

Mr BENNETT (Denison - Attorney-General) - I welcome this opportunity to speak in support of this motion. Having heard the member for Braddon, Mr Weldon, talk at length as to where he wants to be in two or three years I can only say that I am reminded of the frustrated lady-in-waiting.

I think it is appropriate at this stage to thank the electors of Denison, particularly those who assisted me in my campaign. I have no doubt that in the months ahead I will look back with longing at the opportunity to be heard in silence.

The point which came through loud and clear from the electors on 8 February was that they will not tolerate political mediocrity and also that we have their votes only on the basis of a four-year loan, in mortgage terms, repayable on demand. In my view, it is fundamental if we are to satisfy the electorate that we ensure that the legislative process keeps pace with the needs of the community. The classic example of this is the problem we now face with daylight saving. We are out of step with the other States and we cannot do anything about it in time to rectify the situation. The Government is addressing that situation as a matter of urgency and hopefully it will not occur in that context again. But it is a classic example of the point I wish to make.

Whilst there are obvious disadvantages from Tasmania's being an island with a small population, there are also many advantages in that we can demonstrate ourselves to be a compact and effective unit which can lead the way for the rest of the country in a number of key areas. However, with the current attitude of the Federal Labor Government, this is becoming extremely and increasingly difficult.

I forgo my chance to parish-pump, so to speak, because there is one issue which is close to my heart and should be close to the heart of every member in this House. It has received a deal of publicity in recent days. It is, of course, the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project. The public deserves to know the true facts of the matter and I am more than willing to forgo my chance, as I say, to parish-pump and be heard in silence to give it those facts.

It cannot be disputed that this program is of enormous national significance. It is of national significance and is funded by the taxpayer which, we must not forget, includes the Tasmanian taxpayer. It is an area of Tasmania that is visited by 51 per cent of adult visitors to this State. It has attracted a team of skilled restoration experts whom we will never replace if we lose them at this time. That team has won national and international awards for the work it has done at Port Arthur since the project commenced in March 1979.

The project has been based on a two-for-one financial contribution - two from the Commonwealth, one from the State. To date the Tasmanian taxpayer has contributed \$3 million and the Federal taxpayer, including the Tasmanian taxpayer, has contributed a further \$6 million.

The whole scheme has been administered by a Commonwealth-State steering committee which provides a forward budget to the Commonwealth each year - a very detailed document indeed. Its expenditure, despite what we heard from Senator Tate to whom I shall refer later tonight, is subject to State and Commonwealth audit and may I say that, to the credit of all involved - both State and the Federal representatives - it has worked efficiently and in harmony. So what has now gone wrong?

It became abundantly clear last year - 1985 - that the scheme would have to be extended. The joint Commonwealth-State steering committee discussed the situation at length and as a result, on 25 September 1985, a very detailed four-year program was sent to Mr Cohen, the Federal Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment. I say it is a detailed document because it is a very well-presented, detailed document which was forwarded with the concurrence of that State-Commonwealth steering committee. A covering letter was sent by my predecessor, the then Minister for National Parks, Mr Beswick, setting out the significance of this project not only to this State but the nation generally. I will read that covering letter, which is addressed to the Honourable Barry Cohen, MHR, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment, because it sets out precisely what the situation was then, and is now:

'Dear Minister,

The Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project has made the greatest single contribution to cultural heritage conservation ever in Tasmania's and perhaps Australia's history. The Project has brought together a group with a wide range of conservation, architectural, engineering, archaeological, historical and interpretation expertise, and their work has ensured that the many facets of this large and complex site will survive and be appreciated by large numbers of visitors for many years to come. Some of the achievements of the Project are shown in the extensive information package herewith.'

That is the document to which I referred earlier.

'The work has not been completed however, and the project will terminate in June next with a number of important aspects remaining to be carried out.' Conscious of the need for further major works, the Tasmanian Government proposes that the project be extended for a further four years on the same financial basis as the first stage. To this end the State will provide \$2.6 million over the next four years subject to your Government's agreement to provide \$2.00 for \$1.00 matching grants. If your government was to agree to the extension of the project I am sure that this would be viewed as a positive contribution to the continued protection of historic sites on the Tasman Peninsula which, as you know, is listed on the Register of the National Estate.'

I am sorry Dr Brown is not here.

'Details of the proposal are outlined in the attached brochure. You will note that principal attention is to be given to the Model Prison, the Coal Mines (in the northwest of Tasman Peninsula), Point Puer, development of visitor facilities, research and planning for sites elsewhere on the Peninsula and providing assistance to the owners of other convict period buildings on the Peninsula.

In view of our proposed inspection together with your colleague the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Tourism, Mr. John Brown, scheduled for 8th November, 1985, which is designed to review the achievements of the Project, I suggest that the opportunity be taken to make a joint announcement of the extension of the Project provided of course that the Commonwealth Government agrees to the proposed extension.

In view of his involvement with the Project and its very significant tourism impact, I am also forwarding a copy of this letter to your colleague, the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Tourism, Mr. John Brown.'

