

Legislative Council

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APPROPRIATION BILL

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (17:50): I rise today to briefly indicate my support for the passage of this bill. There is a great deal of truth to the adage that strong oppositions are vital for strong governance.

The Hon. T.J. Stephens: Hear, hear!

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Don't get too carried away. I know that the role of the opposition and the cross benches is to scrutinise and review and to hold the government of the day accountable. However, as I said last year, I become tired and frustrated listening to negative comment after negative comment from members in this place. As with any budget, this budget has omissions and a disappointing lack of funds allocated to certain areas—but that is part of the challenge of government. Indeed, there is much on which to commend the government in this budget.

I note that it was generally well received in the media as providing a solid framework for the future of state. The Editor of *The Advertiser*, Melvin Mansell, even stated in his editorial of 6 June that the Treasurer had 'delivered what is arguably the most positive and constructive state budget for a quarter of a century'. Yet if you believed everything you heard from the opposition after this budget was handed down, and indeed in this place last week, there was virtually nothing positive and constructive at all; we are now on another road to financial ruin and another disaster on the scale of the State Bank debacle is now almost inevitable.

Indeed, the global economic situation is quite frightening and unstable as a result of the sub prime situation in the United States, where we are still not sure what the long-term effect will be or even if that situation has yet reached its peak. I find dwelling on the past to be a generally unproductive pastime yet also an ever present reality in this place. It certainly comes from both sides, so I will even out the statement by saying that in question time, time after time in response to questions asked by the opposition, we hear from the government, 'Well, what did you do in your term' and 'It is all the fault of the previous government'. It is fair to say that that was more than six years ago; it is now time to move on and get on with the job and govern.

As I said in my reply to the Appropriation Bill last year, South Australians want solutions, not complaints. Sledging for the sake of sledging is tired. It is a tired way of playing politics and it is a tired way of responding to issues that are raised in this place. Of course, we must learn from our mistakes, but at the same time our eyes must be firmly set on the future. There is no doubt that many sectors that were crying out for upgrades after years of neglect have been targeted.

We all are aware that this budget provides for more than \$10 billion to be spent on infrastructure, including a \$2 billion injection into the state's public transport system—which was savaged in the media earlier this year and, at the time, rightly so. I congratulate the government for correctly prioritising major new rail projects as a

vital issue. Together with water and health, spending on transport infrastructure is a direct result of increased pressure from the media, business leaders, the opposition, the wider community and the cross benches in this place. During the first half of this year they all were calling for improvements to transport and health, as well as a move to secure the future of Adelaide's water supply.

It is interesting to note that stormwater harvesting was a really hot issue back in 1994-95. Much of the same debate we are having here and now occurred then, except, of course, sides were changed. I hear no-one here talking about the situation that is occurring up river of the Condamine where they are not only harvesting rainwater but also draining water from the Condamine in huge amounts; and the same situation exists along the Goulbourn River in Victoria. That is what is strangling the Murray River.

Until both those states, Victoria and Queensland, get into some serious debate with this state government, it does not matter how much rain we get, because the Murray will not be revived.

Certainly, that is not a consequence of this government's actions alone. This has happened well over a decade; so, both sides of government have some responsibility for the fact that we did water deals way back when and we are now suffering the consequences of those deals.

This is certainly a big-spending budget and, indeed, the government has made no attempt to hide that fact. On the contrary, the massive investment in public transport in particular will significantly increase state debt from about \$82 million to \$1.9 billion by 2012, and it will be some time before these services are delivered.

However, vision and a lot of money is required to provide infrastructure for 10 years down the track. Tramlines are being extended, the rail network will be electrified and 80 new buses and 58 converted electric trains will be bought. These are all initiatives which I fully support. With this in mind, I feel compelled to comment on what I feel was a pathetic instance of political game playing by the opposition following the handing down of this budget. All year we have heard about the desperate need to upgrade our state's infrastructure. The media certainly did not need any encouragement, but it seemed that the Liberals were prepared to go to any lengths, not matter how embarrassing, to ensure that the issue remained in the public spotlight.

For example, members would no doubt recall a shadow minister from the other place crammed awkwardly between two scantily-clad models at a media conference to highlight our overcrowded and unreliable public transport system. I also note that tax reform—

The Hon. T.J. Stephens interjecting:

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: I'm sure you did. I am sure you had to draw a lottery. I also note that tax reform has been a key issue for the opposition this year and has called for payroll tax cuts to help South Australian businesses become more competitive. The Rann government should be able to afford it, we kept hearing, due to receiving such huge tax windfalls courtesy of a sustained economic boom and the GST. This may be true, but when the government provides payroll tax cuts and infrastructure spending as two of its key features, the budget is branded by the Leader

of the Opposition as 'the most irresponsible set of decisions since the State Bank collapse', while simultaneously crowing that the Liberals had set the agenda.

So, they were terrible ideas but they were also his ideas. Certainly, that is a strange logic; and to the Leader of the Opposition I say, 'You certainly cannot have it both ways.' I congratulate the Treasurer for keeping his word and maintaining a budget surplus. In *The Advertiser* of Tuesday 3 June, the Treasurer stated:

I believe that in the current economic and financial times, the credit squeeze and massively increased petrol pricing, we need to keep the budget strongly in surplus.

This budget contains a huge surplus of \$160 million, which the government expects to grow over the next four years to \$424 million in 2011-12. Large surpluses over the past few years have enabled the government to provide significant infrastructure investment in this budget in vital areas, such as our public transport system, schools and hospitals. That said, there are a number of areas on which I would like to concentrate. As I said, there are a number of sectors where there is scope for a great deal of improvement. I will start with child protection.

