



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

### **Main Committee**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2007-2008**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 2) 2007-2008**

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENTARY  
DEPARTMENTS) BILL (NO. 1) 2007-2008**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 5) 2006-2007**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 6) 2006-2007**

### **Second Reading**

## **SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 29 May 2007**

## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Cobb, John, MP

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**Mr JOHN COBB** (Parkes—Assistant Minister for the Environment and Water Resources) (7.15 pm)—I rise to speak to the Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments) Bill (No. 1) 2007-2008 and cognate bills and to congratulate the Treasurer on the 2007 budget, his 11th budget. There is one thing that cannot be denied by anyone: you can only deliver a budget like the 2007 budget when you provide for the families of Australia by giving them certainty and allowing them to do the production and make the money that our country needs. Obviously a budget like that can be delivered only when the economy is in particularly good health. This is a budget that will not only maintain the nation's economy in good health; it will also make a particular contribution to health outcomes for people right across Australia, including western New South Wales. I note in passing that measures to improve the health of the nation—in fact, health policy in general—were noticeably absent from the Leader of the Opposition's budget reply.

I have to say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker Secker, as somebody who is certainly welded to the heartland of country Australia in the central west and the far west of New South Wales, I am particularly pleased that \$65.1 million is being put towards establishing the Charles Sturt University School of Dentistry and Oral Health in Orange and in Wagga Wagga, with dental education clinics at Albury, Bathurst and Dubbo. This new school will be a focal point for students wanting to train in and practise dentistry in country areas. For the first time, kids who are interested in rural dental health will be able to study dentistry out in the country regions. A dental school in Orange has been talked about in the region for probably the best part of five years, so how is it that we are able to get it now? I will tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker: the member for Macquarie, Mr Kerry Bartlett, and I—two members of the government who were both looking at having Bathurst and Orange in their electorates at the next election—put our heads together when we were approached, and we said, 'Yes, this is something that has to happen. This is something that is necessary for country New South Wales and dentistry.' We went and spoke to the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Minister for Education, Science and Training and other members of cabinet, and I am very proud of the fact that our efforts have borne fruit and a dental school is going to be a fact of life next year in the central west. I think I have to make the point that this sort of thing—proposals that are not just talked about but actually come to fruition—can only happen when members of the government are involved. I also note that backing up this initiative is \$12.5 million of funding that will support up to 30 annual clinical places for dentistry students in established rural training settings.

I also welcome the commitment in this budget of an extra \$156.6 million to help the Royal Flying Doctor Service to continue to deliver vital services for people in western New South Wales and in Australia generally. The flying doctor is very precious to country people, particularly isolated people. In my region, in places like Menindee, Wilcannia, White Cliffs and Tibooburra, where there are enormous distances to travel and where there might be only two stations in 100 kilometres, it is a lifeline. I am very proud to be part of a government that is continuing to fund outback health. As a representative of the people who actually live out there, I can assure members that there is nothing romantic about falling sick or suffering a major injury if you do not have a service such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which we are funding. This government's solid and continuing support for the Royal Flying Doctor Service will be noted right around Australia. I can assure you that our own Flying Doctor Service, based at Broken Hill, which looks after western New South Wales, south-western Queensland and north-western South Australia, is noted and appreciated by everybody.

The people of western New South Wales also welcome the additional start-up grant for the new MRI facility that we established last year in Dubbo. It will now be funded by the government. So far this facility has not been a profitable one, but our government is making sure that it has plenty of time to establish itself in the region. We will be funding it for over two more years until it can establish itself in the region. This is part of a program that, since 1998, has expanded access to Medicare eligible MRIs from 18 units to 115 units. I think I should repeat that: during the term of this government—in fact, since 1998—we have gone from 18 MRI units around the country to 115 units.

While talking about health in regional Australia, I should mention other issues such as a new rural clinical school to be operated by the University of Melbourne. This will be a school with a difference. It is going to put

graduates into regional practices spread around New South Wales to do their training. So they will learn and actually do their training while at practices in selected areas, where the practice can provide the sort of supervision and training necessary, so that those doctors will learn the rewards of practising out in the bush and will want to stay there after they have graduated. There is also \$8.5 million to boost the visiting optometrist scheme in very remote communities, increasing both the number of optometrists providing services and the number of communities covered; almost \$10 million to provide grants for another 400 new doctors to practise in rural and remote areas under the Rural Retention Program; an additional \$4.3 million to expand to another 32 locations around Australia the rural women's GP services—which gives women the opportunity, when they need it or desire it, to be attended to by a female GP; and, very importantly at this time, a \$30 million commitment to provide mental health support and crisis counselling specifically targeted at drought hit areas around Australia. Unfortunately, we still have many areas, especially in my electorate, that come under that umbrella.

But health is not the only area that the budget has addressed. AusLink has been a big winner in this budget. AusLink is important to Australia generally, but is particularly important to export industries and to rural Australia. The AusLink program is Australia's biggest ever infrastructure program. It deals with rail links and roads—not only main roads but also local roads, because our government recognises that everything we export starts its journey on a local road.

