



Speech by

**ELISA ROBERTS**

**MEMBER FOR GYMPIE**

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Hansard 21 June 2001

**BUDGET DEBATE 2001**

**Miss ELISA ROBERTS** (Gympie—ONP) (6.18 p.m.): I rise to speak in response to the Beattie government's state budget on behalf of the citizens of the Gympie electorate. First of all, I would like to highlight those few areas within the budget that may affect my electorate in a positive way. Firstly, there is the funding for 140 new park rangers, should we be entitled to one of those. If the additional \$3 million to be allocated over a three-year period to the Home Assist/Home Secure Program for the elderly and people with disabilities occurs, it will be very well received by my constituents.

An amount of \$50 million is to be provided over a three-year period to provide school maintenance and upgrades. I am sure that the schools in my electorate will be ecstatic with that promise, should it be kept, particularly the Cooroy State School, which has been fighting to have satisfactory improvements and renovations carried out in order to cater to the special needs students at that school.

The \$2.5 million per annum increase being provided to Legal Aid could not have come at a better time. Only last week I was told by Legal Aid Queensland that one of my constituents, though deserving of legal aid, was not to receive any assistance because Legal Aid is broke.

One of the budget highlights which will affect the Gympie electorate positively is the government's plan to provide \$3.1 million for the support of children and families, to meet the individual needs of families with children with a disability and to fund the development and operations of nine new family support and respite services across the state. I must say that that is badly needed in my electorate and would be much appreciated.

The investment of \$0.5 million to allow the Rural Fire Service to begin a five-year program to update and develop a range of new training and reference materials to train Queensland's 45,000 rural fire volunteers is a positive step in encouraging those volunteers to remain active in their various brigades and enthusiastic in their delivery of a much-needed service in many regional and rural areas. I am sure that all rural fires will be pleased that, at the very least, they were acknowledged.

The commitment to provide \$1 million worth of equipment for SES volunteers statewide is another positive step in further encouraging volunteers to remain in this capacity and to improve their ability to carry out the many and various roles which they perform for their communities. It is also a positive step to see the rehabilitation of abandoned mines in Gympie.

With regard to employment, the budget outlines a number of 'back to work' and 'educating school leavers' programs, which really seem to be well placed avoidance tactics to cover the real issue of employment, that being the fact that there is not any. The schemes which this government is providing to those who are unemployed are just tactics to keep the public occupied whilst they wait, wait and wait for the jobs, jobs, jobs to materialise. Even though I am one of the youngest members in this parliament, even I can remember a time when jobs were everywhere. I am sure all honourable members in this chamber have stories of how, when we were young, we could leave a job in the morning and have another in the afternoon. Sadly, those days are gone and in its place are a number of quasi-employment strategies that, frankly, are not fooling anyone.

This government could have better utilised its millions of dollars in creating employment, encouraging small businesses and assisting those already in business, that is, the dairy farmers, the

loggers and the many businesses who supported their industries, and the fishermen who are finding it more and more difficult to remain in their industry and to maintain economic feasibility.

There are also a number of business management, better practice and viability-type schemes outlined in this budget. Once again, this is a complete waste of time to those industries that this government has successfully destroyed. Dairy farmers did not need any advice on how to run their businesses efficiently. They were going along quite nicely, thank you, until the rug was pulled from under them. There will not be much point teaching people how to be business savvy or management smart if they do not have a business! It is nice to talk about back to work initiatives and training initiatives, but at the moment the priority and emphasis should be on jobs existing in the first place. I can almost guarantee that there would be few Queenslanders who would disagree with me.

It seems quite ridiculous to me that in this budget the government talks about identifying and assisting emerging industries, whilst at the same time they are destroying other industries that have been lucrative businesses for generations. Is the government sick of farmers and primary producers? Are they too boring for this government? Do they feel like supporting something new and more exciting than industries which have been the strength and the main support of this nation since its inception? Or is it because in this great, big trendy world of globalisation this government has been told what industries it should support and encourage and which ones to destroy because it is going to be the job of another country to produce those goods?

I also note that the government plays up the fact that it closed portions of land in the name of conservation, but they failed to mention the real results of these closures: people without jobs. In regards to this paltry Experience Pays Program, the government should have been tougher on employers who were found to have discriminated against workers because they were deemed to be 'over the hill'. I know for a fact that such disgusting behaviour does occur because I worked for such an employer on the Sunshine Coast who, when looking to hire another secretary, gave me the order to 'throw away any resumes of people born before 1960'. That would mean that half of the honourable members in this chamber would be out of a job if they had an employer with the same views. I say to this government: forget about the Breaking the Unemployment Cycle initiative and create some jobs, jobs, jobs—and then some more jobs!

