




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) (2020-2021) BILL

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 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (5.03 pm): It is well known that the Labor government are famous for their ability to do nothing, particularly in terms of infrastructure development. Not only can they do nothing; they can do nothing for impossibly extended periods. Top of mind for me are the empty agricultural colleges in my electorate or the lack of investment in our vital road networks. As a result, over the last five years Queensland has fallen further and further behind New South Wales and Victoria.

It is clear to me that a big part of the reason the Labor government has allowed this to happen is that Queensland under Labor has lacked any economic leadership. We have lacked it for half a decade. The government spent most of a year trying to recruit a chief economist without any success. Apparently no-one wanted the title 'Queensland chief economist' on their CV and it was not seen as a real career booster. The joke around the pubs was that we did not need a chief economist anyway because we did not have much of an economy left, having attacked our own agriculture, mining and tourism industries.

After this long game of musical chairs we have a new Treasurer and a new Under Treasurer. All those who love Queensland—and I love Queensland—must hope they bring something more to the job than their predecessors did in the last two Labor administrations. We speak this week in response to their first budget effort. This is a budget Labor would not release before the election, but I cannot really see what the issue was. This is a budget of no surprises and, therefore, very little new hope.

Up-front I must say that I do welcome the recognition of the importance of the regions in the budget strategy. It says the regions will play a critical role in driving Queensland's recovery from the impact of coronavirus. Unfortunately, I have concluded that this is mostly cheap flattery in the case of Central Queensland as west of Rockhampton and Mackay there is not a single extra dollar being invested to back that up. All the funding announced in departmental budgets was previously announced or has been given a quick rejig or freshen up before being wheeled out again. Even the Blackwater manual arts announcement is in that category; that was announced a long time ago. In fact, the press release was out eight months ago.

Yesterday I tried to find out when agricultural freight will be able to use Labor's promised inland freight route, but the Minister for Agricultural Industry Development did not seem to know. Yesterday I also listened with great intent to the ministerial statement by the Minister for Employment and Small Business and the Minister for Training and Skills Development. The minister spoke of the \$1 billion investment in training. The minister said that this would include—

\$200 million over four years for the Building Future Skills Fund including the \$100 million rollout of new and improved TAFE facilities across Queensland which will position Queenslanders in every region to take up the jobs of the future, including in renewable energy, agriculture ...

Let me highlight that. The minister said it will position Queenslanders in every region to be able to get the training they need to be job ready and have the skills they need for meaningful employment. Guess what? There is not one dollar of investment for Central Queensland west of Rockhampton. The

Longreach Pastoral College sits empty while the Labor government sits on a detailed proposal from the Remote Area Planning and Development Board, or RAPAD as it is known, to use the facility to provide skills training in the west. In the budget there is not one extra dollar of investment.

Likewise, on the Central Highlands the Emerald Agricultural College campus sits empty and the TAFE campus falls into disrepair. We have lost and continue to lose valuable teaching staff due to that. Essential courses are closed down even though our biggest employers are the mining industry, the agricultural industry, and tourism and hospitality.

Only this week I was approached by an Emerald mother whose 15-year-old son enrolled to do his electrical certificate II through the VETiS program at the CQU Emerald campus. The course was cancelled as there is no electrical teacher at the campus. In desperation she tried to enrol him in Rockhampton, although this would entail her driving him on a six-hour round trip to attend classes. Both Rockhampton courses are full.

In Blackwater one of my constituents has returned to TAFE as a mature age apprentice to gain qualifications in the specialised field of high voltage electricity. They lost their teacher last year. Between mining, Powerlink and the electrified coal rail freight network, there is high demand for these qualifications in Blackwater. However, in order to receive the training, our children have to leave their homes and leave their region to have a chance. One of the advantages in living in a mining or an agricultural town is that you should have an opportunity in terms of training and employment in those industries, but this is simply not happening. So excuse me if I take offence at the minister's boast that every Queenslanders in every region will have that opportunity. Under this government and this budget, they do not have that opportunity in the Central Highlands and they do not have it in the Central West.

I also noted with interest yesterday's ministerial statement by the new Minister for the Environment and the Great Barrier Reef and the Minister for Science and Youth Affairs. The minister highlighted the investment of \$5.5 million over four years 'to expand our air quality monitoring and management system'. For most of the last parliament I have been trying to get the minister's predecessor to engage with my constituents in the town of Bluff, which is 20 kilometres east of Blackwater. They have been suffering major dust issues from a mine which was approved far too close to their town. I heard crickets.

When I heard the ministerial statement yesterday, I hoped for a minute that the department would be monitoring air quality in all of our Bowen Basin towns—Blackwater, Bluff, Emerald, Capella, Tieri, Dysart, Glenden, Moranbah, Clermont, Nebo and others. We know that there has been a return of black lung but, even addressing that, the government has chosen not to measure air quality in our mining towns—or at least not in the public and transparent way that might show any problems and allow GPs to manage vulnerable residents. Unfortunately, the government having announced the expansion of air quality monitoring, the minister did not go on to say where this would be done and whether it would be done on permanent monitors or portable monitors. Instead, the minister merely stated the obvious in that air monitoring is 'a crucial source of information for governments and the community during extreme weather events like bushfires'. You have to be kidding! Our mining communities have the right to permanent air quality monitoring before we worry about air quality during weather events.

