

Budget Reply Speech

DELIVERED BY CASSY O'CONNOR MP



WEDNESDAY, 3 JUNE 2015
(Please check against delivery)

[11.57 a.m.]
Ms O'CONNOR (Denison) -

Madam Speaker, I rise with pleasure to respond to the second Hodgman Budget. While the Liberals have been slapping themselves on the back about what a terrific Budget it is, it has been roundly condemned by the community sector in Tasmania. We heard the Treasurer this morning get up and attempt to attack the Greens Alternative Budget. He said what we do not understand is the difference between capital and recurrent expenditure. We most certainly do. We understand that Governments make choices about the money that they receive. Tasmania's special circumstances, the health of our people, our socio-economic circumstances, are the reason that we received extra GST revenue. That money is designed to go towards recurrent services that improve the health and wellbeing of the Tasmanian people.

This Budget the Hodgman Liberals have put forward is all about their choice to invest more in roads and bridges than in the Tasmanian people. No one should forget - certainly the community sector has not forgotten - that the Liberals came into Government promising to restore essential services but immediately set about cutting them. In the Department of Health and Human Services \$210 million was cut over four years. That is a massive cut out of the Department of Health and Human Services. While there has been some extra money allocated in this year's Budget towards health, it will not go any way to restoring the money that has been cut out of the health system and restoring the 221 jobs that have gone out of the Department of Health and Human Services since the Liberals took office.

As I suggested to the Treasurer yesterday, rather than spending all his time at big Tasmanian TCCI functions listening to the end of town that he is most comfortable with, perhaps he should spend some time in the community sector. Perhaps the Treasurer and other Ministers responsible for preparing this Budget should have a detailed conversation with the Tasmanian Council of Social Services. The mood in the room last Thursday afternoon at the annual TasCOSS Budget briefing was one of extreme disappointment. This Budget was described as a lost opportunity. It was recognised for repackaging a whole lot of existing funds and pretending they are new allocations. Alison Standen from the Smith Family said that this Budget is a lost opportunity to bring about structural change that enhanced the educational opportunity for young Tasmanians that improves their health and wellbeing.

An opportunity to deliver genuine, generational change in Tasmania has been lost in the second Hodgman Budget. They have chosen to allocate funds to capital and infrastructure projects over investing in the health, education, housing and the community support of the Tasmanian people.

One of the saddest aspects of this state Budget is the gutting of housing in Tasmania. Over the next four years, Housing Tasmania's budget will be cut by \$127 million. Apart from money that was announced last year to build a much needed homelessness facility for young people on the north-west coast, there is no new money going into increasing the supply of social and affordable housing in Tasmania.

The Minister for Human Services talks about the affordable housing strategy being developed; that is very welcome work. Stakeholders in the sector are telling me that the very clear message to come out of the Minister's office and the department is that the strategy is not about supply. The message has been given not to expect any new capital dollars out of this affordable housing strategy. What is it going to be? Is it just going to be a high-level document that identifies the shortage of supply in Tasmania? What is it going to be if it does not deliver an increase in the supply of social and affordable housing in Tasmania?

Over the last year, since the new Minister for Human Services took up the portfolio, we have seen the Housing Tasmania waiting list jump by 43.5 per cent. Nearly 900 people or families who are now living in housing stress or who do not have a home. Knowing that, knowing the Housing Tasmania waiting list is going up, knowing and acknowledging in the Budget papers that it will take longer to house category 1 applicants and it will take longer to house any applicant on the waiting list, you would think this Government would set aside some of its infrastructure money to stock up the housing fund. But no, no new capital dollars for social and affordable housing in Tasmania.

If you want to improve the lives of Tasmanians, give people the opportunity to excel in their education and their training and get a good job, you have to start with a secure and affordable home. It is the foundation for wellbeing and yet all those Tasmanians living in housing stress, looking for a home, desperately hoping this Government will help them, have been sadly let down. It is possible to allocate some of that very significant GST windfall of some \$560 million over the next four years into the housing fund. That will create an economic stimulus. It will create local jobs. It will support small business and most importantly, it will give Tasmanians, who are doing it very tough at the moment, a home.

