



Speech by

Ted Malone

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (9.51 pm): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in this budget debate. I will speak briefly about the shadow portfolio matters that fall within my jurisdiction. Of course, they will be examined during the estimates committees hearings that will be held next month.

When a budget is handed down we are provided with an opportunity to assess the allocations that are made to departments and individual electorates. I have to say up-front that it was disappointing to see that the Emergency Services budget was underspent by \$15 million. In terms of capital spending, Emergency Services was given a huge opportunity to get back into delivering services. Obviously, there are a number of places in Queensland where there is a need for extra services. For example, there is a need for fire stations at Nerang and Redlands. Also, in the expanding suburbs around Brisbane, Townsville and Mackay—particularly around Townsville—there is a need for extra services. Although \$15 million is not a lot of money in terms of capital works, it certainly would have gone a long way towards providing those services.

The delivery of capital works not only in Emergency Services but also right across all of the portfolios has blown out tremendously. For example, I refer to the new replacement ambulance centre that was built in South Mackay. Basically, it is a relocatable donga with a Titan five-door shed. The cost of that was well over \$1 million. To me, that is extravagant and above all expectations. I am realistic enough to understand that the delivery cost of those sorts of capital works has increased tremendously in recent times. But I just wonder about the fiscal ability of some of the departments to deliver that infrastructure on time and on budget. The ability of departments to match the delivery requirements with the funds that are available is going to be a real challenge for all of those departments that are heavily involved in the delivery of infrastructure.

In terms of the Emergency Services budget there is increased funding for extra QAS paramedics. That is welcomed. We need more paramedics on the ground. That has been proven over and over again. But there is a real concern within the department that a lot of paramedics are going on stress leave on full pay or part pay, or they are going on sick leave generally simply because they have been abused or they cannot handle the intimidation from those who are higher up in the service.

I also continue to receive quite a number of phone calls about the rostering system within the QAS. That is a real concern to me, because, although you would expect a normal roster to be sustainable, the workload of paramedics and the situations that paramedics are faced with on a daily basis mean that a roster for paramedics has to be viewed in a different manner. There should be some flexibility within the rostering system for paramedics, particularly those who are stationed in urban areas. They work fairly long hours and sometimes even work overtime to deliver a service. They receive very little time off as they work on a roster. So there is a need, as there has been in the health and other allied departments, for the Department of Emergency Services to consider how it handles its manpower to make sure that the roster reflects the requirements of those people who work at the coalface. It is quite well recognised that young doctors who work in the health system sometimes work two or three shifts without a break. A similar situation is occurring within the QAS.

It is also a little bit disappointing for me that there is no funding allocation for extra firefighters in this budget. I think that issue needs to be rectified. One of the things that I hold dear to my heart is the community helicopters that are based in Mackay, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Sunshine Coast and the Gold Coast. Even though the department has raised the subsidy to the rescue helicopters by \$100,000 a year, most of the community organisations that offer that helicopter service have upgraded their helicopters to IFR aircraft. Certainly, the cost involved in flying those aircraft in terms of the cost of fuel and the cost of manpower has gone through the roof. An extra \$100,000 a year really does not meet those organisations' requirements. I can speak from experience that the cost of operating the helicopter in Mackay is something like \$3.5 million. The subsidy that will be available to that organisation has increased from \$900,000 to \$1 million. So that organisation still has to raise, through sponsorship, community donations, CWA fetes—all of those sorts of things—almost \$2.5 million to fly that aircraft every year.

It must be understood that community helicopters cover QAS areas. In a lot of cases they support the QAS almost to the point at which they are an alternative to the paramedics on the ground. In Queensland's inland areas and up along the sparsely populated central coast, the rescue helicopters are a hugely important resource. I think that the government is being a bit stingy in its million-dollar subsidy for each of those operations. I think the subsidy should be closer to \$1.5 million to allow those helicopters to do their job properly. They are a very effective way of getting patients to a hospital quickly in times of an emergency, thus achieving good patient outcomes.

I was also heartened to see that the Department of Emergency Services, through Emergency Management Queensland, is upgrading the Bell 412 helicopters. Over a period they have provided an excellent resource, but they certainly need upgrading. I think that is a step in the right direction.

The other point I wish to make—and others have made it—is that the state government has certainly been a winner with the GST. Others have quoted figures. The GST that Queensland receives has increased from \$4.6 billion to \$7.9 billion in a four-year period. On top of that, we have to consider payroll tax and stamp duty, which has blossomed over the last few years in terms of the amount of real estate being bought and sold and the houses being built in Queensland. On top of that again is the royalties from the mining industry. The coalmining industry alone brings something like \$1.1 billion into the coffers of Queensland each year.

I believe that my electorate has been well funded on major issues, such as electricity, an extra rail loop at Dalrymple Bay and the dredging of an ocean outfall for ships moving out from Hay Point. Those are the sorts of things that we would expect to be funded by a government. But what we have to look at is the gaps. It was only today in the business section of the paper that Terry McCrann spoke about the bottlenecks we are experiencing at our coal ports. It is disappointing that we did not see some extra funding for a third rail line down the range from the Bowen Basin. There was no mention of any planning or money being put aside for that.

