



Speech by

**JEFF SEENEY**

**MEMBER FOR CALLIDE**

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### 1999 STATE BUDGET

**Mr SEENEY** (Callide—NPA) (12.37 p.m.): I rise with somewhat of a heavy heart to participate in this debate on the first real Labor Budget. I have to confess that when I look at this Budget as it relates to my electorate of Callide, I am filled with a sense of foreboding.

The Budget offers no hope to people who desperately need hope. It offers no recognition of the needs of what is fast becoming one of the most economically depressed areas of Queensland. It appears to me to be a typical Labor Budget—the type of Labor Budget that we got used to during the Goss years when, year after year, Budgets cut the guts out of the bush. Despite the spin that has been put on this Budget by the Premier and a compliant urban media, it appears to me that this Budget will, in the fullness of time, continue that fine Labor tradition of cutting the guts out of the bush.

I have to echo the concerns that have been raised by so many of my colleagues in this debate, and particularly the member for Gladstone who spoke a short time ago. We are concerned about the so-called 6% equity return. More accurately, it can be seen as a stealth tax—a Beattie stealth tax. To apply the concept of achieving a 6% return on some of the Government assets that provide services to people in rural and isolated areas such as the electorate that I represent can mean only one thing. It can mean only that over a period of time those assets will be moved to areas where their usage will be greater and where it will be easier for departmental bean counters to achieve that 6% return. It will, without any doubt at all, ensure that there will be a reluctance to establish new assets in those areas—areas that badly need new assets in a whole range of departmental areas of responsibility. I think that in time that 6% equity return, that 6% Beattie stealth tax, will be seen as one of the greatest blows to the delivery of service in regional areas in Queensland's history.

**Mr Lucas:** What about the Commonwealth's 12% one?

**Mr SEENEY:** The member for Lytton does not bear much resemblance to the former member for Lytton. He was a man we could all respect. The comparison between the situation at the Commonwealth level and the situation at the State level has been made many times. The Commonwealth Government has completely different areas of responsibility. I would have thought that the member for Lytton was intelligent enough to realise that the State Government and the Commonwealth Government do different things. We provide services to people. The State Government provides schools, roads and hospitals. The Commonwealth Government provides none of those things. It has a completely different area of responsibility and the comparison is absurd, childish and hardly worth repetition by members of this House.

I move now to some of the specific Budget measures that affect my electorate of Callide. Cuts in road funding deserve particular mention. Funding to the central Queensland region has been cut from \$235m to \$133m. \$100m, or 40%, of central Queensland's roads budget has been taken away for the coming financial year. The central Queensland region is an area of development. It is an area in which road funding is particularly important. It is the type of area in which the Government should be spending an extra \$100m, not taking that amount away.

Two or three weeks ago I made a speech in this House about the importance of road infrastructure not only in central Queensland but also in regional Queensland generally. The types of things I talked about that were rumoured to happen have certainly happened. The central Queensland region has lost \$100m. The Wide Bay region, which encompasses the eastern side of my electorate, was lucky, I guess. It lost only 16% of its roads budget—down from \$195m to \$162m. It is almost

impossible to overstate the importance of the road network to rural and regional Queensland. It is almost impossible to overstate the benefits that will flow to all those rural communities and industries if we can build and maintain a decent road network. This Budget certainly does not do that. It does the exact opposite of providing for what is needed in my electorate.

I feel for local authorities and their work forces in this region. I know from my experience of local government that it will be extremely difficult for local councils to maintain their work forces. All of the social effects that flow on from the loss of those local authority jobs will be felt in every community right across the Callide electorate.

The other cut that is typical of a Labor Government is the \$27m cut from the Primary Industries budget. While that does not surprise any of us, it still disappoints us all. I guess it is a reflection of Labor Governments. It is something we have come to expect from Labor Governments over time. It is an indication of how little the Labor Party caucus values primary industries. Not one person in the Labor Party caucus understands the contribution that the primary industries sector makes to the economy of Queensland. For heaven's sake, this Government had to get the member for Inala to be the Minister for Primary Industries! That this Budget cuts \$27m from primary industries funding is a true reflection of the esteem in which the primary industries sector is held by this Government.

