



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (4.24 p.m.): Today I am pleased to talk to this appropriation debate. There are number of issues that I want to cover. I notice that in a ministerial statement the minister talked about the figures for the financial year 2002-03. We now have an operating surplus of \$15 million and a cash surplus of \$645 million respectively for those years and an increase in the state net worth of \$6.8 billion to \$64.9 billion. I genuinely hope, in all sincerity, that is correct. One of the concerns we do have is the fact that we have heard this before and we have suddenly found those \$10 million or \$15 million surpluses to be quite large and substantial deficits. I hope that that is not the case.

I am not surprised about the valuations. The valuations have gone up across the board everywhere. I have seen valuers travelling out my way. They are valuing everything they can possibly get hold of. I would not be surprised if they have valued the kangaroos and the rabbits and the foxes out there to try and boost the numbers. Values have gone up. That is good. The Treasurer has suddenly found himself in a vastly improved position this close to an election. I notice that about \$1.7 billion is available. We have \$1.4 billion available for a capital works building fund, which is wonderful. There is also \$343 million available for recurrent expenditure to go to the various departments, which is of course desperately needed. There is no doubt about that.

I was interested in one point here. I hope the minister will be able to answer this. It might be a fairly simple answer. I understand that in the appropriation bills the equity adjustments, which relate to almost \$100 million out of \$175 million that is being appropriated in these bills, are basically round robin events. While they may be able to be held back for budgeting purposes to balance the books a bit, they eventually end up back in Treasury. While we are talking about \$1.5 billion, are we really talking about the total amount of money that will be able to be used for all the resources of the department or will that money find its way back into Treasury again?

I offer some genuine advice to the Treasurer in relation to where funding is required in my electorate. I am sure he is getting plenty of advice from others as well. There are a number of issues that I want to canvass today. Probably one of the important ones is public liability. I do not believe it would cost a lot of money but I think there is a lot more work that can be done. For instance, there are community care underwriting agencies that have been operating in six other states for about 10 months. They offer not-for-profit groups liability insurance. We cannot get it in Queensland. There have to be reasons for that.

I believe there is much more that can be done. Whether we even have to set up some sort of a group or whether we offer this group an opportunity, we have to get our legislation in place first to make sure that it is compatible with their requirements. If that does not work we set up our own company or something. We have to do something. We cannot let public liability insurance run along the way it is now. It is just not satisfactory. Groups and whole social fabrics of communities are collapsing before our eyes because they cannot get public liability insurance. It is okay down here where you can go to the theatre or whatever the case may be, but a lot of other communities which are on the coast as well and in the cities are having great difficulty in being able to continue.

The airconditioning of schools is absolutely essential. However, some of the schools in the area cannot get funding for airconditioning even though they are in a warmer region than those currently covered by the Cooler Schools program. That is unreasonable, very unfair and totally discriminatory. I see no reason why we cannot put funding into that particular program—

**Mrs Carryn Sullivan:** How many schools did you aircondition?

**Mr HOBBS:** Every school in the original Warrego electorate was airconditioned. Everything west of Mitchell was done. When the Goss government came in, it stopped the program. I am pleased the member asked the question. All I am asking now is that the government continues that. Quite a few of the smaller schools have raised money through their P&Cs. So they are playing their part, but they need some assistance and they really have not had a fair go. I appeal to the Treasurer to direct funding towards that. Our kids are our greatest asset, and I am sure that they will repay that funding time and time again in the future for our state.

Health is a big issue which everybody has some concerns about, and the issues are fairly similar across the board. Health is one of those big black holes that we can pour money into, but it has to be managed well. There is a lot more that can be done to stretch the dollar further within the health system. However, there are a few simple issues that need to be resolved such as administrative type issues like the patient transit scheme, because various districts have different rules. In some hospitals the patient can go to a private doctor and get it signed off by an authorising officer at the local hospital; in other centres they have to get another medical opinion, for heaven's sake. In effect, there are two doctors looking at the one issue. It is a total waste of time and is frustrating the officials.

Waiting lists are getting longer. My local area has had a brilliant health system in the past and has not had the problems experienced here, but it is building up now. Waiting lists are getting longer and it is difficult to attract professionals to the region. It is genuinely quite a serious issue. Specialists are being worked to the bone and cannot get the relief they need. In some of the larger centres it is very difficult indeed. Housing for allied health professionals is another requirement that needs improvement. We need to provide allied health services to the various communities. As society progresses, those demands keep increasing. Everyone expects to have a service of some sort—

**Mrs Edmond:** Why did the opposition oppose us calling for more money for Queensland in the Health Care Agreement?

**Mr HOBBS:** What the government put up was a crazy thing simply because the funding was already there. It has the money. It has had record money—nearly \$300 million extra in GST funding. It has money coming in from stamp duty. It is unbelievable. The funding that the government has now is far in excess of what it has ever been, yet this government just cannot provide the funding. The federal government is providing more funding than it ever has. Quite frankly, I think the minister is doing her credibility no good at all by trying to argue a line like that. Nobody believes it, Minister. Nobody except those opposite believes it. The figures just do not stack up.

While the Minister for Health is in the House I want to raise a particularly important issue, and that is that there is a proposal to centralise laundry services in the far south-west. I do not believe that that would be satisfactory at all. Obviously that will result in job losses from the various towns. I do not think that, say, places like Cunnamulla, Quilpie and Charleville—maybe even a larger area—could have one central laundry service. In instances of flooding, road closures and so forth, what on earth would those places do? If there is an accident such as a bus turnover or whatever, there would not be enough facilities. There is a proposal at the moment to close down the Cunnamulla laundry service. I would suggest that that is not the way to go. Funding should be put into a new laundry service in Cunnamulla, and that would be a very satisfactory situation.

