

Speech

House of Assembly - Wednesday, 22 June 2011, Page 4323

APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr BROCK (Frome) (20:38): I would also like to speak on the budget handed down by the government, and the Appropriation Bill. First, let me congratulate the new Treasurer, the Hon. Jack Snelling, for bringing down his first budget. Bringing a budget down is not an easy task, trying to do the best with funds available and to be able to please everybody in the state. It has been very interesting to hear members from both sides of the chamber and their views on this budget. I will also give my view, as I see it as a country member, on the budget.

While my main focus is on the electorate of Frome, I am also very concerned with regard to other parts of this great state, particularly regional South Australia. We all understand that any government, and in any case any responsible person or company, needs to adjust their budget according to the opportunity for income.

This state has been promoting the many opportunities for the resource commodities and the great additional opportunities with the awarded opportunities for the defence industries and renewable energy projects. As has been mentioned earlier tonight, this state has been very fortunate with the opportunities we have had so far. As the previous treasurer has stated, we had the global financial crisis and the loss of expected revenue from the GST share from the commonwealth government.

However, this GST is now increasing, and we are on the up. This state has had the best years of the exploration for mineral resources, and we are looking forward to the next 10 years; and, hopefully, we can grab the opportunity and reduce the debt and increase our infrastructure spending in the regional areas of South Australia. As we are all aware, Australia and, indeed, South Australia escaped the worst of the crisis, and while our state received a great share of the commonwealth stimulus package moneys, we seem to have missed the boat with long-term planning.

We had, with the pause that was created in activities as a result of the above issue, an opportunity to look at getting people ready for the time when the resumption of activities occurs within the resource sector. This state appears not to have grasped the opportunity fully, with cuts to adult education and this opportunity now being slashed—and also the reduction of TAFE subjects being taught in the regional areas, which is not the right direction we should be going in as a state.

We have people looking to be skilled or retrained, and here we have this opportunity not being taken to the fullest advantage. How are these people able to get the required training to be able to apply for positions within the resource sectors—which, I might add, are all in the top end of regional South Australia—when the opportunity arises. This is being made harder with the reductions of opportunities in regional South Australia with large infrastructure improvements being made to teaching facilities in metropolitan Adelaide.

Unemployed people in the regions are finding it hard. Unemployed people in the regions are really struggling, and if they have the opportunity for retraining they have to come to Adelaide. Some of those people cannot afford to come to Adelaide, not only in terms of the cost of petrol but also with respect to the cost of accommodation at the different locations.

We have also sent a very clear message to business opportunities within the regional areas by eliminating or making uncertain funding for Regional Development Australia after 2013. This does not send a very good, positive image out to the commercial industries or the resource opportunities. We need Regional Development Australia to be able to grasp the opportunities there. Local councils are very, very supportive of growth opportunities, but they cannot do it by themselves. They are also struggling.

We should be increasing the activities of these sectors in Regional Development Australia to encourage activities and opportunities both on this side and also on the west side of Spencer

Gulf. There are many opportunities within regional South Australia, but the message being sent to potential business partners is not very encouraging. One of the things that the member for Mitchell just indicated was: build it and they will come. I agree.

I think that is a great philosophy, but here we have the emerging resource opportunity in the north and they do not have anywhere to export their opportunities. Their minerals will be going straight up on the Adelaide to Darwin railway and being loaded at Darwin. We have Port Adelaide and Outer Harbor, but there is a lot coming down there to get to the overseas markets. The member for Mitchell has a great philosophy: build it and they will come. Build the infrastructure and they will use it. We will then reap the opportunities with the royalties, the charges and so forth, and it creates employment opportunities.

Another issue I want to bring up relates to school buses. The country school buses have been an issue for many, many years, and, as members will be very well aware, I endeavoured to get a select committee to investigate the operation of the school buses in country areas last year. That was not successful.

