




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL; DUTIES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (10.31 am): I rise to contribute to the debate on the budget brought down this week by the Treasurer. The opening line in this year's Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Service Delivery Statements states—

A strong agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector remains essential to meeting the Queensland government's objective to create jobs in a diverse economy.

This statement is clearly at odds with the figures in this year's raids, rip-offs and writedowns budget. The raw figures show a 2.5 per cent cut to agricultural spending which equates to a real cut of \$5 million in the forward estimates. It is hardly a glowing endorsement of the importance that the agricultural sector plays in Queensland's economy and it reaffirms this government's history of neglecting rural and regional Queensland. While the minister says she is trying to grow agriculture across Queensland, in truth there is not a lot of support.

There is not a lot of commitment from her government, especially when costs have increased in line with CPI, Public Service wages are up 2.5 per cent, and average growth in government spending is three per cent. There is no big spending in agriculture. Indeed, the real question in terms of spending on biosecurity and the new Office of Rural Affairs with no new money is: what does it all mean to existing programs and more particularly to existing front-line staff and especially those in the regions? There is simply less money for agriculture against the background of Labor's massive spending spree in the Public Service vis-a-vis hiring 4,103 more staff than forecast in 2015-16 and with the Public Service wage bill ballooning by 7.3 per cent, but not in agriculture.

I firmly believe that agriculture is ideally positioned to fill the void left by the downturn in the mining and resources sector. There is a growing demand for our produce both domestically and internationally and there is no question that our hardworking farmers are at the forefront when it comes to producing top quality produce in this state. It is my vision to develop a global agribusiness plan focusing on major income creation for Queensland agribusiness with a special focus on South-East Asia. This is a budget short on detail. My phone has not stopped ringing with calls from producers, industry groups and media expressing their concern with the lack of detail contained within the budget.

I am particularly interested in how the government will work to improve front-line services in the areas of wild dog and pest officers, agronomists and fisheries officers. These positions are vital to ensure our farmers and producers receive the support they need to function. The LNP worked hard to get more staff in the regions out of head office and out into the regions and on the front line, but there are no new front-line staff in this budget. Overall, there is less money and fewer staff on the front line. Funds for the biosecurity overhaul will need to be found internally, so there will be cuts in other areas. We will have to wait and see where.

Whilst I acknowledge the ongoing commitment to drought assistance funding and the injection of funds into Queensland's biosecurity capability, Panama Disease and research facilities, I do have concerns with the government's announcement to rebadge the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority as the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority. Given that the Rural Debt and Drought Task Force report was then referred to the Finance Administration Committee for consideration and is not due back before the House until the end of the year, one would question the motive behind this initiative.

The announcement of this initiative in the budget makes a mockery of the committee process, and committee members and indeed producers right across the state have a right to question the logic behind this decision. I certainly hope this is not some bandaid measure rushed through parliament as part of the budget process to appease the task force chairman. There is no detail in the budget document relating to how this new entity will function and if in fact loans, grants, rebates and subsidies would be administered, including lending criteria, and if this new entity will be subject to the same strict financial regulations and rules as our commercial banks. After all, if our producers cannot access low-interest loans with more flexibility in terms of repayments and security than a commercial institution, what is the point in establishing this entity?

The last thing our producers need is another bureaucracy that creates more obstacles and burdensome red tape. The fact the minister is looking at an expanded board charter highlights these concerns. What assurance can the minister give that the new Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority will provide the necessary assistance to Queenslanders in an efficient and cost-effective manner? I also ask whether this new entity will continue to administer the delivery of the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangement Assistance Program for primary producers, small businesses and non-profit organisations.

I note that the minister is establishing a Queensland Climate Risk and Drought Resilience Program along with a new Office of Rural Affairs. Where will the funds for these initiatives come from? In a department that is strapped for cash and, according to the minister, needs to spend a lot of money on getting biosecurity up to scratch, how much will this cost and is this simply another layer of bureaucracy? There is nothing new here.

This is a Labor policy that someone in the bowels of the department has pulled out of the draw, blown the dust off and presented to the minister as a new, you-beaut idea for the bush. The last time that this was done, Labor's previous incarnation, the Office of Rural Affairs and Rural Communities, was headed by that old bushy, Anna Bligh's partner, Greg Withers. That is right: that old bushy with his South Brisbane earring. I wonder if he is still around and available to head up this new hard-hitting policy unit? I hope that our farmers and industry will be consulted on the minister's plan to introduce legislation to improve farm debt meditation as the relationship between our farmers and lending institutions has been at times in the past very ordinary.

