



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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APPROPRIATION BILLS; REVENUE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (11.06 am): I rise to join the debate on the Appropriation Bill 2008 and Revenue and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The Premier in 2007-08 argued in her budget that it should take into general revenue the amount by which the interest earned on investments, principally on supporting public servants' superannuation, where the return exceeded 7.5 per cent. In 2006-07 it took some \$2.7 billion into general revenue and budgeted for a \$1.5 billion excess. The actual earnings in 2007-08 barely covered the necessary contribution to keep the super fully funded. These surpluses were seen as a way to service the ever-increasing burden of debt looming over this state.

The Premier's protege and new Treasurer, in a stunning exhibition of the sleight of hand needed to operate as a Labor Treasurer, has had a tremendous idea. He will transfer all funds and by nature all responsibilities to the Queensland Investment Corporation in exchange for a debt instrument that earns the general government sector 7.5 per cent per annum. The government will claim the credit if it flourishes and blame the Queensland Investment Corporation if the scheme fails.

Labor's mountain of debt, increasing by more than 100 per cent over the next five years to \$64.3 billion, is destined to significantly reduce its ability to service the Queensland community. It will instead be devoting more and more funds to interest repayments on debt. If we compare the debt servicing costs in 2007-08 of \$2.5 billion, it equates to seven per cent of total expenditure. By 2011-12 interest costs will have risen to \$5.4 billion or 11 per cent of total expenditure.

The path that Labor has set upon, financing capital works in such areas as health, education and roads through borrowing, because of a decade of poor economic management, commits our state to a future in which massive cuts in service, in staff and increases in taxation will be unavoidable. Expenditure on capital works in these areas is continuous and, as they cannot be self-funding, must be eventually funded from recurrent income. Even such deceptions as private-public funding to be used in building schools is no more than a desperate effort to get debt off the state's balance sheet.

This device in every sense is a debt that the state will service by paying rent rather than interest, which will probably have been lower given the state's capacity to borrow cheaply. The only virtue immediately grasped upon by the Public Sector Union is that private sector maintenance of these new schools will immediately expose the high cost of maintaining state owned schools under the present arrangements.

Last year in my contribution to the debate on the appropriation bills I expressed my concern at the level of debt then forecast for 2010-11 to be \$51 billion. The more recent projection for that year is now \$59 billion, rising to \$64 billion in 2011-12. That is almost certain to be wrong and closer to \$70 billion. The government is not retiring net debt so that from 2007-08 through to 2011-12 it will have paid out over \$15 billion in interest, with no end in sight.

Debt in itself is not unhealthy, as we have heard from many members. Many of us have loans that we are repaying. But that is very different to what this Labor government has risked here in Queensland. I

have listened to government member after government member loyally praise their Treasurer for this budget without fully understanding the financial implications and the legacy he has brought upon us all.

Imagine the projects that could be built with that amount of money. How many new hospitals, roads and schools could be built with \$15 billion? How many community services to support people with disabilities, mental health, domestic violence, sexual abuse counselling, alcohol and drug education could be supplied with \$15 billion? How many underground powerlines could be built for \$15 billion?

The negligence of the Beattie years is showing right across the state. 'Come to Queensland', was his catchcry—'Come one, come all to the Smart State.' And they came in droves to start new lives in this our great sunshine state but soon learned that all that glittered was certainly not gold. As new suburbs popped up and people flocked to Queensland this government failed miserably to invest in social capacity. It did not build the necessary infrastructure or adequate transport facilities and provided minimal community programs, particularly in the area of mental health and disability.

Yesterday morning the Treasurer told guests at a QCOSS breakfast that Queensland had experienced a decade of unprecedented prosperity. Yet it was his government at the helm during this period of gross neglect that we will all be paying for dearly in years to come.

Let me speak about my electorate—Currumbin on the southern Gold Coast. As I have extolled to honourable members on numerous occasions, it is an area of breathtaking beauty, glorious beaches and lush valleys. It is also an area feeling the strain of population growth and suburban density pressures like many others in south-east Queensland.