However, with respect to some schools, the students live a large distance away, and bearing in mind some of these parents of these Eyre Peninsula students are not very well off at all. They are struggling. Some of them do not even have a car. I will just use one example, the Lochiel to Snowtown bus. It had 10 people on it. It came down to nine, therefore the bus was eliminated. The Snowtown Area School took it upon itself to lease a bus for three years to be able to maintain those students coming in. If those students did not come in from Lochiel School to Snowtown, they would have gone to Balaklava or somewhere else, and that would have had a domino effect on the Snowtown Area School, forcing potential for closure. As the member for Stuart has indicated, schools are a very important part of the community. They are the lifeline, as are hospitals. That is something that the government needs to look at. Just because we go one below the qualifying number of 10, then we should continue to do that. We are here not only for the metropolitan area but also to qualify and assist regional students.

The electorate of Frome, as with other electorates, has a proud wine industry which not only provides export earnings for the state but is also very active in promoting tourism activities not only for people within this state but also interstate and overseas visitors. It was interesting to see in recent statements by the Minister for Tourism that the Clare region was one of the regions in the state experiencing more international tourists. This may have been as a result of running the 2010 Tour Down Under. This event gave Clare and the region great international exposure, and I am very grateful, after a lot of lobbying, that the finishing leg of the first stage of the 2012 Tour Down Under has been returned to the Clare region. The reason I am saying that is that exposure is very important. We cannot have and do not have all the money within South Australia—we need to get people from overseas and interstate.

However, despite the greater exposure with increasing tourism, the state of our regional roads leaves people with a very disappointing image of our state, and that applies not only to people living in the regions but also to the many visitors. Can you imagine somebody coming in and they go on the Northern Expressway—they are going to Clare—and, all of a sudden, they get into the back areas and the roads are very bad. The first impression is a lasting impression. They will go away and they may not come back. The amount of money included in this budget for regional roads is appreciated; however, it is far too little.

As I have mentioned previously, the state of our regional roads can be attributed to many years of successive governments not placing enough emphasis on maintaining them. We are now experiencing this loss of maintenance and infrastructure repairs to accommodate today's vehicles and lifestyles. Some of these roads were built at the end of the 1950s and 1960s—60 years ago—and lots of these roads are in their original condition. The motor car and vehicles have changed dramatically but, no matter who has been in government, we have not kept pace for many years. There are numerous roads in my electorate, in particular, the Port Broughton to Bute and the Bute to Kulpara roads; this last road being in the electorate of the member for Goyder. However, roads do not know any electoral

boundaries, and I will be fighting very hard, as will the member for Goyder, to get both those roads upgraded in the next budget or the budget after that.

Also the Gladstone to Yacka road and then the road to Clare are utilised by many travellers with caravans and, again, these are tourists. These roads are not only becoming very dangerous but they are a bad image for our state. Just recently, I was in the main street of Bute and the road there is falling apart. DTEI has indicated that it is a low priority. I questioned that with the Minister for Infrastructure and, to his credit, we had a meeting, and I would hope that this road will not only be patched but it will be repaired to an acceptable standard.

During my regional visits as Chair of the select committee on grain for the parliament, the issues of roads has been brought up continually at all meetings, together with the standard of rail infrastructure, in particular in the Mallee area. There are trains that have speed restrictions and load restrictions, and that does not do well for moving grain by rail. Country people are, and always appear to have been, perceived as second cousins, and this affects the lifestyle and the confidence of extra activities in the regions.

Recently, the opposition stated at a meeting in Clare that the government would close a further 17 country hospitals and, whilst the Minister for Health has stated that this is not the case, I certainly will be asking for clarification from the minister. Statements like that do not build any confidence in regional South Australia. We cannot afford to lose any more of our hospitals, or any of the services in our current hospitals.

I have been communicating with the Minister for Health regarding increasing the payment for the authorised country people who require medical or specialist attention in Adelaide through the PAT Scheme. I have been talking to the minister for the last 18 months. This system has been the same for over 10 years at the same cost: 16¢ per kilometre, \$30 per night for accommodation, and you then have to pay the first \$30 out of your own pocket. That is an absolute disgrace for the less fortunate people in our regional areas. This system has been the same for 10 years—I will just repeat that: 10 years—and in the meantime the cost of living, the cost of fuel and the cost of accommodation have risen dramatically. Again, regional South Australia has been asked to pay for services that are readily available in metropolitan Adelaide.

