



Speech by

**ANITA PHILLIPS**

**MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA**

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Hansard 14 May 2002

**STATE HOUSING AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Ms PHILLIPS** (Thuringowa—ALP) (4.21 p.m.): I rise in support of the State Housing and Other Acts Amendment Bill. In particular, I want to discuss the changes the Department of Housing is undertaking to ensure that it is responding to new challenges. The Department of Housing assists more than 185,000 Queensland households to meet their housing needs every year through its various programs, including community housing, public housing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing.

The department is experiencing a growing demand for housing as more affordable segments of the private market continue to shrink. Affordable housing is housing which is appropriate for low and moderate income households in terms of size, standards and access to services and facilities. Rent levels for affordable housing should not exceed 30 per cent of gross household income after any applicable Commonwealth rent assistance is deducted from the rent. Low income households are the poorest 40 per cent of households on an income distribution. Many households on moderate incomes also face difficulty in meeting the costs of appropriate, well-located housing.

The Department of Housing's view is that housing is genuinely affordable only if it is well serviced, well located, safe, secure and accessible to people in need. Housing is not affordable if it is poorly located or in some other way imposes further social or financial costs on the household and its individual members, the community or the state. For example, the affordability of low-cost rental housing is significantly diminished by the cost of running a private motor vehicle if it is inconveniently located in relation to jobs, shops, schools and other facilities, and/or in relation to transport services providing access to these services. Affordable housing is therefore defined broadly in terms of the relationship between the dwelling and the residents, their capacities and needs. It is not solely a physical or financial characteristic of the dwelling, and affordability cannot be measured in financial terms alone.

While housing demand is increasing, the department is also faced with greater costs to maintain around 50,000 dwellings state wide. These new pressures are compounded in the current environment of declining Commonwealth funding for housing. In response to these pressures, the Department of Housing has diversified the services it provides and targeted funding to more effectively meet the changing housing requirements of Queenslanders. The first four state budgets brought down by the Beattie government have seen resources poured into improving existing Department of Housing dwellings across Queensland through a state-wide upgrade program. A record \$270 million over four years has been allocated to undertake the first state-wide upgrade and urban renewal program for public housing dwellings. This program, at Rasmussen in my electorate of Thuringowa, is an excellent example of urban renewal. At present, nine houses are being upgraded. The existing houses—besser block cottages built by the coalition government—are not appropriate for living in north Queensland. The improvements being undertaken include flexible external areas, verandahs and other outdoor spaces, fences and upgrades to the interiors. Tenants I have spoken to who have already had improvements made are overjoyed with their new houses.

As a child, I lived in a Housing Commission home in a large estate that was on one side of a main road with private housing on the other. All my growing years, I was aware of the identity that came from living in a certain area. In 2002, thankfully, we are much more aware of the psychological effects that this can bring, and this government's efforts to allow low-income families the dignity to live in

houses that do not look different from anyone else's is to be applauded. We are gradually achieving this in Rasmussen, thanks to the Urban Renewal Program.

In addition to the \$270 million, \$12 million has been provided to install air cooling in 2,000 government-owned dwellings in western Queensland, and a further \$15.5 million in funding over five years commenced last year to install insect and security screens in around 700 dwellings north of the Tropic of Capricorn. These are all firsts, and highlight the government's commitment to improving the quality of life of battlers and also creating jobs in the building industry.

By contrast, the Howard government has made a policy shift away from capital investment in housing. Instead, it has decided to provide rent assistance for people to live in private rental accommodation. This has created innumerable problems, one of which is that, generally speaking, such housing is not suitable for people with disabilities. Private sector landlords are unlikely to provide the added cost of adapting dwellings for people with special needs.

Again by contrast, since the election of the Beattie government, 60 per cent of all newly constructed Department of Housing dwellings have been built to an adaptable design. This includes almost 25 per cent of buildings that have been modified specifically to meet the needs of individual clients—a significant jump from only five per cent 10 years ago. Recently, two of these houses have been built in my electorate. I inspected one of them as it was being built and publicly commended the minister and his department for the innovative design which is so flexible that it can accommodate a range of people with special needs. It has wider than normal doorways for wheelchair access, low-level switches for lights and fans, et cetera, a specifically designed bathroom, and an ensuite that has been commended in particular by carers who have been to inspect the house. I also commend the innovative community housing initiatives that are looking at meeting the needs of adults with intellectual disabilities who want to live independently from their ageing parents.

The Department of Housing, as other members have stated, is being forced to do more with less and is looking to new ways to address the shortage of affordable housing in Queensland. It is all very well to promote programs for potential home owners, but those Queenslanders on low incomes who will never be able to afford such a dream must continue to struggle to find affordable rental accommodation.

Adequate shelter is one of the most basic needs. I have personal and professional experience of the powerlessness people feel when they cannot afford to adequately house their families. No-one should have to beg for housing in such emergency situations. It is imperative that partnerships between all levels of government be formed to meet this need. This state government, through our proactive minister, is more than contributing its share. Local governments are being encouraged and are showing a willingness to become involved.

The federal government alone is showing its true colours by reducing its commitment. Along with other members, I will be very interested to see whether there is a reversal of this policy in tonight's federal budget. I fear that I will be disappointed. Low income earners in our community will be let down once again by the Howard government. On their behalf I applaud the minister's initiative in introducing this amendment bill, which will deliver an improved quality of life for these Queenslanders. I commend the bill to the House.