



Hon. Ruth Forrest MLC

Legislative Council

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Electorate: Murchison

CONSOLIDATED FUND APPROPRIATION BILL 2005 (No. 23)
Noting of Budget Papers

Mr PRESIDENT - I call the honourable member for Murchison, and as this is the honourable member's inaugural address, I know that she will be extended the normal courtesies.

Ms FORREST (Murchison - Inaugural) - Mr President, I rise on this my first occasion to speak to this House, on matters relating to the Budget.

I would appreciate the opportunity, however, to acknowledge the long and outstanding contribution made over the last 24 years to the Legislative Council by my immediate predecessor, Tony Fletcher. Historically, the seat of Murchison has been held for a number of consecutive terms, resulting in lengthy terms by previous members. This is a trend I would like to think possible for the future!

Members laughing .

Ms FORREST - I wish to acknowledge and thank you, Mr President, and all the honourable members and staff of the Legislative Council for their warm welcome and support over the last two weeks.

In winning the seat of Murchison, my acknowledgment and gratitude is extended to the many people who supported me throughout my campaign - in particular, my partner and campaign manager Bruce, and my children. I believe the support I received from colleagues, friends and a network of people, whom I have cared for during my nursing and midwifery career, was an important factor in this success also.

Support was widespread across the region, particularly along the west coast, King Island and Circular Head, which is extremely gratifying but also a challenge to me to truly represent these remote areas, the issues of which are unique and diverse.

My campaign, which started in early January this year, was a very exciting time that was both a physically and intellectually stimulating experience. I was encouraged by the interest shown by the majority of people in the electorate of Murchison and their willingness to discuss issues relevant to their particular region.

I must say that I found it necessary on many occasions to inform members of the public of the role and function of the upper House of our State Parliament. This discussion included some with young schoolchildren and a very excited recently turned 18-year-old who was very enthusiastic about the chance to vote.

I believe we, as members of the Legislative Council, should take time to visit schools, if invited, to explain our system of government in Tasmania to these young and interested students. This is something I hope to have the opportunity to do over the next few years.

Over the months of my campaign, many issues were raised by constituents across the region. I would like to raise a number of those regional issues, as well as some matters that affect the entire State.

Mr President, concern has been raised by the Wynyard and Burnie communities regarding the long-term viability of the Wynyard airport. The issue of particular concern at this time is in relation to the proposed shortening of runway 623 at the Wynyard airport by 300 metres from 1100 to 800 metres in length, for a residential development. Burnie City Council, which owns the majority shareholding in the Burnie Airport Corporation, has provided assurances that the shortening of this runway meets Civil Aviation Safety Authority standards. Burnie City Council has given assurances that this will not present a safety risk to any airport user or result in any reduction in capacity.

However, light aircraft operators have expressed concern there may be a potential detrimental effect on small aircraft, in particular the air ambulance service, in suboptimal weather conditions, particularly if the proposed residential development at the end of the shortened runway 623 goes ahead. All residents of the community, particularly the west coast in poor weather conditions, rely on accessibility to this airport. In addition, road accidents, with victims requiring transfer via air to major health facilities for ongoing treatment, are more likely to occur in poor weather.

In 1987-88, redevelopment of the existing airport was undertaken with financial assistance from the State Government, originally in the form of a grant, which was then converted to a loan with a change of government. The loan and interest incurred was repaid via a levy imposed on all ratepayers from regional local councils. The north-west and west coast ratepayers therefore believe they are entitled to some ownership of this airport and should be consulted regarding ongoing development of this land.

As this airport has the capacity for expansion - and in fact expansion is a part of the Burnie Airport Corporation's 20-year master plan - the establishment of the airport as the regional airport for the north-west and west coasts of Tasmania should be promoted. I believe this airport should be upgraded and not have its capacity reduced in any way that could threaten the long-term viability of the airport.

Mr President, the west coast has a number of unique issues. Cloud seeding is a significant issue for residents, business operators and tourists to the west coast. There have been concerns across a variety of sectors, including some highly regarded meteorologists, that cloud seeding - whilst it may produce rain - potentially lacks precision, overall effectiveness and might, in fact, cause harm. The economic, social and environmental effects of cloud seeding requires investigation. Mr President, a select committee, informed by comprehensive, evidence-based research, into the economic, social and environmental impact of cloud seeding on the whole state, should be considered.

Potential economic impacts include: extra electricity consumption for heating and clothes drying; increased use of motor vehicles to transport children to school and after-school activities in wet weather; increased in costs for mining operations in treating of wet ore and dewatering of mines; and potential reduction in tourist numbers in an area which already has the highest rainfall in the State.

Social impacts anecdotally include the negative effects on families at home and at education facilities with children unable to spend as much time outside and the general lifestyle of west coast residents.

Environmental impacts potentially include increased rainfall in areas adjacent to the targeted catchment areas, reduction of rain to other areas of the State and the residual effect of the silver iodide on vegetation, fauna and people, which is used to seed suitable clouds.

Mr President, another major issue, that is not restricted to the west coast, is water quality. The west coast of Tasmania has the highest rainfall in the State and is reliant on tourism and mining for economic stability. The issue of water quality is of particular concern in Queenstown. Not to have a water supply that is consistently clean and drinkable is simply unacceptable.

Tourist regions on the east coast of Tasmania experience similar ongoing concerns regarding water quality. Funds for the provision of a clean, safe and reliable water supply in these areas, as indeed all areas of the State, need to be assured.

Mr President, an issue of concern to all members of the Circular Head community in particular is the issue of Aboriginal land transfer. The recent legislation passed in the Legislative Council to allow land handback to Aboriginal ownership has led to much debate and concern in the Division of Murchison. I believe reconciliation is about all members of the community being treated equally and reconciliation needs to be addressed through means other than land handback. Whilst genuine needs should be addressed through individual assessment, I fail to see how the transferring of land without wide community support will resolve the issue of reconciliation. Issues including community access to these areas, cultural diversity and land management need considerable thought and planning, especially before any further land handback is considered. Mr President, I have a real concern that land transfer or hand-back - rather than resulting in reconciliation has the potential to be divisive through the exclusion of some sectors of the community, and we are beginning to see this division now.

Mr President, I would now like to comment on issues specific to the 2005-06 Tasmanian Budget. This Budget does demonstrate a strong economic position for the State of Tasmania. Responsible economic management is the key to maintaining and enhancing business confidence. Wise use of currently available revenue is essential to ensure the projected reduction of debt. This in turn will provide increased revenue for any future tougher times, which will inevitably occur in an ever-changing economy.

Overall, I believe this Budget addresses many community needs of the people of Tasmania, particularly in relation to health, public safety and education, whilst some other areas may be somewhat lacking.

Mr President, public housing is an issue across the State including the electorate of Murchison. With the buoyant real estate sector in recent times, many private rental dwellings have been taken out of the rental market, and more and more tenants are looking to the public sector for accommodation. Additionally, with an ageing population, we are finding a greater proportion of tenants with special needs such as wheelchair access and fittings for their disabilities.

I am fearful that this Budget does little to address the housing needs of an increasing number of Tasmanians who are reliant on public housing or affordable private rental options. The failure of the Government to allocate specific funding for the second phase of the Affordable Housing Strategy is therefore a concern. I notice in the Twelve Month Report, dated January 2005, that the Director of Housing Tasmania discusses the new public-partnership between the Tasmanian Government and Macquarie Community Partnerships and it may be that the State Government has further plans in this regard. However it is achieved, it is critical that we continue to increase the number of public housing properties in the community to meet the growing demand.

It is interesting to note that the lack of affordable rental housing on King Island has had a significant impact on the labour work force on King Island. The high cost of living does not encourage families to move to King Island, especially when considering the cost of access to and from the island. The lack of low-cost accommodation is a factor in skilled labour force retention, which in turn results in higher retraining costs for business.

Some employers on King Island have experienced a worker attrition rate and turnover of up to 90 per cent of their work force. The major industries there do not have adequate staff numbers to fill positions, and retention of staff is a major problem as families are unable to find suitable, affordable housing. Combined with the significantly higher cost of living, power and transport costs, this is having a negative impact on industry on King Island. I am very pleased to see power pricing parity being addressed by the State Government, however more work needs to be done to address the inequitably high cost of living on King Island.

Mr President, health and aged care are important issues affecting all Tasmanians. As a nurse, midwife, consumer and mother I have a great interest in and concern for the provision of accessible, sustainable and regional health services. Nationally many rural and remote health services are under threat of closure or reduction in service provision and are often understaffed. Nurses and midwives are ageing, with the average age of midwives in Tasmania being 48. Although the University of Tasmania is training nurses and midwives, retention of these graduates is a challenge as the rates of pay in Tasmania are significantly lower than other mainland States. Our State needs to offer pay parity with other States if we are to maintain our nurses and health care professionals in Tasmania.

Another area for concern are the projected figures for the percentage of caesarean births rising from 19.97 per cent in 2002-03 to 23.82 per cent in 2004-05, with figures expected to continue to climb. Whilst this increase is in line with national and international trends, it is a great concern that these percentages continue to rise at this alarming rate, particularly when the cost implications to the health budget are considered. Caesarean birth costs the Department of Health and Human Services approximately twice as much as an uncomplicated vaginal birth, with no discernable improvement in perinatal morbidity or mortality rates.