The total lack of funds for water infrastructure is also crushingly disappointing. Since I have been in this House I have made more speeches about this particular issue than probably any other. I can assure members that I will continue to speak about this issue as long as I am a member of this Parliament and I will continue to speak about it long after I have ceased to be a member of this place, because there is no issue that is more important to the economic future of rural and regional Queensland than the provision of water infrastructure.

The only figure in the Budget that gives any solace at all is \$2.71m for infrastructure construction. \$2.7m does not build much water infrastructure, and even that \$2.7m is conditional. The Budget documents state that that infrastructure is "subject to approval"—and this from a Minister for Natural Resources who has not approved anything except study after study!

A figure of \$8.212m for land acquisitions is included in the Budget. Last year's Budget contained some \$6m for land acquisitions. I well remember that at that time I expressed my hope that some of that money would be used to acquire land at the Nathan dam site. I know for a fact that none of that land has been acquired. I repeat my hope that some of the \$8.2m allocated in this year's Budget will be used to acquire some of the land at the Nathan dam site. The families who have had to live with the uncertainty of that proposition for over five years deserve an opportunity to get out of there and to get on with their lives. I have spoken about this issue many times in this House. It is becoming a real humanitarian issue. These people have had their lives on hold for six years. Some of them have kids who will leave school at the end of this year and their whole future is hanging on what will happen in regard to this Nathan dam project. It is obvious that we will not get a speedy resolution of this issue from the Minister for Natural Resources, but he could at least do the right thing by these people. He could show a bit of heart and use the money allocated in the Budget to solve the very individual and human problem that these people face. This project has been hanging over their heads for six years.

When I looked at the capital funding allocations for things such as schools and health, I wondered whether I was looking at the right State Budget. I thought perhaps I could have been looking at documents from another State. There is absolutely no capital funding for things such as schools and health services in the Callide electorate. The only figure that I could find in relation to health in the Callide electorate was \$354,000 to complete the Mundubbera Hospital.

The Mundubbera Hospital is a great facility. I was there not so long ago when the Minister for Health opened the new hospital. The history of the Mundubbera Hospital is indicative of what happens in the hinterland part of Queensland that I represent. The new Mundubbera Hospital was earmarked for construction in the late 1980s by the then coalition Government. It got shelved very quickly by the Goss Government. Nobody in this House would have seen the old Mundubbera Hospital, but I could use the remaining time available to me to describe it. By any standards it was way below what is acceptable. The Mundubbera Hospital project was shelved by the Goss Government. Immediately on coming to power, the coalition Government took the obvious decision to proceed with it again. I remember well that at the opening of the hospital the Mayor of Mundubbera and I were talking about how many years it had taken to actually get the hospital built through those changes of Government. He said to me, "It's just as well the concrete slab was poured last June." And it was just as well! Otherwise I am sure the Labor Government would have put the project back on the backburner and the hospital still would not have been built.

This is the type of infrastructure that rural and regional Queensland needs. The Mundubbera Hospital is a multipurpose health centre that provides more than just the traditional hospital services. It also provides areas in which nursing home patients can live so that they can continue to be part of the community in which they spent so much of their lives.

The obvious example that follows on from the Mundubbera Hospital is the Callide C project. I am pleased to see that there is \$228m in the Budget to complete the Callide C project and \$20m to complete the Awoonga pipeline. Last June, the concrete slab was not poured for the Callide C project. The Minister for Mines and Energy, who is in the Chamber, will remember forever with embarrassment, I am sure, his attempts to try to sink Callide C twice.

**Mr McGRADY:** I rise to a point of order. That is a complete untruth, and I request that the member withdraw it.

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

**Mr SEENEY:** The Minister can deny it all he likes, but it is one of the great hypocrisies of politics that he now comes into this House on numerous occasions and claims credit for the terrific development that is happening at Callide C. It is a terrific development, but it is a development that was put in place by the coalition Government, and it was a development that Labor immediately tried to stop when it came to power—twice. There were two ministerial inquiries. One of them was illegal. If it were not for the fact that the compensation payments that that Government would have had to pay were so high, it would have sunk the Callide C project and removed that tremendous benefit to the whole of central Queensland.