Another issue that is very important is the RPT air and bus services that operate in the regions. We do get some assistance from the government for that, which is good. It is a wonderful service that is provided. However, unfortunately, like everything else, the costs are going up and there will be a need to increase that funding in the next round. We all want to get the best service for the best price. But the reality is that I consider that some of those services are starting to deteriorate, and we have to ensure that that does not occur.

Road funding is another issue that is ongoing. I am convinced that the state government has in fact been cheating on road funding, and there is a need to upgrade that. The minister talks about putting funding into roads. Let us see how much money finally does get spent on roads. There is a lot of work to do in the south-east corner, because it is particularly important for a decent transit system, but we also need bitumen roads. That is one of the most important issues that I hear from those who live in my electorate.

Local government is another area where funding is very important, and at this stage the state government has not committed to the capital works subsidy schemes that are the cornerstone of local government works done in every town. The Regional Centres Program or the Rural Living Infrastructure Program have not been done at all. We assume that the government is going to continue to provide that funding, but no-one has been told. Of course, councils have to have a five-year rolling program so they can plan ahead. How can they plan ahead when some of that funding runs out next year, the year after and the year after that? So they have not been able to do that effectively. The government is putting the councils under pressure when in fact they are supposed to provide long-term planning.

As I mentioned this morning, mosquito control is a very important and genuine issue, and I am pleased with the minister's response insofar as I think she genuinely tried to explain the issue. However, I do not think we can blame the councils for doing improper developments. Many of those developments have been done for many years, and that is not the point. The community is demanding that we do something about mosquito control. It is the outbreak of serious disease that is in fact the issue, not whether councils have done appropriate or inappropriate development in the past. I do not think they have, quite frankly, and I think it is a bit unfair to blame them. But we have to resolve the issue. We just cannot go on ignoring it. The amount of money required for mosquito control on state owned land would be about \$3 million, and that would have enormous benefits for those who have real problems now, particularly those on the coastal strips. Down the track we also have to look at midge control.

In terms of vegetation management, if the Treasurer is thinking of sharing \$150 million compensation with the federal government he ought to think again and put another three or four noughts onto that. If the government wants to try to do it the way it is doing it now and requiring compensation for what has been talked about, it is way down on the money that it will need. In many instances it will not need a lot of compensation if it does it properly. If it had of listened to us in the first place, we would have had a better system in place and it would not need as much compensation. But of course it wants to go about it with a big stick and it will cost it money, and big money in the end.

Country racing is being ripped off by the government. The original TAB deal was lousy. We are all a bit bewildered by what is happening at the moment. At the time, the TAB deal did not allow any great growth in funding, except for the state government. A small amount of growth goes to the racing industry itself. However, in reality the government is receiving a bigger increase, percentage wise, from UNiTAB than what racing is getting. I think the government has gone completely overboard and is destroying the racing industry. This will just send them down to Victoria and New South Wales.

The Western Downs Solutions Group is a very important group formed on the Western Downs to look at future development in that region, value adding and being less reliant on government. Some funding is required in that area. That funding would be money well spent. At least \$3 million is available from the federal government. If we had matching finance from the state, that money would be returned 10 times over in relation to value adding and jobs created in that region. I urge the minister to look at that funding and to provide it through whichever source he likes. At present DPI is looking at it. I will certainly be talking again to the Minister for Primary Industries about that.

The exceptional circumstances funding and the DRAS, the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme, have not been well run, mainly because the state government has not agreed to new arrangements by the federal government. The federal government has introduced these new changes that everybody out there wanted. However, because the state dug in its heels the system is not working. It is putting up very little funding. I think it is putting up \$7 million so far, which it would probably have spent on drought relief under DRAS, and I suspect the federal government has put up probably \$120 million by now. The state government is nowhere near pulling its weight.

The emergency services staff are doing a wonderful job. Their resources are limited. They are experiencing great problems in obtaining equipment. The new ambulance levy is a disaster. I do not know how the government did not pick that. Obviously, the government is getting more money now than it did in the past. It used to fund ambulance services by two-thirds and now it is funding them by a third.

A new application and accreditation process for ambulance attendants was meant to be in place by May this year. That is not yet in place and the old system is no good. Therefore, anybody who wants to become an ambulance attendant cannot become one, because there is no process. That has been the situation for several months now. There will be a lag time whereby people, particularly in smaller areas that utilise volunteers in emergencies, will not be accredited, because the system has fallen down. Surely there could be some process whereby these people can become accredited.

Family services is a disaster like it is everywhere else. Those officers are doing a wonderful job and are trying as hard as they can, but they do not have sufficient human resources to do the work they are supposed to do. They have enormous case loads, particularly in relation to child protection work. I do not know how they can continue. It is surprising that as many people are able to stay on and do the great work that they do under the pressure that they are under. They get abused and so on. I do not think there is enough support for them. In many cases, administrative assistance would be a help. However, just being able to have an extra pair of hands at times would certainly make a big difference.

I have covered a number of issues today. I hope that the Treasurer can take some of them on board. They are raised because there is a genuine need. I hope the Treasurer can take note and provide some assistance.