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Appropriation Bill 2014

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:13 :47): I rise today to give my address in regard to the wind-up of the estimates process here in the parliament. I know we have only had a couple of speakers so far, but estimates is an interesting process, and it is all the better—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: In the worst Chinese term.

Mr PEDERICK: I thank Madam Deputy Speaker who is agreeing with my presumption, I think. We all view it as an interesting process and, Madam Deputy Speaker, you were there for a lot of it.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: All of it in here.

Mr PEDERICK: All of it.

Mr VAN HOLST PELLEKAAN: Half of it.

Mr PEDERICK: Yes, in one chamber anyway, so Madam Deputy Speaker is well aware of what goes on during estimates and chairs those sessions very well. But what I will say is that some ministers are definitely better than others.

An honourable member: It's a very small few.

Mr PEDERICK: It is a limited number, but what I will say, to all the ministers, in whatever estimates—and I have not done a full study of both committees—to the ones who gave a very short lead speech or did not wheel out Dorothy, that dangerous government dinosaur that just takes time and asks those Dorothy Dixers—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Government questions.

Mr PEDERICK: I firmly believe that estimates should be the chance for the opposition to raise vital questions. We have limited time anyway, and for the government to obfuscate and have their members ask the Dorothy Dixers I think is a terrible waste of time. The long lead-in speeches are a waste of time. If the government wants to have these internal discussions, I am sure they have their party room meetings where their questions can be raised and they will probably get more answers than we do. Be that as it may, I will

commend the ministers who did let us have the floor, even after a long lead-in speech at times. I certainly, from my end, as the member for Hammond, appreciated that.

The committees that I was involved with were environment, water and natural resources, primary industries and regional development. In environment estimates there was long lead speech and then we proceeded to questions. I got on to the question about prescribed burning and the minister tried to fob it off and say that it was not a problem, but over many years now we have seen the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR), or whatever its body was called in previous times, go out and take a prescribed burn. I know there was one in Messent several years ago that was supposed to burn about 25 or 26 per cent of that park down at Keith and they burnt three-quarters of it.

Another issue I raised in the estimates was about the recent fire in the Gawler Ranges, which also overachieved. When I say 'overachieved'—and I used this term during the estimates process—that is not a badge of honour; that is when a fire gets out of control and goes behind the containment area that you are supposed to control it in.

I have had a bit of experience, as a member of CFS and a farmer, of fighting a few fires, lighting a few fires in burn-offs and also controlling fires, so it is disturbing that as time goes by we still see these things happening. What concerns me is that because of cuts to the staff numbers involved in the Department of the Environment, Water and Natural Resources, what is going to happen in the future? We will have less control—less control.

For all the people who think wonderful things are happening out there in the environment and it is getting looked after properly, I do not believe it is. I certainly understand the need for controlled burns. I have witnessed and seen some terrible fires and the results of them in Billiatt Park and Ngarkat. Ngarkat, I have mentioned in this place before, is like a magnet for lightning. With less staff I think we are going to have massive issues into the future.

Just on that, I will quote what the minister said when I kept questioning about prescribed burning and the problems with them getting out of control in national parks. The minister actually thanked me for recognising that DEWNR is overachieving. He said, 'That is what we try to do—over-deliver for the public.' If that is success, I think the minister needs to have a good look at the *Hansard* and what he said, and have a real good look at how they manage park fires, because it is not the idea to overachieve in managing fires in parks, as far as prescribed burning goes.

Obviously, a whole range of questions was asked about where we are going with the environment department, and it looks like more park rangers are going. The minister would not guarantee what was happening, so that means there are more park rangers going. I think there are 88 now, but there were several hundred in previous years. Again, it shows that this government has scant regard for our national parks system.

I was also involved in the agriculture estimates, primary industries. Again, we see through the budget process that over the last couple of years another 121.8 jobs have gone from agriculture. When I was questioning the minister about the estimated result from 2013-14 to the actual result, I could not get an answer. I made the point during the process that we

have 900 staff in PIRSA but that no-one was in here for the estimates process who could tell me why there was a vast difference between the estimated result and the actual result.

The government will always come back—and I have seen it before with other budgets—and say, 'No, it was only this number.' But, hang on, if you have budgeted for a certain number of staff, those positions should be made up. So, it is a cut whichever way you go about it. Also debated in the estimates was the lowest spend in agriculture in 12 years of this Labor government in relation to the net cost of services. The minister tried to fob this off by saying, 'No, that's the net cost but the total spend is \$221 million.'

That may be right according to the budget, but as far as the net cost—what this department is prepared to put into agriculture, \$59.8 million—that is the least amount this government has spent in 12 years. However, I will look at the \$221 million spend. That is made up of employee benefit expenses, supplies and services, depreciation and amortisation expenses, borrowing costs, grants and subsidies (and I note that includes a federal funding grant on the income side of the budget and commonwealth revenue of just over \$76 million), and intragovernment transfers. So, like anything with the budget, it is about how you read it and how people perceive it.

It certainly is disturbing that, again, we have more job cuts and more money cut out of agriculture. We have seen it happen over the last five years, where hundreds of jobs have gone and at least \$100 million cut from the primary industries spend. We know that this Jay Weatherill Labor government, when they deal with Olympic Dam, the new expansion (the second expansion did not happen), all of sudden say, 'Oh, we're reliant on agriculture,' yet there is no money going agriculture's way, not in comparison to what the Premier is saying to us that he believes the input from agriculture is for this state. I think it is time the government took a good hard look at what happens out there in regional areas and sees how vital agriculture and primary production are, being the backbone of the economy.

