



Speech by

**Mr T. MALONE**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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Hansard 20 July 2000

### **BUDGET 2000**

**Mr MALONE** (Mirani—NPA) (10.23 p.m.): I take much pleasure in rising to speak in the Appropriation debate. Firstly, comments were made by members opposite that we were critical of the Budget. I am very supportive of the Budget. I think the Government has done an excellent job. I recollect, when we were sitting on the Government side of the House, how complimentary the Opposition was of our Budget. I return the compliment. It has met all of the criteria leaked from the Deputy Premier's office. We can laugh off the Budget; if you never, never tell us, we will never, never know, will we? It seems to me that the Budget has fulfilled all of the promises leaked about it from the Deputy Premier's office. I congratulate the Government on bringing down a Budget that is so confusing that nobody can attack it. The smoke and mirrors put into this Budget are incredible.

I wish to briefly address my shadow portfolio of Emergency Services. It is an interesting department. Emergency Services incorporates the statutory authorities of the Queensland Ambulance Service—the QAS—the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority and the counter-disaster and rescue service. Those three divisions make up most of the role of the department. The department consists also of the Support Services Business Unit and the Strategic and Executive Services Division, which provide support to the three operational arms under the director-general.

The portfolio is an essential public safety agency and either directly delivers or funds a range of necessary emergency services. These services focus on preventing in the first instance, or minimising the impact of, emergencies and disasters as well as response to and recovery from emergencies and disasters. These essential public services are delivered to every community throughout Queensland and are vital in ensuring the community's safety, enhancing quality of life, protecting the environment, protecting property and strengthening Queensland's regions.

The portfolio has approximately 6,500 permanent and part-time employees in addition to 85,000 volunteers across the State, representing every Queensland community, irrespective of size. The Department of Emergency Services is a hands-on organisation and it is very important in the running of our State and also in terms of goodwill.

Tonight, in addressing the Appropriation debate, it is important to indicate my observations of the reactions of the general public. If the reaction of staff to the Emergency Services budget is an accurate gauge, the Minister for Emergency Services is in for a pretty interesting and challenging time over the next 12 months. However, for the people of Queensland it could be a disastrous year.

A quick analysis of the Budget documents indicates that the provision of services will decline while direct charges through increased levies will soar in several areas. The Budget documents are probably more notable for what they do not say, as I said earlier, than for what is clear and easily understood. Some staff members who may have a deeper appreciation of how the Budget will affect their operations have expressed opinions ranging from derision to shock and scepticism. A recurring theme of staff concern is the spiralling cost of corporate services within the department. It is claimed the empire building within the centre office of the department is milking resources from operational areas. That is a fact. Unfortunately, an initial study of the Budget documents does nothing to allay these fears. It is impossible to gauge just how much is being eaten up in the administrative area.

I am very concerned that the people working within the field are the ones suffering from this top-heavy overbureaucratic approach to administration. Of course, the natural progression of this style of management regime will mean that the people of Queensland will ultimately suffer. Scarce resources are being swallowed up by the administrative arm while the real service providers are being starved.

It is well known throughout the Public Service and among stakeholder groups that the management of Emergency Services in Queensland is causing a great deal of concern in Government circles. While the current Minister has to accept responsibility, he was probably handed a poisoned chalice and told to drink from it. He inherited an administration that was out of control, that had lacked direction from the previous Minister and that was determined not to allow commonsense or rational judgment to interfere with the operation. I understand the current Minister is trying to take back control but is struggling with the bureaucratic mafia at the head of the department.

The initial reaction to the Emergency Services budget is that it lacks any sort of imagination, initiative or purpose. Old programs and projects are being regurgitated, some with a little window dressing, but there is very little that is new or innovative. The counter-disaster and rescue services seems to have hit a brick wall. Projected staff levels, even taking into account extras allowed for in the budget, are lower than what they were two years ago. There is a suggestion that having vacant positions is one way of finding extra money to actually get some work done.

