



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR WARWICK

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1999 BUDGET SPEECH

Mr SPRINGBORG (Warwick—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.10 p.m.): In joining in this debate, I have to say at the outset that I was most disappointed in the presentation of the Budget the other day. I am also disappointed that not everything has been uncovered in the 1999-2000 State Budget. It was one of the most lacklustre, visionless Budgets that I have ever seen presented in Queensland.

I have been in Parliament for 10 years—as has the honourable member for Everton—and I believe I have sat through six Goss Budgets, two full Borbidge Budgets, one Borbidge Budget which we did not have the opportunity to implement, and a Beattie Budget. There was little reason to turn up at this Parliament and listen to the Budget which was delivered by the acting Treasurer because, quite frankly, there was nothing new.

Dr Watson: It was worse than the second De Lacy Budget.

Mr SPRINGBORG: There was a fair bit of smoke and mirrors but, to be fair to Mr De Lacy, there was a bit more substance in his Budget. I do not think there was too much in the acting Treasurer's first Budget to excite anyone. If it was not for a very careful and deliberate process of leaks on the part of various Ministers and the Government, it is probably fair to say that we would not have seen very much media coverage of the Budget. I suppose it is the prerogative of the Government of the day to decide how it wants to sell its Budget, but there was little point in even turning up at this place. A lot of people say, "What's new in the Budget?" I think that is a fair point.

The shadow Treasurer has referred to the situation with regard to the way in which the Budget papers have been written. This has caused problems for members of the Opposition and members of the public. It has been difficult to read and understand some of the issues which have been funded through the Budget.

The other day, members of this Parliament had an opportunity to attend a briefing with Treasury officials at the conference room on Level 5 in relation to the Budget. I thank the Government for organising that briefing. However, I think it is probably fair to say that, whilst we were much better informed, a lot of us were not very much wiser. I suppose it will be a matter of time before the true implications of this Budget appear.

One of the issues we must consider concerns the changes in the appropriation process. This is set out on page 7 of the document with which we were supplied at the briefing. Everyone could easily understand the old process because basically everyone in the community operates on a cash basis. I know that a lot of major businesses do not operate on that basis, but a lot of smaller businesses do. Under the old system, fees or taxes were collected, they went to the Treasurer, the Treasurer distributed them to the various agencies and then it was returned to the people who probably paid the taxes in the first place.

The new process is somewhat more complicated. We are told that it is revolutionary and that it is something we need to do in the 1990s because we need to be able to properly apportion expenditure for something in the year when it actually happened. We also need to factor in depreciation and all those sorts of things. This will enable Government, we are told, to stand on a more level footing with private enterprise.

Whilst I accept that Government probably does need to become a little bit more efficient and a little bit more transparent in the way that it does things, I think it is also very important to point out that Government is not business. Government still has to worry about social infrastructure. Government still has to worry about delivering services to people in the community. I would caution Governments, irrespective of their political persuasions, about how much Government would want to be like business.

I would like to add that there is a great deal of difficulty in tracking down the money trails. It is not easy to understand what is actually being planned to be expended under the 1999-2000 State Budget.

If we look at a number of the Budget papers and compare them with the ministerial program statements of particular portfolios, we find references to different amounts of money for the same sorts of items. There may be a perfectly good explanation for that, but over the past few days I have been going through it and there is a considerable degree of inconsistency between the various Budget papers.

We have had an interesting debate in this House with regard to Standard and Poor's. I noted that the other day the Premier was clutching his heart and wringing his hands with regard to the Standard and Poor's statement. He went out and put something on the front page of the Courier-Mail about how the Borbidge Government was supposedly running Queensland into debt. Yesterday, Standard and Poor's issued a media release. That media release has been quoted by members on both sides of the House during this debate. Members opposite have been cartwheeling around the place in an attempt to explain it away. However, they did not do a very good job.

The report is entitled "Queensland Budget Shows Weakening Finances". In part, the report reads—

"In contrast to recent years, the general Government sector is expected to slip into the red in fiscal 2000,' noted Rick Shepherd, Director, Public Finance ratings. 'A general Government underlying cash deficit of a \$0.4 billion is forecast compared with a small surplus in fiscal 1999.'"

I would have thought that that would have debunked the article which appeared on the front page of the Courier-Mail. As I said, the Premier tried to accuse other Governments of undermining Queensland's very sound financial position when, in fact, it was his own doing.

The Premier also tried to explain it away yesterday at the post-Budget business breakfast. I am not sure how many members have had the opportunity to read Melba in today's Australian, but it is a very interesting article. I will read it into Hansard for the benefit of members currently in the House and for future generations. It reads—

"Queensland's snappily dressed Premier Peter Beattie is well outside Jeff Kennett's league when it comes to dealing with the Press. Try this for size. At the post-Budget breakfast in Brisbane yesterday, Beattie, pictured, made the outrageous claim that The Australian's report saying Queensland's Budget has gone into the red was wrong."

