



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 15 September 1999

BURNETT REGION

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (6.36 p.m.): The Premier has just stood up and reduced this debate to a political argument, but this issue is beyond politics. This is about people, unemployment and poverty. The people will be watching the truth of the Premier's statement that he wants to keep the meatworks open and that he will work to solve the unemployment problem in the Burnett region. If this motion has done nothing else, it has placed the Premier's words on the record.

I rise to speak on this motion tonight because I have seen the heart being plucked from the Burnett and, in particular, the South Burnett. I have seen the percentage of people living on or below the poverty line steadily rising. One in five Queenslanders now lives below the poverty line. The State of our Regions report states that the Wide Bay region is currently recording some of the worst performance indicators, with some shires having the highest levels of poverty in Australia.

Recently, the Premier responded to severe criticism by me and by local media concerning this Government's lack of new capital expenditure and assistance in the Burnett by means of a letter listing all that this Government had done for the Wide Bay/Burnett region since coming into office. He mentioned the implementation of the Breaking the Unemployment Cycle program, which will employ only three people. I thank the Premier, but what about the 417 meatworkers still clinging to a fragile thread of hope that the meatworks may be reopened? What about the town business employees, who are already losing their jobs because of the closed meatworks? What about the timberworkers who are already drifting away because of the inability or reluctance of this Government to announce its decision on the RFA? What about the Tarong power workers, the town businesses and all who have waited so patiently for the extension to be announced? What about the people of Yarraman who desperately wanted the prison but are now prisoners in their homes as they cannot move to another town because they cannot sell their present homes? Even if a miracle occurred and they could find a buyer, the selling price would be only the equivalent of a deposit on a modest home in a bigger town.

The Wide Bay/Burnett region is a huge area. I ask the Premier to study a map carefully so that he understands exactly where the South Burnett is in relation to Maryborough and other parts of the State. If members mention any industry in the Burnett, they will find that it is under some sort of threat through Federal and/or State action or inaction from past or present Governments. It no longer matters which Government is to blame.

Tonight I rose to speak on this motion because the true plight of those in the embattled Burnett region must be brought to the Government's attention. This must be repeated over and over again until the Premier and the Cabinet start to question the accuracy of the information they are being given. I said this earlier today and I repeat it tonight: the Premier and the Cabinet should open their eyes and not only look at but also see the truth.

In his response to the criticism aimed at this Government, the Premier spoke of the \$22.5m for teachers' salaries, the \$3.6m for DPI staff and operating expenses and the \$1.5m for maintenance of Government infrastructure. It is a very hard-hearted man who points to the funding for ongoing wage costs and the maintenance of Government infrastructure and uses that as evidence of his generosity. The Premier is a great performer. However, he should throw away the smoke and mirrors tactics, because he is fooling no-one. He should start performing in a way that counts. At the very minimum, he should leave his advisers, suits and posturing behind and come to the Burnett, meet the people on

their own terms and see for himself what his Government is condemning these people to. Day after day, we hear about the threatened closure and uncertain future of the Nanango Hospital. Day after day, the Minister denies the reports that it will close in spite of the existence of a readily available document stating that its closure is recommended.

The Government should not be surprised at the lack of faith that the people of the Burnett have in this Government. Every time the people turn around they lose more hope. The Ministers says one thing, yet the exact opposite happens. The people of the Burnett are hurting badly. The Ministers need to open their eyes and really look at what is happening out there. These are not just words on a piece of paper; this is fact. People are hurting on a daily basis. Nobody is listening, because the Premier keeps bringing politics into the issue. Regardless of who caused the problem, the Premier should fix it and give these people some jobs. The Government is supposed to be all knowledgeable, and we just the ignorant people. It should use that knowledge.
