

Appropriation Bill - Budget reply – June 17, 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (18:26): I rise also to make my contribution to the budget reply speech. I am just stunned and appalled at the lack of money put aside for any reasonable water infrastructure in this state. We have seen the attention that this government, including Premier Rann and his so-called Water Security Minister, Karlene Maywald, give to this state in the commitment they have given for water supply. It is absolutely terrible.

The Riverland is in a situation where people bought water last year. They spent \$100 million, I believe, and now they have no money left to buy water to keep alive their permanent plantings. They were sold a pup along the way, that water allowances would not increase from 16 per cent. Within a few days it went to 22 per cent, and within 10 days it went to 32 per cent. Many people made poor investment decisions not through their fault but because of bad advice from the government and government sources.

We then get down to the Lower Lakes region which, since November 2006, when the announcement of a proposed weir was made, has just been neglected. The vines at Langhorne Creek will go to pack. The dairy industry has been totally cut to bits. Out of about 37 dairies on the Narrung Peninsula and surrounding areas—the Poltalloch Peninsula—three are left operating. One operator has stuck it out, spending \$3,000 a week on water cartage to keep going.

I sat next to one of the operators the other day, and she still had a smile on her face. She said, 'Milk's gone up to a bit over 50¢, and we're going to stick with it.' They are a very stoic lot down there, because they are not getting very much assistance at all. All that the people there have asked for is a fair go. Above Lock 1 they cannot afford to buy water, and below Lock 1 in many places they cannot access any water, whether or not they have an allocation.

Speaking of allocation, it is an absolute joke for the minister to get around before the last couple of days saying that we might be on zero allocation. It is just not workable. The minister should know that, and she does know that. She knows that you cannot have zero allocation because of the stock and domestic pumps that are shared with the same pump that pumps the irrigated water. You could not have the water police going around on 1 July saying, 'Why is that pump going?', when it is feeding stock and domestic supply.

The Langhorne Creek group has been working very hard on its water supply options to get water to their vines. They have had a little bit of assistance from the government—\$250,000—but \$125,000 of that will have to be paid back. I acknowledge the work of people from DWLBC in assisting the community. It is just too expensive to put up this pipeline project. It works out to \$7,000 a megalitre, and it is just not viable. I have talked to people involved in the bigger companies, such as Fosters, etc., and they have said, 'The vines will survive; we'll get them through. We'll have to take our luck.'

You get down to the Narrung Peninsula communities and around Poltalloch, and the government is just leaving them right out to dry. There should be a pipeline of at least 400mm capacity built from Taillem Bend to start with. That will only get enough water to sustain life as it is right now, after 33 dairies have closed down. These are all taxpaying operations, but the government is obviously happy not to collect that tax. It is obviously happy to let communities wither away.

I firmly believe that, with the government's total lack of attention to these communities, it is hoping that the federal government will pick up these projects: the \$60 million Langhorne Creek project and the \$40 million Narrung Peninsula project by the federal government. For the community's sake, I hope the government is lobbying the federal government very hard. I know that it will not match Penny Wong's criteria for money from the \$12.9 billion plan, because she said it has to have less reliance on the Murray. We shall see whether Labor has just hung them out to dry. Kevin Rudd is not concerned, even though he went to the federal election saying that he would have equity and access to water for all Australians.

The only thing in this budget that has anything to do with water is the \$96.5 million towards the desalination plant at Port Stanvac. I am a bit like some other members in thinking that, by the time this thing gets built, it will have rained. Premier Rann's aversion to building

any water supply measures if it rains will mean that it just will not happen. An amount of \$13 million has been allocated to provide fixtures and fittings for SA Water's new head office, the total project costing \$46.1 million. Talk to the local Lower Lakes communities about that. They are very impressed—I think not.

I just wonder what the state government thinks of letting people just run out of water. At least the Liberal Party is thinking about plans for storm water reuse, more use of waste water, etc.

Mr Kenyon interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: I note the interjection from the member for Newland. I know that the government's plan for any storm water reuse goes out to 2025. The member for Newland had better hope that he still has water to drink by then. He might need to get it from the warehouse full of bottled water the government has for its emergency plan when Adelaide does run out and it has to hand it out. At least the Liberal Party is thinking about the state and about what we need to get on.

