

**Sue Boyce**

Liberal Senator for Queensland



**The Queensland *on*Line**

*21 January 2009*

## THE YEAR AHEAD

Welcome to Queensland onLine for 2009 and Happy 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday to all us Queenslanders!

The major celebration for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Statehood will be on Queensland Day, June 6, but those of us on the centre-right of politics are hoping for an early birthday present with the election of a Springborg-McArdle State Government in the next few months.

The LNP campaign is now in top gear with election planning, and information about your local candidate, about published policies, or how to offer your assistance is available at [www.lnp.org.au](http://www.lnp.org.au).



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On the Federal scene, it's also shaping as an interesting year with the Rudd Government planning legislation on Climate Change and emissions trading and on so-called workplace reform with the "Fair" Work Australia Bill - against a background of rising unemployment, a drastic slump in mining and in construction and a "let's see if this helps the economy; we can always change our minds later" approach from the Rudd Government.

Cynics have already argued that Australia may easily meet its carbon emission reduction targets if industry grinds to a halt - but it's an outcome the Coalition will be fighting to avoid.

I was amused by alternating signs I saw in the Upper Hunter Valley during the break protesting against coal mining and against wind farms. Solar power is great but it isn't going to meet Australia's energy needs, and not even a portion of the need if the Rudd Government can't finally decide what it thinks about solar panel rebates.

I'm not optimistic that the lack of anti-nuclear signs was anything but an omission but I was heartened by the [report](#) this week from the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering suggesting that nuclear power is the only realistic clean alternative source we have. It's time this discussion was had.

The Senate resumes on February 3 with a week of Estimates hearings - where senators have the opportunity to quiz Ministers and senior public servants from all departments - from February 9.

The Senate Committee system is one of the great strengths of our parliamentary structure with committees empowered to inquire into pending legislation, the outcome of previous legislation and other issues considered important by the Committee members.

There are [33 current inquiries](#) being conducted by Senate committees or joint Committees administered by the Senate in addition to six Senate Select Committees.

The public inquiry into the "Fair" Work Bill starts in Brisbane on January 27 with hearings in Adelaide and Perth the same week and hearings in other capital cities in February.

I'll be attending most of these hearings as well as being involved in the Inquiry into Residential and Community Aged Care and the three inquiries being conducted by my own Community Affairs Committee.

I'm very pleased that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs has responded to my urging about the cost of goods in the Torres Strait by holding a limited inquiry. The Outback Stores system established by the Howard Government has led to a marked improvement in the quality and cost of food available in those communities where they have been established, but grocery costs in the Torres Strait continue to be 50 per cent or more higher than on the mainland.

Submissions for this inquiry close on February 20. Details are available at [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/communitystores/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/communitystores/index.htm).

The Coalition-established Senate Select Committee on Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities has taken up my suggestion to have a fuller inquiry into all aspects of the cost of living in the Torres Strait later in the year.

## **NORTH QUEENSLAND FLOODING**

There is nothing that underlines the size of Queensland more than the weather – at a time when most of us in Brisbane were enjoying the holiday sunshine and clear blue skies, North Queensland was dealing with the effects of floods and cyclones.

The total cost of flood damage in Mount Isa, Cloncurry and Boulia shires is estimated at more than \$22 million, with Far North Queensland Cairns and Townsville suffering another \$32 million of damage.

Despite the damage the rain will have some welcome effects, filling many dams and rivers and providing good prospects for winter feed for cattle. Mount Isa reported 169.2mm in four days, just 4mm short of last year's entire total of 173.8mm.

## **QUEENSLAND STATE ELECTION**

While the media and the State Government play games over the date of the next State election, Premier Anna Bligh and her Labor Ministers continue to emulate the "spin" tactics of her predecessor.

