




Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (4.10 pm): I rise in the Queensland parliament to make my maiden speech as the new member for the seat of Warrego in the 55th Parliament. Madam Deputy Speaker, may I also place on record my congratulations to you on your election. I pledge my support and continuing loyalty to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II through His Excellency the Hon. Paul de Jersey AC, Governor of Queensland.

I take this opportunity to thank the people of Warrego for placing their trust in me as their elected representative. I am humbled and honoured to take on the responsibilities of this role. I note the former member for Warrego, Howard Hobbs, who is in the gallery today, mentioned in his maiden speech some 28 years ago in the 45th Parliament that it was customary for an elected representative to conclude his letter to his constituent with the words 'your obedient servant'. He told the parliament he would never forget that this is the position in which he placed himself—that of servant to the people of Warrego. I can advise the parliament that this custom is alive and well, and I too will not forget the position in which I have placed myself—that of servant to the people of Warrego and Queensland.

Since Federation the state seat of Warrego has been represented by many farmers' sons. Warrego is the third largest seat in Queensland and slightly larger than the state of Victoria. Warrego has both Queensland, New South Wales and South Australian post codes. Today I am the first university educated farmer's daughter to represent the seat since Federation and the only descendant of the first country party president in Queensland to be elected to the state parliament. I have strong connections to the land and primary producers through my family. While being first is one thing, what is more important is what you do and what you achieve when you are first.

I am familiar with the Queensland parliament, having worked for the previous 21 years as an electorate officer, a position which has given me much corporate knowledge about the Warrego electorate, some knowledge of the practical workings of the parliament and some experience with politics. I was working in Queensland politics before one could Google it, before email, mobile phones, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and there was limited internet in Western Queensland. One might say how things have changed. There have been significant improvements in telecommunications in some areas of my electorate. However, not everyone shares in these improvements. In some areas, services and speeds have not kept pace with the advances in technology. Some still have limited or no mobile phone coverage and slow and expensive internet. If I can send one message today that is loud and clear, it is that the telecommunications efforts in rural and regional Australia need to be improved. There is much more work to do and that work needs to start now.

I come to this parliament to try to achieve good outcomes for my electorate of Warrego and Queenslanders in general. I note from the information provided by the Parliamentary Library regarding maiden speeches that it is traditional in the United Kingdom for speeches to praise the former incumbent. I particularly wish to thank the former member for Warrego for the opportunity to work with

him for the last 21 years. He has taught me much about politics and a lot about aviation. He has been a keen aviator due to the large size of his electorate, and he flew his own plane Papa Charlie Zulu, which is affectionately known to many of us as Warrego One. I am even more thankful for the fact that both my feet were firmly on the ground when he unfortunately had a wheels-up landing at Charleville in an election campaign and some years later an aircraft engine failure north of Mitchell just prior to another election. There is something about aeroplanes and elections. I am thankful that we are both still here today to talk about it.

There are many other people who have helped me over the last 21 years and during the recent election campaign. I am very thankful to the Warrego electorate council members, past and present, many of whom are great friends and have given me much personal and political encouragement. My local Zonta Club members, past and present, I owe you much for your wise counsel on everything community service and your support. I would also like to place on record my thanks to my brothers and sisters for their continued support throughout the preselection and the election campaign.

Today I feel it is important to outline some of the issues which need to be taken forward throughout the electorate of Warrego: agricultural profitability, improved telecommunications—which I touched on earlier—better health, education and infrastructure outcomes. My electorate is home to many industries. One that has been doing it tough for some time is the agricultural industry. I would like to see all three levels of government focus on ways to increase agricultural profitability. More can be done by governments from all levels to encourage the viability and profitability of the rural sector. The state government has a role. It can help landholders become more viable by controlling wild dogs and helping control grazing pressures with feral fencing initiatives.

