



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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**APPROPRIATION BILL
Estimates Committee A
Report No. 2**

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (12.52 p.m.): I do have certain reservations—and I have expressed them—in regard to the portfolio of State Development and Trade. As the member for Cairns indicated, they relate to education services, particularly overseas students.

While it is for the Government to set overall amounts to be spent within portfolios, it strikes the coalition as startlingly inadequate in the circumstances to outlay only \$300,000 for additional promotion of Queensland's education services in international markets where the State is losing its hard-won market share to other States. In calendar year 1998 over 1997, Queensland achieved only an insignificant increase in overseas student numbers, which reflects poorly when compared with a creditable national performance. This is of concern, given Queensland's leading role under the former coalition and Goss Labor Governments in the area of overseas student education.

When the coalition came to power in February 1996, Queensland had 15.3% of the national market. This grew to more than 17% by June 1998 and was on track, under coalition budgeting and programs, to reach 20%—a boost that would have been worth \$200m to the State's economy. The Minister for State Development and Trade notably ignored these figures in his answers to questions by the Estimates committee.

There was real progress in terms of international university students, even in the difficult conditions in calendar year 1998, reflecting great credit on the universities themselves, which fielded an extensive marketing campaign. The issue is that while the Asian economic downturn—and arguably, perhaps, domestic political factors—created a downward impetus on student numbers, the Department of State Development has a coordinating role in this area and should be doing much more to return Queensland to the forefront in the international education market.

I turn now to infrastructure development. The evident lack of focus on progressing infrastructure projects is also of concern. The Minister for State Development and Trade tacitly conceded under questioning that he had presided over a 12-month period marked by significant inactivity—in short, a freeze. The SUDAW project is 12 months behind schedule. The Tarong project is similarly blighted, particularly in terms of confusion in the private market over the Government's real policies where gas versus coal power generation is concerned, and also over the ultimate fate of the proposed rail service line to the power station. The Nathan dam is in what many observers of the process would describe as limbo. The Government's response that these are all projects reliant on the private sector, inviting the uninformed to assume that any delays are the fault of the private sector, is an attempt to avoid the issue.

The Government's stated policy, which has full bipartisan support, is to facilitate projects. Where SUDAW, Tarong and Nathan dam are concerned, the rate of facilitation has been remarkably slow. Coming from the Bundaberg region, where there are great hopes pinned on the economic and employment benefits of the proposed Coonarr coal port—and I am being continually asked about it—from my own perspective, the inactivity in this area is deafening. It was last October when a consultancy firm was appointed to undertake the impact assessment of a Coonarr coal port. Due to a

public controversy over the firm's involvement in the SUDAW development, Kinhill withdrew from the assessment process and, since that time, there has been no further appointment. There does appear to be a significant slackening off in the assessment process in relation to the Coonarr coal port option.

Another issue raised during the Estimates committee process was concern about the ongoing changes in the State Development Department, which underwent a massive upheaval after the last election. Neither the Minister nor the director-general could do anything to allay fears about future plans, and this is no doubt having an unsettling effect within the department.

My other major concern about the Labor Government's State Budget and its impacts on development in the State is the disturbing drop-off in the proportion of capital works being allocated outside of the greater Brisbane region. Although the Minister, as he pointed out during Estimates, is not responsible for the entire capital works budget, it should be of concern to him as the Minister responsible for supporting regional development and as the Deputy Premier. He refused to accept those figures which showed that investment outside Brisbane had dropped from 58% to 54%, when I was using the proportion quoted directly from his Government's Budget papers. The Minister is surely aware of the crucial role that Government infrastructure development plays in supporting regional economies, and I would hope that, in future, this worrisome trend is reversed.