This issue requires further investigation, not only to reduce the financial burden imposed on the Department of Health and Human Services at the time of birth, but also into the future as we begin to see other health impacts resulting from this surgical intervention.

I would also hope to see implementation of the recommendations made in the Alexander Report 2004, including the development and funding of cost-effective maternity services across the north-west coast. These services include midwifery models of care, which will enable women to receive antenatal and postnatal care across the region as well as birthing services within at least 45 minutes of their home. No specific provision for this is evident in this Budget.

Mr President, a sustainable health system that will be strong and effective for the next 20 years is essential. This includes the development of high-quality and efficient retrieval and transfer services for those members of the community whose health needs cannot be managed within their local region.

It is very pleasing to note that the Government has committed funds required for the construction of the Community Health Centre in Queenstown and upgrades at the Smithton District Hospital. However upgrades and the redevelopment alone will not attract and retain suitably qualified and skilled staff to these areas. Issues including an efficient retrieval and transfer service and equitable rates of pay and conditions will need to be addressed. Funding to support and make accessible re-entry, upskilling and appropriate undergraduate and postgraduate education is vital.

The Nurse Practitioner project will encourage nurses to advance their skills and level of responsibility with appropriate remuneration. However, this will only affect a small section of the nursing workforce. We must move quickly towards salaries equitable to our mainland counterparts.

Mr President, another area of concern for all members of the community, but especially those approaching, and in their senior years, or those of us with ageing family members, is the availability of, and access to, high-quality aged care. This, of course, includes the support required to assist people to remain in their own homes for as long as they wish and are able to. Funding for long-term programs to keep the well, older Tasmanians healthy needs to be considered. As our population is ageing many people now retire with potentially 20 to 30 years of life ahead, keeping these people healthy and out of hospital and aged-care facilities will become much more important. The majority of older people who require higher levels of care do so for one of two reasons. Firstly, the lack of mobility. Programs that promote and maintain fitness and mobility need to be readily available and supported financially. The benefits will be manifold. Secondly, is the problem of incontinence that often increases with

ageing. Continence maintenance and incontinence prevention programs for this age group will help address this issue. Whilst many health promotion programs are provided through the area of women's health, programs for men are also needed. A number of jobs could be created to provide these programs and training for staff that will be cost effective in the long term.

Initiatives to enhance the quality of life for these older Tasmanians could be provided under the \$840 000 Premier's Physical Activity Council programs. These initiatives could lead not only to a better quality of life for the individuals concerned, but benefits for the community and definite economic improvements.

Federal government funding is provided for the majority of the region's aged-care facilities. However, the State Government is responsible for the managed 22-bed high-care facility at Smithton District Hospital, the Ambrose Home. This facility will not meet the 2008 Building Certification Standards and due to the existing structure of this facility, refurbishment options are limited. State government funding is therefore required to ensure the needs of the residents of this home are met.

Members of the Council may not be aware, but an amalgamated facility that will provide suitable and safe care for residents who require high-level nursing or dementia care is currently being pursued through Emmerton Park Incorporated. This facility will provide the opportunity for members of the Circular Head community to age in place, rather than leave their known community to access aged-care facilities that meet their needs.

Mr President, older members of our communities should be able to remain in their local community, with family and friends around them in their retirement and latter years if they wish to. I believe people should be able to enter and depart life, close to family support, within their familiar environment, as much as possible.

Adequate numbers of suitably qualified and trained staff are also needed and as with other areas of nursing, work force issues are difficult to address in rural and remote regions such as Circular Head.

Professional development, upskilling and re-entry programs, as well as the recruitment and retention of suitably trained staff, is a vital component of the planning and implementation processes. I call on the State Government to ensure funding for the 22 Ambrose Home beds is provided for the development of this much-needed amalgamated aged-care facility.

Mr President, the lack of dental health services and access to these has been a concern for many years. The 2005-06 State Budget has allocated \$3.4 million to oral health. This will provide two more dentists, an additional surgery at Clarence and upgrade of the surgery on Flinders Island. Whilst this is a step towards addressing the current problems, it is still not enough. Many people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are unable to afford or access regular dental care. It is vital that we work towards increasing the numbers of dentists and dental prosthetists even further to meet the needs of Tasmanians in an acceptable time frame.

Mr President, I think the wider public will be amazed that current research shows there is a seven-fold increase in the risk of premature birth in women who have poor dental health - including dental caries and gingivitis, and an estimated 18 per cent of all premature births may have been due to periodontal disease. The cost to the Department of Health and Human Services in providing care for the resulting premature babies is clearly significant and these costs could potentially be reduced by up to 7 to 18 per cent if pregnant women had access to early and regular dental care.

