




Speech by
Bill Byrne

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Thursday, 13 September 2012

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL;
FISCAL REPAIR AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BYRNE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (9.09 pm): I rise to make my contribution in the budget debate. Before I progress to some of the substantive concerns that I hold regarding this budget, I thought it might be useful for the House to appreciate the circumstances that led to me becoming a member of the Australian Labor Party, particularly in light of the Premier's comments this week reflecting on his surprise that I had ended up in the party. My story is entirely relevant to this debate because of the circumstances that I found myself in some 16 years ago when a tory government replaced a long-serving, progressive federal Labor administration.

In 1996, I held the position of Army base commander in Central Queensland. It was when the Howard government was elected and, shortly thereafter, my unit, made up of military and civilian staff, made a very substantial contribution to the reinvigoration of the US training presence in Australia. Through nothing short of extraordinary effort, the people of that unit made commended efforts. Loyalty goes both ways and that is why I found it so difficult when, hardly had that success concluded in 1997, the Howard government announced that it was outsourcing the vast majority of what I would describe as base support functions within the ADF.

This Defence reform program never returned one dollar in a thousand days of destruction, pain and grief. In simple terms, the various support functions delivered on military bases were gradually put to the market and in most cases put to large multinational service providers. The reality was that there were no actual savings delivered and, in fact, in the medium term, the cost drivers were grossly in excess of the model that it superseded. It was only later that I realised that this large scale outsourcing within the military services had nothing to do with efficiency and everything to do with neoliberal, free market fundamentalism—pure ideology. So it was this process and the gross inefficiency associated with it, particularly the waste and service failure that followed, that made me really start to question what was going on in conservative politics.

Mr Young interjected.

Mr BYRNE: No, I am talking about the Howard government. But then the tipping point for me was the manner in which long-serving public sector employees were treated—the way in which people who had worked for two to three decades in their particular skill areas delivering outstanding service were simply disregarded by their employer. Does that sound familiar to anyone here? This experience turned me into a crusader against the right wing, free market rationalism that has corrupted most of the Western Anglo democracies.

When I left the Army, I decided I would join the Australian Labor Party in order to fight against conservative politics in this country. Everything that I have seen from this LNP government has validated that decision. With this budget, all has been predictably revealed. This budget has affirmed my decision to join a genuine progressive party and fight against what I consider to be the forces of economic darkness and ruination of the social fabric. So, for the record, I would cut my arm off before I would ever cross the floor to vote with a bunch of tories. Lyndon Baines Johnson once said—

Did you ever think that making a speech on economics is a lot like pissing down your leg? It seems hot to you, but it never does to anyone else.

Frankly, it is about time the community started to hear some sense regarding the true state of Queensland's fiscal position and the Queensland economy. The mantra associated with this budget proves that the task is well beyond this government. Over the last six months, I have sat in this chamber and listened to what I can only describe as neoliberal mantra. I have sat back and listened to these Chicken Little approaches to economics. This government has not once talked about how it is going to grow or stimulate the Queensland economy. All we hear is sensationalist nonsense, parallels with the Spanish economy, falling into the abyss, being in darkened canyons and the like. Queenslanders have every right to question the purpose of this total misrepresentation of the state's economy and fiscal position.

Even life members of the LNP are highly critical of this government's approach. Clive Palmer is on the record as saying—

I just think the emphasis is wrong, when we say we are going to get economic benefits from just sacking people. I don't think it's that simple. I could dismiss all my employees, I don't think I'd get more revenue or money by doing this.

He went on to say—

We also don't like the idea where we got a whole government policy which relies on cutting and putting people out of work. It will be a very sad Christmas were 4000 people who have been dismissed from the government, and another 16,000 to go.

Government members interjected.

Mr BYRNE: Of course, how could I overlook Mr Palmer's insightful commentary on *Lateline*? Here are a few treasures—which I am sure the members opposite are all absorbing enormously—from an LNP life member and major donor, and they should resonate with every LNP backbencher here howling in the background. This is what he said—

This is what Campbell Newman is good at. Putting people out of work.

When referring to the Premier, he said—

He's got no experience in business.

When referring to the government mantra, he said—

How you get this state going is by having confidence, doing quick approvals ... getting investment ... You've got to have a positive go-forward, not a negative wind-down. This guy can only look at his navel.

But, yes, there is more. When talking about the actions of the Queensland government, he said—

It's a disgrace, what's happening in this state.

