Tourism plan cops 'gimmick' slap

Chinese opportunity eyed

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A LABOR election commitment to preserve $1 billion of the $5 billion Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund (NAIF) for tourism has been labelled "a bit of a gimmick".

Yesterday, Opposition leader Bill Shorten announced the plan in Cairns, and said it would "help generate new tourism infrastructure to take advantage of the rise of the middle classes of Asia".

"In the next number of decades it is projected there will be no less than three billion members of Asia's emerging middle class. And Australia, particularly the north of Australia, is so well placed to grab that tourism boom," he said.

Funding would take the form of concessional loans and other forms of project finance, with successful projects required to pass through rigorous selection processes.

While Mr Shorten said the allocation would lead to "support" for projects such as stadiums, convention centres, airports, ports and indigenous business, Advance Cairns chairman Trent Twomey said he was sceptical of the plan.

"The regional priorities ... for Northern Australia include a $1 billion upgrade of Cairns Airport," Mr Twomey said.

"Having a particular part of the NAIF carved out and reserved for a specific sector, does this or does it not affect the ability for the airport to apply for the funds it needs?

"As it stands now, tourism could apply for the whole $5 billion, so why restrict them to 20 per cent of the budget?"

Mr Shorten said the Opposition would make more announcements about the NAIF, but that the $1 billion tourism announcement wouldn't come at the expense of other important projects.

He accused the Government of "doing nothing" with the NAIF since it was created, which Queensland LNP senator Ian Macdonald rejected.

"Tourism infrastructure like airport extensions, new pontoons and boating facilities are already eligible," Mr Macdonald said. "Labor's money-shuffling charade will add no new or extra money to the North."

Meanwhile, Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ) chief executive Alex de Waal welcomed Labor's announcement.

"There are a number of initiatives that will benefit from that commitment," he said.

"Equally, there are tremendous opportunities to capitalise on the demand potential, particularly out of the Asia/China market, and TTNQ is working strongly with local, state and federal government representatives to capitalise on these opportunities."

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>
> ADVANCE CAIRNS' TRENT TWOMEY