Further Government stuff-ups you may have missed over the holidays include:

- A spill of more than 500,000 litres of industrial and hospital waste at the Bundamba Advance Water Treatment Plant near Ipswich in July 2008 was not made public until the information was dragged out of the Government.
- Deputy Premier Paul Lucas postponed the opening of the Tugun Desalination Plant on January 15, apparently because "corrosion" had just been noticed in 45 pipe couplings. Luckily this was found a few hours before the official launch – otherwise the fact that contracts to power the plant have yet to be signed would have made it even more of a non-event. The final decision on the power supplier was supposed to

- have been made in November.
- A plan to introduce a \$20 million barcode fuel discount system has been scrapped by the State Government because of overwhelming technical difficulties – someone should tell the major retailer who has had a card-based fuel discount system running since September 2007.
- Not only does the cost of merging the Mater Children's Hospital at South Brisbane and the Royal Children's Hospital at Herston appear likely to blow out substantially, it now appears that there will be fewer overnight beds available and vastly reduced research facilities. Senior Queensland Health sources confirmed the Government's numbers but they also stressed that "beds" included not only overnight beds but day beds, reclining dialysis chairs and probably baby cots and virtual beds in a psychiatric day-care centre.

The State Labor Government is tired, and has failed to fix any of the major infrastructure problems bedevilling Queensland. Their idea of long term vision is tonight's six 'o' clock news.

## IMMIGRATION AND DISABILITY - WHEN'S THE REVIEW?

Immigration Minister, Senator Chris Evans, promised in November that he would establish a review of the criteria used to assess families including a person with a disability who want to migrate to Australia, but so far there's been no action.

This follows the outcry last year when a Victorian country town looked likely to lose its only intensivist, immigrant Dr Moeller, because his son had Down syndrome. But there are dozens of equally deserving families still waiting.

One welcome change has been Senator Evans' agreement to assess these families on a case-by-case basis, but to date he has not referred this matter to the relevant committee.

The current ridiculous situation is that all families who have a child with Down syndrome are automatically rejected on "health" grounds, irrespective of the health of the child. Only the Minister can overrule this.

Following my representations, Minister Evans has now approved another family, the Pearsons, who have waited for a year in Dubai for a decision from Australia.

In relation to the Pearson's son with Down syndrome, even the Migration Review Tribunal commented: "This is a case where the Tribunal may well have waived the health criterion in relation to the secondary visa applicant **were it able to do so.**"

The inquiry by the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Migration can't come soon enough.

## IF BUSINESS DOESN'T TAKE RISKS, WHO WILL?

I recently heard a financial adviser on radio claim that there were only three sorts of investments – shares, cash or property. "Or, of course you could invest in a business but that can be risky," he added. He was right the first time – apparently forgetting that a share **is** an investment in a business and vice versa.

But what many investors appear to forget is that investing in businesses through the share market or directly is risky - because business **is** risky. Consumers, unions and the media seem to ignore the effort required when



they rail against the profits made by businesses, as though there should be no reward for risk.

A recent survey of company directors undertaken by Treasury and the Australian Institute of Company Directors confirms that our national efforts to eliminate dishonesty and to tame risk have stunted decision making by company boards just at the time Australia needs them to be brave. The results of the survey are available at [www.treasury.gov.au/contentitem.asp?NavId=&ContentID=1387](http://www.treasury.gov.au/contentitem.asp?NavId=&ContentID=1387)

The survey reported that 78 per cent of company directors feel they are at medium to high risk of being found personally liable for decisions made in the interests of the company. This leads them to take an overly cautious approach the majority of the time. This naturally inhibits decision making, with 64 per cent reporting a medium to high degree of restraint.

Directors estimated that the cost to businesses of restrained decision making could be as high as \$450 million.

Australian business already takes a highly cautious approach to business decisions. With economic growth slowing in Australia, we need businesses to take appropriate risks, make investments, and stimulate the economy.