I am pleased to see the removal of stamp duty on intergenerational transfer of farming properties where a financial consideration is exchanged. I believe this would be a great incentive for farming families to enact succession planning strategies earlier and help to future-proof the agricultural industry. I am aware this issue has been raised by Cotton Australia and that this concession does not apply to the water licence entitlement component of these intergenerational transfers. In many cases, the water licence component of an irrigated farming property can account for in excess of 50 per cent, and in some cases up to 80 per cent, of the value of the land and water package. As a consequence, I would ask the Treasurer that, if stamp duty still applies to the value of the water licences, this anomaly be rectified and that that exemption apply to the total family farm asset.

There is no questioning the importance of industry relevant education and training, so it is with some concern that I note a reduction in the number of full-time employees in the upcoming budget along with a reduction of almost \$2 million in funding from the 2015-16 budget to the 2016-17 budget. Surely at a time when we are talking about upskilling Queenslanders and creating jobs the government should be committing to additional funding in this area. After all, we are talking about our next generation of farmers.

I also believe there should be a greater use of our regional and rural TAFEs to deliver industry relevant education and training with a closer link to producers. To use Bowen as an example, I believe there is enormous scope in this community for agricultural courses through the TAFE in Bowen to link with our universities and deliver that training in a locality where they get firsthand experience and where there is a need to educate our next generation of farmers. This would keep our young people in the regions and provide real job opportunities and a career path for these young people.

The minister claims that her government is committed to high standards of biosecurity, but her claims are not supported by her actions. This is a government that cut biosecurity staff in 2014-15 from 621 to 561 in the 2015-16 year—that is right; a reduction of 60 staff. This week the minister has taken action to dump Queensland's hard-won protected zone status for Bovine Johne's Disease, more commonly known as BJD, leaving our state's 19,000 beef and dairy producers to cope for themselves. Furthermore, this minister has ignored serious concerns raised by dairy farmers and rushed ahead with the dumping of the protected zone without final approval from her own industry advisory committee because the paperwork failed to arrive in time for a recent meeting. Only the Queensland Dairyfarmers' Organisation have taken a stance and highlighted the total lack of consultation with real producers in Queensland.

This decision from the minister, dropped out this week with just a couple of weeks notice, is the last thing the industry needs and it goes totally against the line being held by other governments in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It has been packaged as a market driven, industry managed and risk based approach, but that is simply a smokescreen. It is now down to individual farms to cover off and protect their herds by getting assurances. All I can say is good luck with that. The truth is there has been no fair dinkum consultation with the vast majority of Queensland beef and dairy producers, no explanation from the minister, no meetings, no outline of how this is going to work, if the department is going to maintain a list of infected herds and properties, and how producers can check paperwork on the stated health status of cattle.

Earlier today I received a call from AgForce which expressed its concerns at the lack of information amongst our producers regarding BJD and how this removal of the protected zone status will impact on them. They have certainly raised concerns and issues, and a recommendation has been put forward to the government to have a health awareness document—statement or certificate; call it what you like—accompany all cattle, particularly those coming into Queensland, to give them that degree of comfort that they need to know they are bringing cattle into this state that are BJD free. The Queensland Dairyfarmers' Organisation surveyed its 450 members in August last year, and the overwhelming majority of respondents said that they wanted the protected zone maintained. Given that a shipment of dairy heifers from Victoria to Japan were recently found to have BJD, it highlights the potential risk to our live export industry and the need to ensure we maintain our protected status in Queensland.

We simply do not know with beef producers because there has been very limited consultation with only a handful of people. No survey has been undertaken by industry and certainly not by the government. With producers having to self-manage for BJD from 1 July, the entire industry was left wondering because the all-important new regulations on how it was supposed to work have still not been released by the minister. The key question the minister has failed to answer is how dumping the protected zone will stop the spread of BJD in Queensland's beef and dairy herds.

