



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Wednesday, 9 June 2010

MOTION: QUEENSLAND HEALTH, PAYROLL SYSTEM

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (5.30 pm): I move—

That this House:

Condemns the ongoing failure to properly pay Queensland Health workers their proper salary and entitlements and calls for the urgent creation of a commission of inquiry that will investigate and report on the failed payroll system including:

1. the involvement, knowledge and responsibilities of Ministers Gordon Nuttall, Stephen Robertson, Paul Lucas and Robert Swarten;
2. any prior warnings of potential failures of the new computerised payroll system;
3. the cost, including anticipated future cost, of restoring a working payroll system for Queensland Health employees; and
4. the anticipated timeframe upon which it is expected a fully operational payroll system will be operational.

It is interesting on the day after the budget was brought down to have a look at what the Treasurer, the member for Mount Coot-tha, said yesterday about what state governments are about providing—that is, services. This year \$42 billion will be expended for the 4½ million people of Queensland. The Treasurer said in his budget speech at 2.30 pm yesterday—

In this State Budget we report back and recommit ourselves to this task, providing Queenslanders with a chance at the dignity of work—

But there is no mention of paying them. He continued—

This is Labor's first commitment and our calling.

But they will not necessarily pay them. He continued—

The fair go ... the advancement of all, regardless of where you line up at the start.

It is a bit hard to be halfway through the race—and people find out that even though they are doing the work they are not being paid for it and the government cannot pay—and find out that this is acceptable for a Labor government when it claims that its interest is its workers.

What did we find under the heading 'Helping Queensland households'? The Treasurer stated—

A helping hand to those who need it most—as is our calling.

That is all very Churchillian, but it would be nice for those who work for Queensland Health, whether they be the doctors, nurses or allied health professionals or the orderlies, cleaners or the thousands of other workers, to be paid. Under the section of the budget speech headed 'Investing in health and hospitals', there is not one word about paying our workers on time. Instead of that we get a commitment in the budget papers of \$4 million to supposedly fix this payroll scheme. Clearly, it is going to take a lot more than \$4 million to fix it when we hear of the number of hours that people are doing to try to fix up the thousands of current payroll issues. Finally, the Treasurer said yesterday—

We are a proud government, determined to continue the legacy of Labor in building a modern Queensland.

One where we do not pay our health workers! He continued—

... proud of our commitment to jobs and to the workers of Queensland.

These are workers who obviously will not be paid. He again continued—

Through the tumult of the last two years, we have put the dignity of work as the guiding light for our policies.

He made no point about the dignity of pay. That is the interesting thing about this government. It is big on the Churchillian statements, but when it comes to the things that state governments are supposed to provide—a decent day's pay for a decent day's work—it has been unable to do it for 12 weeks or six pay cycles.

That is why we have moved this motion. We have not done this lightly. The consequence of this motion that calls for the creation of a commission of inquiry does implicate a number of ministers. It implicates former health minister Gordon Nuttall, the former member for Sandgate; former health minister Stephen Robertson, the member for Stretton; the current health minister, Paul Lucas, the member for Lytton; and Robert Schwarten, the member for Rockhampton and Minister for Public Works and Information and Communication Technology.

Under the Westminster tradition, ministers have responsibility for things that happen in their ministry. One of the most remarkable things that we heard about two or three sitting weeks ago was the Minister for Health, the member for Lytton, state that as a solicitor he had no knowledge of computer technology and nor did his colleague from Rockhampton, the Minister for Public Works and Information and Communication Technology, who is a former teacher and a former chippie. In his words, there was no need for them to uphold the normal Westminster traditions. They would not take the Westminster view of responsibility. They denied responsibility for what has happened in Queensland Health and throughout this state for the last 12 weeks.

