



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard 1 August 2001

APPROPRIATION BILLS—ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (2.36 p.m.): It is with pleasure that I rise to speak in the committee stage and acknowledge once again, through Mr Speaker, the excellent work that is being done by staff. We really do have an outstanding parliamentary staff. We do not say these things because we just want to pretend it is the case; it really is the case. The staff have outstanding courtesy. There is outstanding professionalism. At times they are given quite demanding tasks and they seek to carry them out in an independent way, regardless of the political background of the people making the requests. That is true of staff in all areas, particularly in the library. I acknowledge the library staff, the Hansard staff, the catering staff, the cleaning staff, the committee staff and all other staff.

I particularly draw attention to library staff, given that the time and resources of members of parliament are limited. We really depend very heavily upon this research facility. As has been mentioned, there is a review under way. I suppose some of us are a little concerned that the outcome of that review be to enhance services, not to rationalise them. While I have not heard that rationalisation is being considered, that is the concern. We will keep monitoring that, because we feel very fiercely that the library does an outstanding job and we want to make sure that library research facilities are available to members, regardless of whether they are non-government or government, backbench or executive.

Electorate staff are so important. I put on the record my thanks for the additional position in the office. From a personal point of view, having been supplying a second staff member for a number of years, at a cost well and truly above the \$10,500 allowance—I know that other members do this also—it is a financial relief to get some additional assistance.

Many of us have recognised for years that it was not fair for our primary electorate officer to do the job without overtime or without time off. The reality is that these people have been doing many hundreds of hours of unpaid overtime. It has been for the love of the public. They do it with courtesy. They do a very difficult job.

While I realise that these positions are available to everybody, be they ministers or backbenchers, they will certainly enhance electorate services. Things have changed a lot since the days when members did not even have a secretary and had to do their own typing or write their notes by hand. These days it is a very demanding job, and electorate officers provide an outstanding professional service when people are often distressed by circumstances and need a compassionate, courteous approach.

I commend my own electorate officer and the new staff. As I said, a lot of us have actually been funding that out of our own pockets, well and truly above our allowances, for a number of years as well as providing additional computers. So the new computer will certainly be a welcome relief to the one we have been thrashing for years.

I note the comment of one journalist who said that, as the opposition had lost staff quota after the election, we should pool this junior position and put it in Brisbane. That ignores the tremendous workload in electorates. It was totally unrealistic to expect existing electorate officers to continue to do the 50 or 60 hours a week that many were doing without any relief. This position is very important in order to provide relief to that staff member. It also recognises the reality that electorate work has increased incredibly over the last few years.

I know that for those of us in the opposition office who have fewer staff, that is just the reality; we have to look at doing more with fewer staff. But by the same token, I believe it would have been retrograde to take those positions away from the electorate offices, where our primary responsibility is still first and foremost to our electorates as well as providing those statewide duties. I want to put it on the record that I am relieved to see that position there, because it has been financially extremely expensive for a number of members to provide those additional services. I know I am not the only one doing that.

The parliament belongs to all Queenslanders. Parliamentarians across the political divide feel very fiercely about the need to maintain the resources of this facility. We believe that school students should have access to educational facilities. I know that there have been some cutbacks in the size of the tours in recent years. But I urge that they continue to be an area of great attention in the interests of the education of our young people so that they know that this House belongs to them.

We are fortunate to have a democracy that does not witness violence in the streets when there is a change of government. This is all part and parcel of our Westminster system of government. There is no ideal system, but this is a good system compared with what happens in many other parts of the world. That is the role of the parliament versus the executive—a very important voice for the people—and we want to see that maintained.
