

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2003-2004: Second Reading

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (4.24 p.m.) —I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2003-2004. There are a number of issues that I will raise in fairly short order. I wish to read one particular issue into the *Hansard* and I would also like to table some documents, so I will be seeking leave to do that later in my speech. This is a budget that technically delivers a surplus, and I believe it is the sixth time that has been achieved by this government. I was in the New South Wales parliament for 10 years and, to their credit as well, both the Labor Party and, most of the time, the Liberal coalition delivered surplus budgets.

I think people do have to recognise that in a technical sense a surplus budget sends good signals to the market. It is a positive thing in terms of the money market and the way the providers of credit et cetera look at a particular government. We can all argue about how the money is being spent and how surpluses are achieved—obviously, government of different persuasions will use various pathways to achieving surpluses.

The two major issues that the budget addresses that will be of some political note are the Medicare arrangements and the measures relating to higher education. I do not intend to speak at length about those two particular issues today. I will be raising them again during the committee proceedings when it meets to discuss the appropriation bills. There will also be specific pieces of legislation debated in the House that will deal with both those issues. Suffice to say at this stage that there are concerns in my electorate about both those issues. As with most things, there are good bits and bad bits. I am determining the balance in the way my electorate of New England is going to looking at those issues.

In relation to the higher education changes, there are some concerns being expressed. I have the University of New England within my electorate. I am an ex-student of that particular university, and I am on the governing council. This bill would seem to eradicate me from that particular process. I am not certain that was why that measure was included, but I would suggest it is probably one of the throwaway items the government is prepared to lose when it gets down to the argy-bargy of Senate debate. There are issues of governance, implications with the various state governments in accepting that and the state legislation which has some import in relation to the governance of universities.

Student unionism is another issue that concerns have been expressed about, particularly by students but also by others—including a number of business people in the Armidale community who, strangely in some ways, have expressed some concerns about the student unionism issues and how it could relate to the spending capacity within the community. The capacity of the flexibility arrangements for a 30 per cent increase in student fees will have an impact, particularly on the ability of regional communities to pay—not only around the University of New England but around other regional universities and communities—and compete for students. There are also concerns that this could have an impact on student loads and on the academic quality of some of their teaching professionals. Those issues are very much at the forefront of a number of people's minds at this particular time. Obviously, there are some positive vibes concerning the regional university loading increase—and the University of New England is included in that—but, as I said, there is a lot more work to be done on that particular issue. I will be raising that issue further down the track.

I mentioned earlier the proposed changes to Medicare. There are very serious issues relating to people's access to doctors who bulk-bill and medical indemnity. I congratulate the government for its recent initiatives on medical indemnity. I am waiting for the views of a number of doctors within my electorate on that particular issue, but on the surface it looks to be positive.

I also congratulate the government in relation to the ethanol issue, which is raised in the budget papers. There is an ethanol plant that is planned—which is most likely to be located in Gunnedah, in the member for Gwydir's electorate—which encompasses quite a large part of the grain growing area of the New England region. It would have a very significant influence on the grain growing industries of our area. The principal of the ethanol plant—and I think we are looking at \$90 million investment now—happens to live within my electorate, so we are very keen to see that progress.

I know there has been a lot of debate on that issue, but I would urge members to pay some attention to the way in which ethanol can have an impact not only on some of the environmental issues that a lot of people are concerned about but also on our import-export relations concerning oil products. It can also have a massive impact on agricultural production. The concept they are talking about for the plant in the Gunnedah area has recently been increased in size and could consume some 300,000 tonnes of grain—

sorghum, for instance. That probably would not mean a lot to a lot of people in this room, but it would have an incredible impact on that grain-growing area. I would encourage the government to keep going with that issue and to do what they can to help these people. I know there are people in Dalby who are looking at a similar venture.