Mr President, my final comment on health is possibly the most important. This concerns the provision of health services on the north-west coast of Tasmania. Duplication of services and infrastructure has led to an inefficient and costly delivery of health services in this region.

Whilst this topic is too complex to discuss in the time available now, I will be raising this issue in this Chamber in the near future. The anxiety of community members of the far north-west, west coast and Wynyard areas as a result of the non-consolidation of health services is becoming more evident. Fragmented services are costly and inefficient and need to be addressed and overcome through the establishment of a single regional facility that will be achieved by securing and enhancing the current site in Burnie.

Mr President, forestry is a major employer in the electorate of Murchison. The Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement will provide a balance between a sustainable forest industry, agriculture and tourism opportunities in Tasmania. This is especially significant for the north-west coast, with its dependence on forestry, farming and tourism. Whilst protecting one million of the six million hectares that comprises Tasmania, this agreement promises no loss of jobs and potentially job creation, and that must be applauded. However, I am concerned that members of the rural sector, particularly those involved in agriculture, have not been adequately consulted. They are understandably concerned at restrictions that will impact on effective management of their land. Further discussion with individuals and organisations such as the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association should be undertaken to ensure the needs of these members of our community are not overlooked.

Mr President, I believe the majority of the people in Tasmania, including those in the electorate of Murchison, support the work of the State Government in undertaking to phase out old-growth forest logging. I recognise that whilst this is highly desirable, the phasing out of old-growth logging should be conducted over a time frame that ensures no negative impacts on jobs, economic opportunity or erosion of business confidence in Tasmania. The funds that will be provided through the Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement to support the country sawmills and the Tasmanian softwood industry will be vital in ensuring ongoing and expanding employment opportunities in the electorate of Murchison.

Education plays a vital part in our lifestyle, employment prospects and the growth of our economy. Quality of facilities is one part of this important area and it is pleasing to see funding allocated to improvement of a number of facilities across the State, including the Yolla District, Smithton and Burnie High schools. An amount of \$1.5 million has been allocated to provide a new north-west support school and inclusion education training facility. Whilst this is a very welcome initiative, adequate numbers of suitably trained staff and support workers are needed currently to support the students who use the existing facility.

Quality of teaching staff in all education areas must to be assured, through high-quality education for teachers and rates of pay that reflect the important and professional role teachers have in preparing our future community leaders.

The problem of staffing at the Magistrates Court is clearly a problem in the north-west of Tasmania, with a backlog of cases that are continually being deferred. I note comments by the President of the Law Society of Tasmania that 'the north-west coast was particularly "underdone" for resourcing' and that the 'Magistrates court is overworked and understaffed.' Law and order was one of the matters frequently raised with me whilst I was campaigning. There is a need for the community and the police to know that those who have infringed the law will be brought to task sooner rather than later.

It is also an imposition and waste of resources for those who are called from their workplace or business to appear as witnesses to sit in the court for many hours, only to be told the case will not be heard on that occasion and to return on a rescheduled date.

I note the reduction in funding for the Magistrates Court in this Budget, down almost 6 per cent from the previous year, and I call on the State Government to increase funding so that further magistrates can be appointed to deal with the workload.

It is also pleasing to see road funds allocated to the Sisters Hills section of the Bass Highway. This section of the highway has seen many serious and a number of fatal road accidents over

the years. This road, as with many roads in the electorate of Murchison, including those on the west coast and King Island, transport produce from these regions that provide a significant boost to the State's economy and wealth. I believe recognition of this contribution is essential and consideration should be given to the returning of wealth to these regions through a more equitable distribution of resources. Additionally, consideration should be given by State and Federal governments to equitable access to and costs of shipping, aviation, rail and road transport.

This Budget I believe will be quite well received as it does create an environment for state growth and address many of the lifestyle issues we value: health, education, public safety and employment. However, we cannot afford to be complacent as this is only a budget and not necessarily the reality of the coming year. The issues of small business, education, the skilled worker shortage and our health services will require close scrutiny to ensure that the much-valued lifestyle of Tasmanians is assured.

Mr President, I wish to state in closing that vision and commitment are needed to ensure long and short-term growth that will assure a strong and resilient economy and future for Tasmania. Broad strategic directions are required by the State Government in considering legislation and policy. As a member of the Legislative Council, I believe I am best placed to consider the impact of legislation and government policy on the community I represent. Considering the needs and wishes of the community, whilst determining what is best for Tasmania as a whole, will require dedication, commitment and hard work. I look forward to these challenges ahead and am proud to be the elected member for Murchison.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mr PRESIDENT - I congratulate the honourable member for Murchison, both on the comprehensive content of her inaugural speech and on the very fine delivery.