



Speech by

Tony ELLIOTT

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

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1999 STATE BUDGET

Mr ELLIOTT (Cunningham—NPA) (10.12 p.m.): Before I say some nasty things about the Budget I will say a couple of pleasant things. As they say, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." I do not know that I can follow that advice, but there are a couple of things I want to say about the Budget.

I am interested to see an ongoing commitment to the Queensland Centre for Climate Applications, which was an initiative of the coalition Government. I think it is very important that that has bipartisan support, and it seems to have that. Both sides of politics acknowledge just how important it is.

Farmers, graziers and people all around the State—and around Australia as a whole, for that matter—are starting to understand better the service provided by this centre. I am not saying that the information produced is highly accurate, but it is certainly another tool for farmers to use. They can look at trends over the past 100 years, or whatever period has been able to be extrapolated.

A few years ago the Deputy Leader of the National Party and I went to a seminar conducted by then Minister, Howard Hobbs, relating to the area of climate applications. We looked at and went through the system. The member for Warwick has always been good with computers and we were let loose on them at lunchtime. We played around with the system instead of having lunch one day. We came to the conclusion that conditions at that time were similar in many respects to some of the worst years for farming on the Darling Downs and southern downs in particular.

As a result, I took the decision to not plant anything and not put any fertiliser in. I was not in a very good position to put it in at the time anyway. In the end I finished about \$25,000 better off. People might say that it would be better to go to the casino and have a bit of a punt because I might pull off a win down there, too. I think using climate applications systems in an educated way probably gives better odds. I believe that these systems do have a use. I believe that they will improve the understanding of climate and I think over time the percentage of correct predictions will increase. I think the Minister for Primary Industries does have his heart in the right place. I think he is a reasonable person who is trying to do the right thing.

I have to admit that, with accrual accounting, I am having some difficulty coming to grips with the figures, as I am sure are a lot of other people. I have a bit of an understanding of it from my experience as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. There were a few accountants there who were able to give us some sort of an understanding of accrual accounting. I probably understand it better than some people, but I am certainly not finding it easy to look at portfolio areas and make comparisons with previous years and understand exactly what it all means.

I have gleaned that this is a negative Budget. I think organisations with the clout of Standard and Poor's are very clearly indicating to the people of Queensland that in the long term this Budget has a negative application and we are going to see deficit budgeting to the tune of probably \$1.2 billion. That is not a very happy state of affairs.

For a number of years, many of us on this side of the House fiercely resisted the imposition of a fuel tax in this State. A lot of us walked over hot coals in order to stop the very few people who saw a fuel tax as a good milking cow and who felt that it was a way to bring revenue into Treasury and thereby perhaps put some more money into education, health, police and so on. We resisted that because we believed that it would have a very negative impact in this State, particularly on those people who can least afford it. It is interesting to look at what the Federal Labor Government did in respect of leaded and unleaded petrol. It attacked its own supporters in the bush.

Those out there in the bush who use leaded petrol are mostly in the lower socioeconomic groups within society—whether it be property owners who are doing it pretty tough, shearers, contract workers or people who live in town and have to commute to other towns and so on. Honourable members would find that in the main these people are still driving vehicles that run on leaded petrol. There is a huge impost on them in respect of the cost of their fuel. That was brought about by a Labor Government. It was thought that that measure would reduce air pollution, but it seems that perhaps the dramas associated with unleaded fuel were underestimated. One wonders just what the outcome will be.

I believe that this Budget builds the empires of the Premier and acting Treasurer and the Deputy Premier. Their areas should be compared with other areas that are in desperate need. The Forde inquiry recommended a massive injection of money to try to do something about child abuse. Those on the Labor side of politics always profess to be the champions of these causes. Here they have the opportunity to do something about the issue and what has happened? The Government has put the money into grandiose empire building in the portfolios of the Premier and the Deputy Premier and has almost completely neglected this issue. If my memory serves me correctly, the Forde inquiry report recommended expenditure of around \$105m. The provision is about \$10m, if they are lucky. That does not really say much for this Government's priorities and its so-called bleeding heart group, who are always saying how terrible things are.

That reminds me of the Attorney-General. We used to call him the old hypocrite, because he was always talking about civil libertarians and the dramas and the disasters. As Attorney-General, he presided over some of the most anti-democratic cover-ups of various problems in Government. I find it amazing how hypocritical some people can be. Before they come into this place they are full of wonderful ideologue attitudes; they are going to change the world. But when they get here, their true colours show through.

I also find it very interesting that the acting Treasurer is trying to take all the kudos, as though this so-called Smart State was his idea. Let me refer to history in Queensland and look at what really happened. The person who should take a lot of the credit for setting Queensland in a different direction was Mike Ahern as Technology Minister under then Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. He did some really good work, particularly with satellites and that sort of thing. He was instrumental in bringing about the early stages of the use of satellites here in Queensland. We actually contributed our own money—State money—to subsidise that program, which was then continued by Premier Russell Cooper. Then we lost Government in 1989. Fortunately, the next Premier, the Honourable Wayne Goss, continued the program.

It really does get up my nose a bit that this Premier acts as though he is some sort of Messiah who has just discovered all of this and is basically inventing the wheel for the first time. The Honourable Wayne Goss was certainly responsible for continuing that program. He put a lot of work into it. And then it was continued by the coalition Government. So this is not something new. It was a well-thought-out strategy that was started by Mike Ahern and continued by Russell Cooper and then the Honourable Wayne Goss. It really does no-one any credit to try to take the kudos for some of these programs. Do not get me wrong. I applaud what the Premier is doing. But we should all just get on with the job, instead of trying to score cheap political points. Anyone with any brains can see that this is the way to go.