As things have turned out, that was optimistic. Mr Cohen did inspect the site on 8 November 1985. He was then told by my colleague that the staff were even at that stage uneasy as to their future - and I suggest that is understandable as a number of them are married and have families. I am told Mr Cohen suggested that the Prime Minister might even like to inspect the site because he, Mr Cohen, was so impressed with what he saw. That opportunity was offered to the Prime Minister, who replied on the basis that he would inspect the site when he was in Tasmania if he had the chance, and his reply was certainly not unreasonable.

However nothing at all was heard from Mr Cohen following his inspection of the site or, as I say, since the letter that I have read and the detailed program that was forwarded to him on 25 September 1985. Added to that, my department advises me that there were countless telephone calls to Mr Cohen's department to find out what he was doing. No satisfactory reply could be elicited from his department.

As a result of Mr Cohen's continued tardiness - and one could say rudeness, because he did not even have the courtesy to acknowledge the documentation he was given which was prepared by the joint Commonwealth-State steering committee - he was forwarded a telex on 16 January 1986 by my predecessor and I quote:

'I refer to my letter of 25 September 1985 proposing that the Port Arthur conservation and development project be extended as a joint Commonwealth/State funded project for another four years.

You will recall from your visit to the site on 8 November 1985 that uncertainty as to the outcome of the proposal is having a disruptive effect on the project staff. This has already led to several staff with extensive expertise and knowledge of the site being lost.

While the current project is scheduled to finish in June this year it will not be possible for all staffing to be maintained right up to that date unless a decision is made in the very near future.

In order that further loss of valuable heritage conservation and restoration expertise can be avoided I ask that you finalise your decision on the State government proposal as a matter of urgency.

John Beswick  
Minister for National Parks'

What response was there to that telex? We were graced with the first response ever received: we had a telex back, but not from Mr Cohen; we received one from his senior private secretary on 18 January, two days later. From it we gleaned that he would draw the minister's telex to the attention of Mr Cohen at the earliest opportunity. What did we get from that - not a word; nothing came from Mr Cohen after that. There was a deafening silence. That is the regard which the Federal Labor Party has for the Tasmanian populace and for a program which has been universally accepted and has worked harmoniously to the credit, as I say, of all involved - Federal and State.

There were more telephone calls; there was still no response. On 25 January 1986 the Premier opened the Commandant's House which had been restored as part of the program. Senator Coates was there. He said he had discussed the matter with the Prime Minister and that he was quite certain we would have a reply in ten days from the Prime Minister. He was most enthusiastic about the program and, to be fair, so was everybody else who has ever inspected it. But by 14 February 1986 we still had not been graced with a reply from Mr Cohen and so it was necessary for my predecessor, Mr Beswick, to send yet another telex. I will read it because it sets this whole thing in context:

'The Hon. Barry Cohen.

I refer to my telex of 16 January 1986 concerning the Tasmanian Government's proposal that the Port Arthur conservation and development project be extended as a joint Commonwealth/State funded project for another four years.'

It is getting like an old tune, is it not?

'Your Senior Private Secretary acknowledged my telex indicating that it would be drawn to your attention at the earliest opportunity.

Although I have become increasingly concerned with continual Commonwealth delay in consideration of our proposal I took some heart from Senator Coates' comments at the official opening of the restored Commandant's House at Port Arthur historic site on 25 January 1986. Senator Coates said that he had discussed the extension of the project with the Prime Minister and was confident that a decision would be made within ten days.

That period has now well and truly passed and enquiries at officer level this week have drawn the reaction that a decision was expected within two weeks.

It is now over four and a half months since our proposal was put to you and over three months since your personal inspection of the site on 8 November 1985.

The continual delays by the Commonwealth in considering this proposal are having a considerably destabilising effect on the conservation and development team staff and are also contributing to the loss of valuable knowledge and expertise as staff, understandably, protect the welfare of their families by seeking alternative and more secure employment elsewhere. While Port Arthur Historic Site plays a significant part in the Tasmanian tourist industry it is also undoubtedly of National Heritage significance and the Commonwealth Government has clear responsibility to ensure that the ruins of the penal settlement which played such a pivotal role in the development of this nation are properly conserved and presented for future generations.

I would be pleased if you would now give this matter your immediate and urgent attention.

John Beswick  
Minister for National Parks'

What do we get from that? What did Mr Cohen give the Tasmanian public - nothing. He gave no reply at all. And indeed we still have not heard from Mr Cohen. Despite the publicity we have seen in the published media and over the steam radio, there has been no request for any other basis of funding from the Federal Government. There has been no query raised by Mr Cohen or his department as to the September 1985 proposal. We are talking, do not forget, of a universally accepted scheme; a scheme which has been totally non-controversial and one which will enhance the tourist industry in Tasmania and the National Estate of this country no end.

There was, can I say, no argument by the Parliamentary Labor Party and I refer to Hansard of 16 October 1985 on page 3579, when Mr Lohrey questioned my learned predecessor, and I quote:

'Mr Lohrey - on the same basis?

