



Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Thursday, 8 June 2006

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (7.54 pm): I look forward to welcoming the Deputy Chairman of the North Queensland Cowboys at the Gold Coast when the Bulldogs play the Cowboys in 10 days.

An honourable member interjected.

Mr LANGBROEK: The Cowboys won there last year. I rise to speak on my third budget since being elected, and for my third I have realised that nothing about a Beattie government budget changes as time goes on. Labor budgets are big on rhetoric and thin on substance. The tomes get weightier, the pile of papers is certainly higher than last year—and I know because I have the pile in my office and it is about 30 per cent higher—the smiles get broader, the ‘hear, hears’ get louder, but the effect of the budget is never felt by the people of Queensland. We still have a health crisis, we still have a lack of water storage, we still sit in traffic congestion every morning and afternoon.

I will initially look to my shadow portfolio of public works, housing and racing before turning my eyes to the budget’s impact—namely, the lack of impact—on the electorate of Surfers Paradise and the dental health crisis. I notice that the Leader of the Liberal Party is in the House and I want to point out something that he mentioned—that is, the graph under ‘General Government Purchases of Non-financial Assets \$ per capita’ on page 47 of the Budget Strategy and Outlook 2006-07. Nothing typifies this old adage better: we are all about making the cake bigger and the government is all about cutting it up.

Let us look at what has happened in Public Works, Housing and Racing. I want to reminisce about question time on the morning before the budget was announced. The Minister for Public Works, Housing and Racing had a go at me. I think he might be trying to get a peg up on me before estimates. He criticised my calls on him to investigate putting more money into the greyhound racing industry after recent cutbacks. The minister referred to me in the *Hansard* as follows—

Instead of him saying, ‘What am I going to do to fix it?’ ... Does he, for example, want us to take money off doctors and give it to dogs? Is that his policy?

...

When he says that I should do something about it, I do not know what he suggests that I should do about it other than take money out of taxpayers’ pockets, away from hospitals and away from infrastructure, and put it into greyhound racing.

That was the Minister for Public Works, Housing and Racing on Tuesday asking me where the money should come from to help greyhound prize money. So I decided to have a look at the Capital Statements in the budget for the last few years in relation to the shadow portfolio that I am entrusted with for the coalition—that is, the portfolio of Public Works, Housing and Racing. Members may recall that the minister himself admitted in this House only recently that Q-Fleet would lose many millions of dollars this year. We cannot take that away from him; he was spot on there.

But just because he owned up to it, that does not mean that he sheds responsibility. What does the bulk of the money spent by Q-Fleet go on? Of course, it is cars. In fact in 2003-04, the budget papers said that \$154 million would be spent by Q-Fleet. How much was spent? \$177 million, a difference of nearly

\$23 million. In 2004-05, Q-Fleet spent \$17 million more than the Capital Statement said it would when the budget was delivered. In 2005-06—the year due to finish in three weeks—Q-Fleet would have spent almost \$9 million more than was predicted in last year's budget. That is right; it said it was going to spend \$164 million, but it will have spent \$173 million.

So this year's budget says \$151 million will be spent. How much it will actually be is another question. One can only assume based on the last three years that it will be a lot more than budgeted. We have obviously always got more money for cars. In the last three years, nearly \$50 million more than was actually budgeted was spent. This is a disgrace that the Beattie government cannot disguise by a surplus.

Q-Fleet lost \$10 million last year and the government is predicting that Q-Fleet will lose another \$5 million next year. Citec lost \$5 million this year and is budgeted to lose another \$6 million next year. Goprint lost almost \$2 million. The minister criticised my recent call for him to do something about the decrease in greyhound racing prize money of \$300,000 by asking me which school it should come from and which hospital. But I note that the minister is quite happy to consistently prop up the business units in his portfolio of public works. The minister is more than happy to pour taxpayers' money into these failing business units but is not prepared to extend the same largesse to racing. He does not care about racing, but I get a lot more phone calls from racing stakeholders than from the people who use the services of Citec, Goprint, Q-Fleet, SDS and Project Services.