I congratulate the Treasurer and the Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Deputy Prime Minister, on the budget's immediate injection of \$250 million to the strategic section of the Roads to Recovery program. Roads to Recovery is probably one of the best road or transport programs that we have ever had, funding not via state governments which are going to hive off 15 or 20 per cent, as they always do, but going directly to the councils to spend as they wish on their local situations. I think that when Labor discovered that Roads to Recovery was so popular they said they were not going to scrap it—because they certainly were going to scrap it in previous elections. But suddenly they have realised that it is a bit hard to face up to one of the outback councils like Carrathool or Condobolin and say, 'Yes, we know that has been wonderful money for you but we are going to take it away.' Suddenly Labor have realised that this is one of the most popular programs for transport ever done and they have backed off.

I think the point about Roads to Recovery is that it provides funds directly to local government, going around the state government and the RTA which love to tell councils what they must do rather than accept what they want. The strategic program, which is part of Roads to Recovery, allows councils to get together and make a decision that they want to have a strategic road which might move tourism by putting in a bypass, and I am very happy to say that, as a result of that \$250 million which is coming into this financial year, there are councils in my part of the country that can start work immediately on sorely needed programs. I guess the councils I first think of are Narromine, Parkes, Lachlan and Carrathool which have roads that have been totally neglected by the state Labor government in New South Wales. For example, there is the road from Lake Cargelligo to Hillston, which is a regional road and therefore a state responsibility, and the road from Narromine to Tullamore, which is also in a bad way. I am very happy to say that, out of a project cost of \$10 million, under the strategic roads program, we are offering those four councils \$6.6 million to put with their \$3.4 to improve their roads. There is the upgrading of Main Road 354, replacing a timber bridge on the Bogan River between Tullamore and Narromine. This will not only provide a different route for tourism and for people going from the south-west to the north-east, it will also eventually mean that trucks will be able to travel without going through all the towns they have had to in the past and without loading up the major routes. The Cowra shire also will be able to get on with sealing part of the Billimari Road just north of the town to improve access for heavy vehicles to the Blaney and Parkes freight hubs, and the Cabonne shire can replace an old timber bridge on the Renshaw-McGirr Way between Parkes and Wellington to provide access from the Cabonne and Wellington shires to the Parkes road and rail hub.

There are three things I know about these projects. Firstly, the Labor Party will probably get around to saying something about pork-barrelling and that the money should not be spent. Secondly, and despite Labor's taunts, it remains a fact that these works are sorely needed in this part of New South Wales, the central west and the further west, and will contribute very much to the efficiency and the safety of all residents and people using roads in the region. These projects will very much help the movement of export industries or simply of goods travelling to Dubbo or to Sydney. Labor's roads or regional affairs shadows will never be game enough, as I said earlier, to front up to any of our towns and say, 'You should not get this money,' because it is sorely needed. People in these towns have stood in line for a long time and they were not getting any assistance from the state. I am happy to say that we were able to help them out.

I would like to close with a few observations about reactions to this budget. There was one comment from a young man of 45 in particular that caught my attention.

**Mr Hartsuyker**—Very young.

**Mr JOHN COBB**—No, sorry, he was younger than that. He was only 25, because he had only been out of school for something like seven years. He was asked by one of the local media what he thought about the Treasurer's 11th budget and he said, 'Oh yeah, it's okay I suppose.' He was asked who he would vote for in the election and what he had done in the past. He said, 'In the elections that I have been involved with I have always been a coalition voter.' He was then asked, 'What are you going to do this time?' He replied, 'Oh well, I don't know. I'm getting a bit bored with them. I don't know whether I mightn't think about Labor.' I thought: 'That is very interesting. It is fascinating.'

This young man of 25 has been pretty fortunate, I must admit. Since he left school he has not really had much of a problem getting a job. In fact, certainly in recent years, he has never had to worry about getting a job. This young man may have borrowed money to buy a car and, perhaps, even at 25 he may have—and I hope he has—made an investment in a house. Whether he is paying interest on a car or a house or whatever it might be, interest rates have always been well down in single digit figures. In his education and health, life has been pretty good to him, really. In our part of the world the Commonwealth has done everything you could expect it to try and prop up state responsibilities as well as to keep interest rates totally under control and to ensure that this young man could get a job—and he can get a good job and has never been better paid for it. Probably never has a man of 25 had more disposable income. I guess he is finding that a bit boring.

If he wants life to be a bit more exciting then I do not doubt it will get more exciting if there is a change of government, but I am not quite sure about the excitement that he will get out of it. We only have to look at history to know that what I say is 100 per cent true. The chances are that two or three years after a change in government it will get very exciting because he will then almost inevitably be looking at higher, double-digit interest rates to pay for that car and house—that will be a bit more exciting. If he then decides that he wants to get a second job, or even hang on to the one he has, to help pay for his car and house, it will be even more exciting because there is nothing surer than that it will be one heck of a lot harder to get a job—a primary job let alone a second job—with a change of government. When interest rates go up and businesses start going to the wall again, it is going to be exciting, but I think the stress and the strain that go with it might get rid of some of that excitement.

It is a fantastic budget, but you can only have budgets like that when the economy is under control, when inflation is under control, when people have jobs, when you have record low unemployment and when you have record wages and record amounts of disposable income. I think we have to take our hats off to the Treasurer and to a government that has produced a budget like this.