Yesterday afternoon I spoke of the drought and mental health crisis on the Central Highlands and across the Central West of Queensland. As I said, Gregory claims a spot in the top five areas around Australia for suicides. This has everything to do with drought and despair and with the closure of the essential small businesses and trades that make our communities viable. It has everything to do with the hollowing out of our populations and the loss of the frontline public service. I am grateful for the continuation of the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme, but the proposed axing of the fodder subsidy would be vicious, short-sighted and just plain wrong. I am pleased to see funding allocations for the council programs—Building our Regions and Works for Queensland—confirmed, but it is not new hope. We need much more from this Labor government.

I welcome funding for infrastructure investments at Capella State School, Blackwater State High School, Woorabinda State School, Longreach State High School and Longreach State School, but Gregory accounts for a quarter of Queensland's land mass—there are over 55 schools—and this should be reflected in a much larger investment. There is also a real need to provide families across Central Queensland west of Rockhampton with large investments in special needs education in regional schools. This is a very important subject for people in the Central Highlands and the Central West. We have people whose children have special needs, yet we do not have the resources. Families move away to try and get a better opportunity for their children who need those services. We need to put special needs front and centre for rural, remote and regional Queensland. They are just as important in rural, remote and regional Queensland as they are in the south-east, and we need to invest in those

children and families who are so valuable to our communities. We need to put more effort into special needs. I call on the education minister, the Treasurer and the Premier to take this up for rural, remote and regional Queensland. It is desperately needed.

There is a desperate need to improve our access to trades training. In the Labor seat of Rockhampton, the Treasurer is giving \$8 million towards stage 1 to rebuild the TAFE facility. I am asking the Treasurer to consider the huge need for this west of Rockhampton as well.

During the election Labor promised renal dialysis services in Longreach. I have spoken in the House about how urgent the need is for both Longreach and Emerald. Less remote centres have been promised it. People need this. People are dying for the lack of it in Central Western Queensland, yet I see no funding allocation for Longreach and certainly none for the larger towns such as Emerald, which services a shire the size of Tasmania. I call on the Labor Party and the Treasurer to show some leadership in health, which has clearly been lacking, and to allocate this funding for renal dialysis for Longreach—Labor promised it—and to ensure renal dialysis funding is also moved into the Emerald area so that people can access this necessary service.

Similarly, transport is about more than the needs of the South-East Queensland commuter. As Minister Bailey made massive commitments in South-East Queensland transport, including freezing the price of tickets, regional drivers' registration costs spiral and roads fall apart as the maintenance budget is robbed for the flash and dash. Registration costs are going up. A lot of people in Gregory need to register work vehicles such as trucks, semitrailers and road trains, but the roads are starting to deteriorate very badly. If you use the road between Emerald and Alpha, you are sometimes lucky to survive. That road is falling apart and is being used more and more as we see the opening up of the Galilee Basin and we see more transport—road trains transporting cattle from the west to the east because of the drought. We urgently need to upgrade that road.

I am also calling on the Treasurer to show some economic leadership and enforce some fiscal accountability on the use of funds in the Department of Transport and Main Roads. The Treasurer will already be starting work on his next budget, due in about six months. Between the south-east corner and North Queensland is the beating heart of our state: Central Queensland. It makes a massive economic contribution to Queensland through the mining industry—whether it be the Bowen Basin or through the opening up of the Galilee Basin—and the agriculture industry on the Central Highlands. The minister for agriculture knows very well that it is a fantastic place to see agriculture grow, be it in cotton, wheat, cattle or citrus. It is the salad bowl of Queensland and it is the beating heart.

In the western part of Queensland, in the Central West, we are seeing an increase in sheep numbers because of cluster fencing. I commend the Premier on her investment in cluster fencing in Western Queensland. I think that is a fantastic idea—an idea started under Andrew Cripps and continued on by the Premier and by agriculture ministers including Minister Furner, who has committed more funding to cluster fencing. We are starting to see lambing rates, which used to be about 15 per cent or even less, around 90 or 95 per cent. We are actually seeing 110 per cent lambing rates where we are seeing twins hit the ground. That is yield increase in the wool industry. The more lambs we put on the ground, the more opportunity we have for a wool clip. We need to rebuild the wool industry out there. We also need to put an effort into making sure our beef industry continues to survive. Reef regulations and vegetation management do not help that industry whatsoever.

I am calling on the Palaszczuk government to invest in agriculture as it will get that back—big time. The same applies to the mining industry. We need more effort put into regional Queensland. That is why I said that between South-East Queensland and North Queensland is the economic beating heart of Queensland: Central Queensland. From Rockhampton and Mackay, all the way out to Boulia and down to Birdsville, you have a massive industry. The biggest beef herd in Australia is in the Central Highlands, going all the way up to Mackay and east to Rockhampton. We need to invest in that. I was hoping that this budget would invest more in agriculture.

I am concerned about the slashing of the agriculture department's budget of \$44 million. We need to invest in agronomists, extension officers and R and D. Finally, we need to reopen the Emerald Agricultural College and the Longreach Pastoral College. There is a great plan from RAPAD to start working with the big pastoral houses to do induction courses there, to start reopening the Longreach Pastoral College. With the Emerald Agricultural College there is interest from the Cotton Growers Research Development Corporation and the Grains Development Research Corporation, who want to invest in R and D in northern cropping on the Emerald farm. That will see us adapt to better varieties, whether it is cotton, wheat or chickpea. We need to invest in those sorts of R and D projects so we can grow our trade to our overseas neighbours, especially in South-East Asia. There is a great opportunity. Invest in these agricultural colleges and let's see this happen.