



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH**

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Hansard 9 November 2000

**APPROPRIATION BILL [No. 2]; APPROPRIATION [PARLIAMENT] BILL [No. 2]**

**Mrs PRATT** (Barambah—IND) (9.19 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Appropriation Bill (No. 2) 2000. In speaking to this Bill, I would like to take a moment to remind all in this House that the State Budget 2001-01 Capital Statement states that the Wide Bay/Burnett area received \$119.41 per person which, according to the table, was the lowest per person spent in any region, and 1.09% of the Budget expenditure, which was the fifth lowest across the State. Of course, the highest expenditure was in Brisbane, which received 37.2% of the Budget. I ask this Government to seriously consider a more generous distribution of funding to rural Queensland.

I would like to take this opportunity to bring to the attention of the Ministers of the various departments the areas within the Barambah electorate that need attention. I will start with what would appear to be the most common request from all the mayors in all the electorates—I should say all but one—and that is in relation to the roads. I spoke very briefly with the Minister in the lift and told him that I would be bringing the state of the shire roads to his attention. Although I acknowledge the Minister's reply that a couple of years ago \$30m was spent in the area, it would be remiss of me not to pursue the ongoing needs of the area. The Minister would be the first to admit that \$30m in an electorate the size of Barambah would cover but a very small percentage of the roads.

One of the most often neglected transport issues is that in some areas the roads are not built to handle traffic such as B-doubles and road trains. The Wondai Shire considers that the Byee road and the narrow bridge over Barambah Creek should be upgraded before the closure of the railway line from Murgon to Byee. There is also a need for passing lanes on the Bunya Highway between Wondai and Kingaroy. The Kilcoy Shire is pursuing overtaking lanes on the D'Aguilar Highway on the western side of Kilcoy to Yarraman. I often travel along that road and I can attest to the long stretches of that road where it is impossible to pass. This road takes in the Blackbutt Range, where I have been told that it will have pull-off bays, but these are really inadequate considering the increasing volume of general traffic and trucks travelling to Tarong North and through-traffic to Rockhampton. There is also a need for funding to rehabilitate the D'Aguilar Highway just west of Kilcoy.

The Rosalie Shire is desperate to have the New England Highway Cooyar to Kingaroy roads upgraded, in particular the construction of passing lanes and the widening of the roads. Nanango sees attention paid to the D'Aguilar Highway from the top of the range to Boobir Creek and Coomba Gully Bridge as being two of the most urgent projects in need of completion. A further section needing attention is the Maidenwell-Bunya Mountains road which, as the Minister would know, is fast becoming the gateway for tourism in the area. Also throughout the shire there is an urgent need for the replacement of guard rails.

In regard to all of these matters we are told that there is no money in the kitty. All of these projects and more could be completed with the millions of dollars that are wasted on projects such as the super stadium that no-one wants and the footbridge that is slowly growing across the Brisbane River. The Chippindale Bridge is an issue in the Kilkivan Shire. I have brought that matter to the Minister's attention only recently. It is a matter that has been of concern to many residents. I have been informed that this bridge is to undergo repairs and maintenance that will "restore" it to its flood-prone condition. I am reliably informed that this bridge is the lowest point between Ipswich and Rockhampton.

The bridge is subject to flash flooding, and traffic from the north in particular has limited visibility before being confronted with a flooded waterway.

I will not go into the detail of this matter as the Minister has my letter and letters from other people in which community concerns are conveyed. This issue would have to be acknowledged as a major works project, but I ask the Minister to seriously consider it as this road is a major traffic carrier.

When I use the word "isolation", what do members think of? Sometimes when we are immersed in the turmoil of everyday living we may crave isolation. It is not unusual to want to get away from it all to some quiet place, just as long as we have access to the necessities of life, such as medical attention, shops and the comforts to which we have become accustomed. However, there is another type of remoteness that is not so pleasant—a remoteness that has been caused by the closing of services that once enabled people who lived in certain areas to communicate with and commute freely to populated areas.

Our forefathers opened large tracts of land well away from the populated coastlines, dangling enticing carrots to encourage people to take up residence and make the barren land productive. They built railways and infrastructure designed to make the remote areas more accessible and tolerable places in which to live. For instance, people in the Kimberleys have one of the finest services in the world, the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Without that service, that area would still be largely unpopulated.

So how remote is remote? In Barambah, many residents are either elderly with family living away or are ill and in need of specialist treatment. Previously, these residents could travel to Toowoomba, Gympie and Hervey Bay on one bus service that used to run the route. Now, Dunkley's bus service has shut down because it cannot afford to provide a service without subsidisation. It could not make a profit from the small numbers of people who used it, even though they may have used it quite frequently and consistently. A few years ago, the trains stopped coming to Barambah except to pick up peanuts, railway sleepers and sometimes cattle. Now people's only means of public transport to Toowoomba and Gympie has gone and they are forced to go to Brisbane, since that is the only bus route to a major centre that is left. How long will it be before that service, too, is unviable?

