



Speech by

VAUGHAN JOHNSON

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (4.30 p.m.): I wish to canvass a number of issues in relation to not only my portfolio area of Transport and Main Roads but also other areas relating to Government agencies in other portfolio areas and that affect people and businesses in my electorate of Gregory.

When we as members of Parliament think about this, the most important issue is how our fellow citizens—the people in our communities—are affected. Even though funds are allocated from Government Budgets to certain areas, certainly many areas are still crying out for funding; they seem to have been left high and dry. I will touch on that as I progress. Although pork-barrelling is often discussed in the House, it is time to be fair dinkum with all of the people of all electorates and give them a fair share of what they deserve.

I wish to mention police services. Police in western communities are no different to police in any other community in the State. For a long while now we have had fantastic police officers in the Gregory electorate. I have said that before and I further endorse the great work they do on a daily basis. But they can do the work only if they have the staff necessary to do the work. A remote area like Windorah, which is 300 kilometres south of Longreach and on one of the main arteries to the west between Quilpie and Birdsville and Longreach and Birdsville, has not had a resident police officer for over 12 months. This is totally unsatisfactory; the local people are sick and tired of this. Relieving officers have come from Longreach or the second officer from Jundah will come and fill in for a couple of days or even just a few hours and then go back to Jundah. After a long period we have just had the sergeant's position in Jundah filled.

The same can be said for places like Thargomindah and Quilpie, which are in my colleague's electorate of Warrego. The sergeants' positions there have not been filled. I know people who have applied for the positions but, because of the requirement for a CJC clearance, they have not been given the go ahead to take up the positions. It is absolutely ludicrous that we have people who want to go to those communities and be a part of them for two, three or four years but who cannot be given the go-ahead. That is totally unacceptable. I trust that the Police Minister, or some of his advisers, are listening so that some of these anomalies can be fast-tracked and corrected. It is an unfortunate situation.

All places, whether they are remote communities, larger towns or cities throughout the State, deserve to have a full complement of police. We have heard the Minister say how police numbers are growing and the recruits are coming through the academies in Brisbane and Townsville, yet we do not seem to be able to get police officers to the places where they should be. Officers genuinely want to come to these places, but they are not given the go-ahead because of the stringent selection panel interviews they are subjected to. I believe that that is totally unsatisfactory and not acceptable to the wider community.

I also put on record my acknowledgment of the great work of the former commissioner, Mr Jim O'Sullivan, over his period of eight years as commissioner of this State. I think Jim O'Sullivan is a truly wonderful person. In the couple of years that we were in Government, in Russell Cooper's absence and as the Acting Police Minister I had occasion to work with him a few times. I cannot say enough good words about Jim O'Sullivan. I wish him and his wife, Del, all the best for their retirement. I wish

Commissioner Bob Atkinson all the best as he now takes the reins of the Queensland Police Service and trust that he can lead it in the same way that Mr O'Sullivan did.

I raise the issue of rural power that was addressed in the House last night by the member for Callide, the shadow Minister for Mines and Energy. That is an issue that is not going away. We have to respect the people who live in isolated, remote communities. They have been subjected to Third World conditions for far too long. To be able to flick a switch to turn on power is something that many people take for granted today, but people in some of those western, north-western and peninsula regions are still dreaming of that. I think it is going to take a coalition Government to overcome that.

I know not everyone can have rural power, but the commodities produced in those regions certainly speak volumes for them. Natural gas is coming out of the ground at a rate of knots and being pumped through to Mount Isa. There is an abundant supply of oil, coal and all the other commodities we need to produce power or any other sort of commercial venture. Yet it seems that although the natural resources come from those western areas we cannot have the products that flow from them.

I believe rural power, or power of any type, should no longer be provided to only a relatively few; all people are entitled to have that convenience. Those who are unable to have rural power—the people in the Barcoo, Boulia Shire, my region, the honourable member for Mount Isa's region, areas west into my area of Diamantina, down into the Bulloo Shire and Thargomindah—are some of the best producers in the nation. They produce masses of cattle, wool and other commodities that enable business operations on the eastern seaboard to function throughout the year.

