



Speech by

STUART COPELAND

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

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BUDGET DEBATE 2001

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (11.57 a.m.): I rise today to speak to the fourth Beattie government budget, the first for this term and a budget that really lacks vision and resources in many areas. This is a budget that does very little to address the concerns of the young people of Queensland. It does little to promote real job growth with real jobs within the state.

Queensland continues to be shown as the worst state for unemployment in the country, yet this government has not looked beyond the blinkers to address the problem in this year's budget. The Premier's promise of five per cent unemployment seems a very, very long way off. He has blamed his government's ordinary performance on all sorts of things. He has blamed it on the Asian economic downturn. He has blamed it on the GST, which every state in Australia has. He has blamed it on high fuel prices, something that other states also have. He has blamed it on high interest rates, which I had forgotten about until the member for Mackay mentioned it.

The members opposite must have very short memories, because I certainly remember the days of the Keating government when interest rates were at a high of 22 per cent. If nothing else—and I certainly do not agree with a lot of the things that the federal government does do—one of its great achievements has been to bring down interest rates. The Premier also blamed it on the participation rate, yet Western Australia's participation rate is higher. Typically, he blames everyone else for his own non-performance.

The Premier still claims Queensland is the low-tax state. It certainly used to be. However, due to the management of this government over the past three years we have allowed Tasmania to claim that title, and we can hope only that we are not overtaken by others. Tasmania has even overtaken us in terms of employment.

This budget does nothing to create real jobs and change the course of past policies which have proven to be failures in addressing the unemployment rate. This budget also does little to address the concerns of people with families. It does little to address the concerns of people with disabilities. It does little for the majority of Queenslanders, unless they are living in Brisbane or the south-east metropolitan area. This is a budget that leaves the majority of Queenslanders wanting, and that wanting includes the provision of funding in crucial areas like disability housing, not fulfilling the Beattie government's commitment to the Forde inquiry, and youth unemployment—just to name a few.

One of the Beattie government's first acts on gaining power in 1998 was to initiate the Forde inquiry into child abuse in Queensland institutions. The main thrust of the Forde inquiry was to identify whether there had been any abuse, mistreatment or neglect of children in Queensland institutions to encompass the period from 1911 to 1998. The major recommendation that came out of the inquiry was the need for the Queensland government to increase the budget of the Department of Families by \$103 million to allow it to meet the national average per capita welfare spending for children and agree to maintain the increase in line with the national average. The additional resources were designed to focus on the prevention of child abuse through supporting at-risk families, respite care, parenting programs and other early intervention and preventive programs for high-risk families. The Beattie government has failed the people of Queensland on this.

In the 1999-2000 budget the Beattie government committed \$10 million in recurrent funding to meet the recommendations of the Forde inquiry. The 2001-02 budget only delivers the \$10 million on a recurrent basis, an additional \$5.7 million on a recurrent basis and \$1 million in non-recurrent funding towards child protection, youth justice and family support services to support the recommendations of the Forde inquiry. Overall, this adds up to a dismal \$31.7 million, that is, \$31.7 million since the 1999-2000 budget, which is certainly a lot lower than the \$103 million required and promised. This shortfall

must be addressed by the government if it is to prove that it is serious about this issue. If this government does not begin to seriously address the funding shortfall in this area, those who conducted the inquiry and the victims of child abuse in institutions must conclude that their involvement was a complete waste of time. This is an inquiry that cost Queensland taxpayers \$2.8 million, yet the government has not implemented the recommendations of the report.

This government also established the Forde Foundation Trust Fund, which was designed to help former residents of Queensland state and church-run institutions and children previously in care repair the past in practical ways and improve their lives in the future. That is certainly an admirable and needed aim. The trust fund was established with great fanfare and awarded the sum of \$1 million to operate. The government started to try to shift some of that responsibility of the foundation onto the churches and other charity organisations. Again this year we have found that only \$1 million has been committed to the running of the trust. The minister was kind enough last week to provide morning tea to the survivors identified by the Forde inquiry. It is a small contribution to the welfare of these people.

The conclusion here is that, while it seemed a good idea at the time to establish the fund, the government has not committed to maintaining the trust to a level that will provide real assistance to those people who deserve our help. Unfortunately, the government has fallen well short of the mark it set itself and abused the belief people had in it 'to do the right thing', as the Premier is so fond of saying. The member for Ashgrove has raised this issue previously and given his views on the performances of former governments. I agree that there are faults on both sides, but this government has rightly committed to implement that program, and it must do it.

