



Speech by

**Mr JIM PEARCE**

**MEMBER FOR FITZROY**

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Hansard 16 September 1999

### 1999 STATE BUDGET

**Mr PEARCE** (Fitzroy—ALP) (11.11 p.m.): Let me open by saying that there are many issues that I would like to cover in my contribution to this debate. Unfortunately, time restricts me, so I will not be able to touch on a lot of issues which I believe are important to the people of the Fitzroy electorate and central Queensland.

This year's State Budget is a Budget that delivers jobs, industries of the future, regional development and a record Capital Works Program. It delivers \$566m to the Fitzroy region and it puts back some of the revenue dollars into what is a region of wealth.

As a former coalminer and labourer in many different jobs, I always welcome announcements and initiatives that create or maintain jobs, firstly in central Queensland and, secondly, across the State. Jobs, as we all know, provide opportunity and stability in a person's lifestyle and allow for the family to function in the home, enjoy quality of life and give their children the opportunity to be educated and to be protected by a good health system.

The Premier, in his second-reading speech, forecast 41,000 more new jobs in the current Budget year. The target of 5% unemployment set by Peter Beattie prior to the last State election is looking more achievable as the Labor Government settles into getting on with the job—developing Queensland. The 41,000 new jobs will reduce the State's unemployment rate to an average of 7.75% over the year—down from the 9% level left to us by the coalition.

Today I want to touch on several areas of the Budget and what it means to central Queensland. I will then speak to a few issues that need to be addressed so that the quality of life for people in the Fitzroy electorate can be improved. Capital works for any level of government is the engine room for jobs and for the public. Capital works are always recognised as the Government doing something. This Budget has delivered the biggest Capital Works Program that Queensland has ever seen. Not only will it deliver jobs and confidence for Queenslanders; it will deliver significant advances in key infrastructure.

Fifty-four per cent of the capital works scheduled for this year are in regional Queensland. I am pleased that the Premier and the Cabinet have recognised the importance of regional Queensland. Regional areas will share in the \$328m allocated for capital works in Education, \$304m for law and order, \$1 billion for power infrastructure and \$585m for Health.

In the Fitzroy electorate, Allenstown State School will get \$294,000 for the replacement of an amenities block. This will be welcomed by the school community as it has been a long struggle and there has been plenty of lobbying to make sure that this facility is provided. A covered play area that the P & C has lobbied hard for over a number of years was promised as an incentive for the school, which was concerned about inadequate facilities to meet the demands of a special education unit which has now been attached to the school. There is no evidence that funding has been provided for that structure. We are a little bit concerned that the department has failed to deliver on a commitment accepted in good faith by the school community. It has caused me much embarrassment because I was encouraged to make the announcement to an end-of-year presentation audience. That is one issue that I know the P & C wants me to pursue. I will be taking this matter up with the Minister in the coming week.

Parents, staff and students at Bouldercombe State School will appreciate that some moneys have been allocated for the planning of a modular building and a new amenities block. The toilet facilities at the school are inadequate and should have been replaced years ago. However, we are pleased that the Budget allocation means that we are on the way. We can expect the new facilities to be in place before the end of the next year. That is certainly welcomed by that school community.

I note that for the third year in a row the Middlemount State School has been identified in Budget papers as receiving a \$396,000 allocation for a new resource centre. We are hoping that the department will surprise us this year by actually completing the construction of that facility. I am certainly not promoting it again as a Budget initiative as we will believe it when we see it.

The Cooler Schools program has been allocated \$27.3m in this Budget. The next round of schools—91, in fact—will be able to put in airconditioning and improve learning environments for students and staff. This program has moved about as quickly as a snail and has caused much frustration amongst eligible schools. I encourage the Minister to look at this delay pattern and, where possible, kick some backsides because, quite frankly, the department's performance in moving this program ahead has been pathetic. Schools in the Fitzroy electorate identified for funding in the Budget papers include Allenstown, Duaringa, Gracemere, Mount Morgan and Ridglands State Schools.

We are pleased that the Budget provides for another 228 teachers. We are pleased that the \$50m allocated for the Building Better Schools scheme will take up the gaps where schools are in need of upgrading and improvements. \$5m will be allocated for the network learning community. This program will provide for information technology, which is something that we all have to take on board and be prepared to see as a necessity. If we do not get on board with IT, we are going to be left behind as a nation.

