



**Flinders Electorate Office
1 June 2005**

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): Just as the Premier intervened and allocated additional resources to the DPP, so too do I ask that he intervene to resolve my concerns regarding the staffing levels in the Flinders electorate offices. The Flinders electorate is entitled to only 2.1 full-time equivalent staff members and I pay an extra 1.2 staff members out of my own pocket. Because of the sheer size of the electorate of Flinders, which is roughly the size of Tasmania, I have to run two offices: one full time at Port Lincoln and another two days a week at Ceduna, four hours drive away.

The bushfire has brought to a head the urgent need in my office for more staff, something I have been asking the Treasurer for since May last year. Since that time I have sent the Treasurer four letters asking for additional funding for staff, together with faxes and telephone calls, and he did not have the courtesy to acknowledge even a single one of them until recently when, on 5 April, some 11 months after my initial letter, he sent me a three-line response rejecting the request without explanation.

I understand that the electorates of Stuart and Giles are staffed at a rate of around 2.5 FTE; and, although Flinders is not geographically quite as large as either of these electorates, I do serve about the same number of people at 32 558, according to the most recent census. However, in Flinders they are spread more evenly throughout the electorate.

I have to respond to concerns about 10 hospitals (which equates to 12 per cent of the state's hospitals), two health centres, 72 education institutions and 10 local councils (14.7 per cent of South Australia's local governments) and to the dire needs for better access to the most basic services, such as mains water, telecommunications, public transport and safe roads, in relation to myriad other inquiries that are the bread and butter of an active electorate office in this huge and diverse electorate.

Due to the geographic and demographic layout of the Flinders electorate, I run two offices rather than one central office—as occurs in Stuart and Giles—to better serve my constituents and to address the vast array of issues, but this puts considerable strain on the resources available to me. The Port Lincoln office operates full time, Monday to Friday, 8.30 a.m. to 5 p.m., in line with other electorate offices throughout the state. However, while other full-time electorate offices are staffed at a rate of two FTE, my office has to manage with 1.7 FTE.

This is particularly difficult when I take one staff person out of the Port Lincoln office to accompany me either to Adelaide during the four-day sittings to assist in maintaining contact with my offices or to assist with the driving requirements to travel around the electorate to meet constituents if it were not supplemented with the staff I pay myself. The travel required is an occupational health and safety issue that is never taken into consideration when considering staffing. For example, two weeks ago a staff member had to assist me with driving as I visited Ceduna and Streaky Bay (an eight-hour trip).

Last week, after several late nights attending parliament, I needed a staff person to help drive to Kimba, a five hour round trip in the opposite direction. A DECS employee attending the same meeting hit three kangaroos on the way up to Kimba from Port Lincoln and had to be rescued. Fortunately, he was not injured. My Ceduna office is open for two days a week with .4 FTE, and will be even more critical when, after the next election, we will officially be responsible right across to the border with Western Australia. I would not be happy but would stop complaining if the Premier would at least consider allocating an additional .3 FTE staff, which would make the number of staff working in the Port Lincoln electorate office on a par with the rest of the state's electorate offices.

Soon after Labor came into government, most electorate offices in the state had their electorate staff doubled, largely for occupational health and safety reasons. However, Flinders did not receive any additional staffing entitlement, despite having to

manage without other members of parliament—either state or federal, upper or lower house—nearby to carry out some of the load, such as the much appreciated and well-used justice of the peace service, unlike metropolitan offices. At this point, I reminded the Premier that the recent ministerial portfolio reshuffle (brought about by the resignation of the member for Taylor) resulted in an additional 16 new ministerial staff.

There are 15 ministers in the government, yet one resignation and reappointment created a reshuffle which suddenly created 16 new positions. In addition, I note that in this budget there are 1 842 more public servants than were budgeted for last time. I find this a bitter pill to swallow, when my staff and I in our huge electorate, with the extra load of the bushfire and the distinct possibility of impending drought, cannot be allocated a mere .3 of a position, which would be on top of the 1.2 staff that I already pay for the sake of our mental health safety and wellbeing.

The recent tragic bushfires on Eyre Peninsula may have faded from the headlines now, but the recovery process will take much longer. We are now in the dangerous phase after a traumatic event when the accumulated mental and emotional stress can manifest itself in depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorders, as highlighted in the speech I gave in Mount Gambier. My staff and I have been at the forefront of working for bushfire victims. The additional workload has not been recognised by this government. I am gravely concerned, too, for many of my farming and rural families, some of whom are facing yet another year without income.

I am sure that I do not have to remind the Premier that my electorate has huge potential, and if this state is to triple its exports (as he set in his goals) much of this export will have to come from the Flinders electorate. Already nearly 40 per cent of the state's grain and 65 per cent of the state's seafood comes from the Eyre Peninsula, and the mining potential may be the proverbial Aladdin's cave. The region already contributes \$1 billion to the state's economy each year, and I am working hard to boost that further by helping to facilitate new projects and investments to bring about more wealth and prosperity for the future, not only for my constituents but for the whole state.

I need more staff hours and I think that I have a very strong case. I call on the Premier urgently to meet my request and ask him to be generous. In days gone by a region such as mine might have had two members and staff, but now it is supposed to be one vote one value. This could only be the case if I am provided with more staff. In the time left, I will quote a few paragraphs from my letter to the Treasurer of 29 April this year in response to his rejection letter. It does not surprise me that the Treasurer has neither acknowledged nor responded to this correspondence to date. My letter states:

Dear

Kevin,

The workload in my office has not abated since I wrote to you about this subject. In fact, it reached crisis point in the aftermath of the devastating bushfire here on Eyre Peninsula on January 11. As well as the direct impact on residents who tragically lost family members and had their homes and properties destroyed, the bushfire has had a ripple effect on the entire community that cannot be underestimated. I take this opportunity to congratulate the state government on its response to helping victims by setting up a single one-stop shop for advice and referrals.

However, my office is one of those agencies at the front line of helping bushfire victims, both in the days immediately following the fire and in ongoing recovery progress and also needs urgent assistance. Demand for help has been such that, in addition to the many people who contacted the Bushfire Recovery Centre, my staff and I have been contacted by hundreds of bushfire victims and others who have sought our help on issues as diverse as feed and transport for surviving livestock where the stamp duty could be waived on replacement homes and vehicles and referrals for counselling.

Many of these constituents have contacted us multiple times, and the queries are still coming in. We have also taken a lot of calls from people in other parts of the state, and interstate, from people wanting to help. Some bushfire victims simply wanted to talk to a sympathetic listener, and we had traumatised people break down in our office. People who come to us for help in these circumstances cannot be fobbed off quickly with a phone number or a pamphlet. My staff have done their best to respond with sensitivity and to help in any way they can, but the sudden increase in work load for an office that was already over-stretched has taken its toll on all of us.

For example, one Friday recently my full-time assistant was alone in the office for most of the day as a trainee and the person I personally pay for were both away sick and I was in Adelaide. During the morning, my assistant had a stressful emotional interview that took almost an hour, while juggling five phone calls and another three people coming into the office. We need at least one more full-time person. However, I would be happy if we could get funding for even 0.3 FTE staff. This would take the number of staff working in the Port Lincoln Flinders electorate office that are paid for by the state government to two FTE, on par with most full-time electorate offices in the state.

