



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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BUDGET 2000

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.52 p.m.): Along with a lot of other members, I wish to make a contribution to the debate on this Budget. Debate on the Appropriation Bills provides an opportunity for members of Parliament to make a contribution on a range of issues. Quite a bit of hot air surrounds Budget debates. I find that this time of the year can be frustrating because of the amount of rhetoric and spin that is around.

Generally, before a Budget is brought down the Government tries to convince the public at large that it has a really good Budget. The Budget is then announced. Then comments come in from the various consumer groups, business groups and industry groups, all of whom have had only a couple of hours or days to consider the Budget. They find out later—days, weeks or months later—just what sort of disaster they have been fed. Unfortunately, some of the comments of the various groups are premature. We have seen that in rural groups and in business and industry groups. Sometimes they have made comments but have not had the political will or the moral or political courage to say what they actually really think. We find that out when we consider the detail of the Budget.

No Budget is totally bad and no Budget is totally good. I regard Budgets as an opportunity to do something for our State. That is as it should be, instead of just putting a certain spin on things, spouting rhetoric and hoping that people will buy it.

On my return from overseas I was interested to read the papers in Sydney and find that they had given this Budget the thumbs down. When the media starts to knock the Budget and give it the thumbs down—certainly when that is the case in the New South Wales papers and so on—we realise that another opportunity has been lost. I say that this is an opportunity lost because I know that a lot of people in rural and regional Australia are suffering enormously. It is well known that they are and have been for 10 or 15 years, and even longer. They really feel it with every lost opportunity to do something for them—their families, their livelihoods and so on. We feel a sense of anger and despair when opportunities are lost. I am sorry to say that that has happened again in this instance.

I noticed when I was overseas that after three years in Government the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair, who came to office in a blaze of publicity, was starting to be ripped to pieces by the press. They are ripping him to pieces because all he does is smile, put spin on policy and indulge in rhetoric.

Mr Borbidge: It's a bit familiar.

Mr COOPER: That is true. I notice a lot of smugness from those on the other side of the House because of certain opinion polls. I wonder why. I know how much notice I take of polls, because there is only one that will tell the tale. We know what happens when people get smug and overconfident. We saw that back in the Goss years. We saw what happened, after six short years of devastation, when people turn. People are starting to turn on Tony Blair at the moment. The same thing will happen here, with a Premier who comes over with smugness, spins, smiles and carrying on with no substance, no reality and no hope but only despair.

From what I know of rural and regional Queensland we have a problem. I think that is a sad and sorry situation, because it is a cruel blow to those people. So many things could have been done and still can be done out there. The Government does not have to prop people up. It does not have to give

them hand-outs. They do not expect that, but they do expect that Governments can take a lead in development and progress. We used to see it regularly here in this State with mines, ports, roads, power stations and so on—all working together and all creating real jobs, not just producing talk and rhetoric. It is not the case that it cannot be done. It has been done. The precedent has been set. The opportunities are there each year.

Sometimes I think it is a pity that Budgets come around just once a year. We go through this performance and then through the Estimates process which, as we know, is a farce, and then we settle back in to the year of mediocrity, which I think is sad. We need to be able to keep this State alive. It is a pity that it is falling behind other States again. In my view, that is something that need not happen.

On the issue of trade, some interesting comments were made by people of prominence whom I talked with overseas. They were quite interested to talk to someone from this side of the world. Their comment was that it is very interesting to see that Australia and New Zealand are taking a lead in free trade. I thought: if ever I have heard of anyone being damned with faint praise that was it, because that is the very thing that Australia and New Zealand should not be doing. Countries such as ours have no hope of competing against the big economies of Japan, the European common market and the United States. They know that we are taking a fall for them. We are trying to take the lead on something we are far too small to take the lead on. Again, that is why our people are suffering and have been for quite some time.

While no-one expects this State to be able to put everything right, this Budget represents an opportunity to make sure we actually set a blueprint for improvement in our wellbeing. I think it is sad and tragic that that has not happened. I wish to make further points. I will continue my contribution later in the day.

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (8.30 p.m.), continuing: Having been a Minister of the Crown, I know that prior to the bringing down of a Budget Ministers have to have done their homework to make sure they get as much funding as they possibly can for their particular portfolio. Some succeed. Some do reasonably well and some do not. A Minister doing worse in one year than in the previous year means not just a failure on the part of that Minister. People in the wider community are affected. In relation to the Budget, in a sense there is only one chance. As a Minister I always made sure I did my homework on my portfolios to ensure they got as much as possible so that they could do their job and do it better. They cannot do their job without funding. Of course, after the appropriation of funds comes wise and sensible expenditure.

