




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

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

 **Mr PERRETT** (Gympie—LNP) (3.40 pm): Less than \$800,000 and rebadging, reannouncements and recycling amounted to Gympie's share of the Queensland state Labor budget. That is less than \$20 for every person in the Gympie region. Gympie's share of the multibillion dollar budget was a rewrite of previous commitments and shows that, despite wild claims of supporting regional Queensland, this government is treating the region with contempt. I remind the government that Gympie is part of regional Queensland. This government is all about paying lip-service to investing in the regions and redressing serious issues of stalled growth and unemployment.

The budget is such a disappointment. For Gympie, all we were given were either announcements about works that have been ongoing for a number of years or a reannouncement of a reannouncement. Despite repeated representations and speeches in the parliament about Gympie's needs, the only new projects are the funding of the Gympie Special School and the Rainbow Beach Fire and Rescue Station. I welcome the commitments of \$490,000 for the Gympie Special School, for the renewal of the administration block and the additional classrooms; and \$300,000 for the Rainbow Beach Auxiliary Fire and Rescue Station. However, that is still \$1 million short of the \$1.3 million estimated by the department to replace the station. All we have in the reams of paper issued by the government are rebadging, reannouncements and recycling.

The \$1.4 million announced for the Rainbow Beach Ambulance Station is a reannouncement from last year's budget and delivers the LNP commitment of 2014. The LNP had committed \$1.5 million for construction of the ambulance station, with another \$400,000 for specialist ambulance vehicles. My representations and advocacy to the department in November last year meant the continuation of remediation works for abandoned mine land management, with \$500,000 to manage issues at Rainbow Beach and \$282,000 in Gympie through the Mine Shaft Repair Program. However, none of this is new as the remediation works are an ongoing project. The funding obligations committed to the Cooroy to Curra section of the Bruce Highway sections C and D are a continuation of the LNP's commitment. The major portion of funding, 80 per cent, comes from the federal government.

Gympie's list of missed needs is long and nothing has been done about it. There is no mention of funding for the upgrade of the Gympie Hospital. There is nothing identifiable to upgrade local bridges which will assist in flood-proofing the region. There is nothing about supporting our local TAFE and its courses which have been impacted by funding cuts last year. There is no identifiable capital expenditure to upgrade local arterial roads. There is no identifiable capital expenditure to upgrade and maintain local schools. There is nothing identified to support local government through targeted funding programs such as the control of feral animals and declared weeds. Gympie landholders continually face serious problems trying to control wild dogs, feral pigs and invasive weeds. I am disappointed that \$3.7 million in funding, spread over three years, has only been provided for control of wild dogs in areas affected by drought in Far Western Queensland.

There is nothing for regional and Gympie landholders. There is no mention of assistance to combat the class 2 weed giant rat's-tail which continues to affect landowners throughout the Gympie region. This is not a political football and it is important that all levels of government work together to assist landholders. GRT continues to spread and is an ongoing problem affecting many Gympie landowners. I am receiving concerning reports of it causing some properties to be devalued and become unviable. The grass is unpalatable and reduces grazing carrying capacities. Landowners are expected to comply with the conditions under the Biosecurity Act to control the weed. Unfortunately the cost to get on top of it is becoming prohibitive and it is severely impacting our valuable local agriculture sector.

The government refuses to provide a specific commitment for the iconic Mary Valley Heritage Railway as sought by the Gympie Regional Council. This is despite the previous LNP government budgeting \$2.6 million for the iconic railway. The Gympie Regional Council will have to apply through the contestable Building our Regions fund, meaning that this project will have to compete for funds against every other region in Queensland. Gympie residents should not hold out much hope for the support, because the government's track record on the Building our Regions fund shows that it does not readily provide to the regions. It has kept the purse strings tightly shut.

In the budget documents we learnt this week that the government could only find in the last year \$406,000 worth of projects to deliver to regional Queensland. That was out of a budget last year of \$70 million. That is right—less than 1.58 per cent of the budgeted \$70 million was spent on the Building our Regions fund. The reality is that last year, which was the government's first full year in office, the LNP's Royalties for Regions program, which this government scrapped, delivered more for regional Queensland than the government's own program. That is right; this government is so dismissive and contemptuous of the needs of regional Queensland that LNP programs delivered more than did the government.