The former member for Sandgate, Gordon Nuttall, was responsible for signing the 10-year IT contract in 2005 without it going to tender. The member for Rockhampton, Robert Schwarten, is the minister responsible for whole-of-government ICT and is responsible for the agency CorpTech. CorpTech is directly responsible for delivering the new Queensland Health pay system. It was part of shared services.

The member for Currumbin, the member for Lockyer and I came into this House in 2004. We all remember going to our first estimates committee where we heard about the benefits of shared services and how it was going to save money across government. It has done so in other jurisdictions but not under Labor in Queensland. We cannot find out the true details of how much it is costing. That is what a commission of inquiry would investigate and report on. It would not report on the narrow terms of reference that the Auditor-General will have been given. We know that is the Labor way—that is, to send something away and get a report subsequently when the media are not necessarily interested in it anymore. A damning report, such as the one on the A1GP fiasco, would come down some weeks or some months later and the government would say, 'That is all right. We have moved on.' Why would it have moved on? Because there is another crisis.

That is the problem with this state Labor government. Since 1989 we have had, in portfolio after portfolio, services that are the responsibility of the state government to provide unable to be provided, crisis after crisis and minister after minister refusing to take responsibility. The people who suffer at the end of all of this are the workers of Queensland—the people who deserve to be paid.

The former minister for health, Stephen Robertson, and the current Minister for Health, Paul Lucas, were responsible for the management, oversight and decision to go live with this system, to ensure a smooth transition to the new payroll system and to have contingency measures in place if something went wrong. I know that the member for Currumbin, the shadow minister, has put out numerous press releases about this very matter since September last year. But these warnings were ignored. Clearly, the information that the shadow minister was receiving was accurate. The government failed to act on the advice.

The health minister was personally and regularly briefed about this payroll system. He should be held responsible for what has happened in his department. There is very clear evidence that the minister should have known some time ago that the health department payroll project was a high-risk venture which was not ready for rollout. The health minister is yet to explain why the payroll system was allowed to go ahead without a contingency plan in place. The people who are suffering are the people whom we asked about in parliament this morning. Those questions were ruled out of order. But this government needs to answer those questions.

There are other issues involved here. There were prior warnings of potential failures. We know that an RTI request from 2008 shows that the Shared Service Initiative has not delivered any viable alternatives to Queensland Health in the past four years and it has cost burnt at least \$400 million. As we have already said, with existing problems and incomplete testing the program still went live. Millions and millions of dollars have been poured into the system, yet the checks and balances were overlooked.

As we have said, there has been a cost burn attributable to Health of approximately \$100 million. The budget papers allocate just \$4 million to fixing the payroll mess. That is a joke. There is no way that the opposition or the public could guess at the financial cost of fixing this mess. I think the Labor government has no idea, either. It has no idea how bad the mess is. It is totally out of its depth.

Beyond the direct financial cost there are many other costs involved with the payroll debacle. There are reputation costs. Who is going to want to work for Queensland Health after what has happened? We are already hearing anecdotal evidence about this. I met a nurse in Mapoon who had worked for Queensland Health in regional Queensland for a number of years. That is a very small community on the cape. She said to me about three weeks ago that after having her pay affected as it has been she has taken a contract in regional New South Wales. That is anecdotal evidence that we are getting from around the state. There are obviously other junior doctors, nurses and allied health professionals who feel the same. Other workers, especially casuals or those with unusual leave entitlements, have faced ramifications due to the fact that this government has not been able to pay its workers properly.

The final aspect of this motion asks about the anticipated time frame. When can Queensland Health workers expect to be paid by a fully operational payroll? This government has no idea. It cannot say when the system will become fully operational. Even the Nurses Union—that great friend of this Labor government—says that there is no idea, after its meetings with the government, when this payroll system will become operational. It has given this government supposedly to the end of the financial year, but there is no confidence that it will be fixed by the end of the financial year. Queensland Health workers and all other public servants throughout Queensland deserve to have these questions answered. That is why we have called for a commission of inquiry. Tonight I urge all members to vote in support of this motion.