



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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Hansard 5 June 2003

#### **STATE BUDGET 2003-04**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (10.25 p.m.): I rise to address the House on the appropriation bills 2003. The impact of these bills will be felt not only by the constituents of the Nanango electorate but also by the people of rural Queensland generally. As with any budget, there are good and bad points. I believe this budget has more bad news than good for rural and regional Queensland and creates a concern over where, after three deficit budgets, the bottom line really lies. I believe this budget is a masterpiece of deception and has, by its very deliberate deception, proved that Queensland still teeters on a financial precipice and casts serious concern on just how far the government is prepared to go to cover its failure to manage the economy.

The raiding of government owned corporations of hundreds of millions of dollars, the inclusion of revalued assets and many other contrivances, including the rehashing of previous budget promises, has resulted in the delivery of a budget that lacks any real substance. Promises were made to the people that there would be no new taxes, but in all portfolios there has been the raising of levies, fees and other charges. All of these may be known as levies, fees and charges, but no matter what they are called, they are in effect taxes, and people are paying more and more and receiving less in many areas.

The ambulance levy is one such tax, and although I have yet to find one person who is not prepared to pay the levy as all believe it is a most worthwhile cause and the Ambulance Service deserves to be paid for by all, it also needs to be fair to all and there are many people who will pay this tax numerous times. Shire councils have also found that they will be paying the levy numerous times, and they will—as will any other business—be passing the cost on to the general public, and that includes pensioners.

It is ludicrous to say that there are no new taxes. This compulsory ambulance levy is by its very definition a tax. One aspect of the budget which I am very pleased about is that the Treasurer has focused on health and disabilities. This is one area that badly needs attention, because since it was first elected in 1998 this government has all but stripped many rural communities of their health services. I consider the so-called boost to health more an attempt to catch up with the neglect of many years than the major initiative that the government is touting it as. It is in fact patching up a long-term neglect of the entire health industry from medical staff to services and facilities.

Throughout the budget, population growth is constantly used to reinforce and justify much of the budget expenditure, and so it should be. I recognise that the majority of new arrivals from other states are here to retire rather than to find jobs. It must therefore follow that in years to come that will put an even bigger strain on the Health budget. What is really alarming, though, is the neglect of medical services in rural areas and the minor consideration that it receives when compared to urban areas.

In the Nanango electorate we have been penalised over the past few years by a major decrease in health facilities, closure of many acute care beds, loss of medical practitioners and restricted ambulance services. For instance, I have been told just recently of an 84-year-old Nanango woman with severe leg fractures who was unable to get a road ambulance service to Toowoomba, and the doctor concerned was told to tell his patient that she had to get herself there as no ambulances were available. In another incident at Kingaroy recently the Royal Flying Doctor Service had five calls to the hospital but could only attend four because it had exceeded its flight time.

In a more recent experience, I was told only on Monday before I came down to parliament that a woman admitted to the Kingaroy Base Hospital found little relief from her severe symptoms. Days later, and still in serious distress, the woman was taken by a relative to a private doctor and an X-ray was undertaken, which revealed an obstruction that was operated on immediately. In fact, it was bowel cancer and a foot of her bowel was removed. It is my understanding that at no time while the woman was in the Kingaroy Base Hospital had an X-ray even been considered. The question needs to be asked why this woman's condition was failed to be detected when she was in such distress. Was it because the staff were not able to attend to this woman's needs, or was it because staffing levels do not permit the attention that was required?

In saying that, I know that the staff work very hard under difficult conditions and, overall, we would not find a more dedicated team of people. But the ever-increasing need to tighten belts or to do more to stay within budgets has become increasingly more stressful for all of those people and that is reflected in the number of serious complaints that continue to be expressed. It must also be recognised that the Kingaroy Base Hospital is increasingly taking up the load of other hospitals in the area, such as the hospitals at Wondai and Nanango, whose services are slowly being diminished to the point at which their closure is imminent.

The fundraising arm of the Energex rescue helicopter service, Crisis, is now stating that it may have to close due to concerns that, now that everyone who receives an electricity account will be forced to pay a levy towards the Ambulance Service, they feel that there is no longer the need and will be disinclined to contribute to the air ambulance. The ERHS is an aerial ambulance service, yet it has been neglected and does not receive full funding from the ambulance levy. I have to ask why. Anyone living in the Burnett region would testify to the constant use of both services in the region.

How much would the government save by increasing the acute care capacity and supplying more expert medical staff to the Kingaroy Base Hospital, which is located in an area that is fast becoming a large regional centre, rather than just relying on the emergency air ambulance service and the enormous costs associated with its operation? I do not suggest for one minute that this air service should be abandoned, but these services could be kept for extreme emergencies only. The ambulance levy is exactly that: a levy that should be for all ambulance services, road or air. Both are vital as many road accident and trauma patients in rural and remote areas rely heavily on them. I do not suggest a return to the days where most rural hospitals were capable of treating every patient in all emergencies. That is not feasible. But many minor procedures used to be undertaken at the Kingaroy Base Hospital and still could be undertaken.

