



Speech by

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**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

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

**Ms LEE LONG** (Tablelands—ONP) (5.35 p.m.): The 2003 Queensland budget, worth in excess of \$22 billion, has left the tablelands, like much of the rest of rural Queensland with no real answers to many of the problems they face. The budget documents again reveal this government's concentration on the south-east corner. I know the point has been made that capital works funding of some 62.5 per cent is going outside the Brisbane Statistical Division. However, even using this self-serving definition, that leaves almost 40 per cent of all capital works spending going into a minuscule portion of this huge state. Simply, the bang for the buck in that part of the state is much higher. All facilities are much more accessible simply because they are geographically much closer together.

The rest of the state struggles to manage with underfunded road systems while this select part of the state gets millions for new bus routes and integrated public transport ticketing systems. As well, this part of the state is the only part with close, easy access to all sophisticated medical services. No matter which way the government wants to paint the division of funds, the fact remains that those Queenslanders who live outside that little dot on the New South Wales border are treated differently to those who live within that little black dot.

However, this budget does include some projects which will benefit the tablelands. They include a proposed tropical biodiversity centre for Mareeba. That facility will link existing government and industry resources, skills and infrastructure and will focus on breeding food and fibre species. This project appears to offer the region some promise of repositioning its agricultural industries in new ways to move forward. I encourage the government to move quickly on its establishment.

Other allocations include the \$700,000 for the revamp of the Atherton Hospital. It is part of the \$1 million the Health Minister has already announced as being fast-tracked to deal with a lead paint issue in the original maternity ward, which is soon to be permanently closed, much to the dismay of the electorate. We need to remember that there is no real extra money there at all, as the minister has confirmed that the \$1 million has to be repaid. I note there has been a \$300 million increase for health across the state. But I wonder how much of that also will have to be repaid.

This budget has allocated an additional \$600,000 for medical equipment for the Atherton Hospital. I thank the minister for that extra funding, as I am sure all tablelanders do. There is no detail of just what equipment that money is for. But I point out that the Tablelands Health Service District recently lost ophthalmic services at one of its other hospitals at Mareeba because the \$80,000 cost of replacing that piece of equipment was judged to be too high.

I trust that given the depth of the need on the tablelands we are in line for more than the 0.2 per cent of that extra \$300 million represented by the \$600,000 for equipment. For example, I note there is an additional \$4 million for renal dialysis services in north Queensland. I urge the minister to consider directing a portion of that funding to the delivery of dialysis services to the Mareeba Hospital in addition to those at Atherton. I have spoken in this place about incidents where people in need are now having to wait, I am told, up to five and six years for attention at one of our dental clinics. We have two dental clinics, including a new one at the Mareeba Hospital, but they are each manned only about two days a week. With the demand, the waiting lists just keep blowing out. In this budget there is extra funding the minister has dedicated to addressing outpatient services, to improving the situation regarding radiologists and for oncology and cancer services, and the hope is that the tablelands will receive some of the benefits that that funding is expected to produce.

I have spoken often enough about instances where tablelanders have not had their needs fully addressed by the local health system. I recognise the commitment of some \$3.5 million annually to the Cairns Base Hospital, which is the default hospital for the tablelands. It is the hospital to which tablelanders have been forced to go for many of the services they can no longer find in their own local hospitals. The extra funding will, I hope, mean that the government will be able to reopen closed floors and wards and can address the concerns outlined so clearly in recent months by doctors and specialists working at the hospital. It is simply unacceptable for patients to have to wait in ambulances and for women to be turned out of hospital beds the day they give birth because of shortages of beds and staff. Tablelanders and all north Queenslanders will be watching closely to see how these problems will be addressed.

In the area of public safety and law and order, I note that there is a commitment to an additional 300 graduates per year from our police training facilities. On the tablelands the police station at Millaa Millaa was left unmanned for a significant period. The town and district had to rely on services which neighbouring stations were able to provide. While this did give some police presence, clearly the best solution is for staff levels to be maintained and for stations to be properly manned.

In fact at another tablelands town, Ravenshoe, the community became so concerned about the burden placed on its police that it requested an administrative assistant be appointed to the station to allow the officers more time on the beat. In rural areas, if local police are unavailable the next officer can be a significant distance away, assuming they are not also unavailable. Therefore I believe it is rural areas that should be the first to benefit from this increased number of police.

There are also to be an additional 110 ambulance officers across the state, and again the tablelands expects to be properly considered for extra staff. I note at this time the renewal of the Atherton and Mount Garnet ambulance stations, which have been listed under the provision of some \$11.8 million for such projects across the state. Of course I welcome this commitment, even if those are old promises. The ambulance station at Millaa Millaa is now complete and it is a wonderful facility. I thank the government.

As it is a regional area, transport is of vital importance to the tablelands. I note in this budget the allocation of \$9 million for the completion of a new South Johnstone Bridge and approaches. Once again, while it is welcome, this is old money. It was also promised last year. I understand that some \$500,000 has been spent on preliminary works and that the project is expected to be completed in this coming financial year. Whenever it is finally finished, it will be welcomed by both locals and travellers, and especially the many tourists who use the road to visit Paronella Park and other tourist attractions. The upgrade of the Kuranda Range road, linking my electorate to Cairns, is also eagerly awaited, and I recognise the allocation of \$900,000 for design work on that project.

