




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BONNEY

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) (2020-2021) BILL

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 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (6.11 pm): I will start my contribution by talking about the budget measures within my opposition portfolios of environment and the Great Barrier Reef, science and innovation, and youth. Queensland is the most ecologically rich and diverse part of our country. We have the best beaches and natural beauty, from the outback to our rainforests and out to the reef. With that comes a massive responsibility to protect and enhance what we have to conserve these natural wonders for generations to come.

That is why it came as quite a surprise to me to hear across the chamber minister after minister proclaiming record spending and record budgets but not when it comes to the Minister for the Environment and the Great Barrier Reef. The minister has clearly drawn the short straw because there has been almost \$9 million in cuts to her department's budget compared to last year. For once, I certainly hope this straw is of the single-use variety to make sure this arm of government has the resources it needs. That is particularly relevant this week as we see almost half of K'gari, or Fraser Island, lost to devastating bushfires with serious questions raised over preparedness.

I acknowledge that with the machinery-of-government changes arts has now been moved, but with the addition of youth affairs to the Department of Environment and Science it really is unclear why such a cut in funding has occurred. Where has this funding been cut from? Which part of our environment does this government no longer think is worth spending money on? Is it fewer trails for families to walk through our beautiful bushland? Did it lead to a decrease in the maintenance and management of campgrounds in national parks so that they are not prepared for Queenslanders? Is it less investment in the protection of our endangered species? I would welcome clarification from the minister.

Going through the list of environmental projects the government has considered worthy, close to \$16 million has been allocated for the acquisition of land to designate it as protected area. How much does \$15.8 million buy? What is the ambitious target the government is trying to hit this year, alongside the introduction of the Protected Area Strategy 2020-2030?

We have heard a lot of cherry-picked comparisons to other states on other matters, so let us have a look around Australia first. In New South Wales, they have over nine per cent protected. Victoria has over 17 per cent protected. Western Australia has 23 per cent of its land protected. The Northern Territory has 24 per cent protected. South Australia has over 30 per cent protected. Tasmania has over 42 per cent protected. The ACT has over 55 per cent protected. The budget shows Queensland lists our current percentage as 8.24 per cent of our land area. What is Labor's aim to increase this figure to in the next year? The answer is 8.25 per cent—an increase of just 0.01 per cent. We will still remain the state with the lowest percentage of protected area in the nation. It is an extraordinary lack of ambition from the government, especially when you consider our international obligations require us to get to 17 per cent as a minimum.

The 2019 report put together by the National Parks Association *Selling nature short: Queensland's failure to invest in protected areas placing wildlife at risk* is supported by the Wilderness Society, the WWF, the Queensland Conservation Council, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the PEW Charitable Trusts and is scathing on the government's progress. It states—

Queensland's exceptionally slow progress on protected area establishment is not a result of any fundamental barrier, but rather a reflection of a puzzling lack of government interest in making the necessary capital budget measures ...

Our Living Outback's commentary on the budget noted that it would actually take 127 years to reach that target at the government's current rate of increase. The minister and I may be the two youngest members of this House, so we could be optimistic about how long we will have the honour of serving here, but I think it might even be pushing it to think we will still be here in 127 years.

I welcome the spending on projects for the Great Barrier Reef rejuvenation and water quality. The Great Barrier Reef is an important asset both environmentally and for our state's economic recovery as a tourist destination. I want to work constructively with members opposite to see it protected and enhanced with funding for adaptation and resilience programs.

The budget measures appear to have merit but they are nothing if they do not achieve their targets. There needs to be more detailed KPIs each year for what is being achieved so that we can assess whether they are working or not. It is a similar story with the regularly touted 'flagship' Land Restoration Fund. Here is what Mike Guerin, CEO of AgForce, recently said of this program—

The Land Restoration Fund in our view is great in theory, but has been a disaster in practice ... We've had producers going to workshops over the last few years keen to understand how they can apply for grants and make some of these changes, but what they've left with a huge PowerPoint deck of information, which is so awfully complex ... Often they get to the end of that process and they are none the wiser. So the consultant has made the money and the producer is left behind again ... It could help landholders and others contribute to better biodiversity and support better climate outcomes, but in practice it is another bureaucratic nightmare.

In reality, less than a fifth of \$500 million available has been allocated since the program began in 2018. The balance of that funding—over \$400 million—does not even rate a mention in the budget, even in the forward estimates. These programs only work if their aims are actually achieved. The Land Restoration Fund could work and be a benefit to our agricultural sector, but some of the problems in accessing it need to be fixed urgently. We need to go beyond the rhetoric and get the outcomes for our environment to ensure we protect the natural beauty we have in Queensland for generations to come.

On the science front, there is not a lot to say because there is nothing particularly inspiring in the budget. I would have loved to see—after a year of a global pandemic in which people have arguably been more engrossed in, engaged with and in many cases ruled by science and evidence—real investment in science and research, but there is precious little new to see. In the SDS, its aim for science would be to increase the value, participation, contribution and impact of science, to strengthen the capacity, resilience and preparedness of the Queensland community. This is not reflected in the budget. There are no meaningful measures to ensure this happens.

Locally I have been advocating for a science centre on the Gold Coast for some time now. We are the only city of our size across the country without an educational facility of this type. The state government supports them in many other places across Queensland. The minister is a proud Gold Coast MP and should take the initiative to investigate this for our region, to use all of the resources of her department to prepare a business case. I am happy to show the minister where I think it should go—in the middle of the Gold Coast next to Griffith University, where there is even an empty state owned building left over from the Commonwealth Games. I will even introduce the minister to the Science on the Go leaders and do whatever else I can to make this project a reality.

We need to dream big if we want Queensland to truly prosper. Innovation is about ideas and creativity. We need to not be limited by what side of the chamber those ideas come from. After the year we have had, we need to look for every opportunity for new infrastructure, projects, strategies and ways to forge a new future for Queensland.

Another project that I think would be worthy of state investment is the Advanced Design and Prototyping Technology, or ADaPT, initiative of Griffith University. They have the land, they just need a financial contribution from the state to help get it built. For youth, while there is an objective to enable young people to have a voice and provide opportunities to lead and contribute, there needs to be a bigger vision than just the youth advisory panel. Youth unemployment in our state is woeful. It is the highest in the nation at 15.5 per cent.

The mental health of our young people is also an area where we need more investment. Just this week we have seen two stories in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* about youth suicide rates and the number of young people on medication for anxiety and depression.

It is the greatest honour of my life to stand in this place as the re-elected member for Bonney and to continue representing the community that I love and that I call home. Unfortunately for the Gold Coast, it seems like the government has been more interested in political considerations rather than directing money to where it is needed. Many of the funded projects are in the marginal seats they threw the kitchen sink at to try to pick up—unsuccessfully, I might add—or in the one seat they hold on the Gold Coast.

I will start with what we did get from this budget for Bonney. It will not take too long because it is not much. It was good to see the mid-2019 commitment to build an expanded mental health unit for the Gold Coast University Hospital, although it was disappointing that only \$290,000 of that was in this budget. We finally got a long overdue upgrade for the Southport Special School's entrance to incorporate a bus and taxi set-down, which is something I have been working to get since 2018. I have actually been on the Southport Special School bus for one of their runs to see firsthand the nightmare that drivers, staff, parents and students face in getting into this school. They often have to drive all the way up from towards Pimpama and Ormeau down to Southport. Often the bus has to go around the block three or four times to get into the school. This causes issues for the neighbouring Musgrave Hill State School, Musgrave Hill Community Children's Centre and the Southport Flexi School, not to mention local residents.

I could not find the \$700,000 committed by Labor for a new fence at Coombabah State High School, so I will keep onto that to make sure it is delivered, although it is quite a lot for a fence. The money for the Health and Knowledge Precinct has been in the budget for some time. There is nothing new here, just like there is nothing new facilitated by the government happening at the precinct. Not a single project within this precinct has been started. It is basically just a big empty carpark. This is a monumental missed opportunity.

