



Speech by

Mr S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK

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UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST BILL

Mr ROBERTSON (Sunnybank—ALP) (10.48 p.m.): I rise in support of the University of the Sunshine Coast Bill and, in doing so, I would like to take this opportunity to raise some serious concerns that I have about the future of research and development funding from the Federal Government to our universities. In particular, I want to take this opportunity to raise my grave concerns about the failure of the Federal Government to make an appropriate contribution to research and development in Queensland. I am prompted to do so by the observation of the Minister in his second-reading speech on this Bill that, since the election of the Federal coalition Government, direct funding to universities has been cut by 6%, and in real terms, because of the impact of wage and salary increases, by some 11%.

A recent report by the Western Australian Technology and Industry Advisory Council has highlighted the inadequate funding of R & D projects in Queensland. The report published in May this year titled Research and Development—the Role of the State Government in Attracting External Funding highlights problems in R & D funding which are common to both Western Australia and Queensland.

Before launching into specific criticisms about the national distribution of research and development funding from the Federal Government, I should highlight the fact that there is a great deal to be proud of in terms of the Queensland Government's performance in funding R & D. Expenditure on research and development in Queensland amounted to approximately \$1.029 billion in 1995-96, placing us third behind New South Wales and Victoria, representing 14% of total R & D expenditure in Australia. However, given that Queensland has 18% of the national population, it is clear that we should be doing a lot better.

In the same year, 1995-96, the Queensland Government contributed approximately \$170m to university-based R & D, the second-highest State Government contribution, eclipsed only by New South Wales. On a per capita basis the State's contribution was \$52 per person, beaten only by the South Australian Government, with \$56 per person. Meanwhile, the two largest State Governments, New South Wales and Victoria, contributed only \$40 per head and \$29 per head respectively. Similarly, Queensland's higher education institutions contributed their share of R & D funding of approximately \$314m, or \$95 per person, which is around the national average.

Unfortunately, R & D funding for Queensland from the Federal Government does not match the commitment shown by both the State Government and the higher education sector in this State. In 1995-96, the Federal Government contributed approximately \$103m to R & D projects in Queensland. On a per capita basis this represented \$31 per person, which was the second-lowest per capita contribution by the Federal Government in any mainland State, with Western Australia being the State treated worst by the Federal Government. Victoria received \$64 per person, New South Wales received \$41 per person, South Australia received \$112 per person and Tasmania received \$114 per person.

There are some valid reasons for the discrepancy between the States in funding from the Federal Government. For example, South Australia's per capita funding of \$112 is due largely to that State's high level of defence-related R & D. Nevertheless, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that Queensland is once again being treated appallingly by Canberra. I cannot but wonder whether there is a correlation between the Federal Government's poor performance in allocating appropriate funding to R & D initiatives in Queensland and the fact that Queensland has scarce representation on the various Federal Government R & D funding organisations.

According to the Western Australian report, Queensland is poorly represented on the major R & D funding bodies responsible for assessing funding proposals for R & D. Currently there is one Queensland representative on the eight-member Australian Research Council committee. That person is currently the chair of the ARC. However, there are no Queensland representatives on the nine-member Research Grants Council committee.

The RGC has four discipline panels. Of the 12-member Engineering, Earth and Applied Sciences ARC Discipline Panel, two are from Queensland. Of the 10-member Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics Discipline Panel, none is from Queensland. Of the 15-member Humanities and Social Sciences Discipline Panel, two are from Queensland. Of the 11-member Biological Sciences Discipline Panel, one is from Queensland.

For the University/Industry Research Collaboration Committee, which advises on collaborative grants and Australian postgraduate awards, there are no Queensland representatives on the 12-member panel. On the 13-member Research Training and Careers Committee there are only two Queensland members. On the 12-member Committee for International and National Cooperation there are two members from Queensland. In total, of the 102 members of the committees that decide the allocation of funding from the Federal Government to the States, Queensland interests are represented by only 10 members of six of the nine committees.

It is clear from the above extract of the Western Australian report that we are punching well below our fighting weight with one hand tied behind our back. Interestingly, the Western Australian report argues that increased representation on these research grants committees will create a greater awareness of the way in which ARC funding formulae operate and will increase active participation in and contribution to the development of ARC policies and funding formulae. The report suggests that through greater representation and awareness the performance of Western Australia in attracting more Federal Government R & D funding will improve. The same observation can be made in relation to the need to increase Queensland's representation on R & D funding bodies.

The numerically poor representation of Queensland on Australia's major Federal Government R & D funding organisations makes one wonder what Queensland's Federal representatives have been doing to allow this to occur. Where have the Federal coalition members from Queensland been, allowing this to happen? Where is their advocacy to ensure that Queensland's interests are protected and that we receive appropriate representation on these crucial funding bodies? It is time we started getting some support from the Federal Government to achieve our jobs growth target. It could start by giving us a hand in increasing its funding for Queensland R & D initiatives by our fine universities.

Receiving our fair share of Federal Government R & D funding is important to achieving jobs growth. It is not just about funding academics in white coats to sit in laboratories, postulating the outcome of some obscure and irrelevant question. R & D funding is critical if new, innovative and sustainable industries are to be created here in Queensland. It means that our technology parks will be able to attract new tenants and achieve critical mass and jobs growth. It provides greater opportunities for downstreaming the benefits of new product development so that our manufacturing sector benefits, not to mention our export performance.

The reason I raise these issues is that the Federal Education Minister, David Kemp, is currently holding on to a proposal that could fundamentally transform the way university research is funded in Australia. The only problem is that he refuses to make his proposals public so that the major stakeholders, our universities, can discuss the implications of any changes to Federal Government R & D funding. Last week the Australian newspaper reported that among the proposals being considered by Kemp is a recommendation that all Australian Research Council programs be replaced with block grants to universities and other higher education institutions. In the absence of information on how these changes could impact on R & D at Queensland universities, I encourage the Minister to investigate the concerns being expressed by university vice-chancellors throughout Australia.

I make the Minister aware of concerns expressed in today's Australian by the past Chair of the Australian Research Council. Professor Max Brennan, in a letter to the editor, said—

"The reported changes to university research funding proposed by Kemp would set the clock back 30 years."

He went on to observe that Kemp's proposed scrapping of the ARC would make Australia unique among OECD countries in not having a major Government funding agency for university research. The fact that Kemp refuses to make this report public raises serious concerns that the Federal Government may be embarking on a program to wind back funding for university-based R & D at the very time when R & D is critical to employment creation in new sustainable industries, not just in Queensland but throughout the country. By bringing this matter to the Minister's attention, I hope the Government can make strong representations to the Federal Government to ensure that, under whatever system Kemp is proposing, Queensland gets its fair share of R & D funding for universities. I commend the Bill to the House.