Included in this budget is \$700,000 for maintenance between Logan and Tugun on the Pacific Motorway, \$426,000 to complete works between Burleigh Heads and Currumbin on the Gold Coast Highway, \$450,000 for improvement at the Tallebudgera Connection Road and Tallebudgera Creek intersection, \$430,000 for the Terminal Drive and Gold Coast Highway intersection at Balinga and \$1.02 million for the Balinga interchange on the Gold Coast Highway. We could actually say that Currumbin has benefited greatly from recent budgets but we had a long wait for one of the biggest infrastructure projects and certainly the most publicised road in Queensland—the Tugun bypass, which finally opened on Tuesday, 3 June 2008.

After 15-plus years and massive cost blow-outs, the people of Tugun and surrounding areas are to be congratulated for their patience, which wore very thin when Beattie decided to tear down homes in Adina Avenue in 2004 because his Labor government could not negotiate agreement to proceed from their Labor counterparts in New South Wales. I am happy to say that public dissent won the day. Despite being over a decade late, Australia's most expensive road will make an enormous difference to traffic flow through the area for several years at least.

In another signal of a government that plays catch-up with infrastructure, the omission of an interchange at Boyd Street is unforgivable. An additional \$32.88 million has been allocated for the construction and maintenance of the bypass and still not a cent from New South Wales. Perhaps some of this money can be invested into better sound barriers as already my office is receiving calls from residents complaining about intolerable noise from the new bypass.

Residents have tolerated trucks, noise and dirt at all hours for a long period of time. Many are still encumbered with the ongoing construction of the Tugun desalination plant. Putting up with major disruption for the sake of Queensland is very noble indeed and I commend everyone for their endurance. I thank all those who worked on this site over the past couple of years. Many contractors lived in the electorate and became a part of our community. We hope they enjoyed our hospitality.

Another major project and one that appeared on the horizon just on two years ago is the Tugun desalination plant. Construction of this \$1.121 billion project is currently almost 75 per cent complete, with teams recently working 24 hours a day to compensate for difficulties incurred whilst installing pipeline along Currumbin Creek Road. The desalination alliance will begin testing some of the pipes in July, in preparation for its operation in November this year when it is expected to deliver 125 megalitres of pure drinking water a day to south-east Queensland. May I take this opportunity to congratulate the desalination team on achieving two million incident-free hours—no small feat—which received due recognition at a recent family day for workers and their families.

After many years of lobbying this government for funding to dredge the Currumbin bar and in 2005 to fund a study of the Currumbin estuary, it was frustrating to see that it was yet again overlooked in this year's budget. Our dedicated volunteer marine rescue have gone public on many occasions when sand build-up and running tides have made the bar highly dangerous to cross. Boats have run aground, swimmers and water users have been placed in unsafe conditions and channels have opened up in unpredictable places.

Premier Bligh goes into a spin with her new cute term 'congestion buster' but what a pity she does not have the same attitude to congested waterways and commit to providing a 'bar buster' to unclog silted waterways. While this government plays politics with people's lives and passes the buck saying it is not a navigable waterway, some 16,000 boat users and countless more swimmers' and surfers' lives are placed in jeopardy. To add insult to injury, the state government has announced that the cost of boat registrations will increase by between \$15 and \$360 per year. By increasing the cost of this the government has an obligation to put it back into maintaining waterways and boating recreation facilities.

The Tweed sand bypass project, funded by Queensland and New South Wales governments and the Gold Coast City Council, has created much discussion and been blamed for the loss of famous surfing breaks like Kirra Point, leaving desert like beaches. Several years of lobbying for some flexibility in the sand grid has at last had some success and indiscriminate pumping will be curtailed.

