




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 3 December 2020

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) (2020-2021) BILL

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 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (8.07 pm): The Palaszczuk government has broken several promises in its new term of government. During the election campaign the figure of \$4 billion of additional borrowings was repeatedly used and, as the budget exposes, that figure has now blown out to \$28 billion. The government asked for a mandate on the back of the \$4 billion increase in borrowings and now it is seven times that figure. It is a clear breach of trust.

We also see a lack of ambition for jobs. In four years time we will still have the worst unemployment numbers in the country and it is simply not good enough. It has been said that secrecy is the enemy of democracy. It is now common practice that the Treasurer, as part of a government that believes itself above scrutiny and forever fearful that its mismanagement will be exposed, tries to hide the facts from Queenslanders. By starting this new term of government in a similar manner to the last five years, the government is seeking to hide information like the real debt levels from the public.

There were mistruths told during the campaign by the Labor Party about the supposed LNP cuts to the Public Service, but when the Queensland ALP Treasurer released his budget costings we saw that in fact the ALP will cut a billion dollars from Queensland Health. The costing document begins with a statement from the Treasurer, Cameron Dick, about how Labor's plan was the only fiscally responsible approach and that any attempt to achieve economic recovery through austerity measures would only delay recovery. The document then goes on to allude to how the 9,000 doctors, nurses and allied health professionals that Labor had committed to hire over the next four years would be funded from existing health budget funding. That means cutting funding from health, with Cameron Dick confirming that the government would have to find \$270 million a year to fund its promise.

This is not the first time the Palaszczuk government has used a so-called 'efficiency dividend' or 'savings plan' without any detail of where the cuts would come from. Just before the election the Treasurer announced an economic update promising \$3 billion worth of savings, including cutting programs. That equates to cutting to the Public Service. Additionally, we know that Australia's electoral authority was probing whether the private details of Queenslanders were shared illegally by Anastacia Palaszczuk's Labor government with unions so they could directly influence voters in critical seats. Then we hear taxpayers will pay an extra \$1 million to pay for the salaries of the Palaszczuk government's expanded ministry. Despite the Premier claiming savings by reducing the cabinet to 14 persons, we now have 19 ministers and eight assistant ministers.

I remind Queensland that we have trouble in paradise after the state government last year sold a pristine Queensland island to the Chinese—a 99-year lease over Keswick Island. I will remind Queenslanders of that every day. I have raised the debacle of Paradise Dam many times in this place: lowering the dam wall by 5.8 metres without all the testing being completed and the region being in the

middle of the worst drought conditions in a decade. There are lost opportunities for Paradise Dam in the budget. There is no new money to honour the promises made to reinstate the dam wall to its full capacity. These promises were made by both candidates and the minister.

Budgets should provide confidence and incentives for regions to prosper. Not dealing with the biggest infrastructure failure in Australia's history is beyond belief. To have no real commitment to fixing it is a shame. We know there is significant investment and expansion that is now on hold in our region as a result of the government not making any real commitments on reinstatement or any commitments to water security. That money allocated for essential works and improvements has already been allocated so there is nothing new, just rehashed announcements.

I am disappointed that there was nothing tangible announced before the election about the Bundaberg port. The political games played out over the Hinkler Regional Deal are a typical example of the arrogance and lengths the Labor government will go to to punish its political rivals. For years federal government money was available for many projects. However, it took the election campaign for the political will to finally approve the multi-use conveyor. After six years of no action at the port we finally have some industry interest. It is important that we remind Queenslanders of this government's contempt for the Bundaberg port. It took years to approve a conveyor that required no investment from the state and years to approve the Pacific Tug Group facility. It is absolutely essential that the government cease with its anti-region agenda and back in the Bundaberg port. It is essential to create new businesses and residential opportunities at the port to significantly boost the economy of our region and create more jobs.

Our community was also promised the delivery of a brand new level 5 hospital, but all I can see allocated in the budget is half a million dollars which is supposedly being shared between improving facilities at the Bundaberg Hospital site and new promised alcohol and drug support, which is welcome. Where is the rest of the money we desperately need to complete this critical project that we kept hearing over and over during the campaign would be delivered? We were promised \$15 million for a new alcohol and drug rehabilitation and treatment facility. There is very little detail in this budget for the facility, however, we welcome the investment.

I am glad that the minister is in the House. I wanted to see money towards the Isis Highway upgrades, as promised. The region deserves to see investment in our notorious road network. Rosedale Road needs overtaking lanes and significant upgrades to many intersections. Moore Park Beach Road is notorious and needs more permanent solutions. I take this opportunity to address issues raised by the minister in question time in referencing my media release. QTRIP is not a budget document.

Government members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gerber): Order, members!

Mr BENNETT: I am glad the Minister for the Environment is here as well. It is disturbing to see the under-utilisation of the \$15 million firefighting air tanker. When one considers Fraser Island has been burning for six weeks now, there are many questions to be answered. The inquiry announced should be independent and needs to have clear terms of reference addressing the many failures of the management of the fires on Fraser Island.