This budget claims to be about regional Queensland, about infrastructure spending and about innovation. Despite the \$4 billion raid on superannuation, infrastructure spending has been slashed by \$2.3 billion when compared to infrastructure projects under the LNP. Despite promises and wild claims to deliver more infrastructure for regional Queensland, spending has been slashed in key regional areas like Wide Bay. Annual infrastructure spending is down by almost \$800 million when compared to the last LNP budget. The major infrastructure projects in the budget were either funded by the LNP or are being delivered by the private sector. The government is so desperate to bump up its lagging infrastructure investment it has included private projects in the budget papers. In fact, this budget will deliver the lowest infrastructure spend in Queensland's history.

Gympie would have gladly welcomed spending on infrastructure in the region, but it seems the government is not interested in Gympie. With an unemployment rate of 9.4 per cent in the December quarter, Gympie needs greater investment in local infrastructure projects, maintenance and improvement of existing facilities, and providing support and incentives for local business that want to grow in the area. Unemployment in the Wide Bay region is 8.6 per cent. It is 3.1 per cent above the Australian average and 2.2 per cent above the state average. Youth unemployment is 20.6 per cent for 15- to 24-year-olds and is one of the worst five regions in Australia.

I hope that the members for Bundaberg and Maryborough take a strong lead in this government and address these issues, because, for the last 27 years, the Labor party has been in government in this state for all but five of those years. Instead of always blaming someone else, it is time those members accept some responsibility. To date, all we hear are the reasons why they had nothing to do with it or why nothing can be done. Those statistics mean that when a party is in charge for 22 out of 27 years that party is responsible; the buck stops with it.

It is about time all electorates within the Wide Bay region were treated equally. Now is the chance for the members for Maryborough and Bundaberg to stand up for the unemployed of all of the Wide Bay to address the unacceptably high rates of unemployment, because the key drivers to reducing unemployment rates are state government investment in genuine key infrastructure projects which increase business and consumer confidence and which create an environment for strong business growth to provide educational opportunities. This budget does nothing about tackling Gympie's above average unemployment rates by making it easier for the region's 4,200 businesses to do business and employ people. It is business—and not bureaucrats—who are the best placed to provide growth and to create employment opportunities.

The Gympie business community is primarily made up of agriculture, manufacturing, construction, education and tourism, with significant employers that operate out of the region. The focus should be on providing a healthy economic and work environment and reducing over-regulation through kneejerk green and red tape which drives people from operating business. That is what is choking Gympie. Holding back employers are government policies limiting the activities of commercial fishers, oppressive tree clearing and vegetation management, increasingly onerous obligations to control feral

animals and weeds without support, and rising employment costs. This mean-spirited government is moving hardworking rural graziers and families who have operated in national parks off their leaseholds. It ignores the fact that they have sustainably grazed their properties for 100 years providing jobs, wealth for families and food production.

This government has budgeted \$209,000, out of a total spend of \$373,000, to progress the Great Sandy World Heritage nomination. This will not help wealth and employment creation in the coastal areas. This is a choking of the job prospects for the hardworking local tourist industry and commercial fishers in our region. These policies are a pay-off to the inner-city greenies at the expense of graziers, the tourist industry, fishers and regional Queenslanders at the expense of employment and wealth creation.

Whenever I speak to small business operators, they regularly raise employment costs including penalty rates, WorkCover and payroll tax being major inhibitors in trying to put on more staff. Whenever costs get out of hand, business is unable to put on more staff. The government needs to take the shackles off business, reduce oppressive regulatory red tape and allow them to borrow, invest, reinvest and open up more employment opportunities. Instead the state government made changes last year to workers compensation which made it harder for the 4,290 local businesses to create more jobs for the local unemployed. Local businesses have told me that they have been hit hard and are already experiencing increases of up to 49 per cent in workers compensation premiums. We all know that an increase in cost for small business workers premiums affects profitability and the ability to employ more people. Enough is enough about paying lip-service to the regions. The key challenges for the Gympie region are addressing the high levels of unemployment, making safer our road network, raising the education levels of locals so they have better chances of securing meaningful work, differentiating ourselves from other regions in attracting tourists, and providing quality facilities for health and education.