The budget papers show the government has failed to deliver on its promise made last year to establish a fish allocation policy and revised regulations for commercial fishing. Whilst I note the government will be engaging with recreational and commercial fishing organisations to investigate the establishment of a commercial net-free fishing area in Moreton Bay, I also note there is no funding allocated to this initiative in the budget. The commercial fishing sector in Queensland is in turmoil thanks to this government and not just because of the current minister but also because of her predecessor, Bill Byrne. It defies logic to think that this government is running at least a year behind—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I ask the member to refer to members by their official title.

Mr LAST: The member for Rockhampton; my apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. The minister is also paying lip-service to Queensland's forest and timber industry, which accounts for more than 10,000 jobs in this state. Apparently the minister is going to continue with the forest and timber industry plan—a plan the LNP started in 2012—but she does not even include the forestry industries in the title of her department.

The Treasurer has clearly shown in this budget that he is incapable of delivering a sustainable, long-term plan and an ability to create jobs in the agricultural sector. The agricultural industry needs a commitment from the government to take on the big issues, to reduce the price of electricity, to better manage and improve water assets, to open up overseas markets and commit to the delivery of infrastructure which will provide real growth in the sector. Unfortunately, what they got was confirmation that the agricultural sector is the poor cousin when it comes to funding in this state at a time when it has the potential to drag this state out of the mire pit it finds itself in. The LNP government had to re-form a dedicated department because there was no department of agriculture under Labor, and this budget clearly shows little has changed in terms of the importance of this sector to Queensland's future.

I now want to turn to my electorate of Burdekin. Words cannot express how disappointed I am in the lack of interest shown by this government in funding vital infrastructure projects throughout the electorate. Projects like the Drive It NQ facility at Calcium, the Bowen Developmental Road upgrade, the Haughton River Bridge project, the Stuart Drive upgrade in Townsville, the all-tide VMR boat-launching facility in the Burdekin, maternity services at Bowen Hospital, the Bowen boat harbour and Collinsville rejuvenation plan are just some of the projects that would kickstart the economy in the region and provide much needed jobs.

Whilst I welcome the commitment to the Mount Inkerman nature tourism development, Bowling Green Bay National Park walking track upgrade and widening of the Bruce highway at Nome, there is no commitment to projects which have the potential to create significant jobs. Regional communities such as Bowen and Collinsville, and to a lesser extent Ayr and Home Hill, are haemorrhaging, highlighted by the announcement last week that Glencore will be closing down the historic Bowen coke works which has been producing coking coal for several decades. Increasingly, we are seeing hotels, motels and small businesses in these towns closing. For Collinsville, in particular, it has reached a critical juncture. If we do not start supporting these communities, they will become ghost towns. That means stipulating the engagement of local contractors in government projects and providing the necessary funding and support to kickstart these projects.

I have often stated in this place that the Burdekin is ideally situated to become the food bowl of South-East Asia. Whilst I know it has often been talked about, there are real opportunities to develop this area to capitalise on the growing demand for Australian produce. If you want a real project that will create hundreds of jobs and change the face of North Queensland, then fund the Elliot Main Channel, which would open up all the land between Home Hill and Bowen to intensive irrigated farming. A raised spillway at Burdekin Falls Dam means there is no reason why this project could not proceed.

There is a distinct lack of confidence out there in rural and regional Queensland. Business owners are looking to government to deliver the big-ticket items—the major projects which will drive investment and boost consumer confidence. Townsville is a classic example of a community in the doldrums. We need to see more cranes and more activity in Townsville. We need to see our tradies gainfully employed to inspire the confidence to put on more apprentices, and the best way to do that is to start building.

Of particular concern to me is the ongoing delays to the Adani mine project and associated development at the Abbot Point terminal. I acknowledge my neighbouring member for Whitsunday, who spoke about the importance of this project yesterday when speaking about his own electorate.

I am pleased to advise the House that we are finally moving ahead with a prefeasibility study for the construction of a food processing plant in Bowen. This facility will not only process produce from the local region but potentially process produce from throughout the state. This is a game changer for this area. We are not sitting around and waiting for this do-nothing government to start long overdue infrastructure projects in the north. Bowen Collinsville Enterprise, Bowen Gumlu Growers Association and local DAF staff and growers are now working together to bring this project to fruition. We are not talking. We are rolling up our sleeves and making it happen. It is a pity that those opposite did not join us on this journey.