



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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BUDGET DEBATE 2001

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (3.23 p.m.): In replying to this budget, I first congratulate the Treasurer on handling such a huge responsibility—and a huge financial responsibility—in trying to address the needs of the whole state. Obviously, this is not a non-Labor government budget, as we can see by the figures. But I will concentrate on the positives, not the negatives.

In common with most governments, this Beattie government has concentrated most of the resources on the coastal fringes, as it has done in all the other budgets for which I have been here. I suppose that is mainly because that is where the votes are. Everyone would be aware that there is a constant migration from rural areas to the cities and other coastal centres, and their needs must also be addressed. So I ask the Treasurer to try to concentrate on taking industry west of the ranges, because that is where it is sadly lacking. We really do need to establish a 'let's populate the interior' mentality, not just to concentrate on the coastal strips. We need the government to encourage industries and businesses. We do not need them crowding into the cities, as they always have done. Every day I see kids leaving our rural areas and going to the city. The people with the will to achieve the potential that this country is capable of in the long term are lost due to short-term lack of vision.

Kingaroy is one of the largest crop growing areas in Queensland. We have so much produce that we could have some sort of industry out there—a value added industry—which would keep all our young people there. We could keep the complexes going 24 hours a day and keep them employed—anything from peanuts to tomatoes and olives, which is a growing industry in our area. I ask that, in the future, the Treasurer considers this type of thing for our rural areas.

We have to scrap the level playing field that everyone keeps talking about and realise that small business cannot compete with the multinationals. Small businesses are Australia's largest employer. To that end, I ask the Treasurer also to consider at some stage offering small business—and by that I mean businesses with fewer than 10 employees—some sort of subsidy. If he did that, I think he would probably solve the Premier's problem of getting our unemployment rate down to five per cent. Small businesses employ people, and he needs to address that issue. And if he did provide incentives to small businesses, that would solve more problems than he has solved already—which I guarantee is not many.

The government loves throwing money around on job schemes and training people to do things over and over again. West of the ranges, job training facilities are really just a way of jiggling the figures. A person who is doing a six-week course at a TAFE college will come off the unemployment figures. If they do one hour a week they are classed as being employed; but I do not think anyone in their right mind would really class that as being employed. However, there must be jobs for them to do once they have finished these courses. Nobody would deny that we need to provide some sort of training, but there must be jobs for them, otherwise they will go back onto the list of unemployed.

The same thing is happening with the mature-aged student subsidy, which appears to be a bit of a con job. The criteria call for people aged over 45 who are not receiving intensive assistance from an employment agency. I have been informed that most people aged over 45 in Kingaroy are receiving intensive assistance and, therefore, do not qualify at all. So one really must juggle the figures constantly.

One thing I am really grateful for is the Tarong extension. It has been an ongoing project in my area for a long time—back when it was the electorate of Barambah. This puts a lot of strain on local businesses. In particular, I have had a lot of correspondence from Nanango Hire Service, which has been operating for over 20 years. When the Tarong north power station came to the area, three extra large companies came in—Donpra; Compressor Hire Service and Wreckair—and they all opened depots in Nanango. A lot of business went to those companies. As a result, one local fellow is just about on his knees and out the door. So when big business does come to an area, we should consider the effect on local industries.

One major concern, once Tarong north is finished and those three operators decide to move on—as they more than likely will—is what will happen to Nanango Hire Service and other similar businesses which will have been put out of business because they cannot maintain viability while these other companies skim the cream from local business?