I now come to country health. It is as though the Labor Party does not look at a map of South Australia. They looked simply at a map of Adelaide, I believe, when they drew up this budget. They got to Gepps Cross and they got to Glen Osmond and that was the end of it. They have just cut the absolute guts out of the country. They have just destroyed any hope of any reasonable amount of development in the bush and regional areas.

As mentioned earlier by other members, including the member for Frome, we have four general hospitals. One is at Port Lincoln because it has to be there, as mentioned by the member for Frome. One is at Mount Gambier. What is that going to do, service half of Victoria? One is at Berri, also to appease another so-called Conservative turned into Labor minister. Then we have one at Whyalla to suit the member for Giles. I do not know whether they have even looked at how many miles there are between Berri and Whyalla. As the member for Frome so eloquently put, most people will still be going to Adelaide.

I have just a few comments on hospitals in my region. We have the Pinnaroo Hospital right on the border and we have Lameroo, Karoonda, Tailem Bend and Strathalbyn. Guess what? They are all destined for band-aid centres. I marched on this place 20 years ago to help save Tailem Bend Hospital. Laura and Blyth hospitals were already on the chopping block as well at that time. Thankfully, we have kept Tailem Bend going. My father has to access Tailem Bend quite often with bad ulcers on his legs, and he has lengthy stays there. That is just gone. He will have to go a little bit further up the road to Murray Bridge, which will be one of the community hospitals—but will there be a bed? I will go into more detail about bed availability in a minute because, with all the acute beds in all the country hospitals throughout the state, someone will want the services somewhere else. Instead of the government going around saying, 'We want to get the 550 country people that are in Adelaide seeing doctors or in hospitals at any one time,' they will actually get more. More people will come into the city hospitals.

I have some notes here on the figures provided in the so-called Country Health Care Plan for South Australia. The figures for the Mallee/Coorong region show that the proposed community hospital at Murray Bridge has 42.3 acute beds. I bet that was a bit of a science when they spent \$11 million and got one bed fewer. Mind you, it is a lot nicer place to work in for the health professionals at Murray Bridge. All seven hospitals in the region—and I include the two other hospitals that service my community, at Mannum just over the river from Hammond, and Meningie just over my border as well—Murray Bridge and the other six that will become bandaid hospitals with no acute beds—currently have a combined average daily bed occupancy of 48.9. That is 6.6 more than Murray Bridge or 16 per cent above capacity.

Compounding that is the fact that the current average stay of patients at Murray Bridge is 2.8 days and the average for the other six hospitals is 3.25. Instantly, there is reduced capacity with increased demand. Some Southern Mallee patients will go to Berri. The Riverland chart shows that Berri hospital's current capacity at 44 acute beds will be increased to 65 under the plan. All five hospitals in the Riverland region combined have an average daily occupancy of 67.8: that is 2.8 beds short before you start.

The average stay at Berri is currently two days while the average for the others, which will have no acute beds, is 3.75 days, almost double. So while the choice of Berri rather than Murray Bridge will ease the load on Murray Bridge, no allowance has been made in the Berri figures for any patient traffic from the Mallee. And that is if they can get there: these are some of the people who will be 90 minutes away. The health minister proudly states that 96 per cent will be within 90 minutes of a hospital. What a terrible figure, and how many people would have died in the past who are allergic to bee stings and maybe will not make it in the future.

It might be wise for the government to try to recruit some circus performers for the new country general and country community hospitals where juggling will be a crucial skill. The government's promotion for this plan is: 'We've joined the dots.' I would have to agree with them on that: it is the dottiest plan that I have ever seen. The plan is for undercapacity, inadequacy and imminent obsolescence that allows for no regional growth whatsoever. It might be argued that, with policies such as the shared services initiative, the winding back or cessation of public transport in country areas and a total lack of real support for river and lakes communities (there is nothing for them in this budget as mentioned earlier) perhaps this government does not expect any rural growth.

It will remove the last remaining incentive for doctors to want to practise medicine in country towns where we struggle to attract them now. If the government is having trouble getting and keeping GPs, it is about to get a whole lot worse. That is not opposition propaganda: that is the message from country doctors themselves. The resultant exodus of country doctors will ultimately lead to the closure of many, if not all, of these hospitals as they become what the government now calls 'unsustainable'. Then the government will hide its poor judgment and mismanagement behind the claim that the country hospitals closed because they could not maintain the staff, and it will be the community's fault and not the government's.

