TIMETABLES AND FUNCTIONS TO BE TRANSFERRED

SPEECH

Wednesday, 14 September 1977

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr LIONEL BOWEN (KINGSFORD-SMITH, NEW SOUTH WALES—) (NaNaNaN pm) -Mr Speaker, could I have a bit of silence? I have a limited amount of time in which to debate this important matter. I want to emphasise the point that there needs to be complete consultation not only with certain people who are deemed to be executive members because they may be affiliated with a certain party but also with all people in the Northern Territory. By way of explanation, the Minister for the Northern Territory (Mr Adermann) says on the first page of his ministerial statement: Well, I did indicate development would take place in a statement I made on 17 July. I now indicate that I had a chance to have discussions with the new executive'. I think the Minister would agree that these are the facts: There was an election recently in the Northern Territory and all seats have not been declared. In fact, this will not be done until tomorrow. One wonders what type of executive with which there was consultation. I am very mindful of the fact that the Prime Minister (Mr Malcolm Fraser) in a sense of exuberance on 13 August issued a Press statement indicating the splendid results that had been achieved by the National Country Party and congratulating Dr Letts, the Leader of the Country Party in the Northern Territory. Of course, he was defeated in the election. Not only was he defeated but also his deputy leader was defeated. A number of other people lost their seats. The point I make on behalf of the Australian Labor Party is that there was a substantial expression of public opinion at that election. The people of the Territory were fearful of what statehood means. Does it mean that the people of the Northern Territory will have to bear fiscal responsibility because that seems to be the underlying factor in and tenor of the Minister's statement?

If honourable members look at Budget Paper No. 11 they will notice that there are a mere 16,000 taxpayers in the Northern Territory. They will also notice that 5,000 people in the Territory earn less than average weekly earnings. Further, they will notice that 1,100 people earn less than $10,000 a year. So the people of the Territory wonder where this burden of fiscal responsibility will lie. Honourable members will see in Budget Paper No. 4, which relates to expenditure, that the amount of responsibility in monetary terms for the Northern Territory is $193m. Equating that to 16,000 taxpayers, each taxpayer would have a burden, if I can put it that way, of $13,000. Are we talking about statehood in this sort of climate? By all means allow for the devolution of responsibility in a proper, orderly fashion. We have always encouraged that. In fact we can take credit for virtually stimulating that sort of development. The report of the Joint Committee on the Northern Territory presented to the Parliament on 26 November 1974 stated:

The Committee does not recommend the transfer of responsibility for all 'State-type' functions to the Territory Executive but proposes that functions of local significance be transferred as soon as possible and that, for the time being, functions of national concern be retained by the Australian Government. The proposals of the Committee are, in effect, that all 'State-type' functions be transferred to the Territory Executive, except that major functions such as rural land, mining, education, health ... be retained by the Australian Government and other major functions such as roads, ports, fisheries, national parks and the police be shared.

Therefore, statehood would not be given on the basis that there would be centralist control from Canberra. In fact, it would be on the basis that there has to be some fiscal support.

It is quite erroneous in law to suggest that we have to create a State in the Northern Territory before the Territory can have what is deemed to be their own fiscus. It has been clearly established by the High Court in a recent case known as Berwick's case that a territory can still have its own fiscus. The Government is running a surreptitious program in which it says that full responsibility means statehood. The point we of the Opposition make is that there can be full responsibility without the burden of statehood. That is not what the Government is saying. The Minister uses language in his statement that is worrying to the Opposition. I refer particularly to page 2 of the Minister's statement and I quote what he said:

In our approach to this matter we will be guided by the principle that the essence of responsible self-government is that a community should be free to make its own decisions in the full knowledge that it will be required to live with and pay for all the consequences of those decisions.

It was as a result of that political environment and in that context that at the last election in the Northern Territory the National Country Party did not do so
well. Concern was expressed there as to what the people would be burdened with. They have not had full and open discussion about what is in the mind of the Government. It is not much good the Minister coming into the Parliament and saying that there has been discussion with the Executive in the Northern Territory because that Executive was defeated at the last election.