The Beattie government has also failed in this year's budget to supply an adequate staff increase for the state's child protection workers. Earlier this month it was reported that Queensland's social workers have to deal with up to five times the number of cases handled by their interstate colleagues. Is it any wonder that staff are on the brink of striking? In this year's budget the government stated that it will recruit a further 50 service delivery child protection staff and a further eight support staff, and that is for the whole of the state! The relevant minister has projected in her budget statement that her department will deal with an increase of 592 cases in the 2001-02 financial year, yet she is only providing a further 50 staff to cope with this extra workload and the workload that already exists. Is it any wonder that such an outrageously high number of high priority child abuse cases remain unassessed? This is unacceptable, and I call on the minister to do something about this situation before it reaches even more critical proportions.

The minister has already refused once to give details of caseloads for departmental staff to a question on notice I asked of her. I have again placed a question on notice requesting those figures. It will be interesting to see if the minister provides details. The minister's response to me was that it was a crude measure of workload and that there is a new measure being formulated to more accurately reflect the picture. However, this morning we have discovered that those caseload figures have been taken to cabinet for consideration. They certainly should be disclosed so that people can see just how the department is operating. If she does not provide them, we can only be left to wonder why she is being so secretive. What is she trying to cover up? Are the caseloads so horrific that dedicated departmental staff are simply unable to cope with them?

Real problems deserve real solutions, and this government is obviously not committed to providing the solution to the people identified in the Forde inquiry. This is the government that will be remembered by those involved in the Forde inquiry as the government that can spend \$135 million on the inner northern busway, \$600 million on the South East Transit Project and \$23.5 million and growing on the footbridge, let alone the amount spent for Lang Park, but cannot find the recommended amount to spend on victims of child abuse as promised so many years ago.

Of course, this is not the only area of services in which the government has let down the people of Queensland. Funding for adequate housing for people with disabilities has also been overlooked by the government. In answer to a question I asked the minister about Basil Stafford she confirmed that of the 45 residents at Basil Stafford 30 were voluntarily moving over the next 12 months and that a new residence would be provided for the 15 remaining residents. What the minister has not answered and which is of great concern to me and those families involved is where any additional housing is to be provided in the future for people whose care is best provided by a facility such as Basil Stafford.

The minister has done some very interesting figuring in the budget statement in relation to spending on disability housing, with the budgeted figures for 2000-01 not being spent in that year but being regurgitated for this year's budget. How housing facilities cannot have needed some expenditure last year is beyond me, especially when the minister repeatedly talks of the West Indian white ant that has infected the buildings at Basil Stafford. What is also interesting is that the minister budgeted for \$1.125 million in 2000-01 for the maintenance of Basil Stafford but did not use it during that time when it was still an operational facility yet has budgeted the exact same amount when she confirmed that the facility is to be downgraded.

The minister has also short-changed people in need of respite and emergency accommodation. In last year's budget the minister set aside an amount of \$700,000 for respite and emergency accommodation yet only spent \$100,000 of this allocation. This apparent idea of the minister's that the money did not need to be spent on respite and emergency accommodation flies in the face of people

such as the Ipswich family who donated their family home for a respite centre due to a lack of facilities in their area.

Today I also want to address the lack of funding in the budget for the Office of Youth Affairs. The Beattie government claims to be committed to the youth of Queensland, and that they are one of its highest priorities. Yet when given the opportunity to put money where its mouth is, look at what we find, that is, the group of people designated to come up with real solutions to a growing number of the problems concerning youth have been given nothing in this budget. The Beattie government made much of the recently established State Youth Advisory Council, which is designed to implement a Queensland Youth Charter. However, there is no sign of any funding for the council in the latest budget. Not only is there no money for the council; the government seems to have also shunned funding its own five-year strategic plan for youth suicide. That is an extremely important project, yet the government appears to have put nothing aside for this.

I also highlight the effects of the 2001-02 budget on the Cunningham electorate and the Toowoomba and Darling Downs regions. The electorate of Cunningham includes a large part of Toowoomba. Even though there is little in this budget for my electorate, some other projects located outside the Cunningham electorate are relevant to its residents. One of the most significant announcements for our region was the long-awaited new Toowoomba Police Station. The \$3.7 million initially allocated out of a total project cost of \$10.5 million is much appreciated. This has been the culmination of a lot of work over a number of years by a lot of people, most notably the member for Toowoomba South and the former member for Toowoomba North. Given that detailed planning and design is complete and work is about to begin, the project was a long way down the track prior to the 17 February election. The fact that an estimated \$1.13 million will have been spent to 30 June is proof of that.

I recognise the fact that every member of parliament in the Toowoomba and Darling Downs region has been working on the project, both prior to 17 February and since. The current facilities housing the Queensland Police Service in Toowoomba are antiquated and inadequate. The staff who work at the station, the residents of the region and even those people who may be there unwillingly will appreciate the new facility. Work beginning on the new Warwick ambulance station will also be welcomed by those residents in the south of my electorate.

The sum of \$2.449 million for the completion of the horticultural facilities at the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE is also welcomed, as is the \$300,000 to redesign the administration centre at SQIT. The work done by SQIT, especially in the horticulture field, will be enhanced by the completion of this project—another project that is largely the result of a lot of hard work over a number of years.