It cannot be said that rural communities are not trying to address the slow, deteriorating hospital situation themselves. Kingaroy Shire Council actually bought the former St Aubyn's Private Hospital, which was operated by the Wesley group, so as to entice more specialist visits for people in the area. Being an ex-nurse, I appreciate the new EBA and awards for nursing and non-nursing staff worth \$175 million, but I must ask: is this additional funding, or 6.9 per cent increase over last year's budget, sufficient to keep up with the inflationary increases in medical and health costs? Many question that it will.

I commend the government on its \$290 million boost to help people with disabilities and their families. I still have major concerns about the waiting time for dental work in the Nanango electorate, which is backlogged by more than two years. Where is the \$5 million allocation for dental health going? It definitely is not going to rural areas. It appears that the majority of this \$5 million is earmarked for urban centres. It is a miserly amount and will not even scratch the surface of the need in rural areas.

One of the major, pleasing aspects of the budget is the continuation of major roads projects that began under the previous budget. Many of these I have watched as construction has been undertaken during the past 12 months. I look forward to the start of the construction of the overtaking lanes on the Blackbutt Range. I actually witnessed Main Roads workers measuring the lanes. I can say to members that it was a highlight of one of my trips down here. At this point, I must also acknowledge the enormous amount of assistance that is given to me with any problem or concern by the district managers who cover the Nanango electorate.

I would like to move on to police matters. I notice that an additional squad has been allocated for the Wide Bay Burnett. Although I assume that this squad is going to be located on the coast, further police have been needed in many of the towns in the Nanango electorate. It is my most fervent desire, as it is of many others, that the towns that have been experiencing high juvenile crime rates be beneficiaries of greater police numbers. Since the Kingaroy Police Station was made a 24-hour police station, it must be acknowledged that the crime clear-up rate has reportedly increased to approximately 85 per cent because of high public support. No police can work effectively without community support and Kingaroy's clear-up rate reflects that. It must be noted that the incidence of motor vehicle thefts, break and enters and drug related crimes is on the increase statewide. So we can be grateful for an effective police force in the Nanango electorate.

However, the Queensland Police Union has already stated its opinion that the budget is disappointing. It claims that it actually makes a \$6 million cut to the Police operational budget in real terms. It also stated that the ratio of one police officer per 100,000 residents and the 297 extra police and 25 more civilian and general staff again reflect the deficit in actual police numbers; that it is only a token gesture and still falls far behind the actual numbers that are needed to effectively police the state. The Police Minister claims that the operational budget has risen by 9.2 per cent. It would appear that it all depends on which side people are looking from.

I want to now turn to what will affect rural and regional areas the most. The decision to allow \$25 million of the budget for drought activities, including farm counselling, will do very little for land-holders. Bills introduced over the past four years have all been aimed at the rural land-holder, depriving them of water, land clearing and vegetation management that will, in hundreds of cases, make what once were viable farm businesses now redundant. The statement by the Premier that there be a total ban on vegetation removal by 2006, without consultation, has angered so many that this government has alienated the rural community to such an extent that what little trust in the government there was—if any—no longer exists. To top it off, land-holders are just downright sick of being described as land vandals.

There is more land vandalism occurring in the coastal and urban areas than what rural property owners, including primary producers and farmers, will ever commit. It is okay to decimate the coastal strips and build concrete jungles and nobody cries 'environmental vandalism' to these developers. They are just allowed to continue regardless. The Primary Industries Minister has allowed the rural economies to be decimated. His department and the Minister for Natural Resources have all but destroyed the livelihoods of so many Queenslanders who have been on the land for generations. The continual restrictions that are placed upon them without any compensation are, as I have often said, akin to daylight robbery, but because this is occurring to the mythical, so-called landed gentry, with its falsely earned reputation of wealth, no-one seems to care and instead willingly allows them to be devoured by the banks and reduced to pauper status.

Our rural industries are in crisis and, unfortunately, those who have the power to make a difference do not appear to give a damn. I must acknowledge in a recent conversation with Minister Wells that he admitted that he now understands the reason why land-holders feel that they have been robbed because of many of the bills passed in this place. I thank him for that willingness to not only admit his previous lack of understanding but also his assurance that, after his visit to Kilcoy and with his greater understanding, he will not sign off on some documentation until at least after the graziers' concerns are addressed.