There are some other issues raised in the budget papers that I would like to mention. Road funding is obviously always very important, particularly in country areas. I notice \$100 million has been returned this year to the Roads to Recovery program. The funding was down to \$300 million last year and it is back up to \$400 million this year. It is one of the great programs in relation to local road funding that we have seen. I know that the bureaucracy are hard at work to undermine the concept of Roads to Recovery through the AusLink plans, and I would urge members of the government not to abandon the straight line link of money between federal and local government. It is a very simple plan and it is working very effectively. Roads that would never have been looked at in the past if that program had not been put in place are now being looked at. I would urge members not to allow bureaucrats or various other ministers who do not like to see direct line funding tamper with this program, because it has been very effective.

The Roads to Recovery program was allocated \$1.6 billion over four years—that is, \$400 million a year. That sounds like a lot of money but, if you look at the way it comes through the system, you will see that the charge per litre at the bowser is only about 1½c of the fuel excise charge, which is 38c a litre. That comes to some \$13.6 billion per annum, and we are talking about \$400 million being returned by way of the direct link between federal and local government. I would encourage the federal government to maintain that project. There are some specific items of expenditure in the budget papers that I am pleased to see. There is about \$20 million being expended on the Devil's Pinch and Bolivia Hill areas on the New England Highway. The Bolivia Hill area just south of Tenterfield was the scene of a bad truck accident recently; two drivers were killed. It is good to see some money being spent in that area.

I would like to take advantage of this opportunity today to speak about the area of regional development. There is a lot of talk within the budget papers about regional development, regional programs, regional solutions, how the five current programs are being married into one and those sorts of things. In the community of Guyra within my electorate we have what is called a rabbitry, and it is an industry that is being developed by Angora City (Rabbits) Pty Ltd. The director is Mr Warwick Grave, who has put about 15 years of work into developing the concept of bringing the best rabbits in the world—in terms of their fur—into Australia. He has had enormous difficulty with AQIS, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, over many years. Currently there is a report before the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Mr Warren Truss, in relation to this problem, with specific allegations by Mr Grave—and, having seen the documentation, I tend to believe what he is saying—that he is being treated quite differently from the way an importation of commercial rabbits that came out of America in the late nineties was treated.

It was only recently—I think it was earlier this year—that around 600 rabbits were released in Guyra. They were shedded, caged rabbits which came out of quarantine. There has been an enormous expenditure to get this industry going. The employment opportunities for a small community like Guyra are huge. The opportunities it has as an industry worldwide are enormous. Mr Grave has put a massive amount of work into this industry over the years, and he has suffered the loss of a close partner who was very involved with this particular issue.

I would like to read into the *Hansard* a letter written on 9 May 2003 that was sent to the Hon. Warren Truss. It reads:

Dear Minister:

Following is a brief synopsis of why I believe this importation from the US, arriving Sydney on 4 November 1998 was not legal.

This relates to the importation from the United States and the way that importation was treated compared with the quite unfair treatment, in my view, of Mr Grave and his particular venture. His letter continues:

The six points are:

1. Conditions for Importation of Commercial Rabbits.

The section on Eligibility (Item 2.1) clearly states: "*Importation RESTRICTED to rabbits born in and continuously kept in approved premises*"—BREACHED.

2. Import Permit #1998/07065 (valid 12 August 1998 to 12th February 1999—this is breached in many Sections—and in particular Item 2.1. If there had been any doubts by AQIS about the import, and there most certainly was, AQIS should have maintained quarantine.

3. Customs A pet rabbit entry requires NO GST/NO Duty payable BUT a commercial consignment has Duty payable—Duty was not paid and I believe Duty was “due and payable”—it was a “commercial” shipment (more than two animals).

4. Environment Australia The document for “commercial” consignments should be signed by Customs and returned to the Canberra office—this was not done. I have the originals. The “pet” declaration was not correct.

5. NSW Department of Agriculture “License/Permit to Keep Rabbits”

The last Permit (#1394 for Colo Area, NSW and dated 26 July 2000 and valid for twelve months) was written on 26 July 2000. As it was envisaged the law was to change—it was no longer essential to have a Permit from 28 September 2001. Where is the Permit, which must be issued before the Import Permit? I had a NSW Permit in 1997.

