

Estimates - Speech in reply - Thursday July 5th, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond):

I want to make a few comments on the estimates experience this year. I found it a little more fulfilling than last year when I thought, 'What have I stepped into?' Hopefully, I will witness many more. I do find that it is the time to get some insightful answers from the government. A fair bit of ducking and weaving is done at times. I commend the Chairs of the committees. Certainly, Estimates Committee B was a much more informal place in which to ask questions, and I think we might have got more answers because of that. We had an excellent Chair in that committee. I want to make some comments about parliamentary standards and ministerial responsibilities.

I note that there is a mix of anger and disappointment in the behaviour of some government ministers during estimates. Their efforts to disrupt this vital function of government by feigning disinterest, using un-parliamentary language and walking out shows great disrespect not only to fellow MPs on both sides of the house but, more importantly, to the South Australian public. These members should keep in mind that we all represent the people of this great state. When we, the opposition, ask questions we do so on behalf of the South Australian taxpayers. To show such impetuous contempt is to insult them gravely.

It is the taxpayers who ask for answers. They pay for those answers and they deserve those answers. It may be clever to deflect, defer, avoid or confuse answers in an attempt to thwart the opposition but, in reality, it is the taxpayer who is being cheated. Not being present at the Leader of the Opposition's budget reply in effect is ignoring the taxpaying voting public. It is unprofessional, un-parliamentary and insults them. No doubt they will see this contempt for what it is.

One thing that really upsets everyone is getting the feeling you are being pushed from pillar to post in your search for answers. Being constantly referred on from one person to another is a source of deep frustration, yet it happens constantly with this government.

The lines of responsibility are often blurred, with one seemingly single topic being the domain of many ministers. An example of this occurred on Tuesday when I asked the Minister for Water Security about the rainwater tank rebate scheme. I was duly informed by the minister that the Waterproofing Adelaide strategy in that line was in the portfolio of the environment minister. This was followed by the subtle suggestion that I should do a little research on ministerial responsibilities. My point is that the delineation of responsibilities ought to be clearer and follow a more logical pattern.

The Waterproofing Adelaide strategy should surely be under the heading of water security, not fragmented across various loosely related portfolios.

An even more striking example of this came to light at a recent meeting to discuss policies for the ongoing management of water resources in the Peake-Roby-Sherlock prescribed wells area. Correspondence was presented in which it was stated that the Water Allocation Plan must be adopted by the Minister for the River Murray while the responsibility for water allocations comes under the jurisdiction of the Minister for Environment and Conservation, who determines the capacity of the resource.

The Minister for Water Security does not determine the capacity of the resource. It is about as confusing as having a Minister for Water Security when we have no water security. I wish to quote from a group of questions asked by the Peake Water Security Group in an effort to get some answers about which minister is responsible for what. Under natural resources management, the Hon. Gail Gago is responsible for most of the areas. However, the Minister for the River Murray is responsible for the Murray-Darling Basin, and this is where the confusion really sets in. This is the question:

What are the respective roles of Minister Gago and Minister Maywald within the water allocation planning process? In particular, who is responsible for signing off the water allocation plan? Where do the respective ministers fit—Gail Gago and Karlene Maywald—with respect to signing off on the water allocation plan?

The answer is as follows:

In the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin NRM region, the responsibility for different sections of the NRM Act is divided between the Minister for the River Murray and the Minister for Environment and Conservation under the Administrative Arrangements (Conferral of Ministerial Functions and Powers) (Natural Resources Management) Proclamation 2005.

The Minister for the River Murray is the minister responsible for the adoption of the water allocation plan. The water allocation plan will provide the policies for any new allocations of water and for the transfer of water allocations.

Allocations are made to existing users under section 155 of the NRM Act. Allocations are made based on an existing user's reasonable water requirements, subject to any reductions needed if the level of allocations would otherwise exceed capacity of the resource. The Minister for Environment and Conservation is the minister responsible for determining the capacity of the resource and for the allocation of water to existing users. In practice this will be guided by the capacity of the resource as determined through the water allocation planning process undertaken by the board.

I will let everyone study *Hansard* about eight times to see whether they can work out who is responsible for what.

That was the big issue during estimates: we asked a question of the Water Security Minister, who just handballed it straight off to the Minister for Environment. I can remember asking a question about environmental flows for the Murray—the word 'environmental' was in the question—and the Minister for the Environment just handballed it. I think it is outrageous.

