



Speech by

Neil Roberts

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

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APPROPRIATION BILL; ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (12.43 p.m.): The estimates process provides a great opportunity for oppositions and the people of Queensland to examine and obtain more detail on government expenditure proposals. However, the quality of information derived from the estimates process relies heavily on the quality of the opposition and its questions. It was no surprise that the quality of questions during the estimates process, and in particular the section dealing with the Treasurer's portfolio, was absolutely appalling because the opposition is simply the most appalling opposition that we have seen in this state.

I want to give just one example of this. The one issue which has been at the forefront of government activity since February this year has been our efforts to fix the state's electricity distribution network. Given the importance of this issue to Queenslanders, one would have expected the opposition to pay some attention to it during the estimates process. However, the member for Callide did not ask the Treasurer, as a shareholding minister, one single question about Energex or Ergon. He did not ask one single question during the more than two hours that he had the Treasurer in the spotlight at the estimates hearing. But was the member for Callide keeping his powder dry for when the Minister for Energy appeared a few days later? No. Once again the member for Callide, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, had the Energy Minister before him for an hour and a half and not one single question was asked on this issue. Now, of course, following the release of the Somerville report, the opposition claims that it knew all along what the issues were in the industry. What a furphy!

It must be excruciatingly disappointing for those Queenslanders who believe that oppositions are there to do their job diligently and intelligently. However, the reality of politics in Queensland is that we now have an opposition—a de facto coalition between the National and Liberal parties—that can only function on the stories that it reads or hears through the mass media. Time and time again we see the evidence in this House which shows that the National-Liberal Party coalition is only as good as the last headline it reads in the *Courier-Mail*.

The lack of depth in the opposition's questions of government ministers at the estimates process has a lot to do with the ramshackle way in which it conducts its politics, but importantly it also has a lot to do with the quality and substance of the budget framed by the Treasurer. The Treasurer described the 2004-05 budget as the best ever Labor budget, and the estimates process has helped to confirm that. Members have to look only at the increases in spending in a number of key departmental budgets to highlight the benefits that successive Labor budgets are delivering to Queenslanders. Since 2001, spending on disability services has increased by 66 per cent, the health budget by 27 per cent, education by more than 26 per cent, and on public order and safety by more than 39 per cent—all this over a period when inflation increased by less than 10 per cent.

Occasionally we have this debate in this place and in the public arena about the differences between various political parties. Some people mistakenly fall into the trap of believing that there are not real differences between the major parties on key policy issues. Well, this budget should dispel that myth because this budget tells a real story about the priorities of this Labor government. It tells a story of the priority we give to the services people need to improve and sustain their quality of life. Massive increases

in the rate of spending on education, health and disability services are achievements that we can all be proud of and which never would have occurred to the same extent under the National-Liberal coalition.

This year's budget also includes a record capital works budget of more than \$6 billion. To put that into perspective, the levels of spending on capital works on a per capita basis are now at levels not seen since the so-called heyday of the construction era in the 1980s. This type of infrastructure spending is generating jobs all over Queensland, and this is borne out in the latest unemployment figures. Queensland is now the jobs powerhouse of Australia. Last month we generated 91 per cent of all the nation's new jobs. This meant that our trend unemployment rate has plummeted to 5.7 per cent, the lowest level since 1978. When the coalition was in power from 1996 to 1998 the unemployment rate was 9.2 per cent. That was the legacy the coalition left Labor when we were returned to office.

This is a good Labor budget which delivers record capital expenditure to build the foundations of our economy while at the same time delivers massive increases to much-needed services to the people of Queensland. It continues with the government's strong and responsible economic management of our state's finances.