Homelessness and the cost of housing are key concerns in the Currumbin electorate, as in many others, and are in desperate need of more funding to assist people in need. In Currumbin, Blair Athol Crisis Accommodation Centre, run by Liz Fritz and her team, does a tremendous job assisting folk who, for one reason or another, are in need of a roof over their heads and a helping hand. Each year, Blair Athol turns away thousands of people. In the nine months from July 2007 to March 2008 they turned away 4,675 individuals which over a 12-month period would equal over 6,200, the highest number on record. Struggling with the resources they have, Blair Athol needs four more funded staff positions to cope with the growing demand.

There were 795 households on the combined waiting list for public housing in the Currumbin electorate in April and 501 dwellings are currently owned by the Department of Housing. This further advances the dire need for low-cost housing options to cater for the huge influx of people coming to Queensland who are severely feeling the pinch financially.

Of the nine public schools in the electorate a number require maintenance and rely heavily on their P&Cs to provide basic items. School absenteeism has been raised of late as an increasing problem by police, shopkeepers and residents. A task force was formed and asked relevant ministers for the appointment of a school based police officer or a truancy liaison officer to help address this issue. To date the request has been ignored despite the fact it is a relatively small amount of money that would go a long way to reducing the impact of student truancy.

An efficient uniform computerised attendance system would also improve the situation. I am very pleased to inform the House that after persistent advocacy from Jan Derbidge and the Save Kirra Hill Committee, the Kirra Hill site was eventually handed over to the community on 20 February this year and restoration is currently underway. Once renovated, it will be used as a community facility which will service many of the invaluable local groups in our area.

Thousands of residents are genuinely worried about the future of the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and its relationship with the National Trust of Queensland, calling for a separation. As a result of public meetings, the group Sanctuary Friends was formed and it has met with the minister, the National Trust president and the new sanctuary CEO. This group is very disappointed with the minister's lack of follow-up with it and failure to set up liaison groups as he said he would, and fears an imminent takeover of the sanctuary by the trust. This government for years has failed to acknowledge the significance of the sanctuary and refuses to give it any funding and now it appears to have abandoned it completely.

Since learning of plans to construct 110kV powerlines from Mudgeeraba to Tugun, countless residents have run an emotive campaign called STOP to prevent high voltage powerlines going above ground through residential areas. Residents are deeply concerned about the lack of community consultation over this decision together with associated health risks and are calling for powerlines to be put underground.

On Tuesday I tabled a petition containing almost 4,000 signatures and received in excess of 440 letters which I forwarded to the Premier and energy minister. After a meeting in the parliamentary precinct, it was agreed that a community reference group would be established and costings to place lines underground provided. Government representatives were asked if this was a prescribed project which can sail past community consultation, but no answer was forthcoming. The Bligh state government needs to budget for these lines to go underground. Failure to do so when it can find money for a billion dollar desalination plant almost overnight is grossly irresponsible. I also want to acknowledge and thank my electorate staff for the enormous pressure that they have endured dealing with angry people and the extra work this has created, in part due to silence from the neighbouring state member. We are fortunate to have a bunch of decent, hardworking police in Currumbin and a healthy smattering of community and volunteer groups, neighbourhood watches, surf clubs and sporting clubs, not to forget our famous RSL, that all add to the social fabric that entwines our everyday lives. I thank them all for their efforts.

I turn now to my portfolio responsibilities of Child Safety and Women. A lack of any real reporting regarding the Office for Women is most disappointing. One would think that this office would receive appropriate funding to enable it to play a crucial role in the dissemination and promotion of domestic and

sexual violence prevention programs and be engaged visibly in statewide initiatives. All too often domestic violence is the catalyst that leads to family separations and child abuse or neglect. I read in the Service Delivery Statements, which used to be called Ministerial Portfolio Statements, that the operating budget for this department for the 2008-09 year is \$592.4 million, with \$586.6 million dedicated to child safety. The statement notes that this figure is more than triple the \$182 million budget allocation for 2003-04 which highlights just how much this Labor government neglected the area of child protection under the stewardship of Ministers Spence and Bligh. We all know what happened in 2004 with the Crime and Misconduct Commission report into child abuse that led to the birth of this new department.

Forty additional full-time staff will be budgeted for in the coming financial year, including one for policy coordination and services for women, equating to a marked 1.5 per cent increase in staffing arrangements. Of the 39 positions within Child Safety, one was for adoption services, 31 for children and young people in care, and a mere seven for children and young people at risk. This number is expected to deal with a 10 per cent increase in the number of notifications received by the Department of Child Safety. That 10 per cent increase comes in the form of 900 notifications to the department. Clearly more front-line officers are required to work with children in at-risk families. In effect, this government is underfunding a department so integral to the state's future and condemning our children to suffering whilst indebting the entire state.

Salaries and wages, after allowing for an increase of three per cent for inflation, have increased by \$11 million or six per cent. This translates to over \$280,000 per employee. Surely those amounts are not being paid to the 39 new staff at nearly \$300,000 a pop! My guess is that instead that money makes its way to the back room and lines the pockets of the Child Safety big wigs. Supplies and services required, presumably to support the need for the 39 new staff, have increased from \$82.5 million to \$90.8 million for 2008-09. After allowing for an increase of four per cent for inflation, this represents a five per cent increase in expenditure on supplies and services, or alternatively \$4 million to support the 39 new staff. Why is this money not spent in attracting and retaining our front-line staff, who do the real work in the department?

As for grants and subsidies, allowing for three per cent inflation, the \$294 million represents a reduction in real expenditure in this department of about \$1 million. So whilst this government trumpets its big spending in child safety—do the sums—it neglects to mention that it has cut real funding. This is the first budget that includes prevention and early intervention in the child safety portfolio statement. Previous ministers have washed their hands of any strategy remotely related to intervention and prevention programs, saying that it does not fall within the child safety portfolio. Disconnected attitudes to a holistic approach that would assist in reducing the incidence of child abuse has no doubt contributed to the rise in reporting. The department has adopted a punitive approach, and reading the language in any of its documents the word 'parent' hardly exists. This must change and will require a major policy shift.

The whole-of-government early intervention and prevention fund, whilst claiming to offer \$70 million, only offers \$2 million in this next year. As we heard from the Treasurer yesterday, agencies will need to put forward their 'test tubes' of ideas to this incubator to deal with avoidable costs of the future. Whilst it is all well and good to have think tanks, incubators and the like, this government turned a blind eye to the human cost of abuse, poverty and addictions for years and avoided investment in family supports that would have preserved a number of family units and avoided huge costs. Likewise, initiatives such as health passports, sex abuse counselling and exit care plans have all suffered from similar neglect. Critical issues around the retention of staff remain unaddressed and just 'sticking bandaids on gaping wounds', as one professional put it, is not going to work.

I have no doubt that the current \$15 million advertising campaign to attract 500 more foster-carers has admirable intentions, although at a cost of around \$30,000 per recruitment taxpayers have a right to expect positive outcomes. Response to the hotline is heartening, and I shall be observing this campaign and am very keen to hear of its conversion ratio. I want to place on public record my genuine appreciation for the people who work in the child safety field. Theirs is indeed a challenging and vital role and they deserve proper training and encouragement via a healthy work culture to be able to deliver best outcomes for children and their families. Let us not forget the families. In summary, the resources applied to this most important area of need in our community—children, our most precious asset—have seen most of the money in increased salaries and services for the administration. These funds have been squandered on increasing office space and computers and have furnished higher salaries for administrative staff whilst funding to the area accounting for more than half of the department's expenditure, grants and subsidies, has actually declined in real terms by more than \$1 million.

The 2008-09 budget for Child Safety represents the failure by this government and its minister to plan, organise and properly resource the state's protection of children when a little commitment and firm direction could have produced so much more from the resources made available. However, looking at the overhang of debt and the rising interest costs, I feel that future funding is not likely to improve any more than the competence of the current minister. It would appear that I was proved correct in last year's debate when I commented on the Appropriation Bill that this government was starting to show the same appetite for debt that we saw in the Cain-Kirner years. Memories of those years should be sending shivers down the spines of Queenslanders across this vast state, as clearly the appetite of the Bligh government knows no boundaries.