I mention again, as I have many times, the pipeline from the Wivenhoe Dam to Atkinsons Dam which will give about 150 irrigators in the Brisbane Valley security of water supply. They have water supply now from Atkinsons Dam, but it is not secure. It would not take much to provide that security. The feasibility study has been conducted. The member for Warrego, who is present in the Chamber, initiated a feasibility study of a pipeline from Wivenhoe over to Atkinsons Dam. We appreciated that study, which cost \$300,000. That work has been done.

I went to the Deputy Premier, Mr Elder, soon after Labor was elected. I urged him to move on this as something useful—to provide water security to irrigators so that they could maintain and perhaps improve their productivity. The value of that pipeline to that entire region, as well as to the State, is inestimable. That is the sort of thing we have been trying to get this Government to follow up on over the last three years. It has not done it, and it has not done it again this year. For the life of me I do not know why, because the Government will not have to foot the bill for that entire project. At the end of the day it is the producers who end up paying the bill, with the taxpayer putting in a certain amount in order to ensure the productivity of the salad bowl, which feeds this city and this part of the State. It is a commonsense thing to do. The thing that disappoints me greatly is that when commonsense proposals come along, proposals that are presented to it on a plate, this Government cannot bring itself to carry them through.

I will outline what water can do for a community and a district. I highlight to members of the House the changes that have taken place in Dirranbandi. Probably a few Government members have been out to Dirranbandi to see the change. I have said before in this Parliament that there is total and utter despair in certain areas in this State. That was the case at Dirranbandi, which had been a wool growing area for 150 or 200 years. When wool collapsed, there was beautiful country but of course no productivity and no money. Dirranbandi had become a ghost town.

Producers at Dirranbandi harvested water. They indulged in some very big water harvesting schemes. A lot of them put up their own money and they made their way. They have converted Dirranbandi, which was a ghost town and a place of despair, to a boom town. People who were employing no-one before are now employing 40, 50 or 60 people as fruit-pickers or cotton-pickers. There are people involved in the grape, melon and cotton industries. It is a transformation that has to be seen to be believed, but it has happened before our very eyes. If people cannot see what water can do, then I pity them because I have seen what can happen.

We aim to achieve sensible usage of water. That is why we advocate the construction of more dams. The Borbidge Government moved very effectively to establish more sites. There were some unfortunate people in Canberra at the time who did not believe it was the time to keep building dams. Of course it was. In a country such as Australia, probably the driest continent on earth, we should be using water smartly. There are so many smart ways water can be used. It can be used so effectively that communities can be transformed. I urge this Government to take another look at the proposal for a dam on the Flinders River at Richmond. That would transform that area in a similar way to the way Dirranbandi has been transformed.

People should not be wringing their hands, wondering what they can do about things out in rural and regional Queensland and Australia. So much can be done and has been done in the past. It is not as if nothing can be done. Of course it can. It is a case of focusing on particular projects—working on them, making them work—and then moving on to others, not stopping and saying, "That's all over now. We are finished. Aren't we good?", as we did with the Snowy Mountains Scheme and the Ord River project. That is where it all stopped. After 200 years we have completed about two major projects. I think that is something we should be ashamed of. There is so much more we could, should and must do. It know it is possible. I commend those two initiatives to the Government.

I mention dairy farmers and the deregulation that has taken place. I think all members know what a disaster that has been. That has been brought about by one reason, and one reason only—that is, the Victorian dairy farmers wanted to go down that track. I am sick and tired of seeing all manner of other Governments, organisations and people being blamed for this. I know that when people lose their livelihoods they become angry. After four, five or six generations in the same industry who can blame them for being angry? No-one can, but it is a question of trying to be rational and maintaining an operation. The Government will not do that if it tears around all over the place blaming, condemning and so on. A recent edition of Country Life indicates that there must be unity in the ranks, and there has to be. Otherwise they will be torn apart by processors. Processors have no desire to keep the dairy farmers entirely mobile. They will pick and choose who they want to use. The industry itself must stay united, otherwise it will be torn to pieces. In the same issue of Country Life the chairman of the National Competition Council lauded and praised the move by the Victorian—

Mr Rowell: I wonder if he would like to exchange positions with some of those dairy farmers.

Mr COOPER: Exactly. These non-elected bureaucratic creatures have caused so much pain and angst in our community that was never needed in the first place. Our people have always been so productive and efficient, yet the processors and the supermarket chains, mainly from Victoria, have been pushing this and pushing it onto other States. Through the domino effect deregulation has now happened. I hope they feel happy because they have destroyed the livelihood of so many people, and for what? For absolutely nothing!

I say to the dairy farmers of Queensland that we are dreadfully sorry that this has happened. We did not want to see it happen. In this Budget the Government could have, from its \$98m of national competition payments, made a massive contribution to our dairy farmers, as the Federal Government did through that scheme. That would have made a big difference, but it chose to put in nothing. I think that action condemns this Government.

