



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

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BUDGET SPEECH 2002

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (11.22 a.m.): In response to this week's state budget, I wish to outline some of the areas which affect my electorate specifically. The construction of a new \$5 million clinical services building at the Gympie Hospital is a major win for the people of Gympie. This building will contain operating theatres, central sterilising supplies and medical imaging departments. The only concern in relation to its construction is the fact that Gympie has no anaesthetist, and no anaesthetist means no surgery. Unfortunately, the benefits to Gympie with regard to health services end there.

A major disappointment of the budget is that the issue of nursing staff levels was not addressed. The current level of nursing staff at Gympie hospital is unsafe, unfair and unrealistic. The lack of appropriate staffing levels is placing extra responsibilities and burdens upon those who are employed at the hospital. The situation at the Gympie hospital is so dire that there are not enough nurses to replace those who are on either annual leave or sick leave. Those who do request sick leave are questioned, and if more than one sick day is taken per month, that nurse is sent to Administration to justify their reason for taking sick leave.

Specialised nurses are expected to work in areas in which they have not worked for many years. In the emergency department, there are only two nurses rostered on for each eight hour shift. Many nurses are not even given meal breaks. This situation is appalling. No-one should have to work in such conditions. This whole scenario is reminiscent of the sweatshop workers during the industrial revolution.

Apart from basics workers' rights, the inadequate levels of staff which exist in this state's hospitals raise issues of safety for both patients and nurses. At Gympie, for example, first year nurses are working unsupervised. Earlier this month, a female nurse was held at knife point by a patient. The current security system is not effective. The guard on duty positions himself only at the front door of the hospital to escort nurses to their vehicles. When nurses were questioned about what would make them feel safe within their working environment, the answer was not 'special alarm gadgets' but 'employ more staff'. By the time an alarm is set off and a security guard has arrived, a great deal of damage could be done. Adequate staffing levels in each ward would enable an immediate response in the event of such a situation, which I am told occurs quite frequently.

There are a number of safety issues which are of particular concern to hospital staff. They include the fact that workplace health and safety issues are not addressed promptly, leaving hospital staff at risk. The unpleasant environment which many nurses are forced to endure—and which I would like an explanation for—is the climate of bullying, intimidation and fear involving senior management. This is very prevalent in the Sunshine Coast and Gympie Districts. When will this cease? Why is senior management immune from the existing workplace bullying programs? Is the preferential treatment of these senior public servants a reward for continually coming in under budget? Why are there so many nurses on stress leave, and why is the reason—stress—reported as some other type of leave? Why are large corporate structures set up in small rural hospitals? Why are the health staff who are actually in the wards not consulted about the best possible ways in which to spend allocated funds?

This government says that it wants to encourage people into the health care profession. I and many others would like to know what incentive, apart from lower than adequate conditions, it offers to prospective future employees? Why will this government not allow health staff time off for study leave?

It supports electorate officers who wish to undertake study, but does not give nursing staff the same privilege.

I take this opportunity to place on record that when I raise these issues and concerns, contrary to comments made by the Minister for Health, I am not simply 'politicking'. They are the genuine concerns of all health staff. If there are doubts as to the gravity of these concerns, one only has to check with the AMA, which has been inundated with complaints about the problems I have spelled out.

I am amazed at the response by this Labor government in relation to the less than adequate conditions for nurses. Historically, Labor has been a party for the workers. When this government has the unions off side, it is ignoring its strongest advocates and supporters. The unions made the Labor Party and this government is now turning its back on them. It is obvious that the left wing faction of this government, in particular, has very little influence on policy decisions.

I may be vilified and abused by members of this House because I bring to the fore the issues of discontent among members of my electorate. Nevertheless, I will continue to do so because it is what I was elected to do. People come to me when they feel they have nowhere else to go or when no-one else will listen. The role of a member of parliament is not, unfortunately, to sit back and wax lyrical about all the good things the government is doing. People are aware of the good things. A member should not be condemned for trying to do their best for their electorate. Those members who are afraid to stand up should face the wrath of this House.

It is time this government showed some accountability to the people of Queensland. This government says that it values nurses. Show the nurses by rewarding them with the remuneration packages they deserve. Mr Beattie, talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. When this government sits down to decide how much it values Queensland workers, give a thought to the men and women who witness despair and sadness on a daily basis. Think about these men and women who very often are the last people on this earth that many will see as they take their last breath, and then tell them you cannot find the money to give them their rewards for choosing to work in an industry where they look after our most precious commodity—life.

From a personal perspective, I believe that the work these men and women do is priceless. When I visit my father, who is suffering from cancer, it is the nurses who are helping him now; it is the nurses who provide him with a sense of reassurance—something I cannot give him, unfortunately. To see these nurses touch my father's hand when he is afraid and in pain and then provide him with the medicine that he needs to find relief is beyond words. It is so reassuring for me to know that, when I cannot be with him, someone is providing him comfort, telling him jokes and just being there at the most critical time in his life and the most difficult time of mine. Please show some compassion and provide these men and women with the working conditions they are begging for.

Continuing on the subject of Health, I refer to the disappointment that the government has rescinded its promise to reduce the public dental waiting lists. In my electorate people are waiting up to four years for a dental appointment. I do not believe even Labor backbenchers can agree that that is a reasonable length of time to wait. It is all very nice to talk about prevention, but what about the hundreds of people in Gympie who are way past the prevention stage and need urgent treatment?

The Gympie Police Station does not seem to be any closer to commencement, with the government allocating \$200,000 less than last year in this year's budget. By the rate it is going, if the funds keep decreasing in each budget, the chance of our ever reaching the targeted \$7 million is less than zero. At this rate, it will take about 35 years before Gympie will ever see its new station. And by then, the cost of building a new station will be a lot more than \$7 million.

In a nutshell, Labor has let us down again. The rest of the budget, in regards to Gympie, just includes proposals which have already been under way for some time, such as the upgrading of the public gallery and the new RSPCA. Once again, this government has ignored our need for crisis emergency accommodation. People are no closer to being able to access Legal Aid; according to staff at Legal Aid, Legal Aid is broke. Another big ho-hum budget for Labor to be proud of and a big 'thanks for nothing' again for the Labor government from the people of Gympie!