



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR WARWICK

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL
APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr SPRINGBORG (Warwick—NPA) (11.05 a.m.): The Justice budget largely reflects the Budget that was brought down in May by the coalition Government. The matter of the funding of victims of crime has been addressed in this Budget in a similar way to that which was outlined by the coalition Government at that time. Legal aid funding in Queensland has been the subject of much concern and comment in the past couple of months. The coalition indicated its intention to address the matter and this Budget has addressed it to some extent. However, it is probably fair to say that we need to effectively look at the whole way that we fund legal aid in Queensland for State matters. It is also important that we continue to put pressure on the Commonwealth to ensure that it fulfils its full obligations for legal aid funding for Commonwealth matters.

I cannot understate the importance of this Government committing to the construction of a new law courts facility at Queensland Place. Accommodation for our magistrates is inadequate. Construction of a new, secure Magistrates Court complex is estimated to cost somewhere in the vicinity of \$120m. It is extremely important that the Government comes forward and commits to the construction of this court complex, as it would do much for capital works in Queensland and also for the creation of jobs. Once the Magistrates Court complex is constructed, the deficiency in accommodation for the District Court could be addressed as well. By the Year 2000, we will have insufficient accommodation for our Magistrates Court and District Court. Of course, this has been brought about by additional work. Current accommodation for the staff of those courts is inadequate.

The coalition Government outlined quite clearly that it was prepared to look seriously at this issue. We were going to commit to the project and were looking at innovative ways of doing so. I concede that money is set aside in the Budget for the planning of this project. I know that, for example, the member for Lytton will be pursuing the issue with his colleagues in Government. It is extremely important that there be bipartisan support for this project. As a legal practitioner, the member for Lytton would be very much aware of the inadequate nature of the accommodation in those courts.

I understand that the current Magistrates Court at North Quay started off as a temporary measure over 20 years ago. Because of the inappropriate design of the building, it is difficult to safely and securely transport prisoners into their hearings before magistrates. A properly designed and secure building would overcome this problem, as lifts could take the alleged offenders more securely to their hearings or appearances.

Failure to properly plan and address the accommodation issues now will leave an unfortunate legacy for future Governments in Queensland and Queenslanders' future access to justice. The Government's Capital Works Program, as outlined in its program statements for the Department of Justice and Attorney-General, fails to adequately indicate the proper current status of many of those capital works projects. For example, projects such as the Government's \$2,092,000 commitment to finish off the Cleveland Court House make the Budget look very good. The irony is that I understand that the courthouse will actually be finished this coming month and will actually be ready for opening. Much of the work has already been done and the credit for it, of course, should go to the former coalition Government.

The former Attorney-General, Denver Beanland, did much to properly resource the courts to cut waiting times. He also moved to condense court operational procedures to make sure that there were uniform court rules. This should ensure that in the long run legal practitioners and members of the public have a far easier understanding of and a less frustrating time when lodging documents and attending to legal matters. I am sure members opposite would very much appreciate and support what has been done in this area, because in many cases it has condensed antiquated procedures that have been in place for 100 years and probably more. It should reduce the cost of legal services to consumers. It should also reduce the costs to legal practitioners by ensuring consistency in legal publications and make the courts a far friendlier place for people. That is something that has been of concern to many consumers of legal services, as reflected in recent publications that have contained surveys of people's attitudes in respect of the courts.

The 1990s has been the decade of information technology. This facility enables people to access information remotely, to store and consolidate it and use it to streamline and assist them to meet their individual requirements. The courts and access to justice are no exception to that fact. Much has been done over the last few years to ensure proper access to video linking, for example, so that court activities can be carried out remotely. The former Government also committed to electronically linking the State's Magistrates, District and Supreme Courts to ensure a far smoother operation and a modern focus for our courts.

It was very important that the former Government put in place the courts modernisation program, because this is something which will do a great deal to ensure that we have a contemporary focus for our courts and that they operate in a modern way going into the year 2000. A major initiative of the former coalition Government was to put legislation on line for all Queenslanders.

Mr Lucas: You had to be dragged kicking and screaming into that.

Mr SPRINGBORG: The simple fact is that members opposite did not do it and we did do it in the time that we were in Government over the past two and a half years. Again, we see the predictable derisive attitude of the member for Lytton.

This initiative of the former Government saw 240,000 pages of legislation go on line to be accessed electronically through the Internet from May this year. It has allowed easy access for people interested in various issues who would otherwise have had to spend up to \$80 or \$90 in some cases to buy a copy of an Act. Importantly, it encourages and allows people to have an interest in the legislative process in Queensland. I know from using the Internet that if one has a query about an Act—and there are many hundreds of Acts of this Parliament—one does not now have to ring up Goprint, cough up \$20, \$30, \$40, \$50, \$60 or maybe even \$100 and wait for the Act to turn up. The Act may be required for one particular piece of information. One can now go onto the Internet, access the site, type in one's query and download the Act. That is a very valuable resource.