The point we make in order to assist the Government is that it should consider all the fears of the people of the Northern Territory. A mere 40,849 people are enrolled in the Territory. The number is less than in any other electorate in Australia. We do not want to over-emphasise the point by saying a large group of people is involved. The population is a relatively small group and it is widely dispersed geographically. Those people do need consultation and understanding as to their needs. They do need substantial financial support from the national Government. Nobody wants to interfere with their local administration. The point we seek to make is that there should be uniformity of administration in Australia. A decision by a person in Darwin to go to live in Perth should not be influenced by different standards in those cities. Laws and opportunities for children, for example, should be the same everywhere. Likewise, if a person in Perth wants to go to Darwin that person should be able to find that there is no change of administration and no lack of opportunity there. That is what federalism is all about. Federalism is not just a fiscal arrangement - the idea that if people are going to make their own decisions they have to live with them and pay for them.

People in the Northern Territory have to make decisions on the basis that they are in a sparsely populated area and far removed from a number of essential services. Their decisions have to be balanced in the light of those sorts of burdens. They need financial support and they should be getting more of it, particularly in view of the very few taxpayers and the slender financial resources available there. People in the Northern Territory are concerned about this question of autonomy. They think that they have been hived off or dumped because that will make the Treasury figures look a bit better. The Treasury can say that the responsibility rests with the people of the Northern Territory and that they will have to do their best to raise the taxes that are needed. We see this emphasis coming through in this ministerial statement. On page 4 of his statement, the Minister said that the people in the Northern Territory will be allowed to levy their own payroll tax. That is a pretty regressive tax at any time but they will be expected to use it. Any sound-thinking economist, looking at the massive unemployment that faces us these days, is very concerned with the fact that if more people are to be employed the employer must pay more tax. Giving the right to impose payroll tax to the States was probably one of the worst actions that could have happened.

The people in the Northern Territory are to be excluded from the operations of the Ombudsman. Why? Why should we not have an ombudsman to look at the laws and ordinances and the administration thereof in any part of Australia? Why should we say that there will not be an ombudsman in the Northern Territory? If it is good enough for the Commonwealth Government to pay for an ombudsman, why could he not be available to deal with all the obvious difficulties that will arise in the Northern Territory? I infer from what the Minister said that, if the people in the Territory want an ombudsman, they will have to pay for him. That would be a pretty substantial burden. We in this Parliament say that we will get money from the taxpayers all over Australia to have an ombudsman but if people in the Northern Territory want one they had better arrange it themselves.

From the point of view of federalism in this country I do not think it is proper, fair, or intelligent to worry about the State and Territory boundaries in relation to this great land mass. As far as we of the Opposition are concerned, a State boundary merely means the extent of the administration. A State boundary should not mean an alteration in the type of administration. That is why we are encouraging the development of the Albury-Wodonga area. It crosses State boundaries. There can be regional autonomy and development with local people making their own decisions. The nonsense drawn up in the Colonial Office ISO years ago as to where a State began and where it finished, thus enabling different laws to be made, has bedevilled this country. We know that for a fact. Consider the situation now in relation to this so-called fair Constitution and how it is being interpreted against these very same people in the Northern Territory. The Minister for the Northern Territory is a member of the Party which is in power in Queensland.

Mr Adermann (—) (NaNNaN pm) - It has good government.

Mr LIONEL BOWEN (—) (NaNNaN pm) - Good government! Consider it in the light of what I am about to say. The Queensland Government is now challenging the right of the people in the Northern Territory to have any representation in the Senate. One would have thought that there would have been consultation within the Minister's Party about territorial representation. The Constitution allows for it but he is a member of the National Country Party and a government of that persuasion is challenging the right of people in the Territories to have representation. Yet he says it is good government. I say it is dishonest. It is political manoeuvring.