For landholders to be profitable they must have stock, they must be able to keep their stock alive, they must have pasture or crops and be free from predators. There must also be more transparency in the meat-processing industry and a continual search for new markets for food and fibre products. The market search must continue for the macropod industry as well. It does not matter if the market is for kangaroo steak, salami, sausages, burgers, pet meat or pet food; it is a great cholesterol-free meat and Western Queensland has plenty of it.

The sudden closure of the live cattle export industry to Indonesia has impacted heavily on my electorate. Producers can handle naturally occurring events one at a time—for instance, a drought or a flood. However, they cannot handle the impacts of these natural events if they are also dealing with the hostile decisions of government such as a shutdown of the live cattle export or regressive vegetation management restrictions. When agricultural industries are profitable, there is a flow-on effect to local communities, small businesses and service industries and jobs. Security of tenure is also important to long-term profitability. I commend the former LNP state government for the leasehold land reforms and freeholding regime which was introduced in the last term. Security of tenure is paramount.

Although some assistance programs for severe and prolonged drought emanates from the Commonwealth government, I would like to see the continuation of the state government Drought Relief Assistance Scheme and the Emergency Water Infrastructure Rebate. There has only been patchy storm rain for a lucky few. However, in many areas of my electorate there has been little or no rain. The rain window is closing, and many areas unfortunately are either in natural disaster circumstances or very close to it. I am disappointed that interest rate subsidies are no longer available to areas that suffer severe and prolonged drought. This was one form of assistance that worked. It helped the whole community. I will continue to raise the need for interest rate subsidies and ask that consideration be given to extending this type of assistance to small businesses. They, too, are seriously affected by drought.

It is also no secret that the average age of a farmer is over 50 years. I believe we need to start to have a discussion on how a rural debt reconstruction board or authority could be established and operated. This needs to start with a view to helping older farmers exit the industry with dignity in their retirement and assisting young farmers become established in the agricultural industry. There are ways to ensure that Queensland remains a major food and fibre producing state and the inland regions remain populated. It is time to have that serious discussion about how farm debt reconstruction can be done.

In Western Queensland, for those who drive out on our highways there is a lot of heavy vehicle traffic. However, we do not have passing lanes. It is a situation which I would like to change on the Warrego Highway, in particular west of Dalby, with passing lanes and upgrades to intersections and the pavement. I would also like to remove much of our heavy vehicle traffic off the roads and onto rail. Projects like the uplands rail hub at Thallon can take thousands of trailers of grain and cotton per annum off the roads. More cattle trains on the rail will also reduce the heavy vehicles on our roads

and increase safety. Freight costs and road maintenance costs can be reduced to the taxpayer if we can move that freight onto rail, and there needs to be a greater effort in this regard.

The health infrastructure in Warrego is in need of renewal, in particular some of the ageing major hospitals. I am keen to work with the communities, the local health and hospital services, doctors, nurses and allied health professionals on how we can replace this ageing infrastructure and make it a priority for state government. My electorate has not only some ageing infrastructure but also an ageing population. The oldies find it difficult to travel long distances to specialist appointments in Toowoomba or Brisbane, and I believe we should encourage more visiting specialist services to major centres in the electorate and also across rural and regional Queensland.

Across the Warrego electorate, there is a very good water conservation scheme known as the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative. There is another phase of the GABSI which has been funded by the federal government, and I am keen to see this next phase continue to conserve artesian water. Our local irrigation farmers at the St George irrigation area have been working very hard to progress towards local area management. I commend these farmers for their work and I would like to see their efforts come to fruition with the implementation of local area management arrangements in the future.

Like many constituents in Warrego, my education was by correspondence at home and then away at boarding school. Boarding school today is a very expensive option but in so many cases it is the only option for the education of isolated children. Boarding and tuition allowances provided by state and federal governments are of assistance; however, they have not kept pace with boarding school costs. I intend to be a fierce advocate to have these allowances further increased so that children from rural and regional areas can have the same opportunities as those who live in closer settled areas. I note that a former member for Warrego, Neil Turner, in his maiden speech in 1975 raised this same issue. In the last term of government, almