



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL (ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A)

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (12.17 pm): I am delighted to be able to participate in this part of the estimates debate. We have a very varied role as members of parliament, but I believe one thing that we do share is the appreciation of our staff. Our electorate staff often work way beyond the call of duty, and we value staff who share a passion for servicing and helping people in the local community. I want to acknowledge my electorate staff for sharing that passion.

I want to raise the issue of the employment conditions of electorate staff across the political divide and across the state. I believe that the current situation—where we have two electorate officers and no provision in the terms of employment or our allowances to replace those staff when they are on holidays—is cruel and really creates tremendous pressure on hardworking staff. The fact that we need two electorate staff is in itself an indication that it is difficult to leave one person in charge of a very busy electorate office for eight weeks of the year with no paid replacement for them under the current arrangements of parliament. I know that I and a number of my colleagues personally employ people out of our own pockets to try to cover part of those two months when the parliament does not provide a staff replacement while one of them is away on holidays. However, to have to fund the full two months of a staff member's wages is not something that we can provide most of the time from our allowances. I know that most of us spend well beyond our allowances.

A related issue is the number of hours that staff can work. I try where I can to give staff time off in lieu when they work unpaid overtime, but because there is no overtime provision within the employment conditions it is only one solution that is offered to you and often it is a very poor one, because once again there would only be one other staff member holding the fort. As best as possible I try to negotiate times when the pressure in the office is less, but staff members can work quite significant hours of overtime and then the opportunity to give them time off in lieu is not there without burning the other staff member out.

I would take this opportunity to say that we must value our staff not only with what we say but with a better package to ensure that there is an allowance for replacement staff when they are on holidays, because eight weeks of the year without that replacement in the arrangements is too much. We also need to look at some provision for overtime so there is another option other than time off in lieu when sometimes that is just not practical and creates too much of a burden on the one remaining electorate officer. I personally have spent thousands of dollars trying to provide replacements and ensuring there is not that onerous burden, but it is difficult to fund two months of the year without impacting upon the other services that we provide.

Another related issue is that of sick leave. I acknowledge that the parliamentary staff and the Speaker in the past have tried to work with us if there is a staff member with an unexpected situation. I have had a staff member who suffered whiplash in an accident when driving to work. With the treatments that were necessary for that condition, it meant that she had to spend quite a lot of time off work. Fortunately parliament worked with us and we were able to get a replacement because it was known it was

going to take some time. But injuries or illness can occur suddenly and people may be away for a week or two and, again, there is no ability to employ people under a replacement package of parliament.

Speaking on behalf of electorate staff across the state, I would urge that this situation be addressed. I think there are far better ways of addressing it in the Public Service. It is time we started valuing our electorate staff with some commensurate packages so they are treated fairly, because they go above and beyond the call of duty. They often go way beyond what they are employed to do as far as serving the public and helping us do our jobs. We value our electorate staff, but we must do more to ensure that those packages do not burn them out. I respectfully bring this to the Speaker's attention, because I think it is time that we took this forward.