The lack of staff in the right positions is reflected in the level of support being offered to stakeholders such as volunteers and local authorities throughout the State. Because of the academic approach adopted by the top echelon of the department's administration, the counter-disaster and rescue services is losing touch with the people with whom it is supposed to work. One can only hope that the current advertising program begging people to subscribe to the Queensland Ambulance Service works miracles. If it does not, the QAS will simply sink further and further into the financial mire it now finds itself in.

The Government is pouring more and more money into the service, but again a lot of it is being eaten up by corporate services and non-service delivery areas. While officers in the field wait for uniforms—and I believe that a recent directive issued after I asked a question in Parliament has put paid to some of those concerns—head office space is at a premium because of the top-heavy administration. It is ironic and maybe even a bit pathetic that the financial performance of the QAS in 2000-01 could very well depend on the success of its advertising program.

Most of that has probably been due to the unfunded election promise to provide the service free of charge to all pensioners. I have to say right here and now that once we gain Government we will not be taking that away, either. It is sad for a such a well-known and respected service to find itself in that position. In particular, it is a sad reflection on this Government. If that advertising campaign does not reap the budgeted rewards, the QAS could again find itself operating at a loss and we will see the operators in the field losing their resources. In the current year the QAS incurred a loss over budget of \$3.8m.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority is defying the pronouncements of the no new taxes Budget by increasing levies and charges to help balance its precarious financial position. Business communities, especially small business, will feel the effects of higher fees and charges while residents in some areas are in for a fairly nasty surprise when they receive their next rate notice and see the amount of the fire levy. It will not be a pretty sight. We are going to have a debate in this Parliament, possibly during the next sitting, about this. In some areas—Kawana in particular—the fire levy is increasing by up to 70%. That will have a huge impact on not only householders but also businesspeople in that area.

This deceptive Government claims that it has introduced no new taxes, but I cannot remember hearing the Premier, the Treasurer or the Emergency Services Minister outlining the new fee structure for the building plan approvals or the additional revenue it will rake in. The Government has dressed up the QFRA budget by using carryover funds to make its projected spending look much better than it really is.

The Government has tried to adopt a damage control budget for Emergency Services, but it seems to have missed the mark. It is ironic that, in a department so used to being involved in disaster planning, there is little that the staff can do to prevent the financial disaster that is looming in this area of administration. I only hope that the Minister can take control quickly and get the department back on track. I will investigate further—

**Mr Robertson:** Trust me. It's okay.

**Mr MALONE:** I complimented the Minister earlier.

**Mr Robertson:** Did you?

**Mr MALONE:** I did. I will do it again. The Minister is doing a good job. However, I need to examine the administration more closely during Estimates hearings. I am sure that we will have some interesting discussions.

**Mr Robertson:** I welcome that.

**Mr MALONE:** That is great.

**Mr Robertson:** I look forward to it.

**Mr MALONE:** We have only two hours, so the Minister will be able to give me an hour and a half, will he?

While I have a few minutes left and the Minister is interrupting my discussion, I would just like to talk about a few issues in my electorate. I have been calling for a new police station at Sarina for a long time. It was fairly high up on our list. Unfortunately, I noticed in the Budget that a new police station in North Mackay has now replaced my police station at Sarina. Unfortunately, the police station at Sarina seems to have dropped off the list. The member for Mackay has gained at my expense.

I compliment the Government on providing the funding for the Conservatorium of Music. We have been looking for that for quite a while. I also compliment it for the ongoing funding for Dalrymple Bay, possibly the biggest coal port in the world. It will be interesting to see if in a future Budget that terminal is leased back to the corporate operators to gain some extra lazy equity—I think that was the word that Treasury used—to bolster next term's Budget.

In relation to education, I was disappointed to see that a resource centre does not seem to be in the Budget for the Pinnacle State School. I have been asking for that for quite a while and I was assured that it was on the way. I just hope that I find that it is when I follow it up with a call to the Education Department.

