



Speech by

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

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (5.21 p.m.): I rise to speak to the appropriation bills before the House. I will touch firstly on my portfolio responsibilities and then turn to some of the issues that are relevant to my electorate.

Over the past month we have seen some of the problems associated with the Families Department: the huge workloads that Families departmental staff have been under and the results of that huge workload. It is a continuing concern. We see it from week to week, from month to month. Since the budget was brought down and debated in the House, the report of the Forde Implementation Monitoring Committee has been tabled. It was tabled in the House on 11 September 2001. It justified the opposition's continued assertion that the government has failed to provide enough funding to carry out the recommendations of the Forde inquiry, namely, extra staffing resources, monitoring, service delivery, complaint handling, et cetera. The interim report of the committee identified areas in relation to funding, child protection, juvenile justice, compensation and the Commission for Children and Young People that needed urgent attention. These have not yet been addressed.

The committee believed that in the area of child protection, many of the elements required for the provision and monitoring of quality child protection services are still lacking. Appropriate information systems, quality assurance processes, monitoring practices and human resource strategies are also still not in place. These would help the Department of Families to deliver and monitor the quality of services for children in care and for those children at risk in the community.

Despite some increases in funding since the Forde inquiry, according to the Commonwealth Grants Commission Queensland still ranks the lowest of all states in terms of child protection funding. Queensland funding remains at less than half of the national average per capita expenditure on family and child welfare. The Forde inquiry recommended that \$103 million additional funding each year was required to bring Queensland into line with the other states. After three years, that is still well and truly below that recommendation. It is \$30 million this year. So cumulatively we are a long way behind the \$103 million extra that was required each year to bring us into line with that recommendation.

The committee identified a number of short and long-term consequences of this underfunding, problems in service delivery and an incapacity to develop adequate early intervention and prevention programs. As a consequence, there is a risk of repeating the cycle identified in the Forde inquiry—overstretched departmental staff relying on overstretched and underresourced care services, which limits the demands that the department can place on quality services and the delivery of appropriate outcomes.

The issue of developing principles of compensation remains to be addressed by both the government and churches. This has been identified as a major problem as the government keeps pushing this problem back on to the churches, even though it was they who took the initiative in the first place.

In addition to inadequate funding, there remain two other significant concerns to the committee. Firstly is the inspection, monitoring, licensing and external investigation. The system that is in place is not yet an adequate implementation of the inquiry's recommendations or of the government's initial response to these recommendations. The committee was concerned that the Department of Families does not have an adequate information system to allow it to systematically undertake monitoring, review, inspection and licensing. Secondly, a formal complaint system has been developed by the department and its implementation in 2001 has been limited owing to a number of factors, including industrial bans in some regions. The committee believes that there needs to be an active communication program to educate clients about the availability of the complaints system and a more

detailed system for the collection and monitoring of information about complaints to ensure that the system problems are identified early.

The committee remained of the opinion that the powers of the Commission for Children and Young People have not yet been fully implemented in the new act. In particular, the commission's investigative powers are unduly narrow and as a result do not allow the commission to give effect to the intention of the Forde inquiry report by addressing the needs of a wide range of vulnerable young people in Queensland.

I have also highlighted concerns about the possible removal of the four-week compulsory training block in child protection and youth justice undertaken by every Families officer on commencing employment with the department. I am still concerned that this has not been ruled out totally and I will continue to monitor these changes. Reports from the Department of Families have indicated that high-priority child abuse cases, the priority one category—being those children considered at high risk of immediate danger from sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse or neglect—are still being left unassessed. The number of cases in both priority 2 and priority 3 have increased substantially and are not being addressed. This is a real concern, given that this is the primary responsibility of the Families Department. Those children who are at risk in our community should be the first priority of the department. How can the Commissioner for Children and Young People achieve strategic objectives while children are still being neglected by another department, with some cases not being investigated because of staff shortages and workloads in that department?

I will deal briefly with the issue of disability services. I do not want to go into too much detail, but I think there is a growing problem in the community in terms of adult people with disabilities who are being cared for by ageing parents. This is going to be a continuing and growing problem for our society as those ageing parents are no longer able to care for their children. How that issue is dealt with and how those people are looked after when their parents are no longer able to care for them will present great challenges to whoever is in government.