This demonstrates what I spoke about earlier about spin, smile and rhetoric. Those in the Government can go on with that for a certain time, but eventually the people will see through them. Eventually they will see that the dairy farmers in this State have been shockingly let down. I know that Western Australia made a good contribution of \$37m, direct from the State. This State did not provide anything like that. I think it is to be condemned for it. It is sad and it is wrong, especially in light of the suffering of the people in those communities which have helped make this State what it is.

We should not just walk away from people like that. If it costs some money, so be it. In the final analysis, what is money if the Government is going to take away so much that has been offered by these people and the contribution they have made over so many decades? There has been a lot of hardship over those years.

The member for Toowoomba South and I were talking privately earlier. We estimate that there are 450 dairy farmers in our area of the Darling Downs. They have made a significant contribution to the region. But now their incomes have been slashed to such a degree that it will cost the Darling Downs region anything up to \$30m. That is not only in one year; that is forever more. That is lost not just to them but to the total community. We have to be positive now and see what we can do about finding other things that these people can do. Their level of expertise is so high, and the work ethic is no problem for them; they have worked from daylight to dark seven days a week.

Mr Purcell: All their lives.

Mr COOPER: They have; that is right. This is where I believe that the people in the DPI who have the relevant expertise should come forward with initiatives to set these people on their path again,

because once they are set on the path to productivity again, they will produce; they will do it again and again, as they have done it before. I would like to see some emphasis on this. Maybe some of that \$98m of NCP money could have gone—and still should go—into not just propping up people but providing positive, productive methods of getting them started and set on their way. It is just like the job retraining schemes in other fields. This is just retraining people and helping them to find another way. That is our responsibility, for heaven's sake. It is not just about dollars: "Bottom line, inefficient, you are out." These people have been so efficient and have made such a contribution that I do think some money could be well spent on such measures.

Mr Hamill: The trouble is we won't get anywhere near \$90m from the NCC this year.

Mr COOPER: All I can say is—

Mr Hamill: The maximum amount that we'll get is about \$80m, but they want to take money off us because local councils won't put in two-part tariffs on water. It's outrageous.

Mr COOPER: There was the instance, though, of local authorities, and we turned back I think it was \$250m-odd—

Mr Rowell: \$153m.

Mr COOPER: \$153m, I am sorry—

Mr Hamill: We've paid that out.

Mr COOPER: Right, back to the local authorities. We wanted to see this other money go back to the dairy farmers.

Mr Hamill: There isn't any other money. That's the problem.

Mr COOPER: Yes, but the one instance was the \$153m from NCP to local authorities. This one is \$98m back to the dairy farmers.

Mr Hamill: There's no \$98m. There isn't.

Mr COOPER: Yes, right. I have only three minutes left. I am happy to talk to the Treasurer about it. Most of us agree that we do not want to see these people go down and end up totally destitute.

That leads me to my final point. We have an organisation in Toowoomba known as Bush Connection. Bush Connection is a combination of St Vincent de Paul and other organisations. Mrs Mary-Louise North and the other volunteers at Bush Connection are there to help these people find new employment and set up after their livelihoods have been destroyed.

Mr Hamill: And all strength to them, too.

Mr COOPER: Absolutely. The dairy farmers are the next ones on their plate.

I have worked closely with the Minister for Family Services on this issue, because this organisation is invaluable in setting up fourth, fifth and sixth generation farmers who have been forced off their land. They feel total failures. They have to move out, go through the pain barrier and come out into another world. Most of them do come through, but they have to be helped through. Government assistance schemes and organisations such as St Vinnie's and the Salvos are playing a tremendous part. I cannot praise them enough, and I know that I do not do it often enough. They are doing positive work in this regard all the time. I certainly support them all the way.

We have had good support from the Minister and I sincerely hope that that continues, because we have seen an enormous number of suicides in our area. I think that the Shire of Crows Nest would just about lead the State in terms of the number of suicides. That is for all sorts of reasons, but one of the reasons is that people are suffering enormously. This issue transcends politics. That is why we need to assist organisations such as Bush Connection. We must also be more positive in finding new ventures for farmers—including dairy farmers—to move into once their industries have been decimated by shameless, disgusting, shocking policies such as National Competition Policy and deregulation, which have destroyed so much of what we stand for in this State.

This has taught me a massive lesson, even late in my political life: you do not ever, ever allow your people to be sold down the drain for a theory—a theory expounded by bureaucrats who have no idea of the human side of it, who did not realise that it would hurt people so much. We do not have to be like lemmings and accept it when they say, "This is going to be good for you." It has not been good.