I challenge the State Labor Government to commit to court services in rural areas of Queensland. We all recollect that when Labor was in Government from 1989 to 1996 it closed 26 courthouses. When in Government we reopened Inglewood, Springsure, Millmerran and Mitchell Court Houses as well as Monto. In those reopened courthouses, courts are held at regular intervals. That is much appreciated by the local communities, as it is delivering justice services to these people locally. After those closures, alleged offenders and other people who might have been pursuing a small plaint for costs, unpaid bills or whatever the case may be against a person had to travel perhaps 150 kilometres or even more to access justice. In some cases, those people who may, for example, have been pursuing an unpaid bill did not bother to do so, because justice was not able to be delivered to them locally. It is fair to say that members opposite recognised the short-sightedness of the previous decision.

I note that the Attorney-General proffers an interest and activity in the Assisted Guardianship Administration Bill, which was being prepared by the former Government. Instead of just being interested in this, I challenge the Attorney-General to introduce this extremely necessary reform legislation to the Queensland Parliament. This legislation is overdue as it will allow people to be able to make decisions on behalf of family members who have a reduced capacity for decision making. Currently, this is a role which is undertaken by the Legal Friend or the Public Trustee. That is not to say that previously this mechanism did not work satisfactorily. However, the challenge to any Government is to meet the expectation of the people, and this does so by providing a far more contemporary focus and application of community expectation. What is wrong with having family members properly appointed making decisions as guardians on behalf of other family members who may have a reduced capacity to make their own personal decisions?

The former Minister for Justice and Attorney-General, Mr Beanland, deserves much praise and credit for the way in which he went about modernising the courts process in Queensland. He provided the necessary resources and addressed many of the fundamental issues that had been inherently deficient for years, if not decades. The passage of the Civil Justice Reform Bill in 1998 fundamentally changed the operation of civil jurisdictions of the Supreme, District and Magistrates Courts forever for

the better. That new law paved the way for the introduction of uniform civil court procedure rules before the end of 1998. I know that, as a legal practitioner, the honourable member for Lytton would appreciate the importance of that reform legislation. The legislation was an Australian first and sought to take our civil courts into the 21st century.

One of the most striking impacts of the law was the reduction in the number of forms required in the civil jurisdiction from 700 to 70. It also made way for a greater degree of transparency for clients and their solicitors, ensuring that clients knew up front the fees involved. It also put in place improved mechanisms for dealing with disputes.

Just some of the things outlined in the coalition's Budget in May included the following: the repair of Roma's historic courthouse, at a cost of \$1.125m; and the construction of a courthouse at Doomadgee at a cost of \$1.13m, which was to be the first of three new gulf community courthouses to be built at a cost of \$3.6m over three years. I am sure that all members of this Parliament, particularly those who represent remote, rural and regional areas, would appreciate greatly how this will deliver justice to our regional and remote rural communities. Funds were allocated for the completion of the courthouses at Cleveland and Gladstone. I have already mentioned the situation with the Magistrates Court at Brisbane and the need for new facilities. Funds were allocated in our Budget for the planning of the new Magistrates Court facility in Brisbane. Courthouse security was to be boosted by \$600,000, including \$237,000 allocated for Ipswich. There was community conferencing funding of \$800,000, which was to be expanded to include Brisbane. There was greater funding for victims through an extra \$2.2m allocation, which included \$1.2m for victim compensation under the Criminal Offence Victims Act. It also included an extra \$1m in grants to victims groups. The Budget included appropriate funding for the Electoral Commission of Queensland and it increased funding for the Public Trustee to \$39.9m, which was in anticipation of the new powers of attorney and adult guardianship legislation.

I turn now to more general issues. Much has been made of the Government's decision to sell its remaining interest in Suncorp over the next 12 months. This in itself is a decision which will have a significant impact on financial and insurance services for many people in rural and regional areas of Queensland.

Mr Hamill: How is that?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I am about to come to that.

The former Queensland Government made a commitment to maintain its interest in Suncorp at about 15% into the foreseeable future. This was done to ensure that the Government was able to play an active role in influencing the direction of the institution.

Mr HAMILL: I rise to a point of order. The honourable member is misleading the House. The coalition decided in its last Budget to sell down its interest in Suncorp to 10%.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! There is no point of order.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I refer here to the daily report of Macquarie Equities Ltd of 8 September. It states—

"The Queensland Treasury has announced its intention to sell down its holding in SME to zero rather than maintain a minimum of 15%."

