



Speech By
Stephen Bennett


MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL

APPROPRIATION BILL

REVENUE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (9.25 pm): I do not share the enthusiasm for the budget that the member for Bundaberg does—surprise, surprise! I want to give the House an update on the purple bin program that has been in the parliament now for a couple of months. It started last year. To date another \$500 has been raised for domestic violence watches and trackers. If members want to get behind a charity, this is a good one to back.

In relation to health, the budget talks about new beds across Queensland from 2024 to 2028. We know locally there is \$20 million for the early works package, but I have concerns about the lengthy delays and the delivery, with the promises of funding potentially going over two election cycles before anyone will be seen in the new hospital. Locally we know the gravity of the government's terrible record on health, trying to gloss over the worst ambulance ramping and wait times in the state. I am concerned that no acknowledgement of the failures has been forthcoming. Thinking that just throwing money at it will fix the problem is dangerous. We see health promises and commitments locally. Local residents know this government has no ability to deliver these solutions. The crisis in health in Agnes Water and Childers has not been addressed in the budget and it is in dire need of attention to make sure that those residents get the services they expect and deserve.

After visiting other east coast states recently and seeing what great work and significant investment other governments, both Labor and the LNP, are making to try to address the housing crisis, I was devastated on behalf of many Queenslanders and those most vulnerable, to see no new money to build social housing in addition to the investment fund announced last year. I raise concerns with this government's attempts to gloss over their failures in finding solutions to the housing crisis and reports recently proving what we have been saying for seven years: we are spending less per person than every other state and territory—half of what Western Australia and South Australia are spending.

The housing crisis, the failure to address chronic shortages and failures to find alternative delivery options has created the tragic reality that many of the most vulnerable, including women, are spending up to six months in refuges. While 50,000 Queenslanders are looking for leadership and solutions, this budget exposes expenditure on social housing will fall from \$502 million down to \$441 million. The housing crisis has developed over the last seven years due to the failure to partner with the private sector and the failure to unlock the government's land bank, bringing more land to the construction sector to build the homes people are desperate to obtain. If we accept the government's claims they have built only a thousand new bedrooms, the crisis deepens with the reckless selling off of properties by this government—nearly 600 dwellings, not beds, sold—so we have a net decline.

We need more tradies in Queensland, as the member for Buderim mentioned. As a previous builder I have trained many apprentices, and I am horrified to think that the completions, which are an important part of training and development, are down by 1,200 and, without wishing to repeat it, 14,400 apprentices have failed to progress into the workforce. We should be absolutely appalled at the crisis that is unfolding in the trades sector.

Queenslanders are being hit with the pain of higher power bills. The state's energy assets will siphon more than \$1 billion back into Treasury. Government owned corporations are being used as cash cows. I know many residents are asking: why, if the government owns the energy assets, do they not have better control over these bills?

An important part of a functioning community is the strength of its local government. Since the government reduced the budget for the Works for Queensland program seven years ago, we have seen diminished services being provided to our region. Over the forward estimates, there is only \$190 million remaining in that program. Councils will not be able to support 26,000 workers given that 40 per cent funding cut. The cuts continue to our local governments with the budget reflecting a 60 per cent reduction in available funding to Bundaberg and Gladstone regional councils. Funding to maintain our important local government road networks has seen no increase since 2015. It is bewildering why local government roads are not being maintained as they are an important part of our networks. An important funding stream to assist our councils deliver the Building Our Regions program is being reduced from \$30 million to \$19 million.

The region I am privileged to represent has a proud history and a bright future, especially in agriculture. Farmers have had plenty thrown at them by this government. While this budget was an opportunity to truly reflect the importance of the sector, unfortunately opportunities to develop more technology based solutions for farm productivity and sustainability that support environmental benefits have been ignored. On the back of funding cuts, industry-led programs such as the Smartcane BMP or best management practice programs are being axed. My area relies heavily on sugar cane and other horticultural products and it is an insult to the agricultural sector that those best management practice programs, which do so much, are being cut. I do sympathise with the industry and we will look for a solution.

Water and water security are vital to my region and I am extremely concerned about a real lack of commitment on this issue. We have seen \$30-odd million for an early-works package, but how slow can we go on the restoration of Paradise Dam? For years construction crews have been tearing down the dam. Surely we do not need to go through another planning and delay phase? Let us get on and rebuild Paradise Dam.

