




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL; REVENUE
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (9.31 pm): I rise to deliver my response to the budget delivered this week. In his media release on Tuesday afternoon the minister said that the 2017-18 budget encourages economic development in rural and regional Queensland, yet this budget has cut overall funding to the Department of Agriculture. At a time when the agricultural sector is injecting more revenue into this state than ever before, this government cuts funding to the tune of \$14 million. It is patently obvious that the minister has not listened to our farmers, because if he had there would be money to address the spiralling electricity costs for the agricultural sector and money for dams such as Rookwood Weir, because in rural and regional Queensland water means money and a vision for our agricultural sector. Instead, we saw a cut to the agriculture budget and a cut to Labor's own Building Our Region Fund with no new money allocated. The President of AgForce described the budget as underwhelming, saying—

While there are billions of dollars set aside for road and rail projects in south-east Queensland, there appears to be no major new funding for regional and rural transport initiatives that would make it safer, easier and cheaper to get farm goods to market.

This view is not restricted to AgForce though, because as Stuart Armitage from QFF said—

The state budget has failed to properly fund and support a vision that rightfully places Queensland agriculture as a major contributor and employer in the state. It is disappointing that the reliable workhorse of rural and regional Queensland appears to be overlooked in the government's vision for the state.

It gets worse, because Growcon, canegrowers and the nursery and garden industry of Queensland also condemned this budget. That should ring alarm bells for this minister, because the government has failed to deliver for the bush. The government has failed to deliver that shot of confidence the agricultural sector needs. Is it any wonder that they shake their heads in dismay?

Our farmers are out there day in and day out dealing with those spiralling water and electricity charges, drought, wild dogs, sugarcane disputes, dodgy roads—you name it—and what thanks do they get? Absolutely nothing. This is confirmation that agriculture runs a distant last when it comes to the priorities of this do-nothing government. Once again, the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors are the poor cousin. Is that not a reflection on this minister who has sat back and watched as the axe was taken to this crucial portfolio? I might add that it is a portfolio which contributes \$19.95 billion to the Queensland economy and which employs 57,000 people. One has to feel sorry for the forestry industry, because it does not rate even a mention in the budget. I wonder what all those forestry workers and associated businesses think today about the fact that they did not rate a mention by a government that does little more than pay lip-service to the agricultural sector?

Perhaps the most frightening figure in the agricultural budget is the \$1.2 million allocated next financial year as part of the rural economic development package. To put this into context, as part of his responsibilities the minister is the Minister for Rural and Economic Development. The best he could muster up in this budget is \$5.2 million over three years to be shared among growing Queensland's food exports, establishing a rural economic economy centre of excellence and the continuation of the

department's one-stop service. Is it any wonder our industry bodies are unforgiving in their condemnation of this budget, not to mention our rural communities who rely on the agricultural sector for jobs and business?

In delivering his budget speech, the Treasurer said when talking about the reef that it remains under pressure from agricultural run-off, climate change, coastal development and illegal fishing but then in the next breath said the importance of Queensland's agricultural sector to the economy cannot be overstated. In one breath he is sinking the boot, blaming agricultural practices for climate change and damage to the reef, and then in the next breath he tries to tell us that the agricultural sector's contribution to the economy is crucial. If it is so crucial and important to the economy, why is the government not stumping up the funds in the budget to support and develop an industry that contributes so much to this state?

For our western graziers in the Warrego and Gregory electorates, this budget is a disaster. Funding for cluster fencing has dwindled to a paltry \$1 million, and that will have a major impact on the control of wild dogs in the western areas of the state. Our sheep and wool producers will be devastated by this news which now threatens to derail the process of wild dog eradication and the rebuilding of the sheep and goat herds in those areas. This decision will seriously undermine confidence in these western communities, threatening jobs and further impacting on those businesses that supply fencing and related products to graziers and contractors. There is unequivocal evidence to support the benefits of cluster fencing to the western areas of our state, and this cut is a major setback for those particular areas. It has given our sheep and wool growers optimism for the first time in many years and led to the revitalisation of the sheep and the wool industry. To pull the rug out from beneath the feet of these farmers through a massive reduction in cluster fence funding is appalling.

I note that the government is establishing a rural economies centre of excellence, and I certainly hope this is not a rebadging of the doomed office of rural affairs that we saw in last year's budget. Where will this centre of excellence be established and what will it actually do? Let us hope it is not another bureaucracy based in Brisbane.