Many people in our region have asked many times why the fire has burned for seven weeks. Questions have revealed the tanker was not engaged early in the fire. We know that Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, QFES and the traditional owners cannot agree on anything, in particular a plan to fight the fires, including access to water et cetera. We are heading into another fire season and we are again questioning this government's responses to our state's fire management. Do we need another inquiry to inform us that the lack of back-burning and the minimal use of our Indigenous land and sea rangers et cetera will again cause large tracts of protected estate to burn out of control?

Honourable members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Pause the clock. I cannot hear the member on his feet. Order!

Mr BENNETT: There are serious issues with the financial position of the Wide Bay Hospital and Health Service. In fact, the majority of HHSs across the state are in financial distress. Budget papers confirm our worst fears. In May this year I wrote to the Auditor-General highlighting my concerns around issues that the budget now highlights. I predicted in May we will have a serious budget overrun of nearly \$10 million. The budget shows the Wide Bay Hospital and Health Service is nearly \$8 million over budget. I have predicted, based on the current trends, the real debt position will be close to \$30 million by the end of this financial year.

The Wide Bay Hospital and Health Service has had an additional 150 full-time staff appointed since last September, when the best performing CEO in the nation was politically unceremoniously sacked. There are now significant budget overruns and the performance of the hospital's emergency

department is failing. Waiting lists are blowing out to nine months for outpatients, 12 weeks for endoscopy and six months for surgery. It may be easy to blame the COVID pandemic for these failures, however the Wide Bay region has had only 28 cases of COVID-19, with 23 community isolated and not requiring hospital support.

I acknowledge and welcome the promises that were kept for local projects, like the \$42 million towards an East Bundaberg flood levee and the funding for smaller projects, which the member for Bundaberg will talk about, such as improved lighting at Salter Oval and money for Bundaberg Central Men's Shed and the Mon Repos Turtle Centre, but we did not see any money for the car park. We spent \$25 million revamping the Mon Repos Turtle Centre—a complete budget overrun—and we have not ended up with a car park. We welcome further commitments and we will continue to work towards solutions.

I congratulate Woongarra State School for receiving much needed money for upgrades. Making significant announcements involving flood mitigation was important after six years of promises of boots on the ground and six years into the government's 10-year action plan. What is disturbing is that the announcements are dependent on federal funding. It is evident that the government has only this week made contact with the federal government around a co-funding arrangement. I would have thought that arrangements would have been sorted any time in the last six years to avoid any further delays.

Investment in tourism opportunities is going to be desperately needed. We have seen an immediate boost in visitation locally. It is important that our investment assists the creation of and improvements to our tourism offerings ensuring we have quality offerings. That is why the ongoing issues and lack of funding for the safety and access issues at Round Hill Creek, Agnes Water, 1770, are extremely disappointing. The Southern Great Barrier Reef is an important tourism offering and not having suitable egress and access from 1770, Round Hill Creek is a real failure of this government. Additionally, further protections are required at Lady Musgrave Island, particularly in the lagoon, to ensure the future of the visitor experience. We must work together to get that happening. Serious environmental issues in Moneys Creek at Bargara have been ignored in the budget and we need to keep the pressure on to ensure this project becomes a reality.

I again use this opportunity to advocate for support from the government to ensure the sugar industry in both Maryborough and the Burnett has a future and the local sugar mills maintain viability. This should be priority of this government as it is about jobs and the future of an important agricultural enterprise, a proud industry, needing this government's support.

Moore Park Beach Surf Club is desperate for much needed government support. Having been severely damaged in cyclones, the club and Surf Life Saving Queensland have been trying to secure the remaining construction funding. There is \$500,000 already committed and the club just wants the state government to get on with the job. I thank the minister for agreeing to meet me on this issue.

I want to put on record that I will be working with our team to ensure a secure future for the Goora Gan Steiner school in Agnes Water. Currently the school occupies a previously vacant government building under a sublease, which has seen the local school flourish with 50 students enrolled, looking to expand to 70. Unfortunately, the future of this successful school, which provides such a vital opportunity for the education of children in Agnes Water, is not secure. Government legislation prevents any extension to a sublease, something that creates a real threat that the school will be evicted and left with no opportunities to continue providing this essential service. I look forward to meeting with the minister to chart a way forward to secure tenure. I am sure all in this House would support the future education of our young people.

I mention minor changes needed to the Land Act and the Water Act to provide real opportunities for many in Queensland. I intend to work hard to achieve sensible outcomes that should allow improved access to overland flow of water to allow the construction of one only-200-megalitre dam near the town of Buxton to deal with access to water for important farming enterprise and, additionally, access to water by the rural fire brigade when this community faces one of the regular fires that occur. It is important that we continue to work towards good outcomes out of this budget. I will continue to work, as I have to from the opposition, with the government members to make sure that the community gets its fair share.