As I said earlier, there is nothing in this budget to support Gympie residents to improve their educational and skills levels. Education qualification levels in Gympie are among the lowest in Queensland, with only 13.5 per cent having a bachelor degree compared to 21.6 per cent in the state. Almost 70 per cent of students at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gympie campus are mature aged, demonstrating that the previous lack of a local higher education facility delayed their chances of further education. It is therefore disappointing that the government in the last 18 months has been systematically preventing and withdrawing increased educational opportunities for Gympie locals at both a vocational and university level.

The government has given nothing to support our local TAFE and its courses which have been impacted by funding cuts last year. Last year the government closed down nursing studies which were being delivered out of the Gympie TAFE. The nursing course was part of the collaborative arrangement Gympie TAFE had with the University of the Sunshine Coast, which is also situated at the Gympie education precinct. It was being used as a pathway course for students who were then able to transition to a bachelor degree at the USC. Compounding the problem is government inflexibility and a narrow, bureaucratic, visionless mindset regarding the USC. Since 2014 the university has been trying to expand its Gympie presence so it could offer more courses and increased spaces for enrolment. However, since February last year through sheer bloody-mindedness the minister has continually refused to support an expansion and prefers to leave an empty and unused building while students are denied access.

The minister's paralysis and inaction on decisions regarding the education precinct has impacted staff, students and courses. The minister is beholden to the union movement, which does not want to share the campus with anyone but is quite willing for buildings to lie empty and for courses to be gutted. This mindset is reckless and is an irresponsible treatment of taxpayers' dollars. It does nothing to address economic and educational activity in the region. There is both a cost to the community in lost opportunities and a cost in leaving buildings unused and empty. There are also lost opportunities for local students who are not able to attend university because of distance and financial factors, for the high number of unemployed youth who want to gain skills, and for mature aged students who are trying to upskill but who are not able to move away because of work and family commitments.

The only way to help growth in the Gympie region is by direct expenditure and investment in genuine key infrastructure projects. It does not mean recycling projects over and over again. The Bruce Highway upgrade from Cooroy to Curra has become the gift that keeps on giving. The stage C upgrade has been reannounced. The government continues to reannounce funding for what was an LNP commitment. The stage C upgrade was announced by the LNP minister and member for Indooroopilly with the then deputy prime minister Warren Truss and former prime minister Tony Abbott. There has been no real plan to grow Gympie and the Cooloolo Coast.

This budget is pretty light on for a government that has had to raid superannuation. This budget does not live up to any of its promises. All it does is deliver more debt, more deficit and a decline in infrastructure. Debt continues to increase over the forward years despite the unprecedented raid on superannuation. I remind members opposite of the Labor Party's election commitment to pay down debt. The Treasurer and Premier promised to pay off net debt, but this budget includes an increase to net debt of \$7 billion. Debt will continue to rise over the forward years. Debt is still increasing up towards \$80 billion, and it is clear this government has no plan for fixing it.

I do not know about members opposite, but when average Queenslanders look at their household or business budgets they know something is seriously wrong when debts continue to rise and spending is not reigned in. They know that it is time to pay off the debt and get rid of the superficial and unnecessary expenditure, otherwise debt will spin out of control. Unfortunately, this government is incapable of being fair dinkum about reining in expenditure and paying down debt. Instead it searches for hollow logs. I have news for those Labor members: those logs will dry up.

Last year the government used an accounting trick of shifting \$4 billion of debt onto government owned enterprises. This time they had to resort to stealing \$4 billion from public servants' superannuation to pay for their promises. The budget sets the priorities of the government. This is where the government is judged on whether it governs for all of the state, including the regions, so they grow and prosper.

The Treasurer promised an innovation budget, but there is nothing innovative about a short-sighted cash raid which does nothing to address the state's financial problems. There is nothing innovative about keeping businesses hamstrung from growing. There is nothing innovative in recycling announcements while paying lip-service to the regions. I am extremely disappointed that Gympie and the region has not received its fair share, and after 18 months the government continues to ignore Gympie and fails to deliver.