



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE D

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.10 pm): As a member of Estimates Committee D, I would like to place on record my thanks to the chair and other members of the committee, the research directors and the Hansard and parliamentary staff who put in a great deal of hard work to make the estimates committee run smoothly. I would like to commend Geoff Wilson and Neil Roberts for the way they conducted themselves, especially for remembering and reporting all that information. That being said, I believe there is considerable room to reform the estimates committee process so that non-government members are able to properly scrutinise the government of the day.

During the committee hearing I asked the minister many questions about the Mines and Energy portfolio. Despite a recent price rise of 11.37 per cent, the minister would not rule out further increases to the uniform tariff for small consumers this year. While electricity consumers in the south-east who have signed contracts will be protected for at least 12 months, those small consumers outside the south-east will remain vulnerable to further price increases.

In direct contrast to the previous announcement by the minister and the Premier of the benefits of the introduction of full retail competition, small consumers in non-contestable areas outside the south-east receive little to no benefit from the introduction. There was a promise to protect them through the community service obligation and uniform tariffs. They are unable to access this retail market. Therefore, obviously they would have to be very sceptical, especially after receiving an increase when they were told that everyone in Queensland was going to be better off.

The minister also could not or would not confirm that electricity prices would fall when the drought breaks, despite blaming the massive recent increase on the drought. It was also disappointing that the minister confirmed that the government would not be funding the new Energy Ombudsman position and office; instead it will be funded by a levy on retailers, the cost of which will then be passed on from the retailers directly to the consumers.

The minister was unable to confirm dates for the commissioning of the Townsville South Power Station that was originally expected to be online by late 2009. AGL's intention is to develop a new 370-megawatt Townsville South Power Station. This project was first announced in October 2005, with the assurance from both AGL and the state government that, regardless of where the gas was to be supplied from, the project would be online by 2009.

Another question I put to the minister was about a baseload power station in north Queensland, and I am pleased to see that a steering committee has been put in place, which includes Townsville Enterprise, to look at alternative sites. One alternative site is of course Collinsville which is in the Bowen Basin. With north Queensland, I am always pushing for a site in the Pentland district. There is a need for this because a lot of investment has been held up due to a lack of a reliable energy source.

I would also like to put on record that Pentland has had extensive drilling by Xstrata and there is a 45-year shelf life. Pentland has a rural environment. It has a railway corridor right at its door. It is rural

living. It has unlimited water supply and a great potential. It has not had the infrastructure problem like the Bowen Basin has had, where people are living in their cars or the back of their utes. There have also been massive service problems in Collinsville. I spoke today about the rent increasing by 1,200 per cent. This is not a problem in Pentland, so I encourage the minister to recognise that Pentland also needs to be investigated as an alternative site.

The minister confirmed that investigations into introducing night shoulder rates for tariff 62 had been carried out. This is a concern because night tariffs are used by many farmers who are able to schedule their irrigation and other power requirements around the cheaper off-peak tariffs. I believe that is very important because, if they are paying more, the consumer pays more. We all know this.

One of the questions I put to the Minister for Emergency Services related to the fact that Charters Towers has lost its night-time ambulance service. Never, ever in the history of Charters Towers can anyone remember our night-time ambulance service being closed down. I mentioned that a person was knocked down on the same street that the ambulance station was on yet he was left to bleed for 13 minutes before an ambulance arrived. This is a matter of life and death. Emergency services should be there to respond in the quickest, fastest and safest time possible.

Time expired.