Another issue is climate change. Time restraints and Dorothy Dixers denied me the opportunity to examine a number of matters on the subject of Sustainability and Climate Change. This is a subject that the whole world is keenly interested in, but most of what we got was spin. Questions about real costs, real savings, actual plans, alternatives and methodology, etc., need to be carefully examined, because we really need to get it right.

The member for Kavel mentioned the prisons to be built at Mobilong. From my reading of the answers I received during estimates, there may be some cost blow-out above the \$400 million—which includes the building of the prisons (the women's prison as well) and the management—over the 25 years. So, we will be keeping a very close eye on the new prison development to make sure we get the best outcomes for the community.

In relation to education, in the wake of the budget, South Australians are reluctant to applaud anything held up as a bold initiative, or presented as investing in our future. The voting public has grown wary of this government and its habit of stuffing a \$10 note in your top pocket with one hand while sliding your wallet out of your back pocket with the other. Promises of new spending—which are often re-announcements—are invariably followed soon after by news of a corresponding cut elsewhere. The government's treatment of education personnel is cruel and arrogant.

The public outcry that followed the dumping of the aquatics and music programs last September clearly caused the government to rethink its position. Given that it took nine months to come up with a new plan, we must assume that it had not thought it through carefully first. After leaving hundreds of staff, students and centre operators completely in the dark for that nine months, the announcement about retaining the programs was quietly slipped in under the shadow of a much bigger backflip. And what a backflip it was—three weeks out from the budget, the workers compensation levy on schools had to be pulled.

To add insult to injury, the government then claimed that the programs and staff jobs were never in doubt. What an insult to the intelligence of everyone involved. The public is entitled to doubt that this government is the benevolent, considerate government it purports to be. It was evident in its statements that these funding reversals would be at the expense of something else in the system, so now everyone else in the education system is left anxious that they will be the ultimate loser. The government boasts that it is spending \$3 600 on each child's education, but we are all left wondering how much of that money directly benefits students, and how much is splashed on departmental administration and building monuments to themselves.

The public is getting used to the underhanded way this government does business and will not forget. Memories of the State Bank 'train-wreck' will come flooding back.

Speaking of announcements, the orchestrated circus referred to at a press conference last Wednesday morning was typical of Ringmaster Rann, also known as 'good news Mike'. In announcing the government's backflip on passing on the 1 per cent workers compensation levy to schools, the Premier took centre stage and painted this embarrassing blunder as a measure of the government's goodwill and grace, but that is where the humility stopped. When it came to fielding questions on the matter, the ringmaster slipped back out of the spotlight, which then fell squarely on his tightrope walker, the Minister for Education and Children's Services. It was left to her to clean up the mess and cop the flak from the press.

I refer to a couple of ministers who happen to be absent without leave today—the Minister for Water Security and the Minister for Education and Children's Services. That is not good enough when we are finalising the budget today.

The Labor government's health program seems to have upset almost everyone in the system: doctors, nurses, administrators, hospital boards, ambulance personnel, and even the patients, who are waiting interminably and then being told to bring their own pillows.

Mr Hill insists it is all part of a grand plan—the product of a close and thorough consultation with one other person. The idea must have looked good on paper! *'Let us rationalise and reorganise the health system, get rid of a host of capable and willing management personnel in the field, save the*

country hospitals the bother of having to manage a range of health scenarios by taking health services away from them, reduce the country hospitals appeal to doctors practising their skills and subsequently passing them on to others, and spend the money we save on building another monument to ourselves.'

One of the side effects of these changes relates to patient transfer costs. At the moment the system is that, when a patient presents at a hospital, the medical staff determine whether they can deal with the patient at that hospital. If they decide to send on the patient they call SA Ambulance for an emergency patient transfer. The cost of this transfer is borne by the hospital and it cannot pass it on. I understand that it is quite common for this budget item in hospitals' finances to be overspent, causing some difficulty at the local level.

The rationalisation of hospital services will have the effect of increasing the number of these emergency patient transfers as hospitals lose the medical staff, expertise and facilities to deal with a broad range of conditions. It is inevitable that their emergency patient transfer costs will blow out even further. As I understand it, the government has not yet figured out how it will deal with this problem.

