



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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BUDGET 2000

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (10.03 p.m.): In reviewing the Beattie Labor Government's Budget, it is important to focus not just on what the Government says it will do in the next 12 months but also on what it has actually done to deliver on previous Budget promises. The Premier says this is a sober Budget, but what sobers me most is that, aside from the spin doctoring that tries to focus on new promises, there is evidence that this Labor Government has failed to meet many of its own targets in the key area of health service delivery.

It is an irony that Premier Beattie earlier this week stated that Queenslanders, like all Australians, are sick of political parties, politicians and Governments that go out and promise and do not deliver. It is an irony because he has done just that: failed to deliver.

Tonight I will outline some of the most damning areas in which his Government has failed to meet its commitments to the people of Queensland, but obviously I will go into more detail in a few weeks' time during the Estimates process for both the Health and Women's Policy areas.

Unlike the Premier, my focus is on getting to the truth rather than laughing off what he knows internally about the state of Queensland's finances and, most importantly, the state of the public health system. Unlike the Health Minister, I also believe that the onus is on the Government to provide documented substantiation tabled in Parliament to questions about the Government's performance. Health Minister Edmond's cynical spin doctoring over health staffing levels cannot explain away why the department has not only failed to meet mental health staff targets but has gone backwards in the last 12 months.

The Health Minister cannot blame the non-inclusion of Mater Hospital staffing levels in Budget papers on the fact that there are 358 fewer staff in integrated mental health services in Queensland than 12 months ago and that there are 385 fewer full-time equivalent staff than the Government's own target. Mental health services were supposed to be a core area of service delivery for this Government. Minister Edmond made big promises and she has been found to have failed to deliver. The Beattie Labor Government has failed to meet its own targets.

The fall-off in mental health staffing levels is a disgrace, given that the mentally ill are extremely vulnerable and that mental health services are stretched to the limit or, in many places, non-existent. Even adding in the figure quoted to the press by Minister Edmond of 2,062 full-time equivalent staff positions at the Mater Hospital—these figures were not quoted in the Budget papers—it still does not add up to a supposed increase of 89 staffing positions in the State Health Department as the Minister claims.

Furthermore, note 3 in the Ministerial Portfolio Statements on Queensland Health staffing figures reveals that the number of staff working in non-Government organisations is not included and has not been included in past years. Note 3 states—

"Consistent with previous years, staffing numbers do not include any staff working in non-government organisations funded by Queensland Health including the new hospitals at Noosa and Robina."

For Minister Edmond to refer to the Mater Hospital staffing situation in the Budget papers without the accountability of specific detail or numbers is mysterious. I challenge the Health Minister to supply a

complete breakdown on a district-by-district basis of the operational full-time equivalent staffing levels. Only then will there be a true picture of how the bureaucracy has grown under this Government at the expense of operational staff. The ball is in her court. I challenge the Minister to prove her statements, to open the books and give us the detailed staffing figures for all districts on a district-by-district basis. She will not do it because it means that she would have to be held accountable for her statements.

I remind the Health Minister that, while mental health staffing levels have gone backwards in real terms under her stewardship, the Premier's office has seen staffing levels grow beyond last year's targets. It just illustrates where the Premier's priorities are—and it is not the engine room at the Health Department but his own media machine.

It is extraordinary that actual employee expenses at 30 June 2000 for integrated mental health services have blown out by about \$2m on last year's Budget allegedly because of a New Year's Eve bonus and salary increases to the new visiting medical officers, yet the Health Department has failed to meet targets of new full-time equivalent staff positions by 385. This makes me very suspicious that the real reason there is such a shocking shortfall in the number of people to do the job—

Mr Nuttall: Shocking!

Miss SIMPSON: Members opposite may think it is a laughing matter, but the mentally ill in our community are extremely vulnerable. It is time the Government took responsibility for what is happening in the system. It is one thing to allocate money but to not deliver the services is irresponsible. I believe that it is time we had an audit of the mental health services in this State. If this is truly a priority of the Government, let us see how it is performing in the key areas of quality care to these people. We have seen in the Budget papers that the Government has failed when it comes to allocating the really needed staff, the full-time equivalent staff positions in our community. There has been a failure by this Government to deliver in one of the areas that most needs to be expanded in the Queensland Health Department.

It makes me very suspicious when we see an increase in the estimated amount for staff expenses of \$2m and yet a failure to meet the target of full-time equivalent positions by some 385 positions. One has to wonder whether this is just another way of fudging the figures—making sure that they do not fill positions because they might have to pay for that basic level of service. For the mentally ill that basic level of service is not a luxury service; it is the service that is required to keep these people alive, to keep them out of hospitals, out of acute care situations, and to make sure that they are able to have a quality of life in their own communities.