However, after saying that, we see that the government is getting rid of another two research centres. Flaxley has been empty for years now—it has obviously taken a long time for people to work out how they are going to get rid of it, and it is on the market; now, sadly, we see Lenswood Research Centre on the market, as well. Both these centres have been vital centres as part of our research programs into dairy and horticulture in South Australia. Flaxley is listed as one of the assets that will be sold as part of the \$680,000 income side from sale of assets. I note from the year before there was a deficit of I think \$57,000 from selling a vessel and a trailer, so one would hope that the asset sale program might be a bit more successful.

The sad thing is the assets sales that are being looked at now, these vital research centres, and it makes me really worry about the future of Struan, a research centre at Naracoorte, which I know the government has been running right down. It makes me worry about the future of Turretfield, and I know that Minnipa has been talked about out in the regions, and people are worried about whether that research centre will go. That would be a real tragedy, and I cannot quite see how the state can do that because, as far as I understand, it is part of the national framework of grains industry research, but anything can happen with this Weatherill Labor government.

It was interesting that when minister Bignell went into one answer about clean and green and selling product to China and other places he mentioned the GM-free status of South Australia. He was talking about the supposed benefit and, before anyone gets too excited about what I am about to say, we on this side of the house do support investigation and we do support a moratorium on GM cropping. But after the minister had finished that commentary, when I asked what science-based evidence there was and what work had been done to show that the state actually has a real benefit from GM-free, he answered, 'Oh, it's anecdotal.'

If we are running a state's agricultural production system on anecdotal comments, that really worries me because there is a whole range of anecdotal comments out there in the public sphere. I think the minister—we well know his bent: he is waging a war, I think, against Monsanto—is doing this based on anecdotes. His department obviously had not done any work on whether or not being GM-free as far as a marketing tool is beneficial.

I certainly know that you will get other people in politics, and it might be the Greens, who will say that Japan will not take GM canola. Well, that is a lie because they are already taking it from Canada co-mingled, where they co-mingle it: they put GM canola and traditionally-bred Canola together. I would like to see the government do some more work. They need to talk to their researchers out at the century-old Waite area about the work they are doing in regard to agriculture on all scales, whether it be traditional breeding or GM breeding, and perhaps get the minister up to speed on what is happening around the world.

I also asked quite a series of questions about ovine Johne's disease testing and the effect that can have on sheep producers in this state. I appreciate that the adviser was a vet, I believe, and his comments were that people are not put into quarantine from a screening test but that it does affect their market, so obviously it affects profitability. The responsible person has to make a clear decision that he does not want to upset the wool industry any more, so people who have had these notices—that have not been proven, it is just a screening test—in regard to testing for OJD will take a big hit. The sad thing is at the ram sales they will take that hit, but there is no compensation, and that is very sad.

I could go on, but time is running away and I need to talk about regional development. This is a very interesting time with the new Minister for Regional Development. He gave quite a lengthy lead-in speech—it was about 13 minutes.

Mr Griffiths: 13½.

Mr PEDERICK: It was 13½ minutes, I am reliably informed by the member for Goyder who did a great job during the estimates process just staying alive. I have mentioned this before, but I must say that I have seen some interesting performances by ministers over the eight years I have been here, and this was the worst performance of a minister I have seen in regard to estimates. We managed to get up only limited questions in the time, after the long lead-in speech. Then we had the Dorothy Dixers from the government's side to fill in time as well. Then we saw that the advisers did not even have the obvious answers to the Dorothy Dixers lined up ready for the minister. It was very difficult to get many answers at all to our questions.

A very big issue that was raised was about core funding for regional development associations. This is a huge issue out there. What the regional development associations (RDAs) out in the field are telling me is that a lot of them had been living on their savings for the previous 12 months, as far as the financial year process is concerned. These people are really looking down the gun with respect to how to fund their core activities—this is a business about opening the door in the morning and running your office—and they are using up their cash reserves.

I am reliably informed that one of the associations that deals with Geoff Brock's (Minister for Regional Development) own area, the area of Frome, Mid North and Yorke, thought that they were going to close their doors. I wonder whether there is a special deal being done to prop them up to keep the minister going.

The minister told us in estimates that boards were all signed off—that their CEOs had signed off on the deals for this \$1.6 million—but the information I am getting is that the boards basically had a gun held to their head and were bullied into agreeing to the way it had to be done. It is all linked to grant funding, and people are going to have to be very creative with their grant funding applications to make sure that they retain staff, keep them on the ground, so that they can run projects. It will be interesting to see whether this has been placed on every government department. If they had to rely on grant funding, it would bring a whole new paradigm to the way government works.

What I have heard also out there in the field is that, allegedly, advisers have been telling minister Brock that the RDA has never had core funding, which is a blatant lie because they did, and that is how they operated. If that is what has happened, that is an absolute disgrace. These advisers are making this big money and are telling Geoff Brock when to get out of bed and when to go to work. They need to have a good look at what is going on.

In the last couple of minutes before closing, I want to say that I did challenge the minister about why he has not come out to Murray Bridge to have a look at the Gifford Hill project. I asked him soon after he was made the minister to come out; I rang him personally. I know that he was out there once when I was in a meeting with him, and then he was out there last week with some chief executive officers. But then he said, 'No, I can't get out,' and I said, 'Well, I'm free next week,' but who knows whether or not we will see him.

Sadly, I think the biggest problem with what Geoff Brock negotiated with the Premier when he was the member for Frome (and I did raise this in estimates) is that he asked for only \$39 million for regional funding when he could have matched the \$139 million the Liberal Party had put up, and he would have done a far better deal for regional South Australia and perhaps we would have got that \$15 million funding that the Liberals had up as a policy for the racing club development in Murray Bridge, which would have provided funding for up to 1,000 jobs over time. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it has been a disappointing estimates time.