



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 16 September 1999

1999 STATE BUDGET

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (11.30 p.m.): The Beattie Budget for 1999-2000 has received a very lukewarm reception by all sectors across Queensland. I suppose that most of them are still trying to get around all the rhetoric contained in the Budget papers. Even the members of the Labor backbench were not at their supportive best when the Premier delivered the Budget Speech on Tuesday afternoon. I must say that they were very quiet and very reserved. He even lost his union mates, who cannot make head nor tail of where the Government is actually heading. Everyone has been saying how wishy-washy the Budget papers are compared to those of previous years, with very little detail of capital works spending outlined for specific areas. I suppose that there is a method in their madness. The Premier and acting Treasurer has decided that the smoke and mirrors tricks will cover up a very dismal excuse for a State Budget.

On top of this he has thrown in a 6% BST—a Beattie stealth tax—which will have myriad impacts on all electorates and departments across Queensland. This tax can only operate as a major disincentive for additional infrastructure across the State. It is a tax on the development and the growth of Queensland. From July next year, every Government department that builds a hospital, a road or a police station will have to pay 6% to the Treasury Department. There is no limit to how wide ranging the BST will be, both socially and on capital works.

On Tuesday, the member for Cunningham outlined the worrying position of the decimation of small schools across the State. Those schools will be valued at their replacement cost. Of course, in most cases, rural and regional Queensland will once again suffer. The Premier mentioned that he will not allow capital assets to run down. The only other option, if they do not meet the criteria, is to shut down or be sold off. It is a shape up or ship out option for all departments. I am just wondering if it is very workable.

Will this be the final nail in the coffin—that is, if we really need one—of the Tarong Power Station expansion? Public generators already pay a massive dividend. Will it be the end of hopes for mains power for many isolated communities? The BST will be another disincentive to the already challenging task of improving electricity distribution across Queensland. The list can go on and on, and I am sure that it will be covered by most speakers in this debate. It has already been covered during this debate.

Is it not marvellous that the Premier and acting Treasurer has been able to rummage around the departments and, bingo, find \$568m of unspent moneys or so-called carryover funds? Why is such a huge amount of money left unspent when, every week in Parliament, we have been told that there has been no freeze, no hold-ups in capital works or any other programs? \$568m? He has to be kidding! Something or someone has missed out badly. But doesn't it make this year's Budget look a lot better! Why was that money not transferred to other departments, such as Health, which is suffering across the State on service delivery because of budget blow-outs? It is really a joke. I believe it is a joke, anyway. In the Charters Towers electorate, we could have built the Hells Gate dam with that sort of money and secured a future for the Charters Towers and Dalrymple Shires into the next millennium.

That brings me to another point. Will the Department of Natural Resources build any dams? Will the department dare expose itself to the increased BST—the Beattie stealth tax? The cost of water

from new projects is already a major issue. The cost of water will certainly rise to reflect the additional tax burden.

I can confidently say that no member has any qualms about establishing Queensland as the Smart State. As a Queenslanders, I have always considered Queensland to be the smartest State in Australia, anyway. But yes, I do agree that Queensland needs to be the educated State and an innovative State. There is a definite need for our children to be given the opportunity to be leaders in the technology and intellectual arenas for the coming century.

Mr Nuttall interjected.

Mr MITCHELL: I will have something to say about that later. I know that the people with the right skills will have the best opportunities of getting and keeping employment. But let us not get carried away with the need for high intelligence and leave the not so fortunate behind without assistance to acquire work skills of some level to gain employment or to keep employment.

Recently, I was informed about the proposed accreditation of field harvesters— better known to most of us as kangaroo shooters. I believe this to be just another bureaucratic bungle simply to verify their existence. Most of the shooters out there have been doing this for most—if not all—of their lives, and they could teach any instructor more than they will ever know. The cost of this accreditation is well beyond most of those people, who would have to travel to TAFE institutes from western areas such as Julia Creek, Hughenden and Winton and accommodate themselves for a couple of days while they accessed the training courses. That would be just another burden on some of those people out there who are trying to make a living. These are some of the stupid things that make it difficult for our grassroots people to maintain employment in rural Queensland.

I turn now to the capital works funding in the Budget for the electorate of Charters Towers. Roads are an integral part of my electorate. The Flinders Highway is one of the most strategic roads in Queensland, connecting the north-west mineral shelf to the port of Townsville. \$1m for about 10 kilometres of road west of Hughenden into Richmond will finally see that section widened. In Budget Paper No. 4, under service priorities, it is noted that the continuation of the widening and rehabilitation of the highway totals \$61m. We definitely need to keep money rolling into that highway. I notice that the Minister is in the Chamber. I am sure that he would realise just how much that highway is used. That money will be spent over the next five years. It is good to know that the money is rolling in.