Behaviour management programs for students at risk will receive \$5m. While this Budget allocation recognises that children with behavioural problems do need assistance, its size is an indication that Education Queensland is still not prepared to acknowledge or recognise the major impact that children with attention deficit disorder—ADD—or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—ADHD—have on a school community. It is about time that someone took this matter more seriously. \$10m has been allocated to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

I welcome the doubling of the Budget allocation for teacher housing. I know that parents and citizens organisations in Dysart prepared an excellent submission to Government for the maintenance and upgrade of teacher accommodation. I think that we as members of this place all realise that, if teachers are to be encouraged to take on rural appointments, better teacher housing needs to be provided. We are certainly appreciative of what the Minister has done in recent months with regard to the standard of accommodation in Dysart in particular.

I wish to talk now about women in rural Queensland. I think all of us here recognise that women in rural and regional Queensland are always a consideration for Labor Governments when it comes to framing a Budget. The women of rural Queensland have the respect of our Government. We recognise the important and sometimes thankless role that they play in the family and in the community, especially small communities, as volunteers, business operators, service providers, and as employees of Government and the private sector.

Women are important to getting the balance right when it comes to the development of policy that impacts on our quality of life and family values. I will be encouraging women across central Queensland to voice their concerns to Government through the extensive community outreach strategy announced in this Budget. This strategy will be implemented through a series of community forums hosted by the Office of Women's Policy.

The Rockhampton Office of Fair Trading will continue to provide consumer awareness education to people about their rights and responsibilities. \$750,000 has been allocated for the establishment of a new tribunal to hear disputes between retirement village residents and village operators. This is another Labor Government social justice initiative. I applaud the setting up of a special investigation squad to target unscrupulous property dealers. There are a couple of crooks operating in the Rockhampton area who will be brought to the attention of this squad.

Emergency Services will be enhanced through a record \$478.5m budget allocation. This is up \$49.5m on last year. I am particularly pleased about the record \$16m budget allocation for the rural fire brigade service. We all know just how important a role the rural fire service volunteers play in protecting property and valuable primary production land. Government has an obligation to do what it can to give a helping hand to these dedicated volunteer bush firefighters. There are 45,000 volunteers in 1,600 brigades protecting 90% of the State. This year's budget allocation represents a 30% increase on last year and will deliver 124 new fire trucks.

\$510,000 has been allocated for personal protective equipment such as helmets, gloves and overalls. An important boost has been given to communications by the allocation of \$305,000 for new

equipment and radios. \$1.85 million has been allocated for subsidies for brigade equipment such as hoses, drip torches and knapsacks. An allocation of \$160,000 has also been made for brigade insurance costs and an amount of \$350,000 has been made available for station construction and upgrades. The Labor Government is helping rural bush fire brigades because it knows the important role that they play and the difficulty they have trying in to raise the dollars necessary to carry out their activities in a safe and acceptable way.

Local councils have ongoing funding worth \$1.2m annually to support counterdisaster and rescue services. The SES cadet program will continue, with \$1m having been allocated for this important activity. \$24.5m has been provided in the Budget for the free ambulance service introduced by the Beattie Labor Government at the beginning of this year. This will be of benefit to some 850,000 pensioners, seniors and their dependants. It has certainly been very warmly welcomed by people in the Fitzroy electorate.

Changes to the electoral boundaries mean that at the time of the next State election in 2001, the Fitzroy electorate will expand to approximately 40,000 square kilometres. A number of small communities such as Wowan, Dululu, Baralaba, Goovigen, Jambin and Banana will be added to the electorate of Fitzroy, along with Moura. Each and every one of these communities will have particular issues which will be important to them and which will require my support as their elected member. I am already assisting with funding applications on education and housing matters and pursuing such things as fish ladders at water storage facilities, a water supply to Banana and coal industry related issues.

The Fitzroy electorate is one that brings with it new challenges almost every day. My experience of 10 years so far means that I know the short cuts and know how to go about getting, wherever possible, the outcomes that benefit the people. One issue that I am determined to win sooner rather than later is improved television reception for the town of Mount Morgan. I have, on behalf of the good people of Mount Morgan, made a formal submission to the Federal Government's television fund issues paper and in doing so I have highlighted the poor to nil television reception that Mount Morgan people have had to put up with, despite living only 45 minutes from the regional city of Rockhampton. Premier Beattie is supporting me on this quality of life issue.