Mr Palmer said—

We're a decentralised state, but we brought a Victorian in to tell us how we should run our state. He wasn't elected and all he could say was that we have got more public servants per capita than Victoria.

Mr Palmer went on and said—

That's been the case since Federation. There's no great news about that ... We've got to provide those services across a great geographical area. And yet this guy wants to come in, sack people, so there's a decline in services, so people get unemployed and there's no money in the economy.

And the coup de grace—

For god's sake, get some advice from an economist, not from an ex-barrister or someone like that. But is this what it's really about, or is he playing politics with the people of Queensland?

I could not have put it better myself. I am starting to see Mr Palmer in an entirely different light. When taken as a whole, the Queensland economy is in excellent shape due to Labor's management. The state's fiscal position is generally sound and any suggestion otherwise constitutes economic buffoonery.

There is no massive debt crisis in Queensland, with Standard & Poor's on the record as saying that Queensland has a far lower level of general government debt relative to operating revenue compared with its international peers. So this entire debt mantra from this government is nothing more than spin for the purpose of creating fear and anguish in the community. It is a crusade to justify the destruction of the public sector and the eventual sale of assets. The really amazing piece in all of this is that this government actually believes Queenslanders are stupid enough to accept their exaggerated, low-road, self-serving statements. Queenslanders are witnessing an ultraconservative government applying a rabid and absolutist economic rationale. That is what this budget represents.

Let me move to those elements of the budget that have actually attracted my attention. As Queensland headed towards the 2012 election, the LNP proclaimed that it would deliver safer communities. How many times did we hear the mantra 'tough on crime'? The proof of the pudding will be in the eating; however, just for one moment let us recognise that most police services around the world have two essential priorities—firstly, reduce crime and, secondly, reduce the fear of crime. This government seems to spend an inordinate amount of time looking in the rear vision mirror blaming the previous government. Leading up to the last election campaign, it served the LNP's interests to whip up fear of crime in our communities, and whipping up fear is a methodology preferred by this government.

But allow me to reflect on the accepted measures of reducing crime so that the members of this House understand history and Labor's positive legacy. It is irrefutable that the former Labor government delivered over 3,800 extra police above attrition as well as actually reducing crime. A comparison for the decade between 2001 and 2011 speaks for itself: there was a 30 per cent decrease in the overall crime rate in those 10 years, there was a 25 per cent decrease in offences against the person in the same period and there was a 46 per cent decrease in offences against property in that decade. I will enjoy testing this budget's implementation in contrast to that record.

This LNP government promised the Gold Coast an illegal firearms squad and a permanent major and organised crime squad. Ten of the LNP candidates signed a contract with the Gold Coast promising both squads. What has been announced in this budget is a \$1.1 million investment to establish a major and organised crime squad on the Gold Coast incorporating an illegal firearms team. Incorporating the two and not providing adequate staff to form an illegal firearms squad means that there is one fewer squad of detectives for the people of the Gold Coast, which is a clear breach of the contract. Why would Queenslanders ever enter into a contract with the LNP again when it is so clearly willing to breach the conditions of this contract?

The government has also promised \$1.1 million for the new incorporated squad. How far will that go when you consider that, among other things, it will need a new operational base of some description, vehicles and wages and there will be operational costs of targeting organised criminals and bikie gangs? What a con job! It is tough talk delivering little to the people of the Gold Coast who might also add the loss of the Burleigh Police Beat as a result of these budget cuts. I am prepared to bet that the LNP—

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Order! Members on my right, the speaker is not taking interjections.

Mr BYRNE: There are too many. I am prepared to bet that the LNP members of the Gold Coast are not even aware of the implications of this budget and certainly are unable to stand up for their region.

Let me move to the issue of alcohol related violence in entertainment precincts. The previous Labor government understood that alcohol related violence in our entertainment precincts was a substantial problem. The Drink Safe trial was funded in 2011-12 for \$3.1 million.

Mr Crandon interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Coomera, please cease interjecting.

Mr BYRNE: That money provided a number of measures and extra police and the program has been a success in protecting the community. The LNP essentially inherited a good program. What has it done with it? Government members have obviously sat around in their office meetings working out how to cut worthwhile programs by providing only \$1.5 million.