6. PAQF—The Approval of Post-Arrival Quarantine Facility at Wyong (NSW) AQIS states—“for such a short period (14 days) and such a small number of animals (i.e. nine rabbits) why wasn't the NSW Quarantine Station at Eastern Creek used? This would have totally removed any queries about the integrity of the Wyong PAQF, and the query on procedural manuals and protocols and compliance agreements. It should be the very basis of the “Precautionary Principle” applied with a blowtorch to my company after this 1998 debacle.

I am available, at any point in time, to discuss any matter with you fully and frankly.

Thank you for your time in reviewing this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

Warwick Grave

Director

That letter was addressed to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and particularly Mr Chris Parker, an advisor, for the work they have done already. I also call on them to conduct a parliamentary inquiry into this matter. It has been a very expensive operation for Mr Grave to set up. He believes that, because of the various machinations that AQIS have taken on—the slowness, the lack of activity and the prevarication that has occurred—it has probably cost him in the vicinity of \$1 million. He is looking to the government to inquire into that particular process not only for his own business but so that the procedures are better in the future and not as expensive to operate.

I seek leave to table the letter that I have read from and some other documentation concerning this particular issue.

Leave granted.

I would add that Mr Grave is not a constituent of mine. He is actually a constituent of the Leader of the House, Mr Tony Abbott, and I believe that he met with Mr Abbott last Friday and I thank the Leader of the House for his consideration in tabling the documents. It is a serious issue that does need to be looked at.

Another issue that I will touch on briefly is Roads of National Importance. There is currently a debate on this going on in another place. I was a little bit disappointed that the RONI funding, as they call it, was not actually increased. I think there is something like \$200 million in this year's budget, but I would ask the government and the other members adjoining my electorate—and I think there are three of them at a federal level—to look at the classification of the Mount Lindsay Road-Main Road 622 from Legume to Woodenbong. It is a distance of 45 kilometres. It will connect Warwick, in Queensland, through to Kyogle. Neither of those places is in my electorate but they are very important to somebody else's electorate. The upgrade would make it much safer for heavy vehicle transporters that use the road as well as domestic travellers. We believe that this particular road does have the appropriate RONI principles involved and I would encourage the minister to look very closely at including that in the Roads of National Importance criteria this year.

Another issue which I will raise is Telstra. I was very disappointed to see Senator Minchin in his media release predicating the program of the government—not this budget solely but the budget strategy—where Telstra made a contribution of more than half to the budget surplus and where most of

the tax cut that was given back to people came out of bracket creep. I am disappointed to see that Telstra is still factored into the government's long-term plans. It is obvious to anybody who talks to country constituents that they would prefer Telstra to remain within the hands of the people. It is very obvious, given the principles of competition policy and economic rationalism for that matter, that those who are remote, who have distance to contend and who are small—that is, country communities—will be disadvantaged by any full privatisation of Telstra. I will be opposing that in the parliament and working with people in the Senate to oppose it, irrespective of whether that is deemed to be some sort of trigger for a double dissolution. It should not be sold.

Another issue is water property rights. There are a number of issues raised in the budget papers and I will be raising this issue in the committee processes. The government have got to make up their mind about whether they are serious about this. In 1995 they signed the COAG arrangements and various competition policy rules were put in place. We have gone through a whole range of intergovernmental agreements and bilateral agreements and national action plans on water quality and salinity agreements, national heritage trust, catchment blue prints, and still there is no recognition of property rights. One of the underlying factors of the COAG arrangements back in 1995, which predicated the coming together of the states and the agreement, was that the definition of property rights was supposed to be put in place.

Another issue is the gold card, and I am very disappointed that it is not included. I know the Clerk report is still being considered and I would urge the minister to look at those people who were available to fight in the Second World War but were not in the qualifying services area. They need help now. They are in their eighties and I think the government should recognise people by giving them the use of the gold card. I will raise other matters in the committee stages. *(Time expired)*