I will continue to lobby strongly for funding through the black spots program. I am pleased to see \$2.75m allocated for ongoing roadworks that will in time see the completion of the widening of the Fitzroy Development Road, also known as the Dingo/Mount Flora Road, north of Middlemount. Much of the work has been completed to the satisfaction of central Queenslanders who make frequent trips from the coalfields to Mackay and Rockhampton. I thank the people of Middlemount, Tieri and Dysart for their patience and confidence in me as their local member. They know that the job is getting done and they appreciate that the Government remains committed to upgrading roads to improve safety and movement of passenger vehicles and transportation of primary produce.

Health services will always remain a priority issue for people living in rural and isolated areas, and the Fitzroy electorate is no different from any other rural electorate when it comes to the delivery of health services. The lack of professional health workers and the reluctance of medical practitioners to establish services means that rural Queensland will always be disadvantaged.

The ongoing downsizing of the coal industry means that a number of hospitals will be put under the microscope by Treasury bean counters. I know the importance of hospital facilities for people living in these areas. I know that, through fundraising activities, the community has contributed to the purchase of equipment and the maintenance of hospitals. It is well recognised that a well-equipped hospital is essential to rural towns.

The Government recognises that rural communities must have appropriately funded health services. The Government acknowledges the magnificent contribution made by the public to maintaining hospital facilities and will continue to provide the necessary funds. This is supported by yet another record recurrent budget for Health of \$3.45 billion.

I am pleased that an extra \$4.4m has been allocated to the Home and Community Care program. Every member of this House knows and understands that there is an ever increasing demand for care in the home for our frail elderly residents and their carers. Our Government acknowledges the needs of our most valued citizens and has put the money up front. Another 6,000 Queenslanders will receive assistance under the program. Mental health services will get a \$13m boost. Community based mental health care will get an additional 80 clinical staff. I know this will be welcomed by people in rural Queensland, in particular in the Emerald area.

There are one or two issues that I am prepared to put some effort into in the hope that we as a Government and I as the local member can deliver on and in doing so improve quality of life for those in our community who, for health or financial reasons, are disadvantaged. In the area of health, there is a group of people who suffer in silence. They are the people who suffer from chronic ulcers—chronic wounds which can easily turn malignant. They can cause stress and confine sufferers to their homes. I am told that one woman in Rockhampton has suffered from chronic leg ulcers for 45 years. The

average time for which people suffer with this problem is about 16 years. In recent years a machine called a VAC—a vacuum assistance closure machine—has come on to the market. The VAC machine has been tested. It cleans and promotes growth of granulation tissue. Wounds that have in the past refused to heal are now healing in a matter of a few short weeks.

This machine reduces long-term cost of care and treatment. Not only is it cost effective; it is easy to use and contributes to a decrease in suffering and an improvement in quality of life for affected people. The cost of a machine is around \$5,000—a mere pittance in light of the long-term benefits to patients and the Health budget. There are, of course, other costs such as dressings, but the short-term cost increases will be a minor consideration in the light of the long-term savings. The purchase and distribution of the VAC machine has been earmarked as a project that I intend to take up.

I will be continuing to work with Government Ministers, in particular the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, Anna Bligh, in an effort to have women on a widow's pension recognised as eligible for consideration for concessions allowable under the Queensland Seniors Card. The card, as all members would know, provides holders with discounts on many services offered by Government and the private sector. I see no reason why the widows cannot access the same benefits. The widow's pension is less than a single pensioner's level of payment by more than \$40 a fortnight. Honourable members can see how difficult it would be for those women who have lost their loved one. Age and lack of skills means that many widows are left to carry the financial burden once shared by them and their husbands. I thank Minister Bligh for taking this matter seriously and for implementing action that could see these inequities addressed.

As I said at the beginning of my contribution, there are plenty of issues that I could cover, but time does not permit. I could look at police services—those things that benefit people in local communities by having a good police service. I could look at hospitals in more detail. There are a number of issues that I could talk about. I believe that this is a good Budget. It sets the basis for the Labor Government to move on. I certainly look forward to working with the Ministers over the coming months to put in place a number of programs that I wish to address in the Fitzroy electorate.

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