened by 2 hours. That movement of freight from Port Adelaide to Melbourne is undertaken solely because Port Melbourne is incapable of turning ships round and moving freight itself. At a cost of $120m, what is the benefit of such a move? The true railway people in Australia, those who are developing expertise in respect of freight movement, would acknowledge that it is nonsense. The fact that it cannot spend the $170m on the east coast indicates that things are becoming desperate for the federal ALP which is to face an election soon. Given the marginal seats in Victoria and South Australia, it is keen to see a few more project signs erected around the country indicating ...
Mr EDE: A point of order, Mr Speaker! We have now had over 5 minutes of this from the honourable minister. We do not dispute the need for this House to debate the matter of the railroad. I say 'debate' because the minister should have raised the matter by way of a ministerial statement. Given that we have been very quiet and have allowed him to continue without interruption, I feel that he should wind up his remarks and allow question time to proceed.

Mr SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Mr FINCH: Mr Speaker, I appreciate the courtesies extended by the opposition. I am sure that they would agree wholeheartedly that this is a project of enormous importance to the Northern Territory and to Australia. If this country is to have an economic future, if we are to claw ourselves out of this depression, our business future lies in South-East and North-East Asia. That is an unchallengeable statement. I am sure the Leader of the Opposition agrees wholeheartedly. In fact, so does Prime Minister Keating, who has said much the same in the past. With that in mind, if we obtained $200m from the federal government to add to the Territory's existing $100m commitment, we could have this $1300m project under way immediately. Much has been done already. We could start rolling rail, and stockpiling ballast and even commence on some construction work from Alice Springs immediately. Jobs would be created immediately, particularly at Whyalla and for South Australia generally. It is easy to say that $200m from the taxpayers will create jobs, but it must be remembered that, for every dollar spent by government, another $3 or $4 of private enterprise money will be spent. The taxpayers will obtain an enormous flow-on from a small injection of funds.

The Territory has a reputation for being able to get on with the job as we have demonstrated with our One Nation roads program. That is why we had a promise from Minister Brown that we would probably be high on the list for obtaining more money in that regard. This would require a very small contribution of $200m from the federal government. The taxpayer would recoup it almost immediately. During the construction phase, taxes would be paid by the construction companies and the workers and savings would be made on dole payments, road maintenance and in relation to defence factors. All of that would be of enormous benefit to the Australian taxpayer. There is absolutely no reason why the Prime Minister should not put his attention to this meaningful integrated freight transport system that even members opposite would have to support wholeheartedly.