This Government has insisted that long-distance transport has to be competitive and not receive subsidies. However, it has also admitted to continuing subsidisation for three bus services in western Queensland. The coalition Government started these subsidies in 1997, because the services were under threat of being withdrawn on commercial grounds.

There was a time when Australians paid taxes to provide services to communities. As the word "service" indicates, these were not profit-making ventures; they were put in place by Governments who had the best interests of their voters at heart and profit was not a concern. Now if services do not make a profit they are left to die, strangled by the withdrawal of the taxes that subsidised them. Now we must have the level playing field, or NCP. These ideologies do nothing more than impoverish the impoverished while lining the pockets of big companies that can afford to serve a little in return for their huge profits. Hasn't anyone told these companies that their free donation to the community may even be a tax deduction for them? Or don't they have to worry about tax because they are multinationals?

The main concern of the Cherbourg Community Council at the moment is the capacity of its current sewerage system to cope with the growing demand. Recent research from consulting engineers has indicated that replacement and relocation of the treatment plant will be required within the next two years. I ask the Minister to treat this matter as one of urgency.

One area needing attention is the availability of public housing. During the Community Cabinet meeting conducted in Kingaroy, the Minister opened a set of units in Kingaroy. Although we are grateful for that, there is a need for much more as waiting lists are quite long throughout the entire electorate. In particular, and on behalf of the Wondai mayor, I ask the Minister to give the Wondai Shire special consideration, as that shire has no public housing at all.

Once again, I would like to bring to the attention of the Minister for Police and Corrective Services an issue that concerns the police stationed at the Blackbutt Police Station. Police in that area are confronted with the situation in which approximately 75% of the area's roads are unsealed or clay/dirt roads, which are not just difficult but at times impossible to navigate during periods of wet weather. Blackbutt is surrounded by large tracts of State forest and many of those roads are in that State forest. It is essential that the staff of this police station be equipped with a four-wheel drive vehicle so that they can continue to protect the residents of the area. As I have mentioned, I have brought this matter to the Minister's attention. He informed me that he would pass it on to the relevant authority to be addressed. I understand it is in the pipeline, and I thank the Minister for that. Hopefully, the requisition of a four-wheel drive will be forthcoming sooner rather than later.

The opening line in an article quoting QUT marketing and international business lecturer Dr Mark McGovern states, "Farmers' incomes tipped to disappear". The article goes on to state that the average Australian farmer's income is predicted to drop to nothing by 2017. That grim prediction is the result of a study undertaken at the Queensland University of Technology which looked at incomes in the 1950s

and took into account current industry trends. In that article, Dr Mark McGovern stated that agricultural leaders are afraid to confront their futures and must act now to change the income decline. Dr McGovern stated further that our entire agricultural industry needs to be analysed. He went on to say—

"We need to change the whole structure so that those who are presently successful can be even more so.

So this assumption that a few successes are going to change the industry's fortune or a few farmers leaving are going to be able to change the fortune of the industry, these things are going to be just inadequate for the task at hand, so a fairly fundamental re-think is what I'm calling for."

I would like to ask the Minister to concentrate his attention and effort on ensuring that the Premier and the rest of the Beattie Cabinet understands the severity of the crisis facing rural industries in Queensland so that action can be taken and the future of rural industries is secured. In doing that, I would like once again to bring to the Minister's attention the concerns regarding the Minister's or his department's apparent lack of appreciation for the tick eradication program and the delay in extending tick eradication into areas such as Coolabunia, Moffatdale and Boobie.

I am told that this implementation could be achieved with current staffing levels and minimum extra expense. Drought has been mentioned by many members tonight. It has been stated by experts that the ongoing effects and the recovery of those affected is between two and five years. Therefore, it is essential that these people be supported and not left floundering. Dairy deregulation and the true cost has also been addressed by many. The dairy industry in Barambah has also suffered severely.

One area which I believe is vital to community development is the need for Government to provide incentives to encourage industry to rural areas to establish employment opportunities for residents west of the ranges, especially in communities like ours which have suffered through deregulation, NCP and Government legislation.

At a recent meeting of the Burnett Catchment Care Association held on 19 October in Wondai, those who attended expressed concern about the spreading of noxious weeds. I would like confirmation from the Minister that he did in fact get the letter from the BCCA meeting in which it was stated that due to drought there was a necessity to transport grain and fodder from areas far afield such as central Queensland, an area known for its parthenium. The drought has also forced the movement of stock to feedlots that have been stocked with animals from other areas, which has allowed the spreading of noxious weed seed due to the manure from these feedlots being spread across our paddocks as fertiliser.