Standard and Poor's has proved that the Australian report was correct. The article continues—

"He indulged in a bit of babble about accrual accounting before saying: 'But I am delighted with the coverage in the Courier-Mail, they were right. I've always said a lot about the Courier-Mail, but I tell you I love it dearly, it's a great newspaper.'"

Dr Watson: Yet a couple of weeks ago down at the Gold Coast he was bagging it.

Mr SPRINGBORG: That wouldn't be right because he tells us that he is an honest and trustworthy bloke. He says that in the Parliament and also on radio stations. I have been listening to him. The article continued—

"Maybe you should buy several copies of today's edition, buy a few for your grandkids. It's a great edition. Is the editor here? He's not. Someone, tell him I said I love him.' Although thousands of kilometres from the action, we can feel editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell's ears burning with embarrassment. But what makes Beattie's assessment of the Courier-Mail so remarkable is the torrent of pre-Budget leaks that somehow fell into the paper's hands.

PS: Melba's economics guru assures us there might be one Premier or State treasurer in Australia who understands accrual accounting, although he doesn't know which one. But he's sure it isn't Premier Beattie."

Mr Welford: Who said that?

Mr SPRINGBORG: It's in today's Australian. I can tell the Honourable Minister for Natural Resources and Environment that the Australian newspaper saw right through the facade which has been tossed up by the Beattie Government with regard to the very sound state of Queensland's finances and the attempts by this Government to blame the underlying deficit that has been identified by Standard and Poor's in this particular financial year on previous Governments in previous financial years.

I would like to take the opportunity to speak about some of the issues relevant to my own electorate before I touch on my shadow portfolio. As I went through the ministerial program statements trying to identify new capital works in my electorate, I became very disappointed. During the Goss era I was usually able to put a highlighter through six or eight, or even 10, individual things that were to occur in my electorate. On this occasion, however, there were only two.

Although I know that when the coalition was in Government it addressed a whole range of issues relating to education and roads, a number of other areas certainly required to be addressed further. I note that the Minister for Emergency Services is in the Chamber. I commend her very much for what she has done for the Inglewood community with the provision of the new fire and ambulance station. The fire station was an absolute shambles and the ambulance station was in need of a new area in which to grow. However, that is where the kudos stop for the Government, because it has not even tried to address a whole range of other issues around my electorate. This is the first time that I have sat in this place and gone through the capital works budget without being able to draw a line under any new road infrastructure project in my electorate, and a whole range of other issues need to be dealt with urgently.

While I am speaking about the road and transport budget, for the 1999-2000 financial year, the budget for Main Roads and Transport has been combined and for the Darling Downs—

Mr Lucas: I reckon you would look good making a speech on Lenin's tomb.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I will do that at another time. When Mr Mickel is finished with that book, the honourable member for Lytton should look at it. It is a very good and interesting book. He might even learn something. After the next election, the honourable member for Lytton will be needing some of those embalming techniques for the honourable members on his side of the House

The budget for Transport and Main Roads has declined from \$69m to \$27m. There may be an explanation for that decrease. The explanation may be the new, funny way in which these accrual accounting Budget papers have been put together. Certainly, on the surface that appears to be a reduction of over \$40m on infrastructure spending that is planned for Main Roads and Transport.

A moment ago, the honourable member for Ashgrove carried on in his contribution about the Government's Charter of Social and Fiscal Responsibility. As I have said, we have already heard the Premier wax lyrical, put his hand on his heart, and wring his hands about openness, accountability and all those sorts of things. However, one thing that we have to consider is that, this year, accrual accounting has been used to actually hide a lot of things and make things a lot less transparent.

Mr Welford: Why did you bring it in?

Mr SPRINGBORG: That may not necessarily be the fault of the accrual accounting process. I am saying to the Honourable Minister for Natural Resources and Environment that, in terms of this Budget, some very, very good lessons can be learned about openness and transparency and making it a lot easier for members of Parliament to be able to pick up Budget papers and understand what they mean. We are going to have to go into the Estimates process to get information about a whole heap of really important areas that concern people—prize out one by one by one things that in previous years would have been indicated explicitly in the Ministerial Portfolio Statements.

We have seen the Darling Downs Health budget cut by \$5m. I believe that that cut will have a major impact on the ability of the health service professionals on the Darling Downs and in my electorate of Warwick to deliver services to those people who genuinely expect them to be delivered. I know that there is a responsibility on those health services and facilities to make sure that they are getting value for the Government dollar. However, over a long period it has also been apparent to me that it has been most difficult for our district managers to make savings in their budgets and still deliver those services. Unfortunately, if they have to take money from one area to put into another to deliver those services, the people who deliver the primary health service, such as nurses, particularly casual and part-time nurses, are the ones who suffer. On the surface, there appears to be a \$5m cut in health services in the Darling Downs region. That issue needs to be addressed.

