

Regional Awareness (Appropriation Bill) Sept 26, 2006

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): I wish to speak tonight on the lack of regional awareness by the Labor government.

Ms Bedford: I was in Murray Bridge last week.

Mr PEDERICK: Absolutely. The occasional member opposite recognises where Murray Bridge is. However, I digress. The first issue on which I would like to speak is the funding that is being pulled out of the branched broomrape eradication program over the next four years, which involves a fair chunk of the electorate of Hammond around Murray Bridge and up towards Mannum. This program was promised as part of an unholy alliance with the former member for Hammond. Part of the compact that relates to this program states:

... to commit to a program of fumigation to eradicate branched broomrape where ever it is discovered in South Australia and thereby provide certainty to the release of the land from quarantine and to fairly compensate the landholders who make their living from the land upon which the infestations occur.

What we have seen in the budget laid down last week is that \$500 000 of state funding from that program will be taken out in this financial year, \$750 000 will be taken from that program in the next financial year, \$1 million the year after that and another \$1 million in the year after that. That hardly sounds like an effective eradication program for branched broomrape, which is a weed that could threaten our whole export markets. This just shows the contempt the Labor government has for regional South Australia.

The cost economies in fumigation have changed since the days of the unholy alliance with the former member. Methyl bromide is not a practical method of fumigation nor a cost effective method. Advances with application of pine oil, which is sprayed on to the soil, and Basamid, which goes through an air seeder are having a great effect on the control of this weed. We are finding with years like this, where times are tough out in the rural areas, that people are not taking up spraying programs on their own accord because they do not have the money to spend. They barely have enough money to keep going, and all we can see is the government taking money from the program. This has already had a direct effect on one of the project officers with the program who has just quit his job because he was downgraded to a .5 placement, and has progressed on to other employment. I just wonder how this will affect the other states that are, in conjunction with this project, putting in funds, and the commonwealth government also put in funds to this program. What will they think? 'The South Australian government is taking money out, we will just drop our funding as well, and damn the rest.' It is just not good enough and it is just typical of how a Labor government treats regional South Australia when they do not need a vote.

Another item that has happened recently was the closing down of the Mallee Financial Information Service. This has left a lot of programs out in the cold, but most of them have been picked up in other areas. But one program I would like to comment on is the Youth Extreme Leadership Program in the Mallee, which is a great program for encouraging youth to take on leadership, to make active decisions about their future and plan for their business. This program is only surviving by different agencies taking up the funding. At one stage it was thought that statewide this program may be picked up. We will have to see where that goes into the future.

I will talk about regional roads briefly as well. And what can you say? There is nothing going to rural South Australia. There is \$3.4 million in extra road maintenance, when there is a \$200 million backlog, and where is that going to go? It is not going to do anything. I have a couple of major highways, Murray Bridge through to Loxton; there is the Pinnaroo to Loxton Road; the Wellington to Strathalbyn Road—all need upgrades, apart from many other roads throughout my electorate. These are more areas where money could be spent regionally, but it is spent on backing up blown-out road funding projects in Adelaide and a tram line to nowhere.

Another hot topic which we were told we would be consulted on relates to the upcoming gaols that will be built out at Mobilong, in Murray Bridge, and by the time they are delivered it only would have taken the Labor government eight years to deliver these gaols—a \$315 million men's prison and a \$96 million women's prison, and, yes, there certainly needed to be an upgrade. We welcome that at that level, but what we do not welcome is the complete lack of consultation with the local council when it came to making the announcement and everyone running around wondering what was going on. This is after only the week previously the member for Cheltenham, when speaking to the proposed sale of the Cheltenham racecourse, and he mentioned it in the house here, saying how Labor prides themselves on how they consult the community. Well, they certainly did not do it on this matter, and we would like to see more communication down the track. I will commend the minister, minister Zollo, for coming down to Murray Bridge and meeting with the local council and Mayor Arbon on Friday last week to discuss the program.

I will certainly be making it my business, along with the local council, to make sure that local services are kept up to the new prisons when they happen—the health services, mental health services and transport services, so families of inmates can get to the prison and then get home again in a timely fashion, and we also will need housing facilities. About 400 staff will be working there. The Public Service Association is already worried about getting people out from Adelaide to work down in the Murraylands. Murray Bridge is a happening place at the moment. All around the area there is building development. So that will also be something to be taken into effect. Education, yes, we have heard about the 17 schools closing and the six super schools, but I am afraid in Hammond, Lameroo, we will get a feasibility study on what will happen there. So that is all we are going to see in education out in the Mallee.

I will talk about the Murray-Mallee Strategic Taskforce, which my wife happened to work with a few years ago. That is having a complete restructure I believe. Two present staff will be redeployed. It will be absorbed into PIRSA and we will lose a direct liaison between the people and PIRSA, let alone the direct conduit between agencies and facilitation groups. It is just another thing where Labor has turned its back on the country community.

I also want to talk about something I have mentioned in the house before, namely, a fire hydrant maintenance program. There is nothing happening there. I have also got constituents who live out near the park at Ngarkat, near Lameroo and Parakie. They had the dreadful fires in late January, and they need decent fire breaks to be maintained for the protection of their property and fencing, let alone their lives, and if someone takes any affirmative action they get into trouble for knocking down a bit of scrub. This needs tidying up. DEH said controlled burns and more clearing would take place to make it safer. There are still problems with fencing being paid for from those recent fires.