There are parallel rail lines down Black Mountain and Connors Range to the coast. Some years ago there was a major accident there and the access to the coal port was closed for close on a week. Imagine what would happen now if something like that happened, holding up the delivery of coal to the coal ports. The lines are at almost maximum capacity. There is a need now to develop a third line, probably in a separate corridor down the range, to make sure that could never happen again. At least there would be reasonable access to the coal port.

If we are going to continue to export coal—and there are probably at least five or six mines that are almost ready to be developed in the Bowen Basin if they can get water—then the missing link between Abbot Point and Newlands would relieve some of that bottleneck of coal going into Hay Point and Dalrymple Bay but not for the mining areas south of Coppabella. That is just one of the things that could have been talked about in the budget but was not.

In the Blueprint for the Bush it was heartening to see the government indicate that it was looking at spending \$130 million to develop the Mount Bridget Dam on the Connors River. As soon as that was mentioned, numerous property owners in the area rang me to find out when the dam was going to be built. I explained to them that we were not quite sure. I have spoken to the minister since. He has taken some time to investigate and has found out that in the next 12 months they will be doing some testing on the site and in the next five to eight years there is a possibility of the dam being built. Unfortunately, like other dams that we have spoken about—the Mary River and Rathdowney dams—there is not any money in the budget to make this happen.

The Mount Bridget dam site has been a well-recognised site for many years. Indeed, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority did some work on that site back in the 1950s. So it is not as though this site has suddenly come about. There will be some very good information somewhere in the department, if they can find it, to either say that they are going to build the dam or give an undertaking to those landholders that they are not going to build it and thereby give some certainty to their future. Those landholders have families who either want to take over the properties or need to move on in a short period of time. So I believe that the government is obligated to make a decision one way or another very quickly.

The indication in the Blueprint for the Bush is that that dam will be built to hold 200,000 megalitres. That dam can be built to quite a large size. Indeed, if my memory serves me correctly, there were indications that it can be built to hold 1.6 million megalitres. That is quite a huge dam. It would seem a shame if we were going to build a dam that we would not build it to its maximum size. I pass that on for the information of the minister.

The other issue I would like to raise—and I have raised this before in the House—is the Peak Downs Highway. That highway has become one of the busiest highways in Queensland. It is probably even busier than the Bruce Highway because of the traffic to and from the mining industry in the hinterland. About 10 kilometres west of Mackay the Peak Downs Highway passes through a little town called Walkerston. That has very narrow streets with schools on both sides of the highway and a shopping centre et cetera. B-doubles of fuel, oversized trucks and heavy mining machinery move through that town. I have been advocating for some time, as have others before me, to build a deviation of the Peak Downs Highway that would bypass Walkerston. Unfortunately, the budget did not indicate any funding whatsoever for that. Indeed, I understand that Main Roads indicates that it will be 20 years before it even thinks about doing it. That is just too far out. I believe that we will see an accident in the middle of that town, with tragic consequences.

I am pleased to welcome the building of the Sandy Creek Bridge on Homebush Road at Rosella. That is facilitating huge, oversized mining equipment moving up to Peak Downs further up. There is a real need to upgrade the road. The bridge was totally under capacity. The department is building a new bridge there. That is fine, but we need extra money spent on the road.

I was pleased also to receive funding of around \$600,000 for the Kinchant Dam Outdoor Education Centre. That is a great facility for young students right throughout the Mackay district. It is a welcoming area with recreational activities. When there is water in the dam they can use canoes, go bushwalking and learn about the outdoors. It was pleasing to see the money for that upgrade.

I also welcome the extra funding for national parks in the Mirani electorate. Unfortunately, it was not enough—\$61,000 to cater for extra work on at least five national parks in my area. That will not go very far at all. I would have thought that half a million would be more appropriate.

We have the Great Walks. The Great Walks go from Eungella National Park through to Homevale, which is about a five-day walk. Certainly extra work needs to be done on that. The Eungella National Park is a magnificent rainforest area. Unfortunately, most of the camping sites in the Eungella National Park have been closed down because the Parks and Wildlife Service is not willing to service the sites. We have a conflict with the department of tourism, which is encouraging people to go to Eungella and experience the great rainforests we have there by encouraging people travelling through the Mackay district to spend an extra day in the Pioneer Valley to get to know our national parks. We have a situation where the Parks and Wildlife Service appears to be basically thwarting that effort. It has actually closed down toilets and showers. We are hearing of people who have travelled from overseas, have hired vans and have been to the national park previously turning up there again to find that they cannot park there, and they have become very abusive to the locals when they find out that they are not able to stay there.

Finally, I would like to put in a plug for the schools in my electorate, particularly the high schools of Mirani and Sarina. They are doing an excellent job. We have two great programs running at those schools. The Mirani State High School has a lighthouse project for numeracy and literacy and, through the dedication of three great female teachers, the school has won national awards for turning particularly young boys around, helping them to get jobs as apprentices. That is terrific.

In Sarina there is an agricultural centre being built. We have had a huge amount of support from the local community, and that is really just getting off the ground now. Obviously there are some issues within the electorate. There are some real issues with the Department of Emergency Services that we will address later on.