One of the greatest needs in our rural areas is a guaranteed water supply. Water is a fundamental essential to growth and the lack of it determines an area's future. That is just what this government has done. It has decreased the Kingaroy shire's water supply, therefore making it very hard for that shire to expand its commercial and industrial base. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition will agree that in his electorate, which encompasses Wondai and Murgon—which previously were located in my electorate—two major employers, who live in Kingaroy, depend on water. I know that the Murgon abattoir and the Murgon leatherworks alone could employ a further 200-plus employees tomorrow if it could get them. Further, a number of other businesses in many of the other towns in the Nanango electorate which rely solely on a single industry that exists within their town are scared stiff to expand because they are not guaranteed a water supply.

So where is the water actually going? It is going to the Paradise Dam project, which is now to be another government owned corporation to supply water to Bundaberg. It will rob many shires north of the dam of water. The government has pledged \$60 million next year towards the dam that will supply water to sugarcane growers in Bundaberg. At no stage has the government taken into account—or appears to have taken into account—the consequences for the inland Burnett above the dam site. With an overall cost of \$210 million, the dam will rob the inland Burnett of precious water resources to supply water to one of the most irresponsible water users in the state.

With its open irrigation system, coupled with evaporation and unrestricted water supply, it is nothing short of criminal. It is just a total waste of a very valuable resource. The question often asked in the Burnett is: why not spend far less money and build the weirs on the Burnett River so they can release water from natural run-off into the Burnett catchment as needed and still supply the shires above the dam? Their only conclusion is that it is a political decision. There are many attractive alternatives but, being cynical, I guess there would be few votes in these alternatives. For such a Smart State I believe this is the epitome of stupidity.

The Coominya township is only two kilometres from the Wivenhoe and still has no reticulated water supply. I know the Minister for Local Government continually states that it is up to the Esk shire to apply for grants, but surely there is some way this government could encourage the shire to address the needs of this long suffering, often waterless town.

Tourism is one major economic hope for most rural towns. We are often told to venture into tourism as that is where the future lies. They plan tourism to survive, plan and promote for the future. The bush has again been bypassed in funding to make regional and rural tourism a realistic industry and to create the jobs that are so desperately needed. I have heard many speakers talk about the devastation that the racing industry now faces, especially in the rural areas. Many of these clubs may survive but others may not. Only time will tell.

I would like to quote from part of a statement by Commerce Queensland CEO, Joe Barnewall, on the budget's effects on business, which applies equally to tourism operators. He says—

In the budget papers, the Treasurer said a challenging external environment explains the downward trend in the Queensland economy and clearly these external factors are likely to continue. So why has the Treasurer forecast a surplus of \$153 million in 2003/04 with a \$1 billion plus revenue from interest on investments? It is now clear why the Treasurer extracted nearly \$900 million currently from government corporations. Without that GOC cushion, the deficit would have exceeded the billion dollar mark. Such extractions are unsustainable. Hiding public debt off the state's balance sheet is a shifty way of doing business in anyone's language. Although the budget has a reasonable spend on research and services such as education, health and police, these do not enhance the major vehicle for wealth creation in this state, which is business. In fact, there is a distinct lack of recognition in this budget that business creates wealth and that it needs to be appropriately cultivated. We know from our surveys that businesses want a reduction in payroll tax and provision of more tax breaks for establishing new, small and medium businesses. But while business is disappointed there are no such tax breaks, it is hardly surprising considering the recent sting on business through the ambulance tax. Small and medium businesses remain aggrieved by this inequitable tax that will steamroll through state parliament and Commerce Queensland believes the government needs to take a long, hard look at its revenue streams. Mr. Beattie continues to say there will be no new taxes. How can we believe him, given that the ambulance levy is a tax? In fact it is a double tax on many businesses.

I think that sums up how business feels about the government's budget. Honesty is what the government offered, but there is no honesty in this government, especially for businesses and rural and regional Queensland. I urge the government to look at drawing new boundaries to the economic statistical divisions within the state.

The total Wide Bay-Burnett dollar allocation does not give a true and meaningful breakdown of capital expenditure by this government. As a whole, the Wide Bay-Burnett receives quite an acceptable amount, but break it down to the dollars allocated to the coastal areas as opposed to the inland region and it is very obvious how uneven the dollar distribution is. The needs of a coastal region combined with a rural economy may make the allocation of funds look good, but in reality they distort the true allocation of funds to the region.

Inland Burnett is a distinctive rural region and Wide Bay is a coastal economy and therefore their financial needs are totally different. If this state is to progress as much as the government claims it will, then that distinction must be recognised and the needs addressed appropriately. Only then can the budget be fair and based on the needs of vastly different regions. I find that this budget, like the previous three budgets, is not a rural friendly budget. It is neither fair nor equitable, nor is this government a government for all Queenslanders.