



Speech by

## Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Thursday, 8 June 2006

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### APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

**Mrs MENKENS** (Burdekin—NPA) (10.42 pm): I rise to participate in the debate on the state budget 2006. Firstly, I am pleased to say that some of the projects that I have been lobbying for in the Burdekin electorate have been acknowledged in this budget. The Burdekin electorate has fared rather well in the budget funds. I have no doubt it is because of the vibrant economy and the exciting industry developments that are occurring within the area.

Despite the lack of public support from the three Townsville Labor members, the Townsville Hospital has received more funding for additional beds. I and the public of north Queensland certainly welcome that. It is a start. It may assist to take up the slack on the waiting lists, but I look forward to more funding designed to cater for the continued expansion of this major public facility which actually services the whole of north Queensland. The 22 beds that will be brought online will relieve some of the access block, but this is only a stopgap measure. It has to be clear that this hospital and its staff are chronically underresourced and that even greater measures need to be taken to cater for the increasing demand on its resources.

I recently revealed the extended waiting times for cancer patients waiting for radiation treatment at the hospital due to the protracted delay in the commissioning of the new linear accelerator promised by the Premier at the last election more than two years ago. This is now promised to be in place later this year, but I understand that there is a further delay in processing the tender for the oncology information management system. This system is essential for the commissioning of the new linear accelerator. I understand that this must go through the procurement division of Queensland Health and that because of delays that are occurring—due no doubt to bureaucratic bumbles—the hospital is now in danger of losing the federal government subsidy for procurement of this information system because time is running out. I call on the minister to make a commitment today that he will immediately fast-track this process so that more patients are not kept from lifesaving treatment because of incompetence within his department.

The \$7.21 million promised for the redevelopment of the Collinsville Hospital is very welcome and will reassure Collinsville residents that they have not been forgotten. Too often those in smaller regional centres are forgotten or overlooked. I am very pleased to have helped secure this funding for Collinsville. I also note the funds for Collinsville State School which are very welcome.

Resident of Stuart and surrounding areas and the staff of the Stuart Police Station will be very happy to learn of the allocation of \$5.5 million over two years for the redevelopment of the station. Having written to the minister about the need for this previously, I am delighted to see this budget item. I also note the funding for the refurbishment of the Ayr Police Station which is carried over from last year.

Our police staff are already overburdened because of the continued lack of adequate numbers but at least in these cases they will be able to work in a more modern environment. This does not, however, mean that I will stop pushing for more police numbers in the north. I put the minister on notice that, while the already allocated numbers may bring some northern stations like Home Hill back up to strength, they are not enough to meet the increased demands on our serving officers.

The \$1.1 million to upgrade classrooms and administration at Ayr High School is timely and is to be commended. But there are 34 schools in my Burdekin electorate. I would like to put on the record that

there are some magnificent schools and some magnificent teachers in the electorate. However, many of them are starting to become very run down and need an ongoing program of renovation, repair and building just to maintain the high standards that we demand in our education system. This work should be continued and it is unfortunate that funding like this to Ayr High School is remarkable for its inclusion rather than its size.

I do have to bring to the attention of the House two items that need highlighting. I refer to the announcement last week by the member for Whitsunday of the allocation of \$129.35 million to construct the Moranbah pipeline and \$120 million for the Water for Bowen project. While there is no doubt that these allocations are legitimate, the announcement by the member was at best uninformed and at worst deliberately misleading. In fact, the Moranbah pipeline is already under construction—something I am sure would not be the case if the government had not already agreed to the project.

What is not clear in the release or in the budget is that, while the government may be paying for it initially, the mining companies using the water from the pipeline will be paying full cost recovery for the construction as well as operating costs all at commercial rates of return. Similarly, according to the member's release and subsequent spruiking, the Water for Bowen project suddenly seemed to be a government commitment and fully funded. Because the member's media release was so obtuse there was conjecture from the potential end users that the impost being put upon them by the government may have changed. Of course this is not the case. In fact nothing had changed. The government had earmarked the \$120 million necessary if and only if potential users met a truly remarkable condition. They are being asked to part fund the environmental impact study for the project to ensure its progression—surely a first even for this government.

The end users have been told that if they do not meet the required target of \$1.5 million the project will not go ahead, no matter what significant public benefits it will bring. This scheme promises to bring new life and prosperity to the region and Bowen in particular. But this government is penny-pinching and playing petty politics. Even if the scheme does get the nod the immediate users like those of the Moranbah pipeline will be paying the same full cost recovery at commercial rates of return. In short, the government will really only be contributing some \$4 million to \$5 million of a \$120 million scheme despite the massive flow-on effects of the scheme.

The fact that the Premier can do this while launching another \$63 million footpath across the Brisbane River is a calculated slap in the face to all northern residents. If he was to be in any way consistent, he would apply the same criteria to those pedestrians who will use it—get them to fund the studies and then charge them a toll to use it at full recovery costs. Somehow I doubt he will do this.