Budget Paper No. 4 also mentions the ongoing upgrading of the link between Hughenden and Winton, which is due for completion by December 2000. I certainly hope that this is the case, because I believe that it is a very important link for the betterment of the economy of the centres in that mid west region and the central region between Winton and Hughenden, mainly because of the increased tourism traffic in that area over the last couple of years.

I know that the Gregory Developmental Road is also mentioned in this section of the Budget papers, with the widening of the Belyando crossing to Charters Towers to be completed by 2005 at a cost of \$35m. However, it does not state how much will be spent this year on the highway. Once again, I cannot stress enough the importance of completing the sections between Charters Towers and the Highway mine—a 13 kilometre section—due to the increased mining cartage and, once again, the tourist and heavy vehicle traffic on that highway. That is very important. I hope that something will be forthcoming this year. As I said, that road is not mentioned directly in the Budget papers.

\$5.5m has been budgeted for the Hervey's Range Developmental Road, for the Keelbottom, Boundary, Spring and Stockyard Creeks, and sealed construction of some 30 kilometres. This is a very welcome addition to that road. They have worked on that for a good few years.

Mr Pitt: We've pumped a few bucks into your electorate, haven't we?

Mr MITCHELL: I certainly hope it keeps coming.

I am very pleased that the Mines and Energy Department has released further funding for the completion of the 66 kV transmission line from Hughenden to Winton and \$3m of a \$6.5m 66 kV line for the transmission between Hughenden and Richmond. This will further enhance the continuing upgrade of power supply in north-west and central-west Queensland.

The ongoing funding for shaft repairs in Charters Towers is most welcome. It is very important for the continuation of that program until we finally get to the bottom of some of those open shafts around Charters Towers. The new DPI office and laboratory funding of \$1.346m will see the start of the construction within the next month of the purpose built structure, which will make a much better working environment for all DPI staff in Charters Towers.

\$14m has been made available for the community sports and recreation facilities program. I believe that applications are currently under consideration. I am quite hopeful about the funding of the squash court centre in Moranbah from that fund. We have seen the completion of the \$7.2m Clermont

multipurpose service hospital and the six-bed nursing home unit. That will be a tremendous asset for health care for many years into the future. The Minister opened that facility in early February this year.

The long-awaited \$450,000 upgrade of the Julia Creek accommodation will be a great boost to that north-west centre. Hopefully it will help to attract professional health workers to the area. Accommodation has always been a deterrent to maintaining staff levels in Julia Creek and many other towns. \$778,000 has been allocated for the completion of the psychogeriatric unit at Eventide Home in Charters Towers. Mosman Hall has received \$1.367m of a \$3.3m project for the rehabilitation/dual diagnosis and transition unit. This will be of great benefit in relation to psychiatric care for long-term residents. Eventide Home has also received funding of \$1.643m for residential care at the institution.

Whilst on Eventide Home, I would like to thank the Minister for Health for the opportunity to have a deputation with her today about the concerns I have received from constituents. I believe we can work together to reach a successful outcome for all concerned. I hope that will be the case.

At long last, the Nelly Bay project on Magnetic Island—which is in the electorate of the member for Townsville—has finally received funding and hopefully will be completed in the not so distant future. The Mount Isa rail line stage 3 will finally be completed this coming year with funding of \$2.4m. The Goonyella relay will reach near completion in this Budget year. Whilst I am dealing with railway issues, I wish to mention the support we have received from a South Australian rail lobby group for the Queensland Transport Minister's call for all livestock to be carried by rail. This was scuttled by the Beattie Budget, which provides a \$400m subsidy to rail. The rating agency, Standard and Poor's, has made specific mention of this payment as contributing to a decline in the operating cash flows for the State in the next year. This payment is the main reason why Queensland has gone into deficit. We now have some out-of-State boffin ranting on about rail's increased efficiency.

What Rail 2000 Inc. has conveniently overlooked is that the road transport industry is one of the highest taxed industries in the nation. Unfortunately, Rail 2000 Inc. has interpreted my defence of the road transport industry on the grounds of fair competition as some sort of condemnation of rail. Well, Rail 2000 Inc. is totally wrong. Rail 2000 Inc. has also asked where I was when thousands of rail employees were losing their jobs some years ago. I was there in the front line at Townsville, Mount Isa and other centres in my area defending those workers and I certainly do not recall seeing Rail 2000 Inc. there. If representatives of Rail 2000 Inc. were present, they would know that it was the Labor Government that sacked some 8,000 rail workers in six years. It was the coalition Government that put a stop to that.

If Rail 2000 Inc. had any interest in Queensland Rail, it would be defending the 1,500 rail jobs that are now under threat by the Beattie Government. I, together with everyone else on this side of the House, wait with bated breath to see just how far the State of Queensland will be in debt as a result of the Beattie Government's Budget.