The important factor to remember here is that these people do not ask for a lot from day to day, but this would be a very small bonus. If it has to be a community service obligation to give them that power, they should be entitled to it as recognition of the effort that they have put in throughout their lives. This issue is not going to go away. It is near and dear to the hearts of many people in western Queensland and one that is high on the agenda of the coalition when we return to Government next year, because I can assure those people that Jeff Seeney will be fast-tracking the implementation of that policy.

I will also touch on the area of professional medical services in the west. I notice the member for Fitzroy is just walking from the Chamber now. No doubt this topic is near and dear to him, too. When we talk about flying surgeons and flying doctors—

A Government member: He is going to stay and listen now.

Mr JOHNSON: I hope he does, because I know he will support me on this. The issue is that of the Flying Surgeon based in Longreach. That service is sacrosanct to the people of remote western Queensland. Whether or not the service is carrying out medical procedures, it is absolutely paramount that we have full retention of the Flying Surgeon service based in Longreach. At the same time we have flying doctor services based at Rockhampton, Charleville and Mount Isa. They are very important and integral parts of our flying medical services throughout central and western Queensland.

I am pleased the member for Fitzroy has stayed in the House, because over the last 12 months we have witnessed two horrible accidents in coalmines in central Queensland, and it is the flying medical services that we need to be able to provide on a daily basis that mantle of safety to people in those predicaments, so that we can save lives by rescuing people from predicaments that place their health at risk.

I say to the members on the Government side that the services of the Flying Surgeon from Emerald to the east, Claremont, further south to Charleville, north to Mount Isa and in the Longreach region are absolutely critical. Those services must be retained. I have written to the Minister and asked her to place an advertisement to fill the void in Longreach caused by the resignation of Dr Allan Basson. Hopefully, we will see that advertisement run before too long. A lot of people in the local community are concerned that the advertisements are not going to be placed, that this position is going to be declared void and go somewhere else in the central region or further to the east. That would be a totally unacceptable situation. I appeal to the Minister for Health today to immediately call for applications. I know that an American surgeon filled in for some two months, but it is absolutely paramount to the ongoing viability of medical services in western and remote Queensland that that position is filled permanently.

June Lithgow, the District Director of Health in Longreach, has told me that the position will be kept open until the end of 2001 and filled. I have to say that 2001 is not on this agenda; this has to be ongoing, it has to be an indefinite posting and one that is not negotiable. We will not be compromising on that. I put that on the record today. I can assure the people of western Queensland that it is not negotiable; we will not compromise. I want to see the Government put in place a procedure now that is going to make absolutely certain that we retain the full services of the Flying Surgeon in western Queensland. So many lives have been saved and so many more lives will be saved because of that professional and sacred help that we have which a lot of people in this part of the world take for granted.

Another issue I want to touch on while I am talking about medical services is dental health. Again, we are crying out for professionals to come to western Queensland. As with doctors, although we have difficulty attracting them in the first place, we need to engage them on a bond so that they remain in the area for a reasonable time. That is something that I believe the Government has to look at closely. These professional people, whether they are doctors or dentists, are a very integral and important part of encouraging people to stay, live and take up positions in western Queensland. The first thing people ask is: what medical services are available? When you look at places like Charleville, Roma, Emerald, Longreach, Mount Isa, Cloncurry and Charters Towers, they are all wonderful centres—

Mr Purcell: If you've got trouble with your teeth, mate, we'll fix it for you.

Mr JOHNSON: With my teeth? I don't have many teeth, but we won't go into that today. I have a couple there, though.

Mr Purcell: You were starting to slow down a bit, mate. We thought we'd fire you up again and get you going.

Mr JOHNSON: It is just a touch of laryngitis. However, I will get over that.

Mr Quinn: Don't put them in my glass.

Mr JOHNSON: I wouldn't do that. We always have to have a couple of comics in the place; we have to put a bit of colour into the joint. I always enjoy a comment from the member for Bulimba or the member for Fitzroy, because they understand exactly what I am talking about. I believe that they support me totally in what I am trying to encourage the Government to do here today.