Of course we have heard much about rail links recently, in particular the 'more expensive but slower than flying' tilt train running between Cairns and Brisbane. That might be a high profile rail project, but it does nothing to address a persistent difficulty in availability of stock wagons to service the Mareeba saleyards and the livestock sales there. In the past the Transport Minister has indicated that the conditions governing the availability of such wagons are entirely economic. The lack of such wagons has directly impacted on the economic viability of both the Mareeba saleyards and the grazing and pig industries which use it. I note the indication of an exploration of ways to improve the performance of the Savannahlander tourist railway, and I encourage the minister to ensure that is a rigorous process that is carried out as quickly as possible.

The past 12 months have been a tough time for the tablelands. The tobacco industry, a former stalwart of the Mareeba-Dimbulah irrigation area, has had the final curtain dropped on it. There are no more buyers for Queensland-grown tobacco. Not only has the last phase of that industry collapsed and more than 100 farming families been devastated; it has occurred for no good purpose. Cigarettes, a legal product, will still be sold in this state, but they will not contain any Queensland tobacco. All that has been achieved is the collapse of a Queensland industry and the devastation of Queensland families, and this government does not care.

The dairy industry, as I said earlier this week, is now bracing for the impact of yet another blow—more slashings of income, of up to 10 per cent from the farm gate price for milk. Following the enforced deregulation of the industry in 2000, the tablelands currently has around 130 dairy farmers. I am advised that this latest blow could see up to 50 of those forced to the wall. All of this is the result of the economic rationalist, level playing field, free trade theories to which both the National-Liberal coalition and the ALP are committed supporters. It is the same philosophy underpinning the joint MOU, signed between the ALP and the Nationals and Liberals, on the future of the sugar industry. Given the devastation this process has brought to other industries in my electorate, the sugar industry's rejection of it is, in my view, soundly based.

I do, however, recognise that the Tablelands electorate has benefited from state government support for a range of developments in the past 12 months. They have included approximately \$6.1 million in joint state and federal funding for Queensland Heritage Trails Network projects. One of

those, the Malanda Dairy Centre, which received injections in excess of \$1 million, shut down less than four months after opening and today has still not reopened. Another, the Hou Wang Temple in Atherton, is a welcome boost to the tablelands tourist infrastructure, as is The Hub facility at Chillagoe. Other QHTN projects included expenditure at Irvinebank and in Mareeba.

There was also some \$8 million in Main Roads funding. Other significant gains for the tablelands of the last 12 months have included some \$820,000 from the Education Department, \$850,000 from the Sport Department, \$300,000 plus from the Department of Families to Mareeba district flexi support and more than \$160,000 from the Department of Public Works for tableland housing and Home Assist/Secure in Atherton, among other projects in my area.

In this budget the Department of Local Government and Planning has offered \$650,000 to Mareeba for library developments, while the Education budget includes some \$630,000 for the relocation of the Ravenshoe manual arts facility to the town's secondary campus. Mareeba has also shared in \$2.5 million in recurrent funding and \$2.5 million in capital that has been spent on new and enhanced family support and respite services.

My constituents and I thank the government for this support. However, during this same period the ALP government has closed down the first-class agricultural support facility that was the analytical chemical laboratory based at Mareeba. I note the Primary Industries Minister's portfolio statement that red imported fire ant control measures, contained entirely in the Brisbane area, are considered to be a rural community development output. I do not quibble over the eradication of the threat, but I do wonder how many rural control measures for, say, giant rat-tail grass have ever been listed as a Brisbane urban project.

Just before Christmas last year the Department of Natural Resources completed a water resource plan for the Barron River in my electorate. This plan will govern investment in water infrastructure in the area for the next 10 years. I note here that already, at the start of this year's dry season, farmers above and below Tinaroo Falls Dam are already facing severe irrigation restrictions due to an already inadequate system of water supply. In the wettest part of the driest populated continent on Earth, I believe we have to do better at harnessing our rivers and other water sources.

I come finally to the budget claim of no new or increased taxes. I have spoken in this place before about the massive fees and charges which farmers are facing for various inspections, approvals, examinations and permits required for plant and animal health matters, for quality assurance issues, for pest control and so on. For example, in his portfolio statement the Natural Resources Minister listed a new interim water charge of \$50 annually for water licence holders.

I have also raised in this place the large fees placed on pontoon owners on Tinaroo Falls Dam by SunWater, which is entirely owned by the state government as shareholders. Other new fees and taxes introduced in the past 12 months include, of course, the community ambulance levy that begins from 1 July, which will slug part of the community multiple times and other parts not at all. In relation to the Transport Department alone there is a fee of \$15 for taking the written test for a learner's permit, a fee of \$10 to replace a registration label, a fee of \$16.95 to transfer a recreational ship registration, a fee of \$20 to book a commercial vehicle inspection, a charge of \$40 for overdue registration payments and a fee of \$10 for overdue boat registration. There has also been a 100 per cent increase in the cost of pensioner licences. I note that the Treasurer pointed out a raising of the bar for land tax, which means that some people will no longer have to pay while others will be paying even more. Clearly this government is well practised in giving with one hand and taking back with the other.

While the consumer price index increased 14 per cent between 1997 and 2000, government revenue from taxes, levies, fees and fines between 1996-97 and budget estimates for 2002-03 had soared by some 25 per cent. No taxation rises, as the Treasurer has claimed, would, if true, clearly be a significant change in the way this government operates. While I do thank this government for its funding of tablelands projects, I believe it still needs to raise its performance to get serious about addressing the needs of rural Queensland.