As the South Australian Farmers Federation stated, there is a complete lack of commitment to regional South Australia and to the vast contribution the country areas make to the state's economy. This year the terrible drought is shaping up to be worse than in 2002, and it is only four years since the last terrible drought and five years since a decent income year for farmers on the land. We see nothing in the budget at this stage. We hear about the task force and the talkfest. I commend the government on setting up initiatives for people to ring up rural counsellors.

On 15 October 2002, the former minister for agriculture, minister Holloway, when the Labor Party actually recognised that there was a problem, stated:

I wish to update the council on action this government has taken to assist those affected by drought. . . Last weekend the Premier announced a \$5 million drought package for South Australian farmers in rural communities that had been hit by record low rainfalls, which threatens their livelihoods and the state's primary industries.

As members are no doubt aware, there are many farms in South Australia, particularly in the Murray Mallee and the north-east pastoral area, as well as in other areas of the state, that have been severely hit by drought. During this year, rainfall in most agricultural areas of the state has been significantly below average, with many farms suffering a one-in-twenty-year low and others having the lowest rainfall on record.

At times it is obvious that people in the Labor Party recognise that there is a time of need for regional South Australia and it is time we all took notice that people are hurting out there. Young lads are leaving the farms if they are lucky enough to find employment elsewhere, possibly in the mining industry. How many people from these families will return? That is the harsh reality in the rural areas: a lot of these people will never come home as such.

Another issue I wish to discuss in regard to the budget is health. Country Health was set up as part of the new three health boards in South Australia from the end of June, with the two city health boards. In effect, regional boards are now being told that the interim country health board was always going to be wound up. All seven regional boards understood 'interim' to mean until a new board and members were established and that the interim board's role was to guide that process. It was with that understanding that they accepted dissolution, and it seems that there are no broad ideas of where Country Health is going.

A document entitled 'Frequently asked questions', apparently prepared by the department for the new Country Health SA board, with a covering letter signed by Barbara Hartwig, described as Chair, Country Health SA, was presented to country hospital boards in August this year. Question 12 asked, 'What would be the legal status of hospitals and health services?' The answer was:

As with metropolitan regions, country hospitals and health services will not have a separate legal status. They will become services to which the board of Country Health SA will be responsible as the single legal identity.

Given that this statement was made in August, country health stakeholders were entitled to believe that the board would survive longer than one year. Yet, now the question of its permanency is being asked of departmental personnel, those stakeholders are being told that the new board was always going to be permanently dissolved and they were made to feel that they should have known that. If it was known all along, why did not one of the many people representing regional boards ever understand that?

It should be noted here that most, if not all, of these volunteer representatives are full-time professionals in various fields, some closely related to health or service provision. They are not just doing their bit for the community. Seemingly, at least some of the new board members were allowed to believe what those in the minister's department knew to be incorrect. If the plan is suddenly changed, why are ministerial departmental staff insisting that it was always the plan? It would seem at the very least that there was never any intention to carry out the promise made in the above answer in August 2006.

On page 1 in the discussion paper, under 'Background', paragraph 4 states that the general view reached by delegates was that, if Country Health is to work as a fully integrated service system, changes would be necessary to local governance arrangements. The true feeling was that they were given little choice and that, while most of these regional boards were delivering good, well-managed services, they could not continue to do so if the minister's department withdrew support by whatever means. In a Powerpoint presentation made by John Hill to the Riverland Regional Hospital board on 22 August 2006, one panel stated, 'Why is the minister proposing this change?' The answer was:

I would like to see all residents of country SA knowing exactly what health services are available to them. Up-front and honest is what I want us to be.

That is an interesting quote. It is true to say that a few Country Health services were in some difficulty. For them, handing everything, including their liabilities, over to the department was sweet relief. For others, however, whose boards had steered them ably and carefully, sharing certain services and facilities with neighbouring hospitals to minimise costs and maximise services, taking the management and control of their own local facility completely out of their hands in such an underhanded way is an insult to their ability and professionalism.

Most of these individuals are experienced, capable and dedicated to providing the best possible service and facility to their local communities. Many of these individuals are well qualified in related fields and leaders of organisations with significant budgets and responsibilities who are used to dealing with government departments and other agencies to provide a balance between the needs and wishes of their communities and the financial limitations of their funding bodies. It is also worth noting that these people have provided their dedication and expertise to perform this vital and ongoing role as volunteers. Where will the government save money on replacing them with a small army of public servants based in the city?

How would city or suburban dwellers feel if the tables were reversed: a bureaucracy located in perhaps Mount Gambier or Port August ingesting information and inquiries, requiring action from suburban hospital councils and waiting however long it takes for a country based authority to make a decision about that inquiry? The government has committed millions of dollars to road projects in the north of the state that are no doubt needed. However, given the numbers at the last election, it would appear that they might be trying to buy votes in what has become a marginal electorate. Perhaps they would do better to earn and hold the respect and trust of rural voters by being sincere about their interests and up-front and honest (to quote the minister's words) about their intentions with rural needs.