In his comments on the global financial crisis, Kevin Rudd has laid the blame at the feet of "extreme capitalism". Unfortunately, the truth doesn't match the spin – US Government intervention into the mortgage market to offer the equivalent of government backing through the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac financial institutions was at the heart of the collapse. Instead of allowing the market to make a decision about the risk of mortgagees' ability to pay back loans, the US Congress laid the groundwork for almost anyone to take out a housing loan, irrespective of their ability to pay it back.

Unreasonable and deliberate risk must be discouraged, but without some risk taking there would be no businesses.

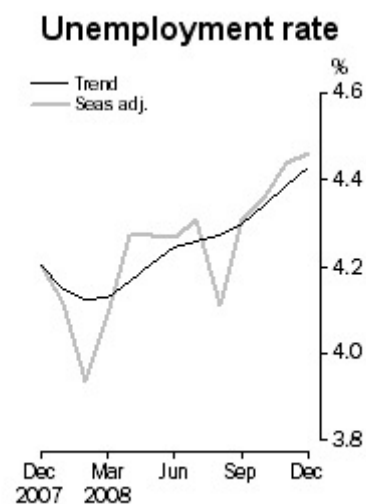
## EMPLOYMENT HITS THE BRAKES

On January 15 the Australian Bureau of Statistics released their [latest unemployment statistics](#), showing that Australia lost 43,900 full time jobs in December, pushing unemployment to 4.5 per cent for the first time in two years. Declines in the mining, tourism and retail sectors hit Queensland workers hard, dropping full time jobs by 17,300.

Since February 2008, the unemployment rate has risen every month. The fact that this has coincided with Kevin Rudd's time in office is no surprise, with uncertainty over Government direction one of the factors making many employers nervous.

While predictions of 9 per cent unemployment by 2010 may seem fanciful, a year ago an Australian dollar spiralling towards US50 cents would have seemed just as unlikely. The simple question is "What is the Rudd government doing to create jobs?"

The recently introduced "Fair Work Bill" – a masterful example of spinning legislation - appears more concerned with union power in the workplace than creating jobs. The Business



Council of Australia has already warned that the legislation could 'exacerbate the impact of the economic downturn'.

<https://senate.aph.gov.au/submissions/comittees/viewdocument.aspx?id=3908bc43-0f4a-4724-9173-87ed93a186dd>

In the current economic climate, Australia needs to create an environment that encourages businesses and individuals to employ others. Instead, the Bill increases the ability of unions to access workplaces where there are no union members and forces employers into bargaining for conditions where the employer is not a willing participant.

I acknowledge that the Labor Opposition went into the last election with a clear policy to overturn WorkChoices. But the current legislation goes much further than this. The Senate Committee Enquiry into the Fair Work Bill commences public hearings in Brisbane on January 27.

## **LUXURY CAR SALES TAX**

In questioning during Senate Estimates, Treasury confirmed that there had been no economic modelling on the likely effect of the Rudd Government's tax rise on cars priced over \$57,180 from 25 per cent to 33 per cent in the 2008 Budget.

The pretty obvious outcome of the new tax has been a massive slump in the sales of vehicles affected by the tax - 23.6 per cent in the six months to December, more than double the fall of 10.6 per cent for the total car market.

If this continues, the total revenue to the Government will fall to \$430 million – less than the \$440 million raised before the tax increase and far below the \$560 million forecast in Treasury's budget update published late last year.

Yet with the other hand the Labor Government is contributing \$6.2 billion in an attempt to keep the Australian car industry alive.

## **GOVERNMENT MORE CONCERNED WITH CLIMATE CHANGE PR THAN REAL ACTION**

The Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, confirmed recently that the Labor Government had spent \$13.9 million advertising its alleged Climate Change policy.

Minister Wong said the bulk of the money went on advertising space in magazines such as *FHM* and *Cosmopolitan*, with \$60,000 spent on market research and \$412,302 spent hiring ad agencies to produce the "right" message.