Mount Mee, Woodford, Toogoolawah and Esk are new areas for me. It has taken me quite a while to come to grips with what they are asking for. I am still not 100 per cent sure as to what they have already asked for. At the moment one of the major concerns, particularly in Mount Mee—which is a beautiful area—is the regular cuts in the electricity supply. I ask the government to consider addressing this issue. This is a dairy farming area, and frequently farmers are inconvenienced when the power fails and they are left with half-milked cows. Anyone who has worked on a dairy farm knows exactly what that means. It is a lot of hard work. The farmers either have to let the cows out and bring them back when the power resumes or they keep milking by hand. It is a huge task for these people. Power outages is one problem that I would really like to see remedied. It is quite inconceivable to me that these people are so close to Brisbane—in fact, where I come from, in Kingaroy, we would say that Mount Mee was almost a suburb of Brisbane because it is so close—yet they still have to suffer this sort of bad service. We know that the people on the electricity boards do their best, and they work hard. Again, resources seem to be the main problem.

Recently I attended Mr Bleakley's funeral at a tiny church in Linville, which is a beautiful place. Mr Bleakley was held in high regard. There would have been over 1,000 people at his funeral. He was killed when electricity arced out to some irrigation pipes. I endorse the suggestion by the member for Keppel that we offer a rebate to enable safety switches to be installed in all houses. I do not believe that would be a difficult thing to do. We offered a rebate for the installation of fire alarms. I know that safety switches are more expensive, but one life should never have a price put on it.

There has been some confusion since the electoral boundaries were changed. An awful lot of people currently in the Callide electorate whom I previously represented still approach me, firstly, because their member is a long way away and, secondly, because they are used to coming to me. Recently an ambulance broke down on the road to the Burrandown races. That may not sound like much of a problem to many people, but those races are held a fair way out. It was an unpalatable thought that someone might get hurt out there but not be able to access ambulance services. Usually there is only one ambulance officer, which seems to be the norm out our way. We would like an increase in staffing levels in the area. Even though I no longer actually represent those residents, I am aware that they would appreciate action in this regard.

The fact that there is no transport to major centres like Toowoomba, where most people access specialist medical services, presents a major problem. This lack of transport has made it very difficult for a lot of people. In the past a bus was available, and there was an attempt to secure a subsidy, but the request was knocked back. We definitely need transport of some description in our area to carry people to and from various places, particularly aged persons or those who have conditions which have to be assessed by specialists who operate from Toowoomba. Some people with illnesses that affect their driving ability require a medical certificate in order to renew their licences, but they must be assessed by doctors outside of the Nanango electorate. These people have to try to get someone to take them to Toowoomba. There are public doctors in Kingaroy who are willing to provide these services, but they have not been given a licence to do so. That is another issue that I ask the government to consider.

As to the DPI—we must take moves to control African lovegrass and giant rat-tail grass, both of which are growing prolifically in our area. The problem has existed for so long now that people have nearly lost their entire farms. There is an amazing dingo population in the region. I believe this is mainly due to the fact that land-holders and graziers can no longer carry firearms in their utilities, as they previously did. However, the problem with dingoes in the Burnett/Wide Bay area is increasing. It is becoming quite frightening. In two separate instances, a child and an adult were stalked and surrounded by a pack of dingoes. That was a very frightening episode for them.

Another problem in the area is high insurance costs, which are forcing the closure of many recreational facilities. I realise that there is not a lot the government can do about this, but it should change the law to make the indemnity form a binding document, otherwise all recreation facilities will close down, to the detriment of people in rural areas.

Recently I attended a meeting of the foster carers group. I noticed that yesterday in question time the minister acknowledged the funding need in this area. These people are to be admired by everybody. Some of the people I met with had been foster carers for over 30 and 40 years. As one gentleman said, he had a child given to him for four days and he ended up caring for that child for 18 years. He had also cared for another 100 children. Most of the time, these people provide for these children out of their own pockets. Not one of the people I met would have been classed as earning an above average income. They all had the biggest hearts. They have many needs. I seriously ask that the government put some money their way.