I am particularly concerned that there is no line item in the budget for drought relief. Instead, one has to go to the fineprint to ascertain that this government will hold \$20 million centrally across no fewer than three departments. We talk about bureaucracy and red tape. If ever there was a recipe for disaster, one need look no further than a scheme which spreads its funding across three government departments with the Department of Agriculture holding no funds. That is right; the very department that should be holding the funds has no financial responsibility for the program, instead relying on that magical big bucket of money held centrally.

The budget papers refer to further funding being found in the revenue measures and yet a perusal of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines finds no funding allocated to drought relief arrangements, so one can only wonder how this scheme will be administered. I am bitterly disappointed that the funding of \$2 million over the next two years for the management of yellow crazy ants in and adjacent to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area comes at the exclusion of areas such as Townsville. I have a significant yellow crazy ant infestation at Nome, 20 kilometres south of Townsville, of which the minister is well aware and yet not one red cent is allocated to address the problem. It seems pointless to me to allocate funds for the eradication of yellow crazy ants in one part of the state to the exclusion of other areas. The area around Nome has been mapped, and residents and businesses including the world renowned Billabong Sanctuary are ready to commence baiting and treatment.

An opposition member interjected.

Mr LAST: That is the one. The Treasurer says the government will invest \$30 million over three years from 2017-18 towards the implementation of Queensland's fisheries management reforms. In his media release the minister said that additional funding of \$20.9 million over three years would support the sustainable fishing strategy. Which figure is correct? We are talking about \$9 million here and I think the minister needs to stand up in this place and explain the disparity in figures. The question that also needs to be asked is what programs or services within the department have been cut to provide the \$9 million which has been reprioritised to fund this initiative? It is like a game of chess, except in this case the minister is playing with taxpayers' money.

I note the minister has rolled out his fishing policy in the past few days, which has sounded alarm bells through both the recreational and commercial fishing industries. The minister's attempts to set up an advisory panel without representation from people in the industry certainly raises a red flag. I hope the minister takes note of action 8.1 in his strategy to amend legislation to clarify the roles of the minister and the fisheries department in decision-making because he has proved that independent, objective science need play no role in some of his decisions.

Agriculture is one of the pillars of the state's economy and I am proud to say that the LNP is 100 per cent behind our farmers and the agricultural sector and it is certainly my vision to develop a global agribusiness plan that will drive continued growth of our primary industries sector and support jobs growth in rural and regional areas. We need to unlock new market and growth opportunities for our agricultural products across the supply chain and address issues such as workforce and skills development, education and research and development.

This budget has failed to deliver on regional and rural transport initiatives that are imperative in getting our produce to market. Our rural roads in particular are in a sorry state of disrepair and producers are sick and tired of driving on unsealed roads that are poorly maintained and untrafficable for many months of the year. This government will spend billions of dollars on the Cross River Rail project whilst our hardworking truckies are freighting millions of dollars of produce every week over unsealed roads across this state. I want to acknowledge the \$3.4 million over four years for the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority to undertake a rural debt survey, operate a farm debt reconstruction office and develop a research function as this aligns very closely with the LNP's position on the recently passed bill.

Biosecurity funding falls well short of the mark. In particular, I am concerned at the lack of funding for weeds, such as prickly acacia which is decimating a large part of rural Queensland. I also want to mention the impact that white spot disease has had not only on our prawn farmers but also on commercial fishermen and crabbers in the Logan River and Moreton Bay area. I know the families and the commercial operators in that area are in desperate need of financial support. I want to acknowledge the work of my colleague the member for Redlands who has taken up the fight on their behalf. It is also disappointing that the intergenerational farm transfer duty exemption has not been extended to family trusts and companies which has been identified by industry bodies such as AgForce as a major issue.

The LNP is committed to building the dams, bridges and roads that Queensland needs. We will create jobs and diversify the economy by focusing on priority areas such as agriculture and build the appropriate frameworks to maintain the profitability, productivity and innovation that will underpin the competitiveness of the agricultural sector. 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.

I will turn to my electorate of Burdekin which has effectively doubled in size as a consequence of the recent electoral boundary changes. The Burdekin electorate will now take in most of the current Isaac Regional Council area. I look forward to working with the residents and businesses in this new area of my electorate which now becomes the economic powerhouse for the state of Queensland.

The budget does little to inspire any confidence in terms of job creation and infrastructure projects throughout my electorate. Many of the projects identified in the budget documents, such as the Bowen Hospital upgrade, a new police station and the Sandy Gully bridge upgrade, are either underway or nearing completion. There are no new projects. The refurbishment of the Collinsville pipeline and Bowen Broken Water Supply Scheme, whilst welcomed, are hardly game-changers in terms of job creation.