I note the Premier's words and the wording in the Blueprint for the Bush document when they refer to the Water for Bowen project. The Water for Bowen project is referred to as 130 kilometres of pipeline from the Burdekin Falls Dam to the Bowen area. This project is simply the renamed and rebadged Elliott Channel that farmers have been begging for for years, and it is just that—a channel, not a pipeline. Sure, it is piped under certain creeks, but it is essentially a channel with trickle-feed water for the end users. It is only a small point, but it shows just how far from reality this government can really be and how little it understands about actual infrastructure.

It is interesting to note that, although the government is willing to commit to the stage 2 expansion of the Abbot Point port facility to the tune of \$63 million, it is not willing to fully commit to funding a vital piece of infrastructure that will allow its full capacity to be realised. It will not commit to supplying water to farmers, irrigators, the tourism industry, aquaculture, the Bowen shire or developments such as the proposed Chalco alumina refinery that stands a very good chance of being located at Abbot Point, but it will commit to what amounts to an aerial short cut for walkers in Brisbane.

As the shadow minister for child safety, I do commend the minister on the allocations and initiatives contained within this budget. I do take a bipartisan approach to this portfolio and I assure him of my ongoing support for any moves that will further enhance the department's ability to safeguard our children. It is without doubt one of the most difficult portfolios to administer. It is a community as well as a government problem and responsibility, and I do appreciate the problems inherent in such an emotive area. However, I am still concerned at the overly long time it is taking for the implementation of the ICMS. This is acknowledged to be vital to the smooth operation of the department and a vital tool for its staff, and further delays are giving rise to concern. The coalition is concerned about the culture that also still exists within a few areas of the department. Issues of secrecy and self-interest that do not enhance the quality of professionalism that this department needs also still exist.

As shadow minister for seniors, I also recognise the efforts of the minister for seniors in this area. However, there does seem to be a lack of new initiatives, and I am disappointed to see that the contributions from our independent retirees have not been specifically recognised. These are the people who have planned ahead for their own retirement. They have funded their own retirement and, in many cases, because of the assets test provisions, are living on lower net incomes at the end of the day than

quite a few aged pensioners. They play a very significant role in our state, and I am a little disappointed that they do not receive higher recognition from this Beattie Labor government.

I place on record my appreciation of the funding for the Burdekin electorate, and I have worked hard to try to secure this. I put my constituents first and will continue to lobby for ongoing improvements in government programs, infrastructure and works, but this does not blind us to the bigger picture. Although the Burdekin has perhaps fared reasonably well in this budget, I can see how other areas of the state have been forgotten and neglected. Rarely have I seen such a transparent attempt to buy your way out of trouble as this budget from the Labor government. After years of neglect of this state's road, rail and water infrastructure and after years of running our health and emergency response organisations into the ground, we are now witness to the degrading spectacle of a state government trying to cover its tracks.

We are expected to believe that this over-late and transparent attempt to regain credibility has been carefully crafted by those mysterious forward thinkers within the Labor ranks and that it is a perfectly acceptable solution to Queensland's woes. This latest travesty from an increasingly arrogant government smacks of desperation. It is a tacit acknowledgement of the enormity of the problems that all Queenslanders will have to deal with in coming years. It is an acceptance by this government of its role in ignoring the crisis in health, in water, in emergency services, in law and order, in housing and in nearly every other area that it has responsibility for.

It seems ludicrous that at a time of record revenue all Queenslanders will now have to bear the added burden of record borrowings just to repair those areas that the Premier has let run down. At a time when we are experiencing a resources boom and enjoying a lion's share of GST revenue from the federal government, the Premier has somehow managed to put us further into debt. The irony of its efforts to desperately shovel money into the bottomless pits it has dug and still be incapable of spending previous allocations would appear to be beyond the grasp of even the most rational of the members opposite. The Labor members seem to have become victims of some insidious group-think in believing that they are the victims. They really believe that the blame for the perilous state of Queensland's essential services and infrastructure lies elsewhere.

It is the federal government's fault. It is the weather's fault. It is the fault of previous governments, the fault of all of those turncoat health professionals and doctors who only wanted to work in a caring and responsive department. It is the fault of greedy farmers, rapacious federal departments and recalcitrant federal ministers. It is the fault of all of those emigres to Queensland who dare to expect decent roads, water on tap, doctors on call and emergency departments that are open. In short, it is all someone else's fault. The Premier accepts no responsibility and no blame and his conscience is clear. He has not been forced to make policy on the run. He does not accept that our previously world-class health system is now a running joke, even after having to trawl overseas pleading for doctors.

It is high time that the Premier and his government were forced to accept responsibility for this state's ills. It is also high time that they recognised what their inept style of mismanagement and lack of demonstrable planning has done to the prospects of this once great state and the effect this is having on the lives of its residents now and for many years to come. Their answer is to throw billions of dollars at a problem and hope it will go away until after the next election. They cannot build new dams overnight, even if in fact they really intend to. They will not replace overnight the many doctors, nurses and other health professionals that this government's policies forced out of the system, and they will not repair the damage done to Queensland's reputation as a progressive, stable, reliable state overnight. The damage has been done, and I do not trust this government to repair it. I commend the bills to the House.