Another issue that I want to touch on is my shadow portfolio. I have seven minutes left to talk about the portfolio of Transport and Main Roads. I was pleased today to see the Minister for Transport and Main Roads launch the Roads Implementation Program for 2000-04, the five-year program. I hope this document has not been gutted. I hope it puts substantial funding arrangements in place, not just the ones for the budget for the next couple of years but ongoing indicative funding. Again, it is absolutely paramount to the ongoing viability of shires right across this State that we can take advantage of that program, because it provides jobs security for local councils and work forces throughout the length and breadth of Queensland. Local authorities have been waiting for that document for a long time. I have not seen a copy of it yet, but I was pleased to hear the Minister's assurance that he would get a copy to me some time today.

Another matter that I want to touch on is the railways. There is a lot of angst in the railways community. I visited Townsville recently, and there is concern about the future of those railway workshops. I have given those people a commitment that under a coalition Government those workshops would not close. They are sacred to north Queensland. We must not forget the importance of those railway yards to the north-west mineral province of Mount Isa. Transportation of that mineral out of north-west Queensland is essential to that project. We also have to consider passenger and freight services not only to the north-west but also to the north and south of Townsville, and the ongoing maintenance and upgrade of QR rolling stock in north Queensland.

Mr Reynolds: Hear, hear! I agree with you 100%.

Mr JOHNSON: I thank the member for Townsville very much. I put that on the record here today. I hope that the member will support those workers in the Townsville railway workshops and support me in making absolutely certain that the Townsville railway workshops become a stand-alone entity. It is of paramount importance that they be given their own management rights and procedures and that they have their own expertise. We need to guarantee those jobs. Those workshops are currently doing a magnificent job building 300 cattle wagons.

Mr Reynolds: A tremendous job they've done.

Mr JOHNSON: It is state-of-the-art. A couple of weeks ago I witnessed about 130 wagons just about to come off the assembly line. It is essential that we keep the work going at those workshops. I can assure the people of Townsville that that will become a reality on the election of a coalition Government. I can assure the people of Townsville and the railway workers of Townsville that I will continue to work overtime to ensure the security of jobs in that operation in Townsville.

Another issue I want to touch on today is Walkers in Maryborough. Last week I visited the Walkers operation in Maryborough and I inspected some of the great work they are doing there. The last one of their 50 locos is just about to come off the assembly line. The 30 three-car sets that the coalition Government commissioned from them is just about complete. At the moment they are hoping to win a contract for six three-car sets for the Gold Coast railway. I hope that that contract is awarded to Walkers. It is absolutely critical to the future ongoing viability—

Mr Bredhauer: You've got a hide. You're the person who complained about us giving the tender to Walkers for the new tilt train.

Mr JOHNSON: Because you didn't put it out to tender.

Mr Bredhauer: Three hundred jobs to those workers in Walkers, and you've done nothing but complain about it for two and a half years.

Mr JOHNSON: I said that to the management of Walkers last week in Maryborough, too. I said to the gentleman in question, "I didn't agree with the way you got that contract. It should have been put out for open tender." The Minister knows that himself. He did not put it out for open tender.

Mr Bredhauer: You didn't want the jobs to go to the 300 workers in Maryborough.

Mr JOHNSON: We believed that it should have been put through the fair and proper tender process, and the Minister knows that as well as I do. That is the way you should do commercial and corporate business, and the Minister knows that. However, members on the other side of the House do not have an understanding of how commercial and corporate business works. The Minister can do what he likes; he will not wind me up on this issue. I know that, when it comes to credibility, the Minister has never been seen there. He has never been seen walking through the workshops in Townsville. I do not know whether the member for Townsville has invited him to visit or not, but I suggest that he does. I know that 40 jobs are going to be lost from Walkers before Christmas, and another 200 will go by June next year if they do not win some of these contracts. I hope that the QR contract for these Gold Coast cars can be beneficial for that company.

The other issue that I want to touch on in the short time remaining to me is major capital works by Main Roads. I know that the Minister and the Premier recently opened the Pacific Motorway, which was a project that created a lot of jobs in Queensland—probably a maximum of 3,000. A lot of the people employed by those construction companies, and people from further south and further north, are now looking to see what projects are coming up. I say to the Minister today that if there are projects up for tender, it is essential they are fast-tracked so that we can keep those jobs going in Queensland.
