



Speech by

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**MEMBER FOR LOCKYER**

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Hansard 25 May 1999

**UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND, GATTON CAMPUS**

**Dr PRENZLER** (Lockyer—ONP) (12.10 p.m.): I rise once again to speak on the issue of the viability of the Gatton campus of the University of Queensland. Simply, the downfall of the campus began after the Dawkins white paper of 1989 insisted that smaller educational centres, such as the Gatton College, be forced into a consolidation process with larger universities. Gatton College, because of its historic links, chose to consolidate with the University of Queensland, even though at the time Griffith showed a lot of interest in Gatton.

Over the next five years of the consolidation process, many promises were made by the University of Queensland to Gatton regarding its future. Those assurances flowed from seven reports to the university's senate, which indicated that the St Lucia campus was already overcrowded, that courses would have to go to the Gatton campus, that the student population would rise to around 5,000, and that the Gatton campus would become a world-class educational and research facility encompassing agriculture and veterinary sciences.

In 1995, the university senate even reaffirmed that commitment in a report which states—

"That the development of a new campus"—

and that is referring to the new Ipswich campus—

"should not compromise the quality of existing campuses or programs, particularly through a diversion of student loading or funding."

Despite all of these promises to the Gatton campus and to the people of the Lockyer region, the actions of the university are quite to the contrary. Courses, staff and students are being moved to the Ipswich and Brisbane campuses. By the end of this year, approximately only 1,250 students will be left at Gatton. This year alone, the economic loss to the Lockyer community because of those moves will be around \$8m, which is more than the value of the whole Lockyer potato crop. Many promises have been made to the three shires in the Lockyer region. Many people in the region invested money in student accommodation, only to see these investments dashed. It is no wonder the representatives of the Gatton, Laidley and Esk Shires have become very impatient with the university's senate.

The University of Queensland, with some 30,000 students, has indeed created overcrowding in the St Lucia campus. Despite the reservations of a part of the academic staff and some supporters in professional organisations, such as the AVA—and I must admit that some of their views are quite ridiculous—to survive today a university must be visionary and outward in its thinking. The University of Queensland is at this crossroad. The Pinjarra Hills, Mount Cotton, Redland Bay and, indeed, the north coast hinterland campuses are under increasing urbanisation and environmental pressures. Those pressures will not go away. I understand the sentimentality of the Mayne inheritance to the University of Queensland. I am sure that that consideration could be resolved adequately by, for example, ensuring that parkland area is set aside for that remembrance.

The development of the Gatton campus as a world-class educational and research facility would be the next logical step in the development of the university. The scenarios envisaged by Professor Lovell and the now retired Vice-Chancellor Wilson for the future of the Gatton campus were correct. Those scenarios have since been further reinforced by the visionary concept of a Queensland animal health institute being based primarily at the Gatton campus, with a centre in Toowoomba as well as in Brisbane. The proposed facility, being a joint venture between the Queensland Department of Primary

Industries, the University of Queensland and CSIRO, has been described as a worthwhile, achievable goal by the Queensland Animal Health Institute feasibility study steering group.

These are the visionary concepts that Queensland needs for the future. We have to be at the forefront of research and development into disease control and prevention in the agricultural and veterinary areas. We should also be at the forefront in research and development of biological controls of the viral, bacterial and pest diseases that continually hinder agricultural and animal production. This research is absolutely necessary for a green and clean future that is vital for the survival of our species. This research can be done only in a rural community where the research centre becomes an extension of the farming community and the farming community becomes an extension of the research centre.

That is what should be happening at the Gatton campus. All the misleading information that is coming out of the university and being fed to the Beattie Government should cease. The reply to my question on notice to the Minister for Education, based on advice from the University of Queensland, is somewhat deceitful. Most of the works referred to in the Minister's reply were actually funded from the old Queensland Agricultural College reserves and not by the University of Queensland. The question on notice identified the University of Queensland's own funds. Consequently, the university has falsely claimed those works. The university also claims to have undertaken significant capital works at Gatton. The refurbishment of other buildings could in no way be called significant capital works. In fact, they are basically maintenance work.

I will give members some examples of such work. The university claimed that new laboratories were built. In fact, only a couple of fume cupboards and some new desks and whiteboards were provided. That cannot be claimed to be significant capital works. The university also claimed significant capital works undertaken for student accommodation. A coat of paint, some replacement cupboards and temporary demountable buildings for student rooms is hardly significant works. In fact, they are just barely maintenance work. There was the installation of a small number of self-catering facilities and small patios in the halls of residences. They are minor works that do very little to improve the teaching and research environment of the college. In addition, Shelton Hall is now vacant and for all intents and purposes has been abandoned. A refit of the dining hall servery/eating area and the installation of an electric boiler is the university's claim of significant works to dining facilities. The university also claims to have constructed a new piggery and student learning centre. There is no new piggery. Works to replace smashed windows and broken side vents and shields, broken flooring and pens was undertaken in a part of the existing piggery. Those works were essential for the continued use of the piggery. The student learning centre may be relocated to the Centenary learning centre. A member of the steering committee for the centre indicated that there was no such thing as a student learning centre.

The capital management plan commitment of \$5.3m to the college over the next three years is laughable considering that the annual income for the university exceeds \$500m. Most of the works should be considered as being mere maintenance work. The major item is the extension of the management studies building, which is now on hold because the University of Queensland is considering a further downsizing of the college.

The university is using the argument that it does not have the money and that therefore all promises are off. The university knew this when it moved the business courses and demonstrates that it had little intention of living up to any commitment to develop the Gatton campus. If it had, the university would have stalled or stopped completely the removal of the courses until it had a plan and funds to maintain the university campus at Gatton. The university has acted in bad faith towards the people of Lockyer.

The inference that the university does not have sufficient funds is also a matter of policy and not fact. For instance, as at 31 December 1998 there was an accumulated surplus in its operating budget of \$37m. The university also has some \$150m in investments. In addition, the purchase of the land and buildings at Bond University is still in train. The university is hardly what one would call cash strapped.

The university is trying to shift the blame for its lack of action in relation to the Gatton campus to the CSIRO, the DPI and industry. It would be worth while for the Minister to approach these bodies and see whether the major impasse was the fact that the university refused to supply any significant input of funds to the concept of a teaching and research facility and merely wanted these bodies to foot the bill for it. The teaching and, to some extent, the research facility is the responsibility of the university itself. In my opinion, the university response is not to inform the Minister but to misinform him.

Let us get on with the job and do what is right for Queensland. The Premier and his Ministers have postulated much about their commitment to the development of regional and rural communities. I challenge the Premier to remember that the development of the Gatton campus has received the backing of EDROC and SEQROC. In that regard, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Mr Jim Soorley, made the comment that the wealth gap between the rural and urban communities is widening and then gave his backing to the Gatton campus. The development of the Gatton campus is indeed a litmus test of the Government's commitment to regional communities, and it will be watched closely.

In conclusion, I have noticed that the National Party is taking a latent interest in the Gatton campus. If that interest is genuine, it is welcomed. However, if it is only political grandstanding to gain a few votes at the expense of the Lockyer people, it is not. Once again, the future of the Gatton campus is being viewed in the regional areas as a real test of the Government's commitment to regional development and will be watched closely by regional councils throughout Queensland. If the Premier does not take notice and become involved, his Government will fail.

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