I admit that I look forward to estimates and having the minister explain to me which hospitals and schools missed out on funding due to his presiding over a regime that consistently costs Queensland taxpayers millions of dollars in subsidies to failing business units. There is no need to try to pin superficial policies on me that I have not even suggested—like taking money from doctors to give to dogs. Money for dogs—and more importantly for our hospitals, our schools and our roads—would be available if the Beattie government stopped losing money through the mismanagement of its business units, in particular within the portfolio of Public Works, Housing and Racing. I make no apology for saying that a coalition government would be looking to improve these units and, indeed, free up money for hospitals, water and schools as a result.

I applaud the spin doctors that the Beattie government has employed to construct the ministerial portfolio statement for Public Works, Housing and Racing. Before one comes to each of the deficit ridden budgets of the failing business units in Public Works, the government spin doctors have placed the heading 'Key Factors Impacting on Business Unit'. A not-so-valuable spin doctor would have just headed the section 'Our Excuses for Being in the Red'. Q-Fleet, CITEC—in fact all of the units—have an excuse section this year. For Q-Fleet the excuse section suggests the continuing decline Australia wide in the used vehicle market for large and luxury second-hand vehicles impacted domestic market conditions. Increasing fuel prices and global economic conditions also played a part. In laymen's terms, there continues to be decreased demand for large gas-guzzling vehicles. That is this year when Queensland overspent \$9 million. What about last year when we overspent \$17 million and the year before when \$22 million was overspent? Should not the staff employed by Q-Fleet be advising about these key factors before they have to use them as excuses? I mean, one would think so after \$7.5 million was spent on employee expenses in Q-Fleet. Were these employees predicting trends in 2003-04 or did the Beattie government just ignore advice regarding the factors outlined in the excuses section and it will become apparent when unjustified spending on petrol loving vehicles began?

I am sure that the taxpayers of Queensland would be interested to hear just how much of their money is being spent on vehicles by this government. Of course, the bulk of Q-Fleet spending is for vehicles. Of the \$320 million given to Public Works in this budget, \$149 million will be used on vehicles. In the budget for 2005-06, of the \$303 million for Public Works, \$160 million was spent on vehicles. In 2004-05, \$172 million of the total \$226 million Public Works budget was for vehicles.

The unjustified spending theme is continued in analysis of capital outlays. I looked at the grand promises of the capital expenditure program for Public Works in 2005-06. This excludes Q-Fleet and the commercialised business units. The budget for capital expenditure was \$111.2 million. In turning to this year's Capital Statement Budget Paper No. 3 and looking at what was spent of the \$11.2 million, only \$68 million was spent due to 127 capital works projects not being completed that were supposed to be.

What do we see announced again in this budget? The Boggo Road redevelopment at \$450 million and air conditioning at George Street that was announced last year being reannounced this year. This government clearly has its priorities all wrong. It is buying expensive gas-guzzling cars, selling them for a massive loss, not building things and doing this all at the time of declaring that it is not prepared to help valuable aspects of Queensland life like racing and the employment it sustains.

This Labor government is overspending and is comfortable about overspending when it should not be, whilst underspending on the things that matter and not following through on the projects it promises despite trying to win the people of Queensland over by declaring a surplus.

Let me turn to the budget for the Gold Coast. One group of Queenslanders that is all too familiar with this government not following through with the projects it promises is Gold Coasters. Once again the people of the Gold Coast will not feel any different after this budget. They will not feel any different when they are sitting in the same traffic congestion they have driven to work in for several years. They will not feel any different waiting in the outpatient section of the Gold Coast Hospital. They will not feel any different with the announcement that rail services to the Gold Coast will be improved, knowing that the government will just delay the commencement or have to announce more funding in the future to actually get something done.

It is interesting to look at the light-blue South Coast Regional Budget Statement. I am sure it is picked for its potentially calming effect. The statement acknowledges that south-east Queensland is the fastest growing region in Australia and that in order to meet the challenges of maintaining sustainable growth over the next 20 years the South East Queensland Infrastructure Plan and Program 2006-26 outlines the expected investment in the region for the next 20 years.