I know that you cannot do everything all at once, and I fully appreciate that. However, I am always concerned to learn that bureaucracies which do not work or which are demonstrating chronic shortcomings in their performance of statutory functions are putting out their hand for more resources and more staff when history shows us that the more they receive the less effective they become and the greater the abuse of power and waste of public resources. I would like to make the point that to improve the performance of a department does not always require resourcing: it sometimes requires focusing on where those resources are going.

Over the past two years since I have been in this place, I know that Families SA has had a very difficult job to do. For the life of me, I would not ever want to work in child protection and make the life and death decisions required of that department. It is always a case of 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'. If the department does not remove a child and that child dies or experiences harm, it is demonised for that. If it does remove a child and it is unwarranted, it is demonised for that. However, there are systemic problems. Those problems seem to come from not having effective policy and procedures in place, adequate training to ensure that staff are working within their competency levels, effective case management and supervision or effective reporting to ensure accountability.

Mr President, I speak from experience on this because, as you know, as CEO of a non-government organisation that deals with another very difficult target group, where the demand is high, you learn to work within the resources you are given. However, the focus must be on providing a well-rounded and effective service. There are shortcomings within this department (as I know is the case with others), but we cannot continually blame a lack of resources for poor performance.

I would suggest that perhaps the new minister for Families SA considers some sort of assessment and evaluation of the competency level of social workers who are given the great burden of having to make assessments about whether or not to remove children. It should be a priority for this government to ensure that we have

experienced people doing very difficult work, which requires a level of communication and conflict resolution skills.

I will give an example of where things could have gone terribly wrong for a family in Whyalla on the weekend. It just so happens that I knew the mother, who was about to have her three children removed. She rang me at 5.30, with police and social workers at her door ready to take her three children away from her. A tier 3 notification in five hours very quickly escalated to a tier 1 imminent danger removal of those children, with no evidence to back up a mandatory report.

At the beginning of this incident, it would have been easy for the social worker involved to make some very simple inquiries, as I did when I arrived in Whyalla on Friday morning. I spoke with and received a statement from a GP who has been looking after the baby ever since that child was born some three months ago. The baby has gained weight, and every week is in the right weight and length percentile for her age and birth weight, and the mother was observed by the doctor as being a very competent and attentive mother. Over that period of five hours, from the original visit from the social worker to the removal of those children, the only thing that lacked was conflict resolution.

I met with the social workers and family members for four hours, and they agreed that the situation had escalated far further than it should have done. From all the reports that we have received through the inquiry, and also through people coming to me, it seems that there is a blueprint: if a parent asserts their right to seek medical advice (which this mother did), rather than have social workers, with no medical background at all, come into their home to make an assessment of a child, as soon as those parents assert their right, it seems that the department goes into damage control, and it is almost like a storm-trooper exercise. I have heard the story many times.

I know that people may think that I am a little more sympathetic towards the families involved in this than I am towards the workers, but I am not. I know when a system is lacking and ineffective, and I can identify when employees are doing a job that is well above their level of competency and training.

The fact is that social workers within this department are not trained according to their policy and procedures manual. When the senior social workers I was dealing with on Friday in Whyalla were challenged as to the policy and procedure they should be following, they literally did not know. Evidence has been given that, when there is a policy or procedure change, the only training or notification that social workers receive is via a memo.

In any human service delivery process, it is essential that workers who are dealing with traumatised and distressed people receive the training in their policy and procedures to learn how to effect the best possible result and not put families through trauma or leave children in highly suspicious circumstances.

I compare the situation in Whyalla at the weekend to the family of 12 in Elizabeth Grove. The department moved heaven and earth to keep that mother together with her 12 children regardless of the filth that they were living in and regardless of the fact that young children were wandering around that neighbourhood in a nappy and singlet

at 11 o'clock at night in the freezing cold. It just does not line up. It shows that one office acts one way and another office acts another way and policy and procedure have little to do with it. As you would all gather, child protection is a passion of mine because I believe we should be doing everything that we can to avoid a recurrence of having to make an apology as we did in relation to the Mullighan inquiry and children in state care. Prevention is usually better than cure.

Of course, the other issue close to my heart is drugs. I hope that over time this government will see the need to equally fund treatment and rehab centres along with harm minimisation initiatives. I know that it seems that I disapprove of harm minimisation initiatives such as needle and syringe programs; I do not. I believe that needle and syringe programs have now become a necessity; however, their administration and the way they are operated is questionable. All I ask is that the Treasurer maybe shift his focus a little and see drugs as a more sexy issue so that we can start to get on top of that particular problem.

On another note, I have to question the wisdom of the government's new concessions to home buyers. Under these concessions more than 9,000 first home buyers will be eligible for a new \$4,000 first home bonus grant, replacing the existing stamp duty concession scheme. I understand that we have a housing crisis in South Australia, and I understand that affordable housing and making it possible for people to get into their own home must be a priority of the government. However, while this might sound great at first, I see it as pouring petrol on a fire that is already out of control.

Although it has been recently reported that the market is slowing down, with prices even falling in some areas, I see this as the first sign of long overdue correction. The problem is that Australian real estate is the most expensive in the world when adjusted to median household incomes, yet we keep throwing money at people to help them buy a house, which inevitably just bumps up prices further, and they struggle to meet the mortgage payments. To me, on top of increasing interest rates and spiralling inflation, that is a recipe for disaster.

The government has made an attempt to help first home buyers a little more. I just hope that we do not suffer the same consequences as we have seen in the United States with the repossession of homes because people cannot keep up with repayments. Many other areas of controversy, such as health and water, have already been addressed by other members, so I will not go into them again. However, in closing I will say that despite my concerns, which I hope the government will address, I believe that, overall, this budget provides a reasonable framework for the future of this state.