



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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REGIONAL COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): Governments that lose touch and stop listening to the community are voted out of office. The Beattie Government has learnt that lesson, and it has learnt it well. The Cabinet now meets in regional centres every three weeks and local people have unprecedented access to the Premier and his Ministers. The success of that initiative, which commenced in July of last year in the seat of Mulgrave in far-north Queensland, is indisputable and I commend the Premier for the initiative.

Another program that I want to talk to the House about today will also ensure that the voice of people in regional Queensland is both heard and responded to. That program is now under way. Last Friday in Cairns I joined the Minister for Local Government, Planning, Regional and Rural Communities, Terry Mackenroth, my parliamentary colleagues Desley Boyle and Warren Pitt, and over 500 people from the Cairns community at a community conference to launch the Regional Communities Program in far-north Queensland. This program is an initiative of Minister Terry Mackenroth. It complements the regional Cabinet meetings and the existing work of the Office of Rural Communities, which provides a communication channel to Government for people living and working in rural and remote communities.

The Regional Communities Program involves eight regional centres throughout the State. It will provide a means for regional communities to identify and prioritise their specific issues and needs, and will influence the Government decisions affecting their regions. Ministers will hear first-hand how people in regional Queensland want the Government to respond to their needs.

I refer to a Cairns Post article that was published on the Saturday after the conference, which referred to some comments that were made by the Minister. The article states—

" 'I am here to listen to what you say,' he told the 500 delegates from all over the Far North. 'What should the Government do?'

Mr Mackenroth agreed it was no longer good enough to tell people what the issues were.

'These days you want to work together with us to achieve outcomes,' he said.

The minister said later the program would give the regions 'a direct line to the executive building in Brisbane'."

That is the kind of influence and involvement that people in regional Queensland are looking for.

One of the key features of the program will be four quarterly ministerial forums that will be held in each region each year. Two Ministers will attend each forum, together with 20 local community delegates who will represent the various social, business and Government sectors that make up the community. Those members will be selected by local community leaders who will themselves have been nominated by the local community. This process will be genuinely driven by the community rather than by the Government. The forums will not just be talkfests or an airing of grievances, because the Government knows that it is not good enough to just listen; it needs to act on what it hears and it needs to deliver to regional Queensland. The Ministers will report back either before or at each of the forums, describing the action that the Government has taken concerning the issues or projects that were raised at the previous forum.

The agenda for the first ministerial forum in each region will be set by the outcomes of community conferences such as the one just held in Cairns. At the Cairns conference, members of the community had an opportunity to select one of eight specific interest areas and then, in a small group

setting, generate ideas and issues and report back on their group's deliberations. I congratulate the manager of the program, Nick Ryan, and his team who did an outstanding job of facilitating the process throughout the State. Certainly the feedback I received in Cairns was overwhelmingly positive, even from people who regularly attend functions such as this and who, I can assure the House, are quite discerning when it comes to methods of consultation.

I would like to share with members some of the highlights from the reports of those eight interest sectors to give members a feeling for and a better understanding of the priorities of our region. These are only some of the issues that have been selected from a whole range that were presented by each group. They certainly do not comprise all the issues and priorities that the groups raised.

The business and industry group proposed that within two years all State Government decision-making policies and practices be allied with the region's own identified economic destiny. The community development group proposed the building of an academy of sport and the arts in the region by the year 2000 to develop the potential of young athletes and performers in far-north Queensland. I will come back to that issue and discuss it in further detail at another time. The community support group's priority was to establish regional one-stop shops for information referrals and issues advocacy, to bridge gaps between clients, services and Government and to promote service development, to be in place by the next Budget.

The education group referred to the need to develop a strategic direction that has broad bipartisan support. It proposed that the Minister should set up a task force to develop a strategic direction for education for the next 5 to 10 years. The environment group called on Government to address sewage and waste infrastructure, eliminate the impact on the environment, and investigate and implement innovative technology. The health group called for the provision of equitable health services throughout the far-north Queensland region by outreach strategies such as community consultation, the review and prioritising of funding resources and the establishment of a task force to compare health needs and resources.

The law, order and justice group, including emergency services, wishes to see the utilisation of a broad range of programs and new innovative strategies to positively reduce the actual crime rates and prison populations. The group also called for classroom education in responsibilities involving personal, family, community and safety issues. That group also proposed the broadening of public education programs of emergency services to enable citizens to obtain a better understanding of their roles and their responsibilities to themselves and their communities. It was particularly encouraging that the law, order and justice group really seems to have received the message about how important it is to actually combat the causes of crime, that we must involve the community in doing that and that we need to develop innovative strategies. The primary industries group, which obviously represents a very critical sector in our part of the world, recommended that there be recognition of the importance of primary industries as the backbone of Australia's economy, remote regional infrastructure development and improved access to education and training.

That should give members a good understanding of the range of issues that people in regional Queensland, particularly Cairns, are concerned about. I look forward to being involved in the forums as they progress. As I said, two Ministers will be present at each of those forums and local members will be invited to attend them. I will certainly take advantage of that opportunity. I will liaise with people in the various industry and sector groups to ensure that they raise the issues that are important to them. It is essential that communication takes place, so that people understand what the Government is doing and how it responds to those initiatives.

In conclusion, again I congratulate the Minister on this \$7m program. Officers will be stationed in each of the eight regional community centres. Each office will have a staff of three to facilitate the process and to ensure that it delivers results for the region. At the conference, the Minister gave something of a warning that I think needs to be repeated to ensure that there is a degree of realism in this process. The Cairns Post states—

"However the minister had a warning for anyone being too enthusiastic in their demands.

'Remember, the Government has to pay for what you want and that means ultimately you the taxpayer has to pay.' "

It is important that people do not think that there is a bottomless bucket of money. We are saying to people, "This is the amount of money that we have to spend, so what are your priorities? What should the Government be doing with your money to make sure that it really meets your needs?" I will leave the matter on that note. As I said, I shall take up some of those particularly important regional matters at another time.