I am also very passionate about regional hospitals and health services. Whilst I am very appreciative of the \$12.5 million for the new GP Plus facility in Port Pirie, again this has been in the previous budgets, and I am only hoping that the start date will be 2010, to be completed by 2013. It has been in budgets previously, and I want it to be up and running. At the same time, there is an issue with the diagnostic mammogram machine at our regional health service. It has been out of action for 12 months, and we have to wait because of all the service and the contract for the whole of the state on the medical side of things. Again, the minister knows about this, and I am very confident that he will take it on board.

We also appreciate that the cost of energy needs to keep pace with inflation and operating costs; however, as mentioned before, there are people out there with certain medical conditions who require constant cooling at the same temperature. I had the privilege of sponsoring a forum on the medical cooling facility, and the member for Ashford was there, as were the Hon. Kelly Vincent MLC and also the member for Bragg. The forum highlighted these conditions and the fact that these people need to have their air conditioners operating at a constant temperature at all times, 24 hours a day. I am glad that the government has increased the concessions for those medically approved people; however, I stress that they need to keep those rebates in line with rising power costs. Do not leave it as it is today; it will not do anybody any good.

I realise that any government or private industry has to economise and look for the best practices. However, some of these moves may cause some concern for the elderly, and one of those is the elimination of the provision of registration vehicle stickers for vehicles. This may be a small cost saving, but it is causing concern for lots of people out there—especially the elderly. They are concerned they may overlook the renewal date and then, if they are

driving an unregistered vehicle, they will not see it, they will forget about it, and then they will be liable for prosecution.

As the member for Mount Gambier indicated, the forward selling rotations of forests is not the way to go; we are selling our assets—the assets of our future generations. It is similar to the sale of the ETSA facilities by the Olsen government. Again, you can see what has happened now: the cost of power has risen dramatically. I think that is a retrospective move, but it is a decision that the other side has made.

Another area of concern, which happened years ago, was the relocation of various services in government departments to Adelaide that became Shared Services. There were to be massive savings by relocating to a central location, but this has not proven to be successful. I understand that a further allocation has been made towards Shared Services to further embed the new operation. The funds that have been allocated in this year and previous years to try to make it work could have been better utilised in providing funding towards extra services, equipment to country hospitals and also improving the road infrastructure in the regions. However, on a positive note, I am thankful to the Minister for Health for last year approving the four renal dialysis machines at the Port Pirie Regional Health Service. These units have been gratefully appreciated by the patients who now do not have to travel three times per week to Port Augusta.

Mr Venning: And you got the credit.

Mr BROCK: And I did get the credit, because I fought very hard in my previous role, also. Just last week at my listening post at Port Broughton, I had one of these patients come up to me and say how grateful they were that they did not have to travel to Port Augusta.

Mr Pengilly: That's one vote.

Mr BROCK: It's one vote. There were two, because it was a husband and wife; I always do it in twos. However, let's get serious. That was dominating the lives of these people; it was ruining their home life. Now they only have to go to Port Pirie, and it has changed their whole lifestyle.

Mr Venning: Rob Kerin helped.

Mr BROCK: Rob Kerin helped; yes, all right, if we can give Rob the credit. If we have to reduce expenditure for whatever reason, then we must ensure that the 'must have' items are maintained, and the 'like to have' items may have to be deferred or reduced to ensure that the items required for our day-to-day existence are maintained and improved.

We can increase income by increasing taxes and the like, which has happened in this budget and previous budgets. This move certainly does not encourage confidence or any increased activities by businesses, and it has been mentioned that small businesses are the backbone of the business community in South Australia and in the general communities.

Just before I close, that is why I think the Adelaide Oval, whilst it will be great for the metropolitan people and the followers of football, is a thing that could have been a 'nice to have'. I believe that that could have been deferred. That \$500 million could have been deferred and utilised on expenditure in rural areas.

Again, we understand the need to balance budgets. However, we need to ensure that we do it in a responsible manner and, whilst people may elect to state that this is a reasonable way to achieve the savings, it is again the less fortunate who are bearing those cuts. The Treasurer may be saying that this is a reasonable family budget. It was very well presented. However, the people who have contributed to this with increasing costs are the people living in the country.