After acknowledging the Gold Coast as the fastest growing region in the country—not just in Queensland but in the country—this government does not put an accelerated development plan in place; no, it puts a 20-year long plan into place to service the region that has 1,000 people moving to it each week.

The highlights in this budget for the Gold Coast have a similar theme. They are top-ups, re-commencements, continuations, and a few new commencements of projects that will be finished some time between now and 2026. One striking feature of this government is the lack of deadlines it gives itself. This allows it to keep saying one thing and doing another. When this government commences something and when the job will be finished is unknown. Results are what are needed on the Gold Coast. Specific allocations for the electorate of Surfers Paradise are the thinnest of any electorate on the Gold Coast. Benowa High received \$600,000 for the upgrading of some language class facilities. The *Bulletin* mentioned that the Bellevue Park State School was getting \$49,000 but I could not find that in the budget papers anywhere, and \$2.79 million was allocated to continue upgrading the Gold Coast sand bypass jetty.

We thank the government for these provisions but are upset that the list was not more significant. The budget seemed to concentrate on electorates surrounding Surfers Paradise. The best illustration of this can be found in regard to the schools asbestos removal process. In my speech on the budget last year I asked the question whether we could get this asbestos out of our schools sooner—a reasonable request. Despite the minister for public works and housing staunchly saying at the time that the market for asbestos removalists was not big enough to get the job done sooner, the job does seem to be getting done quicker and I commend the Minister for Education for doing this. The important thing is that I know of schools in the surrounding electorates of Burleigh and Southport that have had asbestos removed sooner than expected, but it seems that Surfers Paradise State School has been left off the radar of the government in having its asbestos removed along with infrastructure and development plans.

I would ask the Beattie government to, and more quickly than with its 2026 deadline, learn from the lessons of Sydney. Sydney is beset by rampant overdevelopment, beleaguered public transport, unaffordable housing, worsening poverty and homeless lists and an eruption of gated communities. It sounds like the south-east corner to me.

The Gold Coast and the greater south-east Queensland bubble may burst without an accelerated effort being put towards achieving infrastructure health and public transport targets. The Sydney experience tells us that there is limited time to get urban management right when a city region enters hypergrowth mode. This means decisive implementation of our regional plan rather than what we have seen.

Planning logic not laboured financial expediency should guide infrastructure provision. Overdevelopment and car dependency are the two biggest risks here. High-quality infrastructure must accompany this unprecedented growth phase. Consistently recommencing projects, delaying project completion dates and starting vote-grabbing projects in the lead-up to an election which robs funding from incomplete projects is not the way forward.

For Surfers Paradise and the Gold Coast in particular, the Queensland government must look to better invest in promoting the region for tourist purposes. Our visitor numbers are declining. I note from the Capital Statement that in the area of tourism there has also been an underspend from budget to actual for the year 2005-06.

I turn now to dental health. Queensland Labor needs to provide better dental services as part of its health plans. If we look to New South Wales Labor, which also handed down its budget on Tuesday, dental services received a boost in their budget of around \$40 million. What makes this an all-the-more interesting statistic is when we recognise that the New South Wales Labor government, unlike the surplus

in Queensland, is operating on a \$696 million deficit. Despite this deficit, the New South Wales government still found more money for improving the dental services for the people of New South Wales.

In New South Wales the profession and service is dogged by problematic morale and significant waiting lists. In Queensland the same problems dog our dental service. This year general dental clinic patient treatments declined by 19 per cent and the school dental program delivered 40,000 fewer treatments. Because a crippled dental service does not seem to attract as much attention and publicity as the medical crisis that this government has created, the Queensland government has not, unlike its New South Wales counterparts, prioritised the dental service of Queensland. The teeth of the people of Queensland may get some attention when the Beattie government sees the opportunity of self-promotion through an ability to step in front of a camera.