Our intention was quite clear. Under Corporations Law, if an interest of more than 10% is maintained, greater influence can be exerted. That is something which all members of this Parliament would appreciate. Corporations Law indicates quite clearly that if an interest falls below 10% that company can be compulsorily acquired by the largest shareholder.

In its haste to sell down Suncorp, this Government has in no way considered the negative impact the sale will have on services delivered to people throughout Queensland. Federal Labor is making much of its plan to force banking institutions to maintain outlets in rural areas under a compulsory community service obligation. It looks as though State Labor is prepared to abrogate its responsibility to many Queenslanders by wanting to sell out Queensland and sell out its interest in Suncorp. Once the Government and Queensland lose effective influence over the fate of Suncorp, I believe we will see branch closures.

Mr Hamill: You lost that two years ago.

Mr SPRINGBORG: If we look back further than that, we see that when Labor was in Government there were closures of branches and agencies. The Treasurer knows that very well. When the Government abrogates its responsibility and effectively sells down, it does not have the same degree of influence. That is a very legitimate concern and is something the Government in Opposition raised when we debated that legislation only last year. I am only indicating to the Treasurer what has been said previously and the need to ensure the continuation of those services.

I believe we will see further job losses in our rural and regional areas. This will hardly be in line with the "jobs, jobs, jobs" promise the Premier and the Government took to the last State election. I am

also very concerned, notwithstanding the articles of association, about the potential loss of the bank's headquarters from Queensland.

I have here a document headed "Hands off Suncorp", by the honourable member for Nudgee, Neil Roberts—quite an outstanding member of this Parliament and a person of great dignity. He circulated this publication, asking his constituents to write and support the then Opposition Leader, Mr Beattie, in his efforts to stop the sell-off of Suncorp.

Mr Hamill: When was that?

Mr SPRINGBORG: It would have been late last year or earlier this year. I table that document for the information of the Treasurer. But the issues remain the same. I am pleased to see that the projects outlined in the coalition's Budget in relation to my electorate have been maintained by this Government. Much was done by the previous coalition Government to address issues of outstanding need right across the Warwick electorate. These included water filtration, town water infrastructure, new school buildings and sporting facilities.

One thing that greatly concerns me is the decision of the State Government to scrap the water development incentive scheme. This scheme was recommended by the Water Infrastructure Task Force to ensure that farmers were able to assist in drought proofing themselves and enhancing their enterprise by constructing new on-farm water infrastructure. Basically, it provided a 22.5% subsidy for projects above \$200,000.

When I was Natural Resources Minister, I announced the intention upon our re-election to Government to reduce the ceiling to \$75,000. The old ceiling did not necessarily consider the requirements of the horticultural, dairying and sugarcane industries. I believe that when rural industry leaders find out about this change they will be most concerned. I am sure they will come beating on the door of the Minister for Natural Resources. I recognised that there was an issue there and that the ceiling needed to be lowered, but that has not been conceded by the Government.

In relation to my electorate generally, I challenge the Government to ensure that it keeps the new administration building for the Allora State School at the top of the planning list. This should ensure that it receives funding for construction in the next Budget. There is no doubt that this building is needed at the Allora State School, as the current administration arrangements are not conducive to a good working environment.

A new dam is being planned for the Granite Belt. If constructed, it will be near Ballandean, just south of Stanthorpe. I think it was fortuitous that the former Broadwater dam proposal was scrapped. Even though the decision was met with some disappointment on the Granite Belt, the replacement proposal is far more cost-effective and will produce a greater yield.

Preliminary estimates indicate that this dam, if constructed, could yield up to 8,000 megalitres a year for the Granite Belt. This is certainly required for new town water supplies for Stanthorpe, and there is interest on the part of horticulturalists and fruit and grape growers on the Granite Belt.

The results of a full feasibility study are now being consolidated, and I suppose that we can expect to see them in the not-too-distant future. If the results of the feasibility study are positive and there is enough interest on the part of potential water users, the Government should enter into a partnership with the Stanthorpe Shire Council and irrigators to ensure that this dam on the Granite Belt does proceed.

I continue to be concerned about issues unfolding in relation to the Warwick Fire Station. Until 31 August, this station was staffed 24 hours a day on a permanent basis. The Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority announced its intention to embark upon a trial of the use of the majority of existing permanent staff and auxiliaries to bring about a one-to-three firefighter ratio from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. There continues to be much community concern about this. Some of the happenings in the weeks since the beginning of the trial have consolidated the justified concerns of the community.

I am also very concerned about the current situation of the only two permanent fire officers in Stanthorpe being seconded to Warwick in this interim trial period to help fill in. I think that does a lot to take away from the community service provided by the Stanthorpe fire service. If these trials are going to be done, I think they need to be far better planned. A lot more has to be done to allay community concern.

Time expired.