There are some positives in this Budget, and I will try to conclude my contribution to this debate with some positives. I always like to do that. The Cooler Schools program is worth a mention. There is tremendous value in the Cooler Schools program, and there is a tremendous enthusiasm for the Cooler Schools program throughout central and northern Queensland. Many schools in my electorate are desperate to get this program in place and to get some of their areas airconditioned. I take this opportunity to lend whatever support I can to the comments made yesterday during this debate by the member for Fitzroy.

To use the member's words, the Cooler Schools program is moving at the pace of a snail. It certainly is. It is moving at a pace that is frustrating P & C associations everywhere. We are coming up to another summer season, when airconditioning will be badly needed. I join with the member for Fitzroy in urging the Minister for Education to ensure that these things are expedited within his department. Some of those schools have the money, they are ready to go, and they want to get on and do it. It is incumbent on the Minister to make sure that his department changes up a gear and gets some of that work done before the summer season is upon us.

There is one school that I would like to mention specifically, that is, the Wandoan State School. Unfortunately, the Wandoan State School finds itself just outside the line—just over the border. I know that, wherever we draw lines or regions and apply things like the Cooler Schools program, we will always encounter this problem. But I went to Wandoan last week, just before we came back to Parliament. It is not until one gets there on the ground that one appreciates the problems facing the Wandoan State School. During 1998, the Year 1 to Year 4 areas were remodelled, the classrooms were extended out onto the verandas and sliding glass windows were installed to create extra areas. They did a great job. It made extra areas for the teachers and the students, but it cut down the natural air flow. It is the sort of thing that is designed for airconditioning, but the airconditioning was not put in, and it is not going to be put in because Wandoan falls just outside the boundary—just over the line.

This is the sort of thing that makes a mockery of drawing up these regions. No-one could spend half an hour in those buildings without appreciating the need for airconditioning, simply because of the way the remodelling has been done. I have written to the Minister about this, and I certainly will be writing to him again about it. It is a problem that must be fixed.

Not only have the Years 1 to 4 areas been remodelled, but they have two demountable classrooms that would be great if they were out somewhere where the air could flow through them. But those two demountable classrooms have been positioned in such a way that there is absolutely no air flow. When I was there, it was a spring day. It was the first week in September. I walked into the Year 10 classroom, and after about five minutes I was looking to get out. I can just imagine what those demountable buildings are like in the middle of November when there are 25 or 26 Year 10 students in there, plus teachers. The Minister for Education can be assured that I will continue to pursue that issue until we get a resolution.

The other positive in this Budget is the funding for the rural fire brigades. Other members have mentioned that, and I add my support to what they have said. I was a first officer in a rural fire brigade for many years, and I know the time that we spent battling with substandard equipment. I also know the amount of money that private people put into those brigades to make them function. It is good that they are getting some Government recognition.

Obviously, State Development is the big winner in this Budget. I hope that perhaps some of that money that has been allocated to State Development gets out into areas like the Callide electorate in a form that will do some good. I support the comments made by the member for Western Downs, who spoke about the \$27.5m allocated for regional forums. The last thing that we want—and the last thing

that will contribute anything worth while in terms of regional development—are more regional forums, more bureaucrats running workshops, more butcher's paper and felt pens. We have done that to death. Let us see if we cannot do something worth while in terms of regional development. Let us see if we cannot get some of that huge Budget allocation that the Department of State Development has been lucky enough to get out of this Budget. Let us make it achieve something real. Let us get something solid and tangible out of it for rural and regional Queensland.

I shall conclude by saying what I said at the beginning. There is nothing much in this Budget for the electorate of Callide. There is nothing much in this Budget for regional Queensland—for that great bulk of Queensland that makes up the hinterland electorates. It is a typical Labor Budget. It has nothing for the bush, and it is a continuation of what we saw during the Goss years.

Time expired.

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