



Speech by

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

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1999 STATE BUDGET

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—IND) (11.59 a.m.): It really is a privilege to be able to speak on this year's Budget. For many people in the State, when the Budget is released they look to see if their needs will be met and their expectations realised. The change in the structure of the Budget this year was significant. I can recall, as can any other member who has been in local government, the angst that occurred in local government when accrual accounting was introduced and the significant amount of training that was put in place to ensure that not only the officers but also the elected members were able to understand, at least in some practical measure, an accrual-based budget. In relation to this State Budget, there has been less preparation for members. Therefore, for many of us it has been a challenge to extract meaningful data from the new Budget format compared with the structure of last year's cash-based Budget.

One thing that I think is sad about the Budget is that, although it is always a challenge to work through the Ministerial Portfolio Statements in order to get the detail of the parts of the portfolio that relate to one's electorate and to the State generally, that process has become even more difficult. The Ministerial Portfolio Statements contain a great number of words, but not a great number of Budget line items so that one can understand the impact that the portfolio statements will have on one's own electorate.

However, I would like to comment on a number of continuing initiatives. They affect not only my electorate but also other areas across the State, because they are general funding initiatives. An additional \$12m has been allocated to students with learning difficulties, including students in non-State schools. I certainly commend that allocation. There have been a number of schools of thought about the education of students with disabilities, or learning difficulties. One school of thought is to educate them in mainstream schools. I do not hold that view. I believe that, for some students, the special learning centres are a great boon. I pay tribute to the Rosella Park School, which is located in my electorate. The principal of that school has a great deal of compassion, as do the staff, for people with learning difficulties or disabilities. They do a wonderful job in ensuring that those students realise their full potential. I hope that the money that has been allocated to this particular area will also, in great measure, help students with special disabilities or special learning difficulties to see their potential realised.

An amount of \$1.5m has been allocated to the John Tonge Centre. Although I never received any documentation to quantify the needs for the John Tonge Centre, I do not think it is arguable that there is a need for that funding. A mother in my electorate waited nine to 12 months—I cannot remember the exact time—for a death certificate for her son. It was a most difficult and distressing time for her. The hold-up was because the workload at John Tonge was so immense that it could not be processed. So any funding that will go to the John Tonge Centre towards alleviating that sort of very personal distress is to be welcomed.

The \$6.3m that has been allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for funding for the unpaid wages of Queensland Government employees is also welcome. However, I look forward to clarification of that allocation. I read in one document that that \$6.3m was for an education campaign. I hope that some of that money actually goes towards paying some of those back wages. I have looked

again for the document that said that that allocation was for advertising and education so that I could refer to it, but I cannot find it. It was definitely there. I thought that was a lot of money just for education.

Mr Pitt interjected.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: I would hope so.

Mr Pitt interjected.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: That is exactly right.

An amount of \$12.5m is to be allocated over four years—\$2m in this Budget—for ATSI water and waste disposal. I welcome that funding. There has been a lot of division and debate over the rights or otherwise of Aboriginal Queenslanders. I believe that Aboriginal Queenslanders, along with every other Queensland of whatever background, deserve basic sanitary and water safety. As much as is needed should be allocated to ensure that communities—including remote communities, because the technology exists—have at least basic services: access to clean water and access to good sanitary disposal. If that funding has to be accelerated to ensure that equity occurs, then it should be. As I said, irrespective of people's ethnicity or background, they deserve that basic service.

I welcome the funding of \$25m for fire and rescue infrastructure and services. Those officers do a tremendous job under very trying circumstances. Very seldom do they get called out to happy occasions. Any assistance in improving the service and the machinery and equipment that the officers have to provide that service is welcome. It benefits all of us in our communities. Additional money is allocated to the Ambulance Service. However, it was very difficult to track down which areas were going to receive funding in any of the emergency services. That was not the Minister's fault; it was because of the formatting of the Ministerial Portfolio Statements. That made it very difficult to see which equipment and infrastructure was being allocated to which electorates.

