



Speech by

Tim Mulherin

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

Hansard Wednesday, 31 October 2012

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: AGRICULTURE, RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Mr MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (8.30 pm): The Agriculture, Environment and Resources Committee was overly weighted towards government questions and showed that the Newman government is intent on using its massive majority to ride roughshod over due process. Furthermore, after a brief adjournment of the hearing, the committee allowed Minister McVeigh to make a second 'opening statement', which further chewed up valuable time that should have been devoted to proper scrutiny of the budget. This is a further indication of a government that is determined to quash scrutiny.

It was refreshing to hear the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry talk up a number of projects in his portfolio initiated by the previous Labor government. The opposition finds it extremely troubling that some 45 full-time equivalent positions have been retrenched from the fire ant eradication program, particularly in light of the new infestation recently discovered in the Lockyer Valley. Moreover, it is worrying that the Newman government is refusing to fund the full \$6 million in additional funding for the fire ant eradication program agreed to through the Standing Council on Primary Industries. This decision jeopardises the entire national cost-sharing agreement. The threat that fire ants pose to the Queensland agricultural sector is immense. The government's short-sighted cost-cutting measures exacerbate that threat.

The government's decision not to proceed with the construction of a new, state-of-the-art biosecurity laboratory at James Cook University is reckless and irresponsible. It is interesting that, under questioning, the minister walked back from his previous statements that the project was entirely unfunded, recognising that a budget allocation of approximately \$17 million had been made by the previous government. In response to a question on notice from the member for Dalrymple, the minister indicated that the transfer of biosecurity functions from the existing Oonoonba facility to Coopers Plains would cost less than \$2.2 million. This is in direct contradiction to a ministerial briefing note released under right to information, which indicated the cost of upgrades to the Coopers Plains facility and to relocate it from Townsville was at least \$10 million. Under questioning, the minister claimed that the figure of \$10 million was an initial estimate which subsequent work by his department managed to reduce. The idea that the cost of upgrading the Coopers Plains facility could fall by a factor of five in just a matter of months is incredible.

The opposition believes the minister should give a full parliamentary update on this project and detail the scope of the works planned for the Coopers Plains facility. Given the minister's claim that the cost of those works has fallen by some \$8 million, it is most likely that the government has significantly altered the scope of the works recommended by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The decision to axe the JCU biosecurity lab significantly reduces North Queensland's biosecurity capacity and the minister has ignored departmental advice on the required work at Coopers Plains. His decision will drastically reduce the biosecurity capacity of the entire state.

In relation to fisheries, the opposition is concerned about the re-allocation of funding from the recreational use fee and does not believe it accords with the intent of the fee. It does not provide sufficient focus on recreational fishing activities. It is important to note that a number of programs have been defunded, including the recreational fishing enhancement and Fishcare volunteers program.

It was telling that the minister refused to answer, or even properly consider, a question on the competition between the forestry and agricultural industries for the use of scarce land. This is a legitimate area of concern, and government planning decisions to privilege one industry over another has the potential to greatly distort the Queensland economy away from the most efficient market allocation. In refusing to answer this question, the minister refused to rule out a return to the agrarian socialist tradition of the old National Party, which has always been a feature of Queensland conservative parties.

In an answer to a question taken on notice during the hearing, the minister was forced to reveal that the Newman government's massive job cuts will directly affect front-line service delivery in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Under the current definition of a front-line employee, some 55 front-line staff have been fired. Even this does not show the full extent of these job cuts as the Newman government, in their zeal to fire as many public servants as possible, has fiddled with the definition of 'front-line'. According to the definition used by the previous government, some 180 front-line positions will disappear from the department.