In terms of the arts, one issue that I want to touch on is the State Library. Plans are under way by the government to develop an expansion of the State Library. I am concerned that there will not be an increase in the funding available to the State Library to really concentrate on upgrading and increasing both its physical content and its digital content. The State Library is a world leader—probably the world leader—in terms of Queensland publications and Queensland history, but in some of the other areas it really needs a funding injection to bring it up to the level that one would expect a state library to be at. I call on the government to concentrate on providing funding for both the digital and physical content upgrade that the State Library requires.

I turn now to my electorate and some of the issues that are important to my region. On a number of occasions it has been said—particularly by the Leader of the Opposition and the member who represents my neighbouring electorate of Toowoomba South—that the Toowoomba and Darling Downs region has never really been in line for any of the major infrastructure projects that we see in some of the other parts of the state. We do not have any major dams, we do not have any major road infrastructure, we do not have the entertainment centres or convention centres, we do not have the major tourism infrastructure that some other parts of the state have experienced. All of a sudden in the past couple of years we have seen some really big, visionary infrastructure projects emerge on the Darling Downs that have incredible potential to develop real benefits not only for the Darling Downs but also for the state in general in terms of its economic wellbeing.

These are well known to many of the members of this House because we have highlighted them on a number of occasions, and we will continue to do so in order to make sure that they continue to get the sort of exposure that they need and that they deserve so that they will go ahead. In the last week a number of honourable members have highlighted the water pipeline project which is being promoted by City to Soil in the Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs Vision 2000 organisation on the Darling Downs. These people have been working in tandem in order to progress this visionary and beneficial project. To pipe renewed water out of the south-east corner to the productive areas of the Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs has long-term significant economic benefits for our state.

A large investment is required to get this project up and running, but the sort of returns on investment that will be generated year after year and the jobs that will be generated year after year are of national importance. It is going to take a huge cooperative effort from local governments, the state government, the federal government and the private sector—not just moral support but injections of capital—to see it as a reality. It is a visionary project the likes of which we do not see often and the likes of which we must pursue at all costs. It must be pursued in a bipartisan way in order to ensure that it does happen and to ensure that it does not fall through the cracks. Not only does it have huge economic benefits in terms of increased production, it has significant environmental benefits for Moreton Bay and the Murray-Darling system. The environmental benefits for Moreton Bay will lead to an enormous cost saving—a saving which has been estimated in terms of hundreds of millions of dollars. It will lead to an improvement in the environment and increased production in Moreton Bay.

It was good to see the Minister for State Development visiting the Darling Downs last week. His visit was organised by the member for Toowoomba South. I was involved when the minister attended a meeting at Norwin in my electorate. The minister made positive comments about the project. I urge him and the government to continue working on that project. I urge them to work with the Brisbane City

Council and the federal government in order to ensure that it does happen. All levels of government have to accept the responsibility that they will have to provide a significant amount of funding towards the project in order to see it as a reality. We should not see any duckshoving of responsibility and calling on others to do it in isolation.

The second range crossing, of course, is of major importance as a major transport corridor from the south-east corridor to the Darling Downs, to the west and to the north and to the southern states via the New England Highway and the Newell Highway to Sydney and Melbourne. The benefits that that will bring by way of increased safety, the reduction of wear and tear on transport operators and the efficiencies of transporting produce from the western productive areas into the port of Brisbane—and, vice versa, from Brisbane—and to the other states and throughout Queensland are huge.

That has to be tied in to the development of the Charlton-Wellcamp industrial estate which the Department of State Development has been working on. Preliminary work was undertaken by EDROC—the Eastern Downs Regional Organisation of Councils. We also had private sector investment by the Wagners at Wellcamp. This goes hand in hand with the development of the transport corridor and the second range crossing, because it means that the distribution centres that may be located at Charlton-Wellcamp can play an active part. Facilities can be moved out of the Brisbane area and into an area that is centrally located for transport distribution. The inland rail system will also meet at that point and will tie in to the road network and the second range crossing. It is a package of very large scale infrastructure projects which will have significant benefits not only to the Darling Downs but also to the state of Queensland. It will produce lasting benefits to the state and to the economic benefit of the country as a whole.