There is one particular initiative of this government of which I strongly approve, and that is the Cooler Schools Program. But, guess what, my electorate is not entitled to it! Apparently the schoolchildren in the Gympie electorate are not included in the program. Apparently they are not entitled to work in a cool, comfortable and therefore productive environment. I would encourage the Minister for Education to visit one of these schools during summer to appreciate just how stifling and uncomfortable the heat can be for both the students and the teachers and then explain to them why they are not entitled to be included in the Cooler Schools Program.

I wish to express my dismay at the fact that, after years of lobbying on behalf of local police officers for an upgraded headquarters for Gympie, this government has seen fit to provide only a totally inadequate amount of money to 'commence planning' of a new headquarters. This government is very much aware of the appalling conditions under which our police officers have to work. All these officers want to do is the very best they can for the people of Gympie and the surrounding area. This decision to once again delay the actual construction of an alternative building is once again a slap in the face for the people of Gympie.

The budget allocation towards the Queensland Police Service is a bit poor, only providing 300 new police and 60 new civilian staff. The provision of more police, when one considers the area of Queensland, is way under par. We need more public servant positions in the stations to allow the police to get out of the office and back onto the beat, which is where they belong.

It is good to see that this government has been familiarising itself with One Nation policies for improving the employment prospects of its youth by offering school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Not all young people want to go on to tertiary studies, which means that in many instances those who do not are left without a future or any real hope for employment. At least with the re-introduction of apprenticeships these kids will have a vocation and a solid future and career. This commitment to Queensland's youth is a positive step, particularly for regional and rural youth, and will enable them to stay closer to their towns and families.

One other great disappointment for my electorate is the fact that, even though the Minister for Health has been made aware of the problems facing the Gympie public hospital, it has offered \$12.7 million to upgrade the Nambour Hospital whilst Gympie had to settle for a review. The budget describes how there are funds dedicated to enhancing the new Caloundra Health Service in order to improve operating efficiency and effectiveness at the Nambour Hospital. What about Gympie? Nambour is only overworked because they are getting so many patients who could and should be treated at Gympie Hospital.

It seems that the public's outcry and needs are irrelevant when it comes to the allocation of funding. The Labor Party is obviously not looking at winning the seat of Gympie in a real hurry. Please do not get me wrong, I do not begrudge the redevelopment of Nambour Hospital's operating theatres, emergency department or intensive care unit. However, I do resent the fact that another hospital may be receiving an upgrade at the expense of, or detriment to, my electorate's hospital.

I note that one of the highlights of the budget is the upgrading of staff accommodation in regional and rural Queensland to encourage recruitment of medical staff to those areas. Is this a joke? I think it will take a bit more than prettying up staff accommodation in order to address the issue of the lack of medical staff in regional hospitals. Whilst still addressing the health section of the budget, I say that the additional \$20 million which has been allocated over a two-year period to reduce the waiting lists for elective surgery is eagerly received. Only time will tell whether or not acceptable waiting lists will be the outcome.

Continuing on with another disappointing aspect of this budget, considering that the average waiting list for a dental appointment is approximately 18 months, the Gympie public dental clinic, which is situated at the Gympie Hospital, has been excluded from the list of 'high demand' areas that will receive the additional \$5 million aimed at reducing waiting lists. The waiting lists in other areas must be pretty astronomical if 18 months is not classed as an unreasonable waiting time.

The only people in my electorate who may be considered according to a new service model are indigenous people, refugees and the elderly, so at least a single figure percentage of my electorate may see that the time they spend on waiting lists may reduce—but with this government's record maybe not. Although there are only a few specific advantages in this budget for the electorate of Gympie, those which it has received are much appreciated, and I am sure I say that on behalf of the whole electorate. This budget as a whole is not one I would have expected from this self-proclaimed can-do government. Such an uninspiring budget comes as quite a surprise. Nevertheless, I do hope that some of the statewide initiatives and funding do manage to reach my very exceptional electorate of Gympie.

In closing, I ask the government not to treat my electorate as though it and its people are insignificant. The government had a great opportunity with the development of this budget to show Queenslanders that it is a fair and considerate government which treats all Queenslanders—no matter what their political leanings—with the same amount of respect. Well, Mr Beattie and his government have let down approximately 35,000 Queenslanders and shown that they are insincere because the words 'I am here for all Queenslanders' are simply empty rhetoric.

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