



Speech by

WARREN PITT

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard 16 September 1999

1999 STATE BUDGET

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (12.13 a.m.): I congratulate the Premier and the member for Ipswich on the role they played in the production of this year's Budget. The pivotal role played by the far north as part of a vibrant Queensland economy was given further emphasis by the 1999-2000 Budget handed down two days ago. Interestingly, the local media made positive comment on the Budget and in the process refused to be duped by the negativity emanating from the Opposition Leader, Rob Borbidge, and shadow Treasurer David Watson. Unfortunately, this constant negativity has become the hallmark of an Opposition unwilling to make a positive contribution to Queensland's economic growth.

The second Beattie Government Budget continues to build on the sound foundation of the first Budget last year, which was based on improving the employment opportunities of all Queenslanders. The far north will share in the jobs to be created as part of a \$5.2 billion Capital Works Program. Capital works spending in the far north amounts to \$1,640 per person, as part of a \$359.7m Capital Works Program. \$20m will be spent on local government infrastructure to improve roads, water supply and sewerage projects. In addition, the Yarrabah Community Council will receive \$1.7m to enhance its water supply. This is on top of the \$43,000 to be spent on that community's sewerage upgrade to commence a program which will see \$2.23m injected into this area.

The correctional facility at Lotus Glen is to be expanded at a cost of \$13.5m. A total of \$52m has been earmarked for Education. Of that, the further development of the Bentley Park College is to commence, with \$1.7m to be expended in this financial year. The total project will cost in the vicinity of \$28m and it is to be staged over the next three years. The educational precinct is destined to be a model for new schools as we move into the new millennium. That this technology is to be provided is in keeping with the Premier's determination to make Queensland the Smart State.

Even construction design breaks new ground to meet the demands of the tropical climate and provide a more flexible delivery of educational services. The concept of three subschools puts into effect well-documented educational understandings of the complexity of schooling for adolescents. In the Health area, a further \$9m is being targeted for the completion of the Cairns Base Hospital upgrade. It is no secret that I did not support the redevelopment of the Cairns Base Hospital on its existing site. It was my preferred option to establish a world-class facility on a greenfield site. However, the finished wings of the redevelopment are of the highest standard and will serve the people of the far north well into the future.

The Edmonton Community Health Centre, which was funded under the Goss Government and completed during the term of the coalition, has become a vital link in the integrated health network in the southern suburbs of Cairns. The expenditure of a further \$20,000 will finally deliver the balance of the original \$3.375m that formed part of the package. Similarly, the Innisfail Court House upgrade will continue, with a total project expenditure of \$743,000 to bring that facility up to standard.

Coming from one of the State's premier sugarcane growing areas, I am delighted to see the commitment in this Budget of \$6.3m out of a total program which will eventually, in conjunction with the Commonwealth, reach \$38m. There is no doubt that the sugar industry is at a low ebb, with falling prices, exceptionally poor weather conditions, the premature removal of tariffs and declining productivity threatening an industry at the heart of many communities along the Queensland coast. The money used to support the valuable industry is an investment in the future of far-north Queensland.

I welcome the announcement in the Budget by the Premier that \$1m has been set aside for work on a new 24-hour police station at Edmonton. Work and construction will commence after the wet season, being scheduled for March, and it will be completed by the end of the year 2000. A further \$1m will be provided in the 2000-2001 Budget. The construction of a 24-hour police station fulfils a commitment I gave at the 1995 election. In spite of promises by the coalition when it occupied the Treasury benches, no further action was taken. The closest it got was to canvass local real estate agents with a view to purchasing cane land between Edmonton and Gordonvale. Such a proposition would never have met policing needs. It would have taken the police away from the population they were meant to serve. As a result, station numbers at Gordonvale and Edmonton would have had to be reduced. This was clearly unacceptable. The new Edmonton station will have a staffing complement of 20 officers, including CIB and JAB. In addition, the number at Gordonvale will be maintained and will grow in proportion to the population growth.