I was really interested to hear that the Education Department is now looking at providing one computer for every five students. We do have some computers in my schools, but I doubt if we would have one in 10. But we have some computers there; the only problem is that we have no teachers who can actually teach computer literacy. In my own school in my home town, Koumala, a call has gone out for the mums and dads to teach the kids how to use computers. That is getting pretty desperate.

I was very disappointed with this Government's handling of the cut-off for enrolments. In the far-flung schools in our regional areas, if a school was one pupil short of the minimum enrolment, it lost a teacher. A lot of itinerant families come to those areas to work at odd times of the year. It could even be the case that a couple of days after the cut-off day for enrolment a family will move in and, thus, take the number of students enrolled over the minimum number by two or three. Of course, the schools are not going to get that teacher back until those student numbers are maintained for quite some time. So, depending on the enrolments at particular schools, we have teachers travelling all over the place.

A preschool down at Marlborough is all set up to take children. It is two students short of the minimum number and so is not open. While it is closed, the parents have to take those children 110 kilometres to another preschool. Just for the sake of one half day teacher—

**Mr Rowell:** That is Third World stuff.

**Mr MALONE:** It is Third World stuff. If that happened in Korea or the Philippines, they would have put a teacher in there. I have written probably three letters to the Minister. The replies indicate that I have not been successful. I am sure that if I talk to him again he will give me that extra half day teacher so the preschool at Marlborough can be opened.

It was interesting to hear in the Parliament today the Premier and the Deputy Premier crowing about their great support for small communities. The shadow Minister for Primary Industries and I have raised the issue of the sugar industry, and I will not go back over all of that. One of the things we are going to see on the east coast of Queensland is the decimation of some of our small towns, such as Pinnacle, Finch Hatton, Mirani, Marian, Koumala, Sarina, Walkerston, Carmila, Flaggy Rock—you name it. All of those little towns are going to be severely affected by the downturn in the sugar industry.

**Mr Rowell:** How much did we get promised from the State Government?

**Mr MALONE:** We have not had one promise from the State Government.

**Mr Nuttall** interjected.

**Mr MALONE:** That is the problem that the member for Sandgate has. The Government does not understand this issue, and that is clear from the comments coming across the Chamber. The sugar industry has always paid back any loan it has been given. The fact of the matter is that the sugar industry is the cornerstone of all those communities. It covers the grocery man, the repairman, the guy who sells fuel, the guy who sells oil and the bloke who sells machinery. All the money given to the farmer ends up in his small community and the farmer pays it back. This situation has occurred a couple of times before. It comes about as a result of three or four years of bad weather, low prices and disease. It is incumbent upon the State Government to get behind this package and to approach the

Federal Government about it so that they can both work hand in hand. It has to work now, because it is needed in the next few weeks. I implore the Premier and the Deputy Premier to get involved in that process.

Whilst referring to small communities, I want to refer to the problems experienced in Sarina relating to the railway, and the shadow Minister has been to Sarina to assess the situation. Members would realise that Sarina is the base for the haulage of coal to Hay Point. The Jilalan depot and its workshops employ 400 people. I understand that the manager of QR has been up there today offering VERs and slashing jobs one after the other. It is expected that 30 jobs will go from that area. With the downturn in the sugar industry, that will have a huge impact on Sarina. I admire the work of those blokes who work on the railway in Sarina. They are great blokes.

**Mr Rowell:** They are committed and dedicated.

**Mr MALONE:** They are committed and dedicated, as the shadow Minister says. Together we inspected some of the work they were doing when repairing the line. Two tracks 250 kilometres long run from Peak Downs to Mackay. Because coaldust is contaminating the ballast, moisture retention forces clay through the ballast. That in turn creates bog holes in the track. Train speeds have been increased from 60 km/h to 80 km/h. As the trains pound through these wet spots, the track deteriorates. Those workers have to cut the tracks and pull them out between the power pylons, fix the track and put it all back so that it is operational within eight hours. It is quite a job. A lot of the equipment they use has been designed by them. They are just ordinary guys doing a great job. In the time I have left to me, I congratulate the Government on its Budget! It has done an excellent job of confusing everybody.

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