The completion of the large redevelopment project at the Baillie Henderson Hospital is also a good outcome, although there are some concerns, as previously highlighted by the shadow minister for health. Baillie Henderson is a vital component of the health care facilities serving Toowoomba and the Darling Downs, and the completion of this project will allow it to continue the hard work it does.

The announcement by the federal government in this year's budget that it will fully fund the duplication of the Gatton bypass is a huge relief to all those people who use it. It has been a dangerous stretch of road, and this work will substantially increase the safety of people travelling along it. Unfortunately, spending on roads in the Darling Downs is below what is required to develop and maintain roads in the region. I am pleased, however, that there has been an allocation of money to continue the work on the Oakey-Pittsworth Road, part of which is in my electorate. That money represents really the only allocation to Cunningham.

I express my disappointment that the University of Southern Queensland has not received more recognition in this budget. Many members on both sides of this House have quite rightly praised the work of that institution.

Mr Lucas: A top university.

Mr COPELAND: Yes, it is a top university. Unfortunately, despite the government giving capital grants to other universities in the past, none have been made to USQ. Someone more cynical than I may assume that the reason for that is that the university is not in the south-east corner—the location of the universities that have benefited from those grants.

Mr Lucas: I am a graduate of USQ, and proudly so.

Mr COPELAND: Excellent. I hope there are some others who have graduated from there and done very well. I do welcome the \$100 million research capital infrastructure funding in the budget, and I certainly hope that USQ is able to take advantage of some of that funding.

A lot of the outcomes in this budget represent completion of projects that have been under way for some years. I have spoken previously in this House about the unfair Beattie pub tax and the effect it will have by taking significant funds out of community groups in my electorate and electorates right across the state in order to pay for Lang Park. The unfairness of it can be seen in the fact that community groups, volunteer organisations and schools in my electorate will be losing money in sponsorship and support from the local pubs that will have to pay that tax. I said when it was announced that this is an unfair tax. That remains my belief. It also makes a mockery of the government's 'no new taxes' cry.

There is an ongoing concern in the Cunningham electorate regarding the WAMP process and the imminent caps to be implemented in the Condamine-Balonne. Although the Minister for Natural Resources is trying to abrogate the government's responsibility to pay compensation for any property rights that are taken by the state government, it is quite clear that it is this government's responsibility to compensate those farmers who have had water allocations taken off them. It does not appear that this budget provides for that compensation.

I have also been unable to find a line item in the budget with regard to a question I asked of the minister recently in relation to the state providing dollar-for-dollar funding to match the federal government's \$2.1 million allocation already made to the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee. Without this funding Queensland will forgo those available federal funds and the excellent work that that organisation does, outside of the recently announced national action plan on salinity. That work will not be able to continue. I hope I am incorrect, and I look forward to the minister clarifying the government's position on this.

There is also a real concern in my electorate regarding school buses. It is an issue that is not particularly addressed in this budget and it is something that needs to have a major overhaul, after many years in practice. The issue of school buses is raised with me in my electorate office perhaps more than any other issue, and there are some very real concerns. It is an issue that may not need extra funds applied, but some changes in the way that they are applied and the way they are accessed need to be made.

I conclude by highlighting what I see as perhaps the greatest inadequacy with this budget. The Darling Downs region, along with Moreton, received by far the lowest per capita capital outlay in the state. We received only \$785 per capita. This is a huge reduction from \$1,210 per capita in 2000-01. The fact that per capita funding in the Brisbane region has increased significantly over that same period is indicative of this government's focus.

I recognise that there are no major infrastructure projects in our region—no mines, no ports, no busway, no freeway, no Lang Park—and that certainly does affect the capital outlay in our region. That is all the more reason that a major project such as the renewed water pipeline be undertaken. That project, as all members will be aware, has the enormous potential to create a huge economic stimulus for this state, creating real and long-term jobs. Those jobs are something that this state desperately needs. The piping of Brisbane's renewed water to the Lockyer Valley will not only have a significant economic effect on the state; it will also mean a significant improvement to the environment of Moreton Bay. This in itself will be a major economic benefit to Brisbane and the bay. Such an outcome is generally agreed to be of great public benefit. It is also therefore to be expected that the public should make a contribution to the whole project.

I appreciate the Premier's and the government's support of this project. Unfortunately, it will take more than moral support to make it a reality. There must be financial support from local government, as the Premier has said; there must be financial support from the federal government, as the Premier has said; and there must be financial support from the state government, something the Premier refuses to say. I hope that the Premier will soon commit to the project, rather than point the finger at everyone else.

This state has a lot of competitive advantages. Unfortunately, this budget does little to capitalise on those advantages. I hope that the Premier will soon stop blaming everyone else and make a real, lasting and positive contribution to this state.