I have always been a strong supporter of public housing. This Budget delivers funds to provide 12 detached houses, 59 medium density accommodation units and a number of seniors units. Expenditure will exceed \$9m and is ongoing evidence of the priority Labor Governments place on the provision of public housing. This is in sharp contrast to the two and a half years of coalition Government, which saw the spending on public housing plummet to the dismal levels existing prior to the election of the Goss Government in 1989. The electorate of Mulgrave, which has been the major beneficiary of Labor public housing initiatives, suffered the most under the coalition. The only construction during its tenure was that programmed by Labor.

No new land acquisitions were made. As a matter of fact, the coalition embarked on a program of selling off public housing assets. While I am the member for Mulgrave, public housing will receive the funding priority it deserves. I congratulate Housing Minister Schwarten on his vigorous advocacy on behalf of Queenslanders seeking accommodation and public housing.

A number of projects under way in the City of Cairns benefit constituents from the three electorates of Mulgrave, Barron River and Cairns. Besides the Cairns Hospital redevelopment, the Cairns Port Authority receives \$12.47m and the Cairns Convention Centre has an upgrade in the vicinity of \$8.16m. In addition, the Cairns Esplanade project is due for a \$9m injection. These projects are a return to significant capital works expenditure which characterised the Goss years.

During the term of the coalition, construction of public infrastructure in the far north had ground to a halt as it courted its constituency on the Gold and Sunshine Coasts. The people of the far north would have welcomed a portion of the then \$200m used to lift the toll on the Sunshine Motorway by the then Treasurer, Joan Sheldon. At the time, the coalition held four of the six far northern seats, yet its representatives failed to stand up and be counted for the region. Labor is delivering for the far north.

I have listened to the members opposite decry the Premier's call to reduce unemployment to 5%. It is accepted that the task is difficult, yet it is not impossible. One has only to look at the unemployment figures to see that Labor is determined to meet the unemployment program head on. The Premier's call for jobs, jobs, jobs is not just rhetoric. When the coalition was in Government, unemployment was nudging 9%. It is anticipated to drop to a 10-year low of 7.75%.

I welcome the announcement of a \$1m program to bring community police under Queensland Police Service control. Yarrabah is one of three communities to be targeted for this pilot program. The Beattie Government takes very seriously its commitment to redressing mistakes made by past Governments. That is why we decided to compensate former Government employees who were underpaid by the National Party between 1975 and 1986 because they were Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders.

The Government has pledged \$25.4m over three years to compensate the former workers. We arrived at this figure after extensive consultation with the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action—FAIRA. It was FAIRA that represented the Palm Islanders who first contested and, I might say, won a case for compensation before the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The commission awarded FAIRA's clients \$7,000 each. This is the benchmark figure that has been chosen.

The \$7,000 is compensation for the people who, because of their race, suffered discrimination at the hands of the National Party Government after the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975. The Beattie Government has never pretended that this amount would precisely repay people for lost wages. The Government and FAIRA are now in the advanced stages of developing an efficient procedure for processing these claims.

Officers of the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Development have already held a meeting in Yarrabah. There is an alternative to this process. It is a costly and painful business of pursuing cases through the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The previous National Party Government preferred this legalistic approach. By the time it vacated office last

year, the claims were banking up. Labor did its sums and realised that the taxpayer would save millions if we took the conciliatory course. Money aside, it was a just course—one which acknowledges the wrongs of the past and attempts to make reparations. Constituents can decide which course they would rather take.

The people of far-north Queensland have given the Budget the thumbs up. Of course, there are many worthwhile projects that have not been funded for 1999-2000. However, we live in tight economic times and a responsible Government must live within its means. The Beattie Government has done that. Given the continuation of good Government and good local representation, I am certain that the far north will continue to prosper and will continue to receive its fair allocation of public funds in the years ahead. I commend the 1999-2000 Budget to the House.