It is time that there was another operational review of the mental health services of Queensland Health. It is time that there was some accountability in the way in which the money is being spent. Let us see how the department is meeting the national standards—whether, in fact, it is anywhere near the national standards. For that we need some independence and accountability in the way in which these services are being delivered.

I wish also to address the issue of the ongoing industrial dispute in our hospitals. Our public hospitals are a very important part of the history of this State and are cherished by the people of Queensland. When we see health workers stretched to the limit by a dishonest Labor Government, we understand why this dispute has gone on for as long as it has. When we see that there have been many areas where operational staffing levels have been cut back and yet the bureaucracy—the zonal management structure, the high-level bureaucrats—is receiving more and more money, is it any wonder that those who are providing the operational services at a grassroots level are unhappy?

The other day in Parliament I asked the Health Minister, Wendy Edmond, a question about this, and she and her parliamentary colleagues thought that it was a laughing matter. I do not think that the doctors, the nurses or the blue-collar hospital workers would find her response so funny, nor would the thousands of patients who have been inconvenienced by these strikes. It is no wonder that this industrial dispute has gone on for as long as it has when the Government simply thinks that it is a matter that can be laughed off. In many operational areas, there are fewer workers to do the job—particularly, as we have seen, in mental health. This Government can make claims that this Budget will mean more staff but, given its record, we have to be very sceptical about whether that will occur in some of these key areas. This is a fundamentally dishonest and incompetent Government.

Again, the elective surgery waiting lists are blowing out, but we also know that the Government has failed to deliver another key election promise, and that is in relation to the issue of outpatient specialist appointments and the waiting list to get in to see those specialists. In many areas of the State, people could wait up to a year—and certainly this has occurred on the Sunshine Coast—just to see a specialist about a cataract operation. I have talked to people who are slowly going blind because they cannot get in to see an eye specialist, or an ophthalmologist, in order to get on the waiting list for eye surgery.

Mr Rowell: How long for a pair of glasses?

Miss SIMPSON: My colleague asks: how long is the wait for a pair of glasses? That wait time varies throughout the State, but it can take people many months just to get the form in order to get in to see people to have their glasses allocated. People are also waiting for dental appointments. The lists are blowing out to the extent that, in some cases, people are waiting up to a couple of years just to get in for basic treatment.

That has been happening under this Labor Government. It has talked about supplying basic social services, but it has failed to deliver. Over the past few weeks we have seen the cancelling for the first time of complex overnight orthopaedic surgery at the Princess Alexandra Hospital. This is surgery that needs to be done in time blocks overnight due to the length of time that is required. For the first time ever, for several weeks that hospital actually cancelled that type of surgery. At the Mater Children's Hospital, no elective surgery was performed for the month of June, with the exception of some ENT work and other minor work. That is extraordinary. The funding has not been provided for that surgery. We have seen eligible elderly people being made to wait for incontinence pads.

The once-proud public hospital system has ground to a halt and a further burden has been added by this ongoing industrial dispute, which the Government has been incapable of fixing. We have to ask: why has it taken so long to fix the problem and not used the option of going to arbitration through the commission? That is a major question. When we consider the number of people who have had their surgery cancelled, we wonder why the Government was so reluctant to take the union into a forum in order to resolve this issue when that option was available. If the Government really wanted the dispute resolved and the parties had reached a stalemate for a number of weeks, it could have utilised that option, but it failed to take it up.

The capital side of the budget has been extremely disappointing. In 1998-99, there was \$630m allocated for capital expenditure in Health. In the 1999-2000 budget, there was \$585m, and actual spending was \$526m. This year, the capital works budget for Health is \$473m. Since 1998-99, under this Government, that amounts to a fall-off in capital expenditure in the Health Department of 25%.

I turn now to the area of recurrent spending. The overall recurrent spending is up by 3.5% after a 3.7% increase last year. These are the two lowest increases in Health spending in this State in a decade. The ongoing picture is of a once-proud hospital system that has ground to a halt in many areas and of a failure to deliver the core services to the people of Queensland. Meanwhile, the bureaucracy, the zonal management, has been growing at an unholy pace and with very lucrative bonuses for those who are sitting in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy.

I want to address the issue of cancer services, because people in Queensland are having to wait for periods beyond what the specialist would like them to wait for very important services, such as access to linear accelerators. On the Sunshine Coast, each year hundreds of people are making hundreds of trips to Brisbane to access linear accelerators, and there are unacceptable delays for people needing to receive those services. Once again, I urge the State Government to take the opportunity to purchase services from the private sector where it has the capacity and the State Government does not, and one such area is cancer services. The patients do not care who owns the equipment, as long as they have access to it. When people have cancer, they do not want to have to wait four or five weeks for treatment.

