




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL:
AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (5.50 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate of the Appropriation Bill 2017, in particular the Agriculture and Environment Committee estimates hearing report. The estimates hearing provided unequivocal proof that the agriculture portfolio under the watch of Minister Bill Byrne is the poor cousin when compared to other government departments. To see this, one needs look no further than the fact that the department suffered a budget cut of 3.2 per cent—from \$438.954 million to \$424.742 million this year, down \$14.212 million. Astonishingly, the minister gave evidence that there had been no cuts to the budget. That is right: no cuts. That begs the question: are the figures contained in the budget papers incorrect or is the minister misleading parliament? It gets worse, because the minister under questioning also stated that there had been no cuts to staffing, yet the budget documents clearly show a reduction in FTEs.

Earlier today the Premier stood in this place and crowed about the revenue generated by the agriculture sector in this state, yet here we have confirmation that the agriculture budget for this year has been cut to the tune of \$14.212 million—hardly a glowing endorsement of the agriculture sector in this state. This minister is not across his portfolio. During the estimates hearing I asked—

Minister, you clearly said 'no cuts' but, clearly, there have been. Are you saying that the figures in the SDS are wrong?

He replied—

I do not even know what to say to that.

That should be ringing alarm bells right around this state, because the reduction in the agriculture budget is a clear indication that this government does not care about the agriculture sector in Queensland.

The minister now incorporates in his title 'rural economic development', yet under questioning the minister could not identify the section within the Service Delivery Statements that relates to this portfolio area. It gets worse, with just 0.003 per cent allocated to rural economic development in the budget. Is that all our rural industries are worth to this government?

The figures do not add up, with funding under the Rural Economic Development package provided for Growing Queensland's Food Exports, the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence and a continuation of the department's one-stop shop. When I asked the minister how the amount of \$1.2 million would be broken up across these three initiatives this year, the minister responded that the one-stop shop will cost \$300,000, with \$1.3 million allocated over two years for Growing Queensland's Food Exports. Of course, the obvious question is: how much has been allocated to the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence? You would have to ask: is this another one of those doomed initiatives like the Office of Rural Affairs, which was put forward in last year's budget?

Farmers right across Queensland would have been horrified to learn that a question to the director-general regarding what new measures were introduced in the budget to help farmers in the agriculture sector tackle record high electricity prices was ruled out of order by the chair. At a time when

spiralling electricity prices are crippling our farmers, this minister and his director-general do not believe it fits within the portfolio. Instead we had a rambling response from the minister including this little pearler—

... Minister Bailey has been an absolutely outstanding minister.

Who said that? Minister? The government has made a lot of noise around its Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance, yet under questioning this minister could not tell the committee how many jobs had been created under this initiative. What a disgrace. Is it any wonder the rural sector has completely lost confidence in this incompetent minister?

Earlier today we heard that six out of 10 youth are unemployed in our rural sector. Isn't that statistic damning of this government? Many of our rural and regional communities are facing significant challenges in maintaining their population base and addressing spiralling unemployment rates. I firmly believe in the agriculture sector and that it can save the day for many of these communities. All they need is a commitment for critical infrastructure such as water supply and roads and a reduction in the cost of electricity for irrigation. It is not that difficult.

Our farmers are the backbone of this state. Our primary industries are providing more and more revenue, yet this government has clearly shown in this year's budget that the agriculture portfolio is the poor cousin when it comes to funding.