Mr BESWICK - and on the same basis. I hope that the Commonwealth will agree to contributing on the same basis as it has done with regard to the program which is now drawing to an end.

Mr Lohrey - So there would be about another four years' work actually to complete it all?

Mr BESWICK - To undertake the work which is projected for the proposed extension would involve about four years' work.

I advise members that I understand the Federal Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment, Mr Cohen, will be visiting Tasmania next month to see for himself the work being done at Port Arthur, and I hope he will be sufficiently impressed to agree that the project should continue. I think it is obviously one which is of very real significance to Tasmania, but also to Australia as a whole because of the significance of the Port Arthur site.

Mr LOHREY - The minister can rest assured that the Opposition is fully behind such a submission. We believe that the work should be

completed there and, if the money runs out before that work is completed, obviously what should happen is that the Commonwealth should continue with the same financial program as in the past. I hope that Tasmania will be successful and the minister can be assured of my wholehearted support in that submission. I will certainly convey those feelings to Mr Cohen. I guess we could talk more about Port Arthur but I think perhaps I will leave it at that.'

Unfortunately, so did Mr Cohen. He has never even given this State the courtesy of a reply or a query. That is what the Federal Labor Party thinks of this State.

When I listen to the platitudes which I heard at length a few minutes ago it really annoys me, as a Tasmanian who cares for my State, to hear that sort of comment. I acknowledge of course the member's right to make it, but it really does annoy me as a Tasmanian to be treated like this.

This Government - in an effort to keep those people employed, to keep the project team together and to ease some of the hardship which has been created as a result of the undisputed tardiness of the Federal Government - has pledged to provide, out of the \$2.6 million it previously offered, the sum of \$50 000 per month for the next three months.

Having regard to his abysmal track record, what can we hope for from Mr Cohen? We can only hope that some sense of decency prevails.

We have heard nothing more of Senator Coates since his optimistic prognosis that we would hear from the Prime Minister within ten days from 25 January 1986. Of course, Senator Tate now appears on his white charger. He has a terrific history of knocking this project from start to finish. He has played a continual, cynical, political exercise at the expense of 35 jobs and the peace of mind of those people and their families. He said on 15 March in the 'Mercury' that there was \$450 000 waiting:

'Senator Tate said the Commonwealth was holding another \$450,000 earmarked for the project.'

He could not even get that right. In fact that amount of money was staked by this Government - the Gray Liberal Government - and it was passed on to the National Parks and Wildlife Service on the basis that it would be reimbursed by the Federal Treasury. There is nothing unusual in that - I am told a simple journal entry - and indeed \$50 000 of that money has been reimbursed. That money was budgeted for. It was part expended and certainly its total usage has been allocated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

He then said - and I am referring of course to our infamous Senator Tate - that a submission had been asked for by the Federal Government but without response from the State Government. That statement is untrue. It is odd that, if that was the situation and Senator Tate was telling the truth, there was not some correspondence or some contact from Mr Cohen's office. Knowing his knowledge of the project; knowing that it was not controversial; knowing the benefit to Tasmania; knowing the benefit to the country as a whole would not one expect him to say, 'What's going on? Why haven't you responded?' But we have heard nothing because there was no such query.

The Labor Party in this State obviously was not aware of any such query either because a news release dated 14 March said:

'The State Government should guarantee to continue the jobs while negotiations on the extension of the Port Arthur program proceed with the Federal Government.'

I go down to the third last paragraph of the document:

'Providing agreement is reached with the Federal Government for the next stage of works, further funds should begin to flow in the new financial year from July.'

There is no suggestion there of any other source of funding because no such funding existed. It was a cynical, kite-flying exercise, as I say, by Senator Tate at the expense of jobs and people's peace of mind. He certainly does not do this State proud. He is embarrassed but he kept it up. But he was exposed in his true light on ABC radio today, and I pay tribute to the member for Franklin, Mrs Bladel, for what she said about him. When she was interviewed on ABC radio she exposed the man for what he is. In fact she took the side of this Government and she was honest enough to do it when interviewed by Philip Russell. At the end of the interview she said:

'You know Senator Tate might have said something about it, but he is not the only Senator involved in this project, or interested in the project.'

I stress, 'or interested in the project'.

'He's just one person of Labor Caucus.

RUSSELL: Fran Bladel, thanks for talking with me and being so frank.'

I commend that member for her frankness and honesty but it is not doing Tasmania any good at this time because we still do not have the money, we still have not had a response from the Federal Government and the people on the Tasman Peninsula - that team will never be replaced if we lose it - are still worrying about their future.

I am pleased to have spoken in support of this motion. The Tasmanian electors ask for nothing more than fair treatment and this Government will not rest until that has been achieved. We need cooperation, not confrontation. We need loyalty to our State and we need to weed out those whose ideological loyalty outweighs the morality to which I have just been referring. I look forward to a rewarding and satisfying period in this House and I will do my utmost to make a strong contribution.

I have pleasure in supporting the motion and I thank the House for its courtesy.  
Government members - Hear, hear.