In that regard, I have been made aware of some incidents that have occurred throughout the State. One bloke from out Roma way found that he had to have treatment. He could not get in for that treatment at the Herston campus within four weeks and he sought treatment privately. Fortunately, that facility was able to provide that treatment without there being a gap. However, where the State does not have that equipment in place it should be purchasing the use of private facilities. A private provider on the Sunshine Coast will be providing that service next year. I challenge this Government to purchase those services and make them available to the people on the Sunshine Coast.

There should be a similar arrangement put in place on the Gold Coast, where there is also no access to a linear accelerator. We have major regions of this State where people cannot access these services in a public hospital. Why should the Government then sit back and say, "You can get on a bus and make daily trips to Brisbane to receive those services there", when the private sector in that region has the capacity to provide that service? I believe that this Government needs to get over its philosophical hurdles and provide these services to the people by negotiating appropriate access through those who have already made the capital investment.

There are some major concerns about the wait times for access to cancer services in Townsville, with the hospital moving to the new site and the down time that will be involved in the transition period. Once again, I know that people with cancer are having a terrible time accessing these services in an appropriate way. I think that the Government has underestimated the level of demand for these services. Because of the time involved in travelling to these centres, people are giving up attending these services. They have to wait many weeks although they are very ill. When they have to wait a

number of weeks just to receive the basic level of service, that places them under incredible stress and worry about whether that will affect the outcomes of their long-term treatment.

There needs to be greater accountability in relation to alcohol and drug abuse. I have referred to this issue in previous years. The performance indicators in the Budget papers are woeful. If the Government is really serious about addressing the alcohol and drug problem, it needs to have better performance indicators than just the number of people who are registered on the methadone program. That is the sole indicator in the output statements for the Health budget. If the Health Minister has other indicators that she has buried somewhere, I have to ask: why are they not in the Budget documents? It is time that we had accountability and transparency in the way these services are delivered. It is time that targets were set for the outcomes that we want to see in respect of the delivery of alcohol and drug services. There is a need for rehabilitation and detoxification services throughout this State. The Sunshine Coast is a classic example in that there is no access to appropriate services, in particular services for young people. I will be calling on the Health Minister to provide them.

I wish to summarise some of the issues on the Sunshine Coast and in my electorate, some of which have been dealt with in the Budget and others of which have not. I welcome the continuing provision of funding for the construction of the fire and ambulance facility at Maroochydhore on a site that I suggested to the department. I was pleased that that site was able to be purchased from the Maroochy Shire Council. It is an excellent site right on the motorway and it will provide access to a far greater area, particularly the Maroochy North Shore and the airport.

I wish also to address the need for four-laning of the Sunshine Motorway. I have mentioned this to the Transport Minister, but it is still not on the immediate horizon. Sections of this motorway between Buderim Avenue and Maroochydhore Road carry 30,000 vehicles per day. People have been killed on this two-lane stretch of road. The usual capacity for a two-lane road is about 20,000 to 22,000 vehicles per day, yet this road carries 30,000 vehicles per day. It is a deathtrap, yet it is not on the program of work to be done in the immediate future. I urge the Government to get its priorities right and to get over its hang-up about the fact that we kept our election promise and took the tolls off the Sunshine Motorway. This is a road that must be four-laned to meet the growing needs of the Sunshine Coast. There is also a need for four-laning of Maroochydhore Road west of Kunda Park. I mention also the need for money to be set aside for a new bridge over the Maroochy River at Bli Bli and, certainly in the interim, for an upgrade of that bridge. I note that a few years ago a cyclist died on the cane tracks on that bridge, which is very narrow and old and desperately needs replacing. For the sake of the people who use that road, in the interim some attention needs to be paid to safety issues.

I wish also to address law and order issues on the Sunshine Coast. The Sunshine Coast needs more police. I am impressed by the hard work of those officers who are there and by what they try to do. We are a growth area. Illicit drug use in our community impacts on the level of property crime. There is a need for more police in order to provide a presence and timely follow-up when incidents occur. Obviously, we want to see as much crime prevented as possible. The Sunshine Coast needs more police. It is a large district and, accordingly, it takes a long time to travel from one end to the other. It is unsatisfactory that there are only one or two police cars to cover such a large area and that insufficient numbers of police are rostered on to provide these services. I urge the Government to bite the bullet and provide that funding.

Tourism is a major economic generator on the Sunshine Coast. I am proud to see some wonderful new developments in our area providing good quality services to our community, with a range of accommodation. When I spoke to the Premier earlier today he remarked on how much he liked Mooloolaba and that he had visited there recently. I am sure other honourable members have visited Mooloolaba, Maroochydhore and the north shore of the Maroochy River. We have a lot to offer. I urge the Government to give us a hand in relation to tourism. The Minister is nodding. We need as much help as we can get to promote this wonderful area.

Mrs Rose: A great area.

Miss SIMPSON: I agree; it is a great area.

Time expired.