That is why, in our Alternative Budget, we propose to restock the housing fund. It was established in 2008 with \$50 million of capital funds. We know the Government needs to continue to invest in the supply of social and affordable housing in Tasmania. This Government has walked away from that responsibility, just as the Federal Abbott Government has walked away from its responsibility to be a key player in the housing and homelessness sector in Tasmania. We only have a few short months left of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness yet we have heard nothing of any substance from this Minister about what the plan is from 30 June for homelessness services in Tasmania. It is a disgrace because the core job of Government is to look after the wellbeing of its people, provide opportunities and security, make sure the income it receives - and the income it receives from the Commonwealth - goes back into investing into the wellbeing of people. On that front the Liberals have epically failed.

It was interesting this morning listening to the debate on vision and compassion in the MPI debate because it is absolutely crystal clear that the second Hodgman Budget lacks vision and compassion. It has walked away from the Liberals' promise to restore essential services in Tasmania. The Health, Education and Housing budgets are far behind where they were when we left Government. There is \$210 million coming out of public health over the next four years and the great big elephant in the room is the \$1.7 billion that will be cut out of Tasmania's Health budget as a result of the heartlessness, meanness and narrow-mindedness of the Abbott Government.

The other terrible shortfall in this Budget is the complete lack of investment in health promotion and prevention. I acknowledge that the Minister for Health has drawn together people who will contribute to preventative health policy here in Tasmania, but there is nothing in the Budget for preventive health, not one razoo, yet we have a Government that has the ambitious and very worthy goal of Tasmania being the healthiest state in the nation by 2025. It does not add up. You cannot have that goal and not invest in preventive health. You cannot know that the Commonwealth has torn up the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health and not do something as a state to reinvest in preventative health when you have the dollars to do so, and this Government has the dollars.

That is why in our Alternative Budget we are proposing to allocate \$8 million over four years into a preventive health and health promotion fund that would be available to community and sporting groups to tap in to do some of those fantastic things that were possible under the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health - programs such as Glenorchy on the Go. I do not know how many members of this House attended a Glenorchy on the Go exercise session, but that program absolutely changed lives. I spoke to a man who had been in hospital to have a heart bypass operation and his doctor had told him that if he did not change his lifestyle his days would be shortened. He took part in the Glenorchy on the Go program - this gentleman was probably in his 60s - and said it changed his life because he was walking more, exercising more and connecting with people. He was beaming at Buchan Neighbourhood House when I spoke to him. Glenorchy on the Go changed lives but was dismantled as a result of the Abbott Government walking away from the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health. That is the core business of Government.

We have the highest chronic disease burden of any state or territory in the country. We have the oldest and fastest-ageing population in the country, yet there is no response in the second Hodgman Budget to those pressing sociodemographic and health needs of our population. It is a travesty and I hope the Minister for Health turns his rhetoric into action and that the work of the Preventative Health Council is listened to and implemented with funding, because unless you are investing in healthy promotion, lifestyle, diet and exercise programs you will not turn around the significant chronic disease burden Tasmania carries. The flow-on effect of that is increased pressure on our acute care services, more people going into hospital as a result of diseases and conditions that are largely preventable.

The preventive health sector in Tasmania is very disappointed in the lack of investment in prevention in this Budget and is most certainly hoping that turns around and the Minister will match his words with action, because at the moment in the preventative health space in Tasmania nothing is happening. There is no new funding. We have already been marked down for our tobacco program failure, Minister.

Mr Ferguson - You were going pretty well until you said that.

Ms O'CONNOR - Did you agree with all those other things I said?

Mr Ferguson - Most everything you said.

Ms O'CONNOR - Goodness gracious me; that is something.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER - Order. I ask the Member to direct her comments through the Chair and I ask the Minister to cease interjecting.

Ms O'CONNOR - The other area of the Budget where we have seen an increase in funding is in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, an increase of \$2.4 million over four years. I certainly acknowledge that is new money in a technical sense but according to psychiatrist Fiona Wagg of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services who is presenting at the coronial inquiry into the suicides of six young Tasmanians, we have the most poorly resourced child and adolescent mental health system in the country. People I have spoken to who have children experiencing mental ill health tell me it is impossible to get in to see a child psychiatrist, psychologist or paediatrician in any meaningful timeframe. Parents have been told they have to wait up to six months to get in to see a child psychologist, psychiatrist or paediatrician. That is not good enough. I have spoken to parents who are highly distressed because their children are highly distressed and they cannot get into the system anywhere. I have spoken to a mother who was forced to take her young child to Melbourne for a diagnosis and prescriptions for two conditions he was diagnosed with, and she came back here and could not get the prescriptions filled. Her choice is to take that poor kid back to Melbourne to get the scripts filled or wait to see a paediatrician here, and she has been told she will have to wait until August or September.

There is something chronically and systemically wrong with the way we respond to child and adolescent mental ill health in Tasmania. I certainly do not blame the current Minister. I acknowledge that this is an area of Government funding that has been neglected for far too long, but \$2.4 million is not going to deal with the pressing demand in our community around the state. Right around the state right now there are young people in acute mental distress who cannot get in to see anyone for a diagnosis so they are left waiting and waiting, and their parents' distress becomes greater. Where are we going wrong as a state when we can allocate, for example, \$728 million into roads and bridges, yet a young person suffering from depression, or with ADHD, cannot get in to see a clinical specialist in a timely way? That is all about priorities. That is about prioritising capital money over quality recurrent spending that improves the lives of young Tasmanians.

The other area of the Budget where we saw some new funding announced was to tackle crystal methamphetamine, or ice, in Tasmania. I acknowledge that the allocation of \$4.8 million over the next four years is very welcome and will deliver an extra 12 rehabilitation beds. The Minister railed at me for raising this issue and accused me of slighting the people of the north-west coast and focusing on the north-west coast as where the problem is greatest. I do not believe that is the case because I never said the problem was confined to the north-west coast, because it manifestly is not. However, the funding response focuses on the north-west coast. There is a service gap on the north-west coast, in the north, and most certainly in the south. I have spoken to the family member of a user of ice - and this is a person who lives in Hobart - who said it impossible for someone who wants to receive treatment for their addiction to get into a service in any meaningful and timely way. The service gap exists all around the state. The Minister is creating a problem for himself, apart from creating a problem for those people who are affected by this poisonous drug, by confining the spend largely to the north-west coast.

Even though the words in the Budget tell us some of that money will go towards primary prevention, I cannot see how you can deliver the extra dozen beds over the four years and also invest in a statewide primary prevention strategy that engages particularly with marginalised young people to help them make informed choices about drug use in their lives.

The Minister has a serious challenge on his hands because it is a bandaid approach. Yes, we most certainly need extra rehabilitation beds but we also need a statewide, evidence-based strategy that targets at-risk communities and at-risk people and helps them to make informed choices.

Mr Ferguson - That is what we have.

Ms O'CONNOR - The Minister is agreeing with me.

Mr Ferguson - I am.

Ms O'CONNOR - I look forward, in Budget Estimates, Minister, to talking about this because I do not want this issue to be highly politicised. We all care about the wellbeing of our young people. We all care about those families whose lives are being utterly fractured by the impact of this drug. We care about the children who are ending up in the child protection system because their parents are ice users who cannot receive help in the system as it currently is structured.

Perhaps in Budget Estimates you can detail what portion of that money, not all of which is new money because the Budget paper makes it clear some of it will be sourced internally, will go towards a statewide early intervention and prevention strategy, because that is how you will ultimately save lives from this drug. The Minister is nodding his head and agreeing with me, and that is reassuring.

Mr Ferguson - Yes. We have responded with nearly \$5 million. I hope you agree with me.

Ms O'CONNOR - I agree with you on quite a few things, Mr Ferguson, but not everything.

Back to our Alternative Budget, we recognise that if you want to improve the economic circumstances of Tasmanian families on low incomes, if you want to make their houses warmer and healthier, then you invest in energy efficiency. There is not one dollar allocated to energy efficiency measures in the second Hodgman Budget. There is not one dollar allocated towards free energy efficiency upgrades for low income Tasmanians in this Budget. It is a fact that was pointed out by the Tasmanian Council of Social Services last Thursday.