Over recent years, my region has experienced bushfires, particularly in our protected estates, many of which should have been preventable if the government had resourced better management. In this budget we needed to conserve the biosecurity of our state. Whether it is out-of-control weeds, pests or better fire mitigation, we need to do things differently. Engagement with traditional owners and allowing stock grazing permits in state forests would make a difference, but over the years we have seen those things cut. We have to ensure that fire mitigation, particularly in our protected estates, becomes a reality.

I want to talk about some positives in the budget—surprise, surprise—as there are some announcements that will benefit our communities. I remind the House that in 2019 we announced policy reforms to extend support to young people aged up to 21 years who leave care. From 2023-24, carers will continue to receive allowances for 19- to 21-year-olds remaining in foster and kinship care.

The investment to support the development of respectful relationships education materials is very welcomed. We know that we have to do more to engage with young people. We need to understand the education programs that support forming respectful relationships. We must ensure that the allocation of \$363 million over five years does respond to the first report of the Queensland Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce.

I am encouraged to see reflected in the budget the work and recommendations of the Community Support and Services Committee following our inquiry into social isolation and loneliness. I note the chair of the committee is in the chamber. I congratulate all the members of the committee for their work on that inquiry. The budget allocates \$21.9 million as part of a bigger funding allocation over four years to strengthen the community and social services sector. Elevating the role and functions of neighbourhood and community centres to support the delivery of services was overwhelmingly endorsed by all members of the bipartisan committee. As we travelled around the state, we heard constantly about the lack of funding and support for neighbourhood centres. There will be \$51 million to increase neighbourhood and community centres' base operational funding, which is great. There will be \$9.3 million for the neighbourhood and Community Connect worker program and \$39 million for the construction of new neighbourhood centres.

However, there is a caveat because for a decade I have been advocating for Discovery Coast residents who really deserve a neighbourhood centre. The Discovery Coast has a population of 5,000. The funding is disproportionate when we look at where neighbourhood centres are being constructed. However, there is money in the budget, which has to be acknowledged. On the back of the committee's report on social isolation and loneliness, the additional funding to support neighbourhood centres is very welcome.

The 2022-23 budget allocates \$51.7 million to provide for infrastructure and systems to support children, young people and families and to prevent and respond to crime, violence, abuse and neglect. Those are things that we should all be working towards every year.

Tourism is re-emerging with a vengeance. We really need a long-term plan for tourism in this state. We had expected the Tourism Industry Reference Panel's 'next steps plan' to be released. There is no major increase in funding for Tourism and Events Queensland. Every member knows the value of tourism to their regions and we know how important special events are. I see this as a missed opportunity. You know the state is laden with debt when you see recommendations to potentially introduce a tourism levy. Slugging visitors who visit our national parks is not the answer. I suggest that removing bureaucratic impediments and government red tape is a solution that will save operators and businesses a lot of money and should be done before we put some sort of tax on visitors to Queensland. I agree that the industry needs to be bold and courageous, but taxing everything that is not tied down is not a solution; it is a lazy, predictable and ever-increasing practice.

In addressing the issues of future liabilities, debt continues to grow uncontrolled and the government continues to borrow, leaving \$140 billion worth of problems for future Queenslanders. We are already paying \$2.9 billion in interest payments each and every year. Since 2015 in this state, debt has risen 80 per cent. There has been a lot of posturing around taxing businesses after promising not to. However, the government's new payroll tax levy will affect small and family businesses that will have to pass on that increased tax burden to everyday Queenslanders, which is particularly harsh in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Already we have seen Queenslanders slugged with the most expensive vehicle registrations in the nation and, more recently, the highest speeding fines and infringement costs are being imposed on the most vulnerable.

An honourable member: It's not compulsory, you know.

Mr BENNETT: I think under Labor governments it is compulsory to tax us into oblivion. My point is that we need to try to be more efficient with what we have. We have to try to operate in an environment that does not create all these unnecessary burdens

Mr Saunders interjected.

Mr BENNETT: I take the interjection from the member for Maryborough. I would point out that I think there are some good things in the budget, but as we go forward we have to remember that big-taxing governments like this Labor government will have to pay the piper at some point in time. I hope it is not my grandkids who have to pick up the tab.