In Kingaroy, Kilcoy and the surrounding areas, health is a major issue. The waiting times for surgery are still unacceptably long. Every time I inquire at the various health facilities, I am advised that waiting lists are up around three to four years. However, when I come into this place it is denied that the waiting lists are that long. When we ask what will happen to the patients from St Aubyns Hospital, which is now closed, we are told that the hospital at Kingaroy will be able to cope with three to five patients. I can assure the parliament that there are always a few more than that needing attention. However, the staff at the hospital say that these people will more than likely be shipped out to Wondai. It is not acceptable. This hospital is now up for sale. It is the only private hospital in the area. I ask the government to consider at least offering some assistance to the Kingaroy council, which is hoping in some way to raise the funds to purchase this hospital so that we at least have a private facility in the area.

This government needs to put the people first. Although many people have said that the Lang Park redevelopment is a great thing—and they say the same about the pedestrian footbridge, which remains unfinished outside my window here at parliament—I often wonder whether this money should be spent not on monuments to Mr Beattie or the government but on the people of this state.

There are so many matters that need to be addressed that it is hard to know where to start. In terms of education, the school in Esk, the SE unit at Toogoolawah and the school in Kilcoy were all promised various facilities, whether it be a library, a tuckshop, or something along those lines. However, they are still waiting. For some, that promise was made three years ago; others have been waiting up to six or seven years. No government should be proud of that record, especially since the people have been told that the money was there and was allocated. I say to the government: don't say it, just do it. It should deliver on these promises.

I have to thank the previous government for supplying the Blackbutt police with a four-wheel-drive vehicle. We have been after that for a while. It finally came through and everyone is really happy about that. I can tell members that it travels really fast, because on one occasion the police used it to pull me up for speeding. In fact, it is doing more than its fair share of work. I have to commend all the police in my area. They are very diligent on the roads.

Mr Mackenroth: interjected.

Mrs PRATT: It does not matter. I would rather be pulled up for speeding. You never know, it could have saved my life.

Mr Reeves: The Speaker made representation to get that.

Mrs PRATT: We all did. To be quite honest, I do not care who gets recognition for anything. As long as people get what they need and deserve in their area, it does not matter who gets the credit for it.

Public works and housing is another issue that is very big in my area. A lot of people come to see me about that. I had a pregnant woman only weeks off giving birth come to me looking for a place. She had split up with her husband, but there was nothing to be found in the area. She ended up in a caravan until six or seven weeks after the birth of her baby. That was not very good for her other three children or herself. Nobody wants surplus, empty houses—and that is understandable—but I would like to see a little bit more emergency housing in my area. If anyone wants to have a look, they would see that there is very little available.

Mr Schwarten: I agree with you. You had better write to the federal government and tell them.

Mrs PRATT: I will do that, but I am asking the minister to do that, too, because it is the responsibility of all of us.

As I said, the government needs to address the lack of public transport in the bush. There is no train service—there is nothing. We need to try to get people some sort of public transport—whatever type it is. We need it. I would also like to refer to the amount that officers get paid for their mileage when they have to travel. It would be nice to see that amount increase in line with the CPI. If that occurs, hopefully these people will get further along in their fields.

One thing that I am really pleased about—and it is something that I have pursued, not quite so much in parliament but with departments—is that finally I have been told that the Blackbutt Range road is on the five-year RIP. It is a dangerous road. A fair few accidents have occurred on it. I can tell

members that on a foggy night, at two or three in the morning, it can be quite hairy travelling along that road. The area of that road between Kilcoy and the top of the range to Yarraman needs addressing. Owing to the number of trucks that travel along that road, especially to Tarong north, driving along that road is particularly dangerous. Although the people who drive the trucks to Tarong north obey the road rules, the trucks cut up the road severely. So I am pleased that that area of road is going to be addressed.

Another area that is now located in my electorate is Bellthorpe. Its roads are not conducive to safe motoring. In fact, it is really dangerous driving along those roads. I believe that one part of one road is shut for two and a half hours each day to allow for the safe passage of the school bus. I do not believe that is acceptable, considering how far away Bellthorpe is. I know that area is covered by the Caboolture shire, but money is needed to make that road wider. I have discovered that the people in this community have a unique attitude to a lot of their roads. They offer their services free to the council to widen the roads and have done a lot of work that way just so that their children can be safe and secure.
