Eighth Assembly First Session 20/02/2001 Parliament Record No.27

Date : 20/02/2001 Question No : 

Question : AustralAsia Railway Funding - South Australian Contribution

Question Date : 20/02/2001
Member : Ms MARTIN
To : CHIEF MINISTER

Status : Questions

Information :
Labor welcomes the moves towards achieving financial close to the railway announced last night. However, despite the additional commitment of $26m each by the Commonwealth and the Territory to meeting the funding shortfall, John Olsen has indicated today that no more money will be coming from South Australian taxpayers.

I ask the Chief Minister: Did he know that this was John Olsen's position when the deal was announced last night? And does John Olsen's position underline the Commonwealth's commitment as reported in today's NT News which indicated both the Territory and South Australian governments would sign up to provide additional funding for the project? Or, has the Chief Minister yet again prematurely announced a deal when no such deal is yet in place?

ANSWER

Mr Speaker, if one takes the last question first, it wasn't the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory who prematurely announced the deal, it was the Prime Minister of Australia in a public forum who announced the Commonwealth government's commitment if shortfall funding is required to join with the Northern Territory and South Australian governments to meet that shortfall to ensure this great project moves ahead.

No one can speak for the Premier of South Australia, but it is important to note, in the transcript I was given today, that the Premier of South Australia has said about the railway, 'It is important for construction, it's important for jobs, it's important for our state's future. And at the end of the day it will not fall over'. That to my mind is the commitment that I will expect in due course. The South Australian government has some legislative amendments it necessarily would have to pass, as I understand it, in order to provide their contribution. That is entirely and appropriately in the hands of the South Australian government.

What does disappoint me is that on this great day the Leader of the Opposition will once again dig deep, get into the gutter and try to find some way to undermine the fact that this project is going ahead. No matter what is said, done, written or whatever in the print media, Territorians know one thing absolutely clearly and that is that a federal Labour Government would have walked away from this project. Nothing sends a clearer message to the minds of Territorians as to the attitude of the real powers in the Labor Party. They don't want the railway to go ahead.

The other indisputable fact is that the Leader of the Opposition in the Northern Territory has once again been shown to have no influence on her masters in Canberra. It has been an embarrassment to the Labor Party of the Northern Territory, particularly the leader of the Labour Party of the Northern Territory, who has continually tried to utter words on behalf of Kim Beazley, giving unequivocal commitments of $300m on behalf of her federal leader. As late as last week she was reiterating that commitment from the federal leader. He has now been in the Northern Territory for the last day or so and all we've gotten out of him is a walk-away from that commitment. That is the end result of the undermining and attempts to scupper this project that, frankly, have been run out of Canberra - the fact that the leader of the Labor Party of the Northern Territory is irrelevant.

She says, and I pick up the interjection: 'No one believes you'. Now, I don't know where the Leader of the Opposition gets her information from. Maybe you confine your discussions to the Roma Bar. But I can tell you, I get around among Territorians. I go to clubs, I go to businesses, and no one can convince me other than that Territorians want this railway. They know how important this railway is for their future. Every small business in the Northern
Territory sees this railway as essential in underpinning not only their own confidence but the confidence of other small businesses, many of whom the depend on for their own businesses. Territorians know that the achievement of this great project is almost completed.

Mr STIRLING: A point of order, Mr Speaker! I appreciate the Chief Minister's response, but Olsen's refusal to put his $26m on the line, does it undermine ...

Mr SPEAKER: There is no point or order. The Chief Minister has some leeway in answering the question. Have you completed the answer, Chief Minister?

Mr BURKE: Mr Speaker, I want to make this absolutely clear. The Prime Minister of Australia does not stand in the forum and give the commitment of the federal contribution in isolation.

Ms Martin: Well, he didn't talk to Olsen.

Mr BURKE: If the Leader of the Opposition ever took the time to listen, what I have consistently said over the last few weeks is that there have been two strategies working concurrently together. One strategy in terms of achieving a private investor has some time to run. It could be as long as 12 months or more to achieve a private investor. The real issue has always been that financial close on this railway has to occur very rapidly. It has to occur rapidly so that the workforce can be mobilised for the start of the dry season. That has always been the issue. I have said consistently that at financial close either a private investor has to be found or the governments will have to ...

Ms Martin: You promised us financial close six months ago.

Mr BURKE: If the Leader of the Opposition took the time to listen ...

Ms Martin: We have been listening.

Mr BURKE: Clean out the ears, get the old mouth zipped up, and you might hear the answer.

At financial close either a private financier is committed or the governments will underwrite that shortfall. What has been announced publicly is that any short fall funds that would need to be provided by the tax payer will be provided on the same conditions as that would be offered to a private investor. Those short fall funds will be provided by the governments at financial close if needed, and that commitment is not only given by myself, it's also been given by the Prime Minister of Australia.

That's the surety the consortium needs. That's the surety the private investors who are currently involved in the project needed to hear, and that's the sort of surety that will move this project through to financial close without any interruption. Rightly the Premier of South Australia is still vigorously looking to achieve a private investor to take up that shortfall prior to financial close. I applaud him in those efforts. I also note importantly that he says, and these are his words not mine: "At the end of the day this project will not fall over". That is the commitment given by the Prime Minister and that's the commitment I give in this Chamber today.