In the last term of Government, we recognised that if you want to help Tasmanians with their cost of living and improve their quality of life; if you want to help children who suffer from asthma, then you invest in energy efficiency. We delivered, in the last Government, \$9 500 energy efficiency upgrades to low income households, community groups and small businesses. I had Housing Tasmania tenants come to me with tears of gratitude in their eyes because their power bills, in some instances, had been halved. I spoke to a woman at Bridgewater who reckons that over the course of a year, as a result of our free energy efficiency upgrade, her power bill had gone down by nearly \$800. That is a lot of money for a low income family. That is school uniforms, clothes, recreational opportunities for children and the capacity to buy quality food. \$800 is a huge amount of money and for such little relative expenditure on the part of Government. We change lives through energy efficiency, yet this Government has walked away from it. It is such a simple, important thing to do for low income Tasmanians.

Another feature of this Budget which was also mentioned at the TasCOSS stakeholder briefing was how much repackaging of old money is in this Budget, and how much stating of the core business of Government was touted as new money. We heard much in the lead-up to the Budget through those dozens of Budget leaks. We heard much about the \$300 million that will go towards concessions in Tasmania. That line item is in every Budget, year after year, and it increases year after year. This is not new money. This is not an indication of the heart of the Hodgman Liberal Government. This is the core business of Government to help people with their power bills, their rates and registration. People on low incomes depend on concessions. It is not new money, and nor is the \$16 million that funds the Safe-at-Home program. That is not new money; that is the core business of Government, making sure that we have an effective response to women who experience violence at the hands of men, and children traumatised as the result of family violence. Safe-at-Home was introduced by a previous Labor Government and in fact by Judy Jackson.

Mr Ferguson - You would have been in the Labor Party then?

Ms O'CONNOR - I was never a member of the Labor Party. I wilfully chose not to be a member of the Labor Party because it does not get the environment nor the importance of ecological sustainability. I was very proud to work for Duncan Kerr, the former Labor Member for Denison. I was very proud to be an adviser in the Keating Government but I never joined that party. The only party I have ever joined and believed in is the Greens. I joined the Greens in 2002 after they won four seats in the Tasmanian Parliament in the election after the House numbers were cut from 35 to 25.

Mr Ferguson - I withdraw that appalling accusation.

Ms O'CONNOR - It was an appalling accusation. Thank you very much. I was very proud to work with Duncan Kerr because he is a very good man and a total lefty.

I was talking about the funding allocated to Safe at Home and we welcome the review of this program. I point out to the House that that review was initiated during my time as Minister in the last term of Government, but I am very pleased to hear that all 17 recommendations of the review will be implemented. I am also very pleased to

hear that the Premier will take a lead role in what is a tripartisan effort to reduce the level of men's violence against women in our community. We know from Darren Hine, the Commissioner of Police, that Tasmania Police get about 50 call-outs a week to families across Tasmania as a result of family violence.

The word 'epidemic' is thrown around a lot but family violence is an epidemic in our community. For some reason, and I have not seen any statistical assessment of why this may be the case, rates are going up. Last time I checked, we are now at 41 Australian women murdered, killed by a partner or an ex-partner, so far this year. Last year the average death rate was one a week and we are now up to nearly two a week. Something is sick at the heart of our society; it is an issue that should be beyond politics. I acknowledge the Premier has said the money allocated, the relatively paltry \$800 000 over four years into family violence prevention, is a down-payment. I acknowledge that a strategy will be delivered in August but it must be matched by significant funding if we are to educate our young people about respect for each other. If we are to educate boys about respect for girls and women, we must invest in primary prevention and work through schools, community groups and sporting clubs to make Tasmania the safest place in the country for women and children. We are a small island and a compassionate people and we can do it if we do it together.

I will move to the portfolios of one of the poorest performing Ministers in this Government, Mr Matthew Groom. As a person who has read a lot of the science on climate change and the former Minister for climate change I am not reassured that apparently later this year the Minister - not for climate change because we do not have a Minister for climate change anymore - Mr Groom will deliver a 365-day climate action plan. What outstanding news. It should all be sorted out by then. According to the intergovernmental panel on climate change, we are moving towards 4°-6° of warming by the end of this century. We had in Tasmania a climate-smart strategy that was widely adopted by major industrials, small business, scientists and the broader community. Yet this Minister has walked away from his responsibility to set Tasmania up for a low carbon future and adapt to climate change.

Time expired.