



DAVID MORRIS MP
Member for Mornington

State Budget 2019

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) (16:21:53): Just listening to the member for Nepean, I think two points come to mind. He said something about there having not been an ALP member of Parliament on the peninsula for a century or so. Apparently he does not know David Hassett, who was the member for Dromana in this place from 1982 to 1985, part of the first Cain government. I am sure David, if he is still around, would be rather mortified to know he had been forgotten that quickly.

The other point I wanted to make on the remarks from the member for Nepean is that he apparently does not recognise that the Labor Party in Victoria has been in government for 16 of the last 20 years, so if there has been a problem with funding services and funding infrastructure on the peninsula—and I agree with him, absolutely; there has been a big problem with funding services and infrastructure on the Mornington Peninsula—it is down to the government that holds the purse strings, and for 16 of the last 20 years that has been the Labor Party.

Can I say that this is a fascinating budget. Of course it was delayed on purely political grounds. It was delayed to play games and attempt to achieve a better outcome for Bill Shorten in the federal election. That did not work, as it should not have. Then it was brought in, and it was shoved through, because we had to deal with it incredibly urgently—it just had to go through—and we are now left, many weeks after the event, dealing with this take-note motion.

It is interesting, though, that the manner in which the government approached the budget was, you would have to say, rather different to previous years. We are all used to the blizzard of media releases that come out—40, 50, 60 media releases over a few days. With this budget there was one, two or three, perhaps. That was about it.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the budget disappeared without a trace the day after the Treasurer's speech, and that is not at all surprising because when you go through the detail of the budget there was next to nothing new in it.

Almost every announcement, or concealed cut—and there were plenty of those—was well and truly known before the budget day and in most cases well and truly known before election day. So there was absolutely nothing new in this budget despite the fact that we are now six months on from the election.

I did want to comment on the process around the budget and particularly the scrutiny of the

budget. Those that have been around will recall that in 2014 the then shadow Attorney-General put out a media release that was headed 'More government scrutiny under Labor reform plan': Labor will repair the Victorian Parliament's most powerful Government watchdog after years of Naphthine Government cover-ups. ... Under Labor's reforms the Estimates hearings will become a true exercise in holding the Government to account. ... an Andrews Labor Government will not be afraid of genuine scrutiny, and as such we'll be happy to subject ourselves to this far reaching accountability reform. We will: ... Ensure ministers are not asked so-called Dorothy Dixier questions with rehearsed answers. We will: ... Enforce an equal number of Government and non-government members on the Committee.

Well, five years after that release, where are we? Well, we have got a government-dominated committee and we sure as hell have Dorothy Dixers—they were much in evidence over the last few weeks of estimates.

And we had a schedule—I am not sure where the responsibility for the schedule lies—perhaps it is with the former chairman of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee; I am sure the government would like to think that that was the case anyway. But a schedule was agreed to, and agreed to by the majority of government members, that meant we had the education portfolio dealt with between 5.30 and 7.00 p.m. on a Friday night; we had training and skills and higher education, which has been an ongoing contentious area in estimates, dealt with between 8.00 and 9.30 on a Friday night; small business and local government, again critical areas but apparently not worthy of serious scrutiny because they were on at almost 8 o'clock on a Tuesday night; regional development and resources—and we know the Premier says the state is running out of concrete so we cannot build the east-west link—examined by PAEC between 7.40 and 8.40 on a Wednesday night; and then of course child protection, which is again a critical and often controversial area, on between 7 and 8 o'clock at night.

Wherever the blame lies, it is simply not good enough to conduct the estimates process in the way in which it was conducted—it is simply not good enough. There were significant cuts to the time available for specific areas. In 2014 the Minister for Energy fronted the committee for an hour and 15 minutes. The Minister for Environment and Climate Change fronted the committee for 1 hour and 30 minutes, so the combined total of those two portfolios was 2 hours and 45 minutes. This year the energy, environment and climate change minister, who has carriage of both those portfolios, was just 2 hours before the committee. So that is a cut of almost 30 per cent in the time available to examine a minister in a critical portfolio area. That is apparently what this government calls better and more government scrutiny. It is a joke—it really is a joke.

I know many government members are unhappy with the secretive nature of this government. I know they are unhappy with the way these hearings have been conducted. I also understand that you cannot publicly criticise your ministers and the direction of the government, but I do urge them to take every step that they can—behind closed doors, whenever the opportunity arises—to do something about the way the estimates process has been neutered, because it has absolutely been neutered.

It is an absolutely critical part of our democracy that the Parliament scrutinises the expenditure plans of the executive. In this Parliament the only vehicle to achieve that outcome is the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and that process, as I say, has been neutered. It is simply not good for our democracy to have a situation where that

capacity is taken away. In all seriousness, it is a real issue.

Speaking of PAEC, the minister's presentation—I must say that while we all of course are using Microsoft products constantly, you would have to say that PowerPoint is really not the greatest advance in terms of political debate; but anyway—was a vehicle for a series of what I consider to be hollow boasts as well as some claims that might be considered at best interesting. The minister talked about unprecedented investment. She talked about new funding for a range of initiatives. She talked about the detail that was there.

I have got to say that I am extremely concerned, particularly with the environment aspects of the budget, that the various outputs that make up the environment section of this portfolio—climate change, environment and biodiversity, statutory activities and environment protection, management of public land and forests, Parks Victoria, fire and emergency management—in total have received a significant cut.

In the 2018–19 revised budget those outputs total \$1208.7 million. In the budget that has been tabled this year they total \$1179 million. Almost \$30 million has been cut directly out of those outputs for the year. If you consider that CPI is running on the latest figures at around 1.2 per cent, that is effectively a \$45 million cut for the year to date.

Of more concern though to me is that when you get down into the detail and you look at the way the initiatives that are contained in chapter 1 of the budget are funded from these outputs, you see that there is an additional \$6.1 million required from the department to fund the initiatives in the climate change portfolio, so that is \$6.1 million the department does not have to go about its usual business in that output.

In terms of the environment and biodiversity output, that is not too bad. You get to the statutory activities and environment protection, and goodness knows we need that, and there is \$28.7 million more coming out of that output in initiatives than has been done previously, so the department in that output has almost \$30 million less to spend on their day-to-day business. That is concerning.

Similarly with the management of public land and forests, \$32.9 million extra is coming out for government initiatives rather than the day-to-day business of the department. Parks Victoria is not too bad, but fire and emergency management really does take the cake: \$68.4 million of initiatives is no longer available to the department to go about their normal business.

Once you see that \$30 million has been cut from last year and the impact of initiatives is another \$68.4 million, there is almost \$100 million less available to the department to go about their business in terms of the outputs in this budget.

I am very, very concerned about the capacity of the department to achieve the level of service it needs to achieve with the funding cuts it is having to deal with.

This is not a good budget. This is probably one of the worst budgets I have seen in my almost 13 years in this house.