In speaking about roads, I want to mention the Gatton bypass. Funds for the development of this by-pass have been provided by the federal government. The Gatton bypass is the last section of the road between Brisbane and Toowoomba that does not have dual lanes. It is a road that carries high levels of passenger and freight transport. The funds which have been provided mean that the entire Gatton bypass will be able to be duplicated. This will mean that there will be a dual lane carriageway for the entire distance between Toowoomba and Brisbane. This road will link into the haulage routes that go north, west and south.

The Minister for Police announced earlier this year that a new police station will be constructed in Toowoomba. That is a welcome development. The member for Toowoomba South, Mike Horan, the former member for Toowoomba North, Graham Healy, the current member for Toowoomba North, Kerry Shine, and I have been working on this project for a number of years. It is terrific to see that it is going ahead after many years of planning. We welcome that decision.

In the last 12 months we have seen quite a number of new recruits stationed at the Toowoomba Police Station. I would like to see the number of recruits increased. The Toowoomba police—in fact police everywhere—do a fantastic job by way of apprehending criminals. It must be difficult for police morale when officers pursue criminals and arrest them, only to see in a lot of cases that the offenders are released back into the community because the justice system is not dealing with them as adequately as a lot of people in the community would like to see. It was interesting to hear the Minister for Primary Industries talk about catch and release in terms of fishing this morning. I think the Minister for Justice could equally talk about catch and release in terms of the justice system in Queensland from time to time.

I want to move on to the question of schools. I visit a lot of the schools in my electorate and I have found that a number of them have issues concerning maintenance and capital projects. I would like to mention a couple of schools in particular. This is certainly not an exclusive list of schools that are in need of upgrading. I refer firstly to the Darling Heights State School, which is probably the largest school in my electorate. That school is in dire need of some capital work to provide a multi-facility hall. At the moment the students do not have a hall in which they can meet, play sport or take part in the performing arts. They have very inadequate facilities for school assemblies. The school also requires to expand its preschool. The preschool has a waiting list. As honourable members would know, people like continuity in their children's education; they like to enrol them in preschool and then have them continue their further schooling on the same premises. Darling Heights State School urgently requires extension of the preschool.

There are two other schools in my electorate which need upgrades to their administration areas. I refer to the Cecil Plains P-10 School and the Drayton State School. Obviously schools like to concentrate their spending on learning areas where the students will gain maximum benefit from the dollars spent. However, these two schools are in dire need of an upgrade to their administration areas. The school principals, the teaching staff and non-teaching staff are restricted in their ability to deliver real teaching outcomes because of the problems with the administration areas.

I have received many inquiries about the School Transport Assistance Scheme. Probably the most common inquiry I receive in my electorate office concerns access to school buses. There are some interpretations of this scheme that need to be looked at by the Minister for Transport and his department. Decisions are being made which may be justifiable within the Department of Transport but they are adversely affecting the Department of Education, the schools and the education policies that are being implemented. The Department of Transport and the Department of Education have to work very closely together to ensure that those schools and those children are not being adversely affected.

Finally, I refer to tourism. Tourism is a burgeoning industry both in Toowoomba and the Darling Downs and, I guess, in the Southern Downs and South Burnett. It really is a boutique industry that is developing and specialising in bed and breakfasts. There are not any large scale investments as one sees on the Gold and Sunshine Coasts or in north Queensland, but it is a burgeoning industry and one into which people are diversifying as a different income source.

It has come to my attention that Sunlover, a Queensland government agency, has brochures and promotions for every region in Queensland except Toowoomba, the Darling Downs and the Southern Downs. That is an issue that really needs to be addressed by the Minister for Tourism. Certainly, there are reasons why that area has not progressed, but it shows that Sunlover needs to be made more flexible so that it meets the tourism needs of every tourist operator in Queensland—not just those large scale tourism operations in other parts of the State. If it is a Queensland government agency, it should certainly be developed so that it has the flexibility to meet the demands of tourism operators right across Queensland.

In conclusion, there are other issues of importance to the electorate—and I am sure that I will highlight them at other times—but I appreciate the opportunity to speak tonight.