Let us move to the Department of Community Safety. The cuts in the budget are over 300 jobs. Let us be honest: we are talking about ambulance officers, fires, custodial officers and numerous other staff members who assist the operation of the department. They are genuine heroes in the eyes of our community. This government has delivered a budget cut of \$164 million. The true impact of these cuts is yet to be seen, but I believe the likely impacts will include reducing the training of our rural firefighters, and what an exhibition we have seen since the budget was handed down and the piddling incompetence of the minister has been revealed to all. Only a couple of days ago this government was talking about a reduction of 57 per cent in rural operations in uniform positions in the Rural Fire Service in Queensland. The government did not consult with local members about any of that reduction, and guess what? They were not too happy. The member for Gregory described it as one of the biggest blips he has ever seen in his life.

Mr CRANDON: I rise to a point of order. What does this have to do with the debate on the bill and the budget? What does it have to do with Rockhampton? He has not talked about Rockhampton.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Are you taking a point of order on relevance, member for Coomera?

Mr CRANDON: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Coomera, there is no point of order on relevance.

Mr BYRNE: The government did not consult with local members about any of that reduction, and guess what? They were not happy. The member for Gregory described it as one of the biggest blips he had ever seen in his life. In less than 24 hours we have witnessed the minister bouncing off the walls, avoiding the media and talking about conducting consultation over the next six months before he comes up with a plan. I have one simple question: what has he been doing for the last six months? This incident reveals the ineptitude of the budget construct. The destruction of morale within the rural operations of the uniformed element of the rural fire brigade could not be more severe in advance of one of the most threatening fire seasons. Well done, Minister! Excellent leadership!

Likely other impacts may also include reducing prisoner training and work experience in industry, which teaches the value of work and provides real education and training so that prisoners are actually rehabilitated; interrupted meal breaks for ambulance officers; and social workers in prisons being cut. These professionals work with prisoners so that custodial officers can work in a safer environment and, upon release, prisoners are less violent in the community. Prisoners are being locked up for longer periods of the day with fewer activities to participate in so that rosters can be changed. The closure of whole jails affecting regional communities is also part of this budget. I have even heard that social workers involved in educating children to try to prevent them from lighting fires are not even immune from these cuts.

What difference has this budget actually made? How many families will be stressed tonight about how they are going to pay their mortgages or their rent, feed their children and send them to school? What additional strains will be placed on the resources of our emergency services and the police due to the circumstances created by this government? Domestic violence and mental health statistics, although largely hidden, will be interesting measurements of the pain caused by this budget. No amount of crocodile tears or feigned compassion will change the essence of this budget.

What about new spending? This government has managed to find additional money in the budget to fund something very important to them, and guess what it is? I can inform the House that it is an additional \$30 million, and it would have been great if one of the ministers had fronted the community sector workers outside the parliament the other day to talk about that money. After all, this money could have been put to use to look after the people affected; it may have even saved some jobs. But guess what this \$30 million is to buy? More speed cameras and red-light cameras—blatant revenue raising! 'Ho, ho!', I hear around the chamber. 'This is all about increasing road safety,' they say. But, unfortunately, there is no other measure in the budget that could be attributed to increases in education or emphasis on road safety, and I can promise one thing: that \$30 million will generate a lot more revenue than \$30 million. It looks like we will have more operational police sitting in speed camera vans generating revenue for this government. What a misuse of operational police in what is only a dash for cash!

Let me turn to some of the justice issues in this budget. Before the last election the government announced a policy to introduce an offender levy. In that policy document the levy was directed towards a significant front-line police boost as well as supporting more services for victims of serious crime. The budget document indicates that the offender levy will bring in \$10 million this year and \$15 million for each of the next three years. There was also an education commitment to revitalise front-line justice services and empower victims of crime with \$1 million promised this year and \$1.5 million in the following two years. Yet the budget documents show that the money promised has not been delivered. Victims of crime support has been allocated half a million dollars each year in the forward estimates. So despite being promised big things before the election, despite passing legislation to collect the levy and pay the promise, and despite member after member opposite speaking during the debate on the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, the victims of crime have been let down by this government's first real test of its commitment to this vulnerable group of Queenslanders.

I could talk more about QBuild which, of course, has been slaughtered by this government, but I will leave that for another day—perhaps estimates. I will say that this budget certainly lays down a once-in-a-generation foundation. This is a foundation for a one-term-or-less Premier and a one-term government. I look forward to watching this disgraceful budget unravel. Finally, it is great to see rating agencies' ringing endorsement of this budget!