I would like to offer some advice as to why the public dental service cannot find dentists willing to work for them. I will use the illustration of Dr Dan Naidoo. He has been mentioned in this place before. He was the principal dental officer at the Gold Coast Hospital but was demoted two levels and sacked from his administrative role after blowing the whistle on a fellow dentist who was receiving complaints from fellow staff and patients. Since then Dr Naidoo has had his claims vindicated. The dentist that he blew the whistle on was found to be unsuitable and did not have his contract renegotiated.

Despite the sense of satisfaction Dr Naidoo received after his vindication, it must be recognised that because of his sacking and having his concerns fobbed off initially, Dr Naidoo was placed on stress leave and advised by his doctor to leave Queensland Health for health reasons. He is now working as a general dentist at the Tweed Hospital, even though he would love to get back to his previous position of principal dentist. This wreaks of *deja vu* until realising that it is under Queensland Health and a government whose health priorities are all wrong and whose plans to fix the health system in this state are more spin than substance.

The concessions to payroll tax and land tax are welcome developments in this budget. I would like to think that the government has taken notice of the Leader of the Liberal Party, who put these proposals forward last year, and my reply speech last year when I said that more needed to be done and more questions asked in respect of land tax reductions. Last year I said—

I have stood in this place and told members of the lack of a level playing field as a direct result of payroll tax existing in its current form. It costs jobs and its costs businesses. It is an absolute disgrace that this tax has not been dropped to more acceptable levels.

I commend the government for changes to the payroll tax levels. The reductions released in this year's budget are a step towards the reform that this government agreed to under the intergovernmental agreement when GST was first introduced.

We need to keep this budget and its surplus in perspective. The Beattie government's state surplus would not have been possible without the injection of nearly \$400 million of revenue from the Commonwealth if John Howard and the federal coalition were not running such a strong national economy, and certainly not if the Howard government was not propping up this budget with GST receipts. I would like to refer to a new analysis prepared by the Institute of Public Affairs. It has found that since the GST was introduced in 2000 revenue distributed to the states has increased by more than nine per cent a year, delivering an extra \$22 billion to state government. In Queensland, GST receipts went up \$400 million, as I have mentioned before, on last year alone.

Since the introduction of GST the states have experienced phenomenal—indeed, record—growth in revenue, and that is why the surplus is a healthy one. I am not a doomsayer, but these trends of going up and coming down happen in cycles. What visionary strategies does this government have planned for when GST receipts plateau, when the receipts are not as high so as to prop up Queensland's budget position?

I would like to refer again to the Institute of Public Affairs report. This report found that the revenue from GST and big increases in stamp duty have been predominantly pumped by the states into higher wages for bureaucrats and public servants rather than invested in infrastructure and delivering a new reform agenda. Whereas having the Howard government in power and GST revenue available for the states has a positive impact on Queensland, the other prop-up the Beattie government has had to cover up its financial mismanagement is from a less positive source—gambling taxes. Queensland gamblers have handed over \$881 million in taxes to the state government, or are proposed to in the next 12 months. Gaming machines will continue to attract the most tax—an estimated \$582 million in 2006-07—but how socially responsible is this top-up to the surplus Labor wants to focus on? The impacts need to be better considered.

In the time left to me, I would like to address something in the Appropriation (Parliament) Bill. I would like to echo the sentiments of the Speaker from December last year when the Speaker said—

In a number of cases, we have seen more emphasis on personal criticism rather than the real issue, namely, policy debate.

He went on to say—

... whilst no quarter was given in this chamber, we still managed to have some respect and friendship with those of different political persuasions. Unfortunately, I regret to say that in some cases this no longer appears to be the case ... every time we become involved in the personal denigration of a member in this place it is an attack on the whole institution of parliament. It drives people who have a desire for public service away from politics and many members of the public 'switch off'.

I respectfully suggest that the culture that Mr Speaker came into was inherited from the conservative government, not the Australian Labor Party, and the changing culture has come from a Labor dominated parliament exemplified by some members who are civil in the electorate when members of the public are around but often barely acknowledge other members when in the parliament. The masters of political denigration are on the other side of the chamber, and many of the members on the other side seem to heartily enjoy the slagging. So, until there is a change in the culture, those of us who are new will not turn the other cheek.