One of the biggest disappointments is the second M1, or the Coomera Connector. For years and years the second M1 has only ever had planning money, and after six years Labor has not even finished that planning. Of \$1.531 billion, only \$12 million was allocated to the project in this budget for 2020-21. That is less than one per cent of the total funding for the second M1 being delivered this year. Next year the \$115 million is only 7.6 per cent of the total funding. In fact, almost half of the funding is not allocated until 2024 or later.

The government has had more than five years to get this road built, but all they have been able to do is plan, blame others and make excuses. At this rate, it is likely that Gold Coasters will not be driving on the second M1 until at least after the next election. We are sick of sitting in traffic, and this road is what we need to fix much of it.

I worked hard during the last term to assess what was most needed in my area. I spent countless hours at schools, community and sporting groups talking to those in my part of the Gold Coast about what is most needed in our area and getting around to every corner of the electorate. As a result, I came up with this plan for Bonney to take to the election. I would like to table that now because it is a list of all of the items I will continue to advocate for. I would love to say that many of these things have been picked up and are reflected in the budget, but not a single one has been.

Tabled paper: Newsletter, dated October 2020, from the member for Bonney, Mr Sam O'Connor MP [354](#).

For yet another year there is very little for the state schools in my area from Labor. Labrador State School celebrates 100 years next year. What it needs is a fully refurbished multipurpose community hall. The current one has not been touched since it was built 40 years ago. Labor's commitment was to whack in a couple of fans for the hall, which will not do much to help the kids who have to sit in there sweating for much of the year. The \$150,000 committed by Labor at the election is not listed in the budget, but I do hope it is covered by some of the other various funding. The minister is more than welcome to fully fund the hall if she sees fit.

At Arundel, I am aware that the state has contributed towards their new undercover structure through the School Subsidy Scheme. The P&C did fantastic work there, but their classrooms need some of the investment we are seeing at other schools. The government has said they are master planning the school, yet nothing has appeared in this budget. There has been no contact with the principal, school council chair or P&C about this master plan. I ask the minister to please include this upgrade in the next state budget. I will do whatever I can to support the master planning process. My community and I just want to see funding for better buildings at Arundel.

As already announced, we have the replacement building for block B at Southport State High School, which was funded by an insurance payment after last year's fire. The commitment to provide \$100 million over three years to employ 464 additional wellbeing professionals in Queensland state schools and to trial the placement of general practitioners in up to 20 schools also has great merit. I

have seen the value of the wellbeing officer at Arundel State School, which has been able to make that appointment through the great IPS initiative. Zoe Lowe has had a profound impact on both staff and students. She is a known safe place to go to for everyone in the school. She runs classes for every child who has been identified as needing extra support for anxiety.

While work on Brisbane Road at Olsen Avenue is thankfully underway thanks to the federal government paying for half of it, at the Pine Ridge and Captain Cook intersection of Brisbane Road we are once again still looking at planning money until 2022, so it looks like the council will have to go it alone there. While we have seen park and rides at other stations, Helensvale has again been overlooked. The government is all too happy to talk about this station and its connectivity with buses and heavy and light rail; they just do not want to make it more accessible for locals to use. What they need is more car parks.

As we grow, we need to stay ahead of our infrastructure needs rather than scrambling to catch up. I welcome the freeze on public transport fares. We need to get people back onto public transport, particularly because cost-of-living struggles will be faced by many in 2021 as we continue to recover from this pandemic.

I have repeatedly spoken about the need for more police and tougher laws in my area. I have heard story after story of crime being out of control and victims not getting justice. While there have been additional police personnel committed, we have seen on more than one occasion that this government will delay these appointments for as long as they can and will not provide the laws to back them up. Southport station, Runaway Bay station and the Arundel Police Hub urgently need more officers allocated to them to give them the resources they need to take on the tens of thousands of calls for service they receive.

In summary, we were promised a lot and saw little. I want the best for my part of the Gold Coast, and I will continue to fight for it as long as I am in this House.