Ultimately, there will be nowhere for local patients at all, not even a local GP, and young people keen to go into nursing will have to set their sights on leaving home permanently. As hospitals are one of the major employers in most of these communities, it will have a knock-on effect on the total viability of these communities. As the thin fabric of country health begins to tear apart and the system collapses, the government's bold statements about reduced travelling times for country people to get to hospital for assistance will begin to dissolve as journeys get longer and more frequent. You can bet the government will not make a contribution to the transport costs. At the very end of the document is what looks very much like an afterthought:

Opportunities to expand primary health care services at various country locations will be explored.

I am not sure whether this fits under the heading of 'tease' or 'appease' but either way it sounds like the sort of vague and hollow statement for which this government is now famous: distract them with an illusion while you are taking something else away from them.

Talk of better health outcomes for country people is misleading. Some will certainly benefit from the improvement to the range of services available in a few country centres. The rest of the country will, in time, be worse off. So, the gains of some country communities will be at the expense of many.

While I am speaking about health and the problems with transport, I point out that it has been hit on the head in the last 10 days with what this government is threatening to do, and looks like it will do, down in my electorate through the Southern Mallee and Coorong region, not to give appropriate funding to the local transport services. These transport services include: a run that begins at Murrayville in Victoria and comes up the Mallee Highway to Pinnaroo and through to Murray Bridge and then Adelaide; then there are other runs that come up the Dukes Highway from Tintinara, Coonalpyn, etc., and then up Princes Highway (Highway 1) from Meningie.

Many people who live out in these communities do not have a licence. They like to live out where they live, whether it be Lameroo, Coonalpyn, Tintinara or Karoonda, but they still need to access services. Now they are not going to have any bus service because the company that has the current contract cannot afford to operate under the protocols that the

government is forcing it into. It does not want to go under and look like it will breach contracts because it does not have the appropriate government support.

I have been trying to organise a meeting with minister Conlon since early last week. I notice the other minister across the way laughs, but I think it is crucial that we have a meeting, because June 30 is the deadline. The minister laughs, but I am sure that if public transport services in his area were being cut he would be pushing for a meeting fairly quickly.

The passenger transport department seems to love running services in the bush as a real jigsaw: it is mixed up with area rights, who can and cannot go where, who gets subsidies and who does not, and if you do not run a service because it is not profitable you can be fined. Whether they be students attending school or people going to health services or whatever else, they need a service down there in the Coorong and Southern Mallee. One letter that I have received from the Tailem Bend Community Centre states:

I write this letter on behalf of all staff, volunteers and clients at the Tailem Bend Community Centre. The community centre was yesterday made aware of the impending discontinuation of all [local] bus services. This was devastating news as so many community members are reliant on the services to continue their day to day lives. As a low socio-economic area and with the high price of fuel today many community members rely on [this service] to access basic services; it can be the only method of transport for a substantial number of residents, especially the elderly.

With the abandonment of these transport services, residents will be forced to find alternative transport to access basic life requirements such as medical appointments, unemployment schemes, adult education, motor registration, banking and financial services, Centrelink and crisis care, as well as socialisation opportunities offered by local community organisations and the local hospitals day care scheme.

Another letter, which I received today from someone down at the Coonalpyn Hub, states:

In Coonalpyn we have 23 single families of elderly folks with special needs, pensions or of low income living one side of the railway line...

These people rely entirely on the local medical bus to travel to appointments. This medical bus will go if the company is forced out of business with no contract after 30 June. These people do not drive and other services do not fit in with the scheme of things. (See below *)

This is a government that is prepared to belt country communities every which way it can, when they are at their lowest: there is no water and there is no funding. It is as if it put up a fence and said, 'We don't need to know those people.' It is an absolute disgrace and one day it will wake up that it cannot disregard the bush. As we saw today, there was a strike of schoolteachers across this state, about 5,000 or 6,000, and health people will be protesting tomorrow. However, what makes me angry is that the Labor unions will still fund the government opposite, which does not deserve to govern. I commend my remarks.

** NB. I have since learned the medical bus and the Culburra/Unity bus are unaffected at this time.*