Given that Bowen and Collinsville, and to a lesser extent communities in the Isaac Regional Council area, were impacted by Cyclone Debbie, I certainly hope our fair share of the \$63.4 million for recovery and reconstruction projects flows through to these communities. I know my colleague the member for Whitsunday will talk about the impact that that cyclone had on the communities in his area and the need for development and support for those residents and businesses that were severely impacted.

I have already spoken with the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines about the need for urgent work on the Don River at Bowen to prevent a recurrence of the erosion of valuable farmland caused when the Don River overflowed during the recent cyclone event. There is also the issue of the marina at Bowen and damage to roads and infrastructure throughout the Whitsunday and Isaac regional council areas.

I welcome the funding commitment for the air conditioning of the Ayr State High School, the Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program at Home Hill and the Mount Inkerman nature tourism development. The issue of water for Townsville has been well documented. The impending release of the water task force report should provide a clear direction going forward of the infrastructure required to ensure Townsville never again faces a water crisis to the extent currently being experienced.

However, the fixation by this government on a hydro-electric project at the Burdekin Falls Dam is perplexing given previous studies have determined that this scheme is not viable at that location without substantially raising the height of the dam wall. There is no question that North Queensland needs cheap, reliable, base load power. The 50 per cent renewable energy target set by this government is doing nothing but driving prices up.

I also want to acknowledge the funding made available for the construction of the Moranbah Youth and Community Centre, which will be delivered in partnership with BHP Billiton Mitsubishi coal operations and the relocation of the Clermont Moncler Monash Lodge to the Clermont Hospital. These are important projects for those communities that deliver much needed services in the respective communities.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Farmer): Order! Member just a moment, please. Members, there is an increasing volume of conversation in the chamber. Could I ask members who are standing in the aisle ways and gangways to please resume their seats so that we can—

Opposition members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Every member has the right to be heard. I ask that we show respect to the member for Burdekin.

Mr LAST: Once again I see no funds for the Stuart Drive upgrade in Townsville, the motor sport precinct at Calcium, an all-tide VMR boat-launching facility in the Burdekin, dredging of an all-tide access channel at Molongle Creek or the Collinsville rejuvenation project. These are all projects that will create real jobs and kickstart the economy in the region.

Increasingly, we are seeing hotel, motels and small businesses in these towns closing. For towns such as Glenden it has reached a critical juncture. If we do not start supporting these communities they will become ghost towns. That means stimulating the engaging of local contractors in government projects and providing the necessary funding and support to kickstart these projects.

There is a common message in all the rural towns that I visit. That message is that if we do not arrest the decline in population, if we do not stop the families from packing up and leaving these communities we will not have anyone living west of the Great Dividing Range. It might not sound like much, but the addition of a few families can often make the difference between a school staying open, a police station remaining as a two- or three-officer station or the local hospital retaining staff. It might be good in theory to service our smaller rural towns from larger regional centres, but it does nothing to support our local businesses and it does nothing for the long-term future of these communities.

I have been working with the Bowen Collinsville Enterprise on the construction of a food-processing plant at Bowen—a project that has the potential to deliver hundreds of jobs to this community. It is projects like this that are needed across rural and regional Queensland. We need vision. We need a government that can look outside the square. Unfortunately those opposite are letting Queenslanders down.

Youth unemployment in the outback is sitting at 48 per cent. That is right, one in two youths in our outback communities is out of work. If this government thinks this budget is going to solve that problem they are delusional.

Business owners are looking to government to deliver the big ticket items—the major projects which will drive investment and boost consumer confidence. Delivering a budget with a forecast debt of \$81.1 billion and an unemployment rate across the state above six per cent does nothing to inspire confidence. Is it any wonder Queenslanders are bitterly disappointed with this budget?

The people who live in our rural and regional communities deserve better. They deserve the same level of service as those people who live in the city. They need to know that they will not be forgotten. I have the utmost respect and admiration for all those people who live in our rural and regional centres. I can assure each and every one of them that the LNP will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in the fight to ensure that they get their fair share of the budget pie.

I meet with locals in my communities every day. I hear their stories and I share their pain. It is the reason I go to work every day. I want to make a difference. I want to build a better Queensland to provide the jobs, the facilities, the services, the development, but, more importantly, the opportunities for those people to be able to live and find employment in our rural communities. For that reason, the LNP is the only option for our rural and regional Queenslanders in this state. They need to know that we will stand shoulder to shoulder with them to ensure that happens.