Present local government regulations cover the control of known outbreaks of noxious weeds, but do not cover the cleaning of agricultural machinery or trucks transporting the fodder and stock. The Burnett Catchment Care Association is quite concerned about this gap in noxious weed control and I would ask the Minister to review this area in an endeavour to control the spread of these noxious weeds.

Health is an issue that has been mentioned many times tonight. For every shire in the electorate, Kilcoy Shire especially asks for more and better integrated health services for the aged. Respite is a rapidly growing need in all shires and there is an urgent need for the coordination and education of the public as to the availability of the services already in existence in their areas. Throughout all the shires of the electorate there is a consistent request for health services to be maintained and upgraded, not rationalised and downgraded. The Minister may feel she is being particularly picked on, but it is apparent that no-one is convinced they are better off—not the councils, not the staff of the hospitals and not the patients.

I would like to relate one case brought to my attention in which the person involved, on reading the Minister's reply, felt the Minister had called her a liar. That is a very offensive thing to do. Mrs Hale broke her ankle on 1 July 2000. Her husband phoned the Nanango Hospital and was told it was a doctor-free weekend, which happens once every month. He was advised to take his wife to Kingaroy as x-rays could not be taken at the Nanango Hospital without a doctor's authorisation.

I sent my constituent's letter to the Minister. In the Minister's detailed response, she stated, "X-rays, if required, are able to be ordered by the doctor and can be taken at Nanango Hospital if a qualified x-ray endorsed nurse is on duty." The Minister obviously did not read my constituent's short, 10-line letter. It clearly stated it was a doctor-free weekend, which happens once per month. So it was impossible to get an x-ray at Nanango.

Mrs Hale travelled to Kingaroy, a 56 kilometre round trip. A doctor saw her and stated that it has to be a matter of life and death before a radiologist could be called in. The doctor treated the ankle as if it was broken and administered some pain-killing tablets. She made an appointment for an x-ray to be done on Monday morning. Mrs Hale spent the weekend in severe pain. Monday's x-rays established a couple of spiral breaks which required specialist attention.

This Minister has apparently surrounded herself with bureaucrats, many of whom have trouble understanding the real situation. Legislation and answers to questions that come through indicate that she is so far out of touch that in my lifetime it is possible she will not even touch back to earth. Sadly, good people who deserve better have to live with the results. Let me assure the Minister for Health that if the number of complaints coming through my office are any indication, her department is a shambles.

Farrholme has served the elderly well in Kingaroy and they have been cared for by the hospital staff with great respect and consideration. In a couple of years Farrholme will close, and I ask the Minister where she plans to ship these elderly people to? I would ask her to establish facilities in Kingaroy for the growing aged population and not close Farrholme until alternative accommodation is available.

The Minister for Education, Mr Wells, proved his ignorance recently over the true community feeling about the education system. From his response to my comments in my weekly column, apparently I touched a raw nerve with the Minister. Mr Wells accused me of being critical of our local State schools, but nothing could be further from the truth. Even the best teachers in the electorate cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. If the education system is inefficient, no-one will be able to make it work. Mr Wells stated in his letter to the editor that I should ask the community in the region if they were happy with the education system. Mr Wells is apparently unaware that my information concerning the community's feeling was gleaned from a reply paid questionnaire that I distributed quite a few months ago throughout the electorate in which I asked the question, "Does the education system meet the literacy needs of children today?" The result was that 12% of the respondents said yes and 88% said no.

I used the results of this survey and the Courier-Mail's questionnaire results. Mr Wells should follow his own advice and check his information more thoroughly. I wonder if the Minister fired similar shots across the bow of the Courier-Mail in a response to its negative results. Mr Wells quotes figures from his own departmental survey indicating that 60% of State school parents were satisfied with the system. I would like to see that survey if the Minister would be so kind to produce it. If the Minister has been truthful, one wonders why the Courier-Mail claims that only 28% of parents believe their children have been adequately taught. This, in conjunction with my own findings, seems to indicate that Mr Wells is believing only what he wants to believe. I ask the Minister to not shoot the messenger but to ensure his information is accurate. We do not expect miracles, but there is a situation here that needs addressing.

Members will have noticed that I have conveyed just some of the most urgent needs of the mayors of Kilkivan, Murgon, Cherbourg, Wondai, Nanango, Rosalie and Kilcoy Shires. The Kingaroy mayor is the only mayor who has not conveyed the needs of his shire. I can only assume he believes the shire does not need anything, when in fact that shire has greater needs for infrastructure than most others. I have mentioned some of the shires needs, but time constraints compel me to limit representation.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the various Ministers and the staff of their departments for their assistance whenever needed. They have been most helpful in resolving many issues.

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