There's no doubt in my view that Australia must act to ameliorate the effects of Climate Change but spending \$13.9 million on an advertising campaign falsely designed to make the government look decisive and competent is a prime example of flushing money away, particularly when the Government have little idea of the effect of their Emissions Trading Scheme on business and no idea at all of the effect on jobs.

The advertising spend was revealed two weeks after the Government scrapped the Coalition's \$9,500 rebate on solar panels – replacing it with a complicated rebate depending on where you live, with the maximum of about \$4,000 for Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth residents.

The Treasury, which released its plan for an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) in December last year, also recently released details of the \$401,451 it spent on media monitoring in 2008.

This monitoring is undertaken for the Treasurer, Wayne Swan, to keep 'tabs' on what journalists are saying and what 'messages' need to be sent out to make the media more favourable.

While they were keeping an eye on the newspapers, the actual task of modelling the effects of the ETS, particularly on Australian jobs, apparently hasn't been sought by the Government.

The Coalition has engaged the Centre for International Economics to undertake such important modelling before we formulate our response to the government's ETS. A government more concerned with competent policy rather than media image would do the same.

## JANUARY SHOPSMART



Cairns has the cheapest basket of goods in Queensland according to the January [ShopSmart](#) survey.

This month, Woolworths in Cairns had the cheapest basket with \$63.32 and the highest was at Coles in the Myer Centre Brisbane at \$70.31. The average basket price for January was \$65.28.

The ShopSmart survey showed that, on average, the basket cost went down by 49 cents. The biggest increase was almost \$4. In January, prices were down across Queensland, with only the Brisbane CBD recording a six per cent jump in prices.

The Torres Strait communities continue to pay high prices for their groceries paying around \$24 more than the average for the same or similar basket of goods.

One factor we will be watching closely is the changing weights and sizes of grocery packaging and the increasing number of 'home brand' products. Decreasing package size may keep the price down for consumers, but if the intention is to confuse shoppers, I will be highlighting this fact.

Unit pricing is an important tool that should be available to all supermarket shoppers. The ShopSmart website has a unit pricing calculator that will help shoppers with the changing size of packaging to see if they are getting value for money.

The Rudd Labor Government wasted \$13 million on their failed Grocery Choice website. Now that the site is to be administered by the independent consumer organisation Choice, there should be some improvement and some properly relevant and useful information for consumers. In the meantime, ShopSmart will continue to provide up-to-date local information and money saving tips for Queensland shoppers.

## LABOR WASTEWATCH

The Grocery Choice debacle is just one of the failed Rudd Labor Government programs listed on the Coalition's new website at [www.laborwaste.com](http://www.laborwaste.com).

The site aims to monitor the Rudd Government's "waste, inefficiency and mismanagement" of taxpayers' money.

Government control of spending is even more crucial in the current downturn – and the \$28 million spent to advertise and administer the economic stimulus package, the \$14 million spent on climate change advertising and the \$13 million for the failed GroceryChoice website don't add up to a "fiscally conservative" government.

If there are other examples of Government spending you would like to raise, please contact me.

## AUSTRALIA DAY

For most politicians, Australia Day is a working day, not simply a chance to head to the beach or patriotically burn something on the barbie.

But it can be a great way to reaffirm why many of us went into politics in the first place. It is the day when many resident migrants become Australian citizens, with all that entails.



For most of us born in Australia, the freedoms and responsibilities of being Australian are not something we often consider. For those who make the conscious decision to become Australian citizens it's a far more serious and joyous matter.

When I made my first Australia Day speech last year, I was surrounded by people who had made their choice to join our country. It is a scene repeated in halls and council buildings across Australia, as people from a multitude of countries embark on new lives.

The beach and the long weekend have a definite attraction, but if you want to find out what it means to be an Australian join those who are making a public declaration of their decision to become Australians this Australia Day.

Information on Australia Day events, including citizenship ceremonies, is available at [www.australiaday.org.au](http://www.australiaday.org.au).

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**Liberal Senator for Queensland**

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