I wish to discuss a few local issues in the budget in regard to the electorate of Hammond. It is a great thing that the government is looking at a new police station complex in Murray Bridge, although I notice that it has a \$9.5 million figure. However, we are not sure where we are going to put it, so that might put a few blocks on it. When the member for Heysen asked the Hon. Paul Holloway whether the \$9.5 million was just for the police station, the answer was yes, so I hope the court facilities are included as part of the move in future. It was a good response about whether we had a new prison coming to Mobilong.

I asked a question about a children's centre being set up at Fraser Park School in Murray Bridge. It seems that it is to be shifted to Murray Bridge South School, which may be a good thing in the longer term, but it seems that it was promised to another school in the short term. The minister wanted to save \$2 million, so he pulled the idea and is moving on. I was offered a briefing by the minister a couple of weeks ago, but, when I indicated that I would have the Opposition Shadow spokesperson, the Hon. Iain Evans, in attendance, the meeting was pulled. We hope that that goes ahead and we get the right location.

I have mentioned aquatics. We still do not know how good will be the system when we get to the final announcement of what will be left of aquatics. We know that the minister is still admitting there will be some reform, which she said in answer to a question from me about her having already reviewed the report on the renewal or reform of aquatics. I asked whether she can guarantee that in some way, shape or form the aquatics and music program will survive, and she answered:

I can guarantee that we will have some reform, but it would be unthinkable to imagine education in South Australia without music, and it would be unthinkable that we would not have some form of aquatics program.

So, at least the government is thinking about it, but I think it needs to be a bit smarter when it is dealing with real live people—200 instructors alone in aquatics—and starts putting out announcements that it is reviewing programs.

I refer to questions I asked about maintenance of fire plugs. I wrote to the minister some time last year on behalf of various constituents about maintenance of fire plugs. I have had personal experience where people have not been able to access water in time, and there seems to be a bit of a standoff between emergency services and SA Water over who is responsible for keeping them clean. I know CFS crews use them for training, but I will be chasing up that issue even further.

Aerial firefighting is another hobby horse of mine. I believe fixed wing aircraft ought to be used more often the day after a fire in scrubland—where there are no CFS personnel present, so there is no danger of dropping water on them—to extinguish fires the morning after a big fire so they can get on with the job. I am not sure whether that will go on, but it is good to see \$4 million allocated for aerial firefighting.

I have some concerns with the Branched Broomrape program in the Murraylands. I am concerned that, out of the \$3 250 000 savings budgeted over four years, last year the government saved an extra \$300 000, and it is obvious from Estimates answers that that is not being ploughed back into the system. I congratulate John Berger on his new role chairing the community focus group. He is an ex-Mallee farmer, and he is on the ball. I will certainly be keeping my eye on the Branched Broomrape program for the sake of our horticulture and cropping industries.

I want to bring up an issue connected with the CFS which bothers me greatly, and that is the contracting of new fire trucks and fire tenders. Information has reached me that normally these tenders are closed off at 30 June but that they have been pushed off for an extra month. The information I have is that a local manufacturer in South Australia—in fact, in my electorate—has probably lost a contract for about 29 vehicles, I believe. It is outrageous that we have a Premier who advocates keeping work in South Australia when it looks like this one is going out the window.

I wonder whether the Premier is aware that there have been 10 three-four appliances manufactured by a company in Queensland, but I do not believe they are in service yet and they should have been in service at least six months ago. About 150 faults per truck have had to be rectified, and I think the government needs to have a good hard look. It might be cutting the guts out of the contract and working on price alone, but it wants to work out whether it will have any warranty success with the contractor that I believe will get the contract for building these fire trucks.

I think it shows a great disregard for a company, that has classified the CFS as a priority client, which potentially will have to put off 10 to 13 positions when it looked like they would improve their employment by another six staff; and there are 10 staff in another organisation linked to the contract that could be disappearing as well. So, it will be a sad day in my electorate and a sad day for the manufacturer if he has lost the contract.

I think this government will find that it will come back to bite it when it ends up with another batch of second-rate fire trucks and emergency vehicles in the system, which will not have any warranty because the company no longer exists. I am not saying that it will fall over, but there is every chance that it has cut this contract to the bone and it probably will not survive to the warranty stage. Anyway, that is my brief outline of the estimates.