I know that the response to the free pensioner ambulance service in my electorate was very positive. The transition to the free ambulance service was handled very well. Those older people paid their ambulance subscription when it fell due but they were eligible for a rebate on 1 January. I received no complaints about those rebates and the process of receiving them was smooth. I commend that free ambulance service to pensioners who are challenged in their ability to meet their living needs.

Money has been allocated to Unmet Needs, which I welcome. I would like to comment on public housing. If my calculations are correct, \$173m has been allocated to public housing capital works. I commend the Minister for his stewardship of the Housing portfolio. It is a challenge, because in every member's electorate people have public housing needs. The Minister has to organise that housing and, in our electorates, we are challenged in finding adequate, suitable and appropriate housing for these people who have faced problems in the past and therefore have outstanding debts. However, that does not change the circumstances in which they find themselves. They may have an outstanding debt, but they still need somewhere to live. There has been a tightening of the public housing budget. I certainly wish the Minister well in his ability to manage that money.

We have high aged-care needs in Gladstone. I have talked with the Minister about the need for aged-care facilities, particularly in Philip Street. We also have plans for a boarding house facility which, in targeted situations, is an excellent housing alternative not only for young people but also for older Queenslanders, of whom a greater percentage are now separated or divorced. A husband or a wife may be displaced and in need of somewhere to live. For those people who may not want a home to look after, a boarding house in which meals are provided and they have their own rooms would be a solution to safe and secure housing.

I want to express my concerns about a number of revenue measures. Publicity has been given to the reduction of payroll tax this year from 5% to 4.9% and in the next financial year down to 4.8%. However, that reduction must be balanced with the fact that the payroll tax calculation will now include superannuation. I cannot identify in that document—and I do not think that anyone can—the level of bracket creep that will occur because of the inclusion of superannuation. That may become evident at the next Budget. But I question whether the 0.1% reduction in payroll tax will be more than consumed by the bracket creep that will occur as a result of the inclusion of superannuation. I would like employers, particularly those in my electorate, to get back to me with information on that matter.

I wish to express some concerns about our GOCs now being required to pay 100% dividends to the Government. Now that the GPA is a Government owned corporation, it will be required over time to increase the dividend paid to Government. That proportionally reduces the resources of the port authority. I believe QR and other instrumentalities are also required to pay this dividend. This reduces their ability to provide the infrastructure which is their core business. On behalf of the GPA, I express our concern that its payment of this dividend to the Government reduces its ability to grow port business. The Government cannot say that this is introducing a level playing field into an area where there is a monopoly. A port is a port. The port land in Gladstone is owned and administered by the port authority. The ability of private enterprise to produce a competitor is minimal if not impossible. Yet this port, which operates in a worldwide competitive business and which has the potential to grow will be impeded

constantly because of this requirement that it pay a 100% dividend. This is not something that only this Government has done. This measure commenced under previous Governments. As I said, this dividend is an impediment to the expansion of the business of the port and other Government owned corporations.

Already many speakers have commented on the equity return. I wish to spend only a couple of minutes addressing this issue, because I need to touch on some local issues. I express my deep concern about the introduction of this equity return. It has been called a tax and all sorts of other things. The Premier called it a bonus. For the life of me, I cannot see how it could possibly be a bonus. It is a 6% charge on departments that are asset rich. Many of the departments that are hit hardest are asset rich because of the nature of the business they conduct. From my understanding of the documentation, departments such as Natural Resources and Environment and Heritage will be affected because National Parks will be required to pay a 6% dividend on its land-holdings. I would love to be corrected and to be told that that is not true. The fact is that over the years the National Parks estate has been increased so that it reflects a reasonable percentage of the biodiversity and the important natural bushland and rainforest of this State. Members of the community have congratulated Governments for doing that. It is being purported that the money is being put back into the Budget this year and that, therefore, it is a neutral Budget. Next year, that same department, which was doing the right thing by the community in increasing its land-holdings, will be taxed 6% unless it sheds some of its lazy assets. What lazy assets does it have? The Daintree? I do not think so. The national parks behind Brisbane? If the Minister sheds those assets to reduce his liability to the Treasury Department, he will be hanged. Yet the 6% equity return is being levied on departments that, by their very nature, are required to be asset rich—for example, Health, Education and Natural Resources.

When I calculated some of the equity returns to Treasury, I found that the amounts are horrendous. It is fine to say that this year we can flick over it because there has been a plus and minus entry on the balance sheet and it is neutral. However, next year that will not be the case. Departments such as Education will be looking at all of their resources. There are some small schools in my area. I do not believe that I could be convinced that in three or four years' time Education will not be asking, "How can we reduce our obligation to Treasury by reducing our asset load?" The smaller schools and one-person ambulance stations will be sold, as will the clinics operating with one sister at Builyan or Many Peaks. The community depends on that sister for dressings and for other emergent health needs. For high-level care they go to the hospital, but their in situ care will be at risk. I have not yet heard a response from the Premier or anybody else that will allay that fear.

According to my calculations, Education will pay an equity return of over \$328m a year. That must mean that services will go or schools will close. Given the nature of Education, it will remain asset rich. Mines and Energy faces a \$1m equity return; it does not have a great deal of built assets or owned assets. If my figures are wrong, I would love to be corrected. Health is a service that the community greatly depends on. It will pay \$165m. Primary Industries is another one. State Development is hardly touched, as is the Premier's Department. The Parliament, too, is affected by the equity return. The notion of Treasury taxing the departments for assets built on behalf of the community with community money is scandalous.

Consciously or unconsciously, as I said earlier, Budget time is the time when individuals and groups in the community hope to see the realisation of their requests to Government. In my electorate, Gladstone Area Promotion and Development Limited received \$374,000 for Expo Gladstone, which it will welcome. It has been developing a showcase for Gladstone industry and other things in the area to attract tourism. I thank the Minister for that funding.

However, the PCYC and the local council are very disappointed that the funding that was applied for the redevelopment of the PCYC into a multisports facility has not been realised. A number of sporting organisations, not the least of which were gymnastics and netball groups, were looking forward to that redevelopment so that it could become a national standard facility. It was denied national standards funding, because it was not a national standards facility. No it was not; that is what it was trying to achieve. It is a catch-22 situation. I was told that national sporting moneys would go only to facilities that were of a national standard. I said to the person who told me that that the money will stay in the south-east corner and perhaps Townsville or Cairns, because the rest of the State is trying to achieve that standard. That was the purpose of the funding sought for the PCYC.

We received funding for the CQ University, which is welcome. That is an ongoing project and it will be beneficial for families in our community to be able to retain their young people in their community for their tertiary education. The extension of the Awoonga Dam pipeline to Callide and the first raising of the Awoonga Dam will benefit not only the industrial community but also our residential community. I again raise the need for irrigation water for the Yarwun/Targinnie fruit-growing area. The funding for the Queensland Centre for Advanced Technology and the Light Metals Centre will also be of benefit to our community. We need to diversify our commodities base. We are very heavily dependent on aluminium. The development of a light metals industry would not only diversify job opportunities but would also

spread our risk in respect of commodities. In common with the Minister for State Development, I look forward to seeing that development occur.

The Monto minerals project and the space launch facility, although not in my electorate, will also benefit people in my electorate. There has already been comment about the Comalco refinery and the Papua New Guinea gas pipeline. The Aldoga corridor continues to receive funding, as does the Clinton industrial estate.

I thank the Minister for Education for the Cooler Schools funding for Kin Kora, Mount Larcom, Ambrose, Nagoorin, Boyne Island, Central, Toolooa, South, Gladstone State High and West. Those students and the work of the P & Cs and the Government together will ensure that their learning environment at the time when Gladstone and our region is at its hottest will be much more comfortable.

I welcome also the major rehabilitation of the Dawson Highway between Biloela and Moura. That road is a conduit west from Gladstone and is certainly a priority for road transportation. I recognise that my time is almost up. Again, our community has not benefited in great measure in terms of one-off projects other than Expo Gladstone. However, there has been a finalisation of funding for the hospital, the courthouse and a number of other facilities. It concerns me that in today's paper the AWU at the hospital is concerned about the closure—

Time expired.