If anyone wants a good example of what has been going on for years, they should visit the USQ, the University of Southern Queensland. It has been doing a lot of work on the use of the Internet. Through its program of bringing foreign students into this State, without a doubt it is the biggest provider of distance education in Australia. No other university in Australia can compare to it.

Mr Schwarten: I think that's an overstatement.

Mr ELLIOTT: No, it is not.

Mr SCHWARTEN: CQU would be a good comparison. "There is no comparison", you said. I think that's an overstatement.

Mr ELLIOTT: If the Minister has a look at the statistics, he will find that the USQ is way ahead of every other university. It has been at it for longer than any other university.

Mr Schwarten: You said, "There is no comparison." I think that's an overstatement.

Mr ELLIOTT: I am not saying that the CQU is not doing good work, but I am saying that the University of Southern Queensland is the leader. It has been at it the longest.

As I said, this is not something that has just been invented. This has been going on for a number of years. We should all support it. We should not play politics with it. We should all get behind it and work to ensure that it continues, because that is where our future lies. If we are going to continue to maintain our wages structures, our 17.5% loadings, our four weeks' annual leave, all the public holidays which people obviously want to take, and so on, members should not think for a minute that we can compete, in terms of wages costs and unit costs, with factories in Asia and some of those other developing countries. We have to be smarter in technology. The only way in which we can compete is

by being smarter. Surely all members would understand that. But as I said, it gets up my nose that the Premier comes in here acting as though he were the Messiah who has just invented it all.

Mr Swarten interjected.

Mr ELLIOTT: What was that?

Mr Swarten: Those airconditioners— you didn't give me any credit for that.

Mr ELLIOTT: I have not got that far into my speech yet.

Mr Swarten: I just wanted to remind you.

Mr ELLIOTT: I will touch on that now, if the Minister likes. He should sit there and listen for a second. As he well knows, I have been pushing for that for some time. We got a promise from the former Premier to do the very thing that is now about to be done. Unfortunately, we lost Government, so we were not in a position to be able to fulfil it. I do not care who puts it in there. Quite frankly, it is of no great relevance to me. All I am interested in is ensuring that kids are not disadvantaged. They are sitting in 104 or 105 degrees heat in summer—

Mr Swarten: They are in Rocky, too, you know.

Mr ELLIOTT: Yes. They probably need airconditioning there as well. I have no argument with that. All we have to do is single out those areas that need it the most.

Mr Swarten: There's not a place that doesn't need it, though.

Mr ELLIOTT: I would debate that. I do not believe that some of the schools in Toowoomba at the top of the range where the breeze is good—

Mr Swarten: They need centralised heating, though.

Mr ELLIOTT: Maybe they do.

Mr Swarten: That is their argument.

Mr ELLIOTT: Yes.

Mr Swarten: It's dearer to heat than it is to cool.

Mr ELLIOTT: Their problems can be fixed probably for a lot less than the cost of airconditioning some of those other schools. But that is beside the point. I do not wish to waste my time debating this with the Minister.

I am always pleased to see these things. I take this opportunity to say that I am pleased that Clifton is going to get an ambulance centre. That has been needed for a long time. I am also pleased that funding has been made available for the Cecil Plains to Toowoomba road, which is on the border of my electorate and partly in the electorate of my colleague the member for Crows Nest. With the closure of the railway to Cecil Plains, we have seen a massive increase in the number of trucks using that road, and this has caused great deterioration of that road. Over the years, with the assistance of Peter Taylor, the Mayor of the Jondaryan Shire, a lot of work, effort and money on the part of the coalition State Government has gone into that road to get it to a pretty good standard. I am pleased to see another \$2.58m or something like that going into that road. That will be a help at least.

When one looks at this Budget overall, quite frankly, this is the first time since I have been a member of this place that I have seen a downturn in real terms from what we have all worked for, namely, to ensure that Queensland was the low-tax State; that we balanced our books and our Budget; that we did not have a Budget that was in deficit; and that we did not spend more money than we had. It appears to me that, for the first time, we have turned the corner and headed south. And that is probably an apt description, because it is a bit like what happened to Bannon, Kirner and all those others in the southern States who got into a lot of trouble. It took Kennett to straighten out the Victorian mess.

I am not delighted with the Budget. As I said, I am pleased to see some aspects of it, particularly the Centre for Climate Applications. But I am amazed to see this downturn. When making comparisons between last year and this year, the Government says, "We are spending as much money as we did last year." But if we have a \$360m budget in a particular department, for argument's sake, and it gets \$360m in the following year, that represents a decrease of about 4%. If we take inflation into account, we have to have something a little over 1% on each \$100m. As a result, it has to increase by at least \$1m, if not \$2m.

Compared with last year, the amount for this year is down by some \$4m. I find it hard to see how the vital services we need in the area of primary industries are going to be delivered. I do not know how the people involved will be able to do their jobs properly. I find it absolutely incomprehensible that the acting Treasurer and his deputy are featherbedding their own departments. I do not know what the other Cabinet Ministers were doing when they were going through the Budget round. They must be short of backbone because they have not been trying to ensure that the money went in the right direction. Not enough regard was had to the recommendations of the Forde inquiry.