Although in the current Budget the Government has forgotten about this matter, I challenge the Government to make sure that it does not forget in future Budgets the need for a decent administration block and home economics block at the Allora school. They have been waiting for those facilities for a while. When this Government took office, they were at the top of the planning list and should have been the next project that received a guernsey. Also at Inglewood school, which I attended between 1980 and 1982, the science block is absolutely appalling. It has no floor coverings and nothing to stop any chemicals that are dropped on the floor leaching right down to the lower levels. Owing to the layout of the science block, the teachers are not able to instruct students properly in any science experiments. The consequence of that is that the students are not tutored in the areas that they need.

Mr Schwarten: That didn't happen overnight. That was a problem when you were in Government.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I am saying that, when the coalition was in Government, it addressed the resource centre issue at that school very, very quickly. This issue also needs to be addressed. It has been going on for a long time and the Government must consider it. I concede that, whenever I have come to the Minister about issues, he has been very, very good and very open. At this stage, I am not sure whether the Minister has the primary responsibility for this issue. However, when it comes to the construction of the facility, he will have that responsibility. The Stanthorpe State High School also needs a new science block. In that regard, I hope that we are not seeing another example of Labor's ongoing contempt for people in rural areas.

The honourable member for Everton is present in the Chamber. When it comes to new water infrastructure, we really need to see the Government's colours—what its forward plans are, what it is going to do about dams and weirs, and what it is going to do about the remaining Water Infrastructure Task Force projects that were put in place by the previous Government. That was the first time that we had a properly planned process. We need the Government to continue to fund those projects so that those people in rural and regional areas can have some hope.

I turn briefly to the Justice portfolio. I welcome the adoption by this Government of the coalition's drug court policy. I commend the Attorney-General and the Premier for taking that proposal on board. According to the media releases—although, once again, it is very, very difficult to be able to ferret it out; I will have to do it during the Estimates process because it is not completely explicit in the Budget—something like \$3m odd is being made available for a trial drug court process. I believe that this is a real way of getting to the nub of some of the problems in our society, particularly crime, which so often is related to drug dependency. The other day in New South Wales, I had the opportunity to see that program work, and it is working quite well. Obviously, it could be enhanced. However, I caution the Government to make sure that it has a proper reporting process back to the magistrate who is in charge. The magistrate needs to be able to look at the progress of an offender or the drug court will not work. There also needs to be a good, regular testing process of these people—at least in the early stages—three times a week. Otherwise, if those people are tested randomly, after four days it is very difficult to pick up morphine traces in a person's urine, which is what indicates a heroin addict.

This Budget makes no real commitment to the new Magistrates Court in Brisbane. We need some innovative way of dealing with that. When the coalition was in Government, it put in place a planning process and it was considering inviting private enterprise to be part of that process. The Government appears to have given up on that initiative. Currently, the Brisbane Magistrates Court is an absolute shambles, and it is a dangerous shambles. The Government needs to commit itself—

Mr Schwarten interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I will talk to the Minister privately about the issue, because I do not have much time left in which to speak. There is a real problem with the Magistrates Court, and the Government needs to be serious about addressing it.

It is difficult to ascertain in this Budget if more money has been allocated to legal aid. The Government contends that there is more money available. However, I think that there are a couple of problems. An amount of \$0.5m is being taken out of reserves and we are going to have six fewer staff. So that indicates that things are not quite as rosy as we are led to believe.

The reform of the legal profession is at the forefront of the Attorney-General's mind. However, where is the funding for it? How is that going to happen? What is going to be the situation? Is the legal profession about to fund it? The way I see it, that proposal will build up a huge bureaucracy. The only way that that reform can be funded is for the Government to fund it or for the legal profession itself to fund it.

This Budget also gives no clear indication of a provision for extra judges or magistrates, which are needed to be able to deal with the increasing number of civil and criminal cases that are coming before our courts. The other issue is the unilateral decision of this Government to transfer funding for victims of crime from the Attorney-General's department—out of the justice system—and into the welfare system without any consultation with those victims of crime. In that regard, the other point I want to make is that the pool of money, which the Government says has been transferred over, has not really been identified clearly. Funding for victims of crime is going to be competing with all of those other social programs and agenda in the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care. In terms of welfare, although that department does a good job, victims of crime do not require a welfare prerogative, they require a compassionate justice prerogative, and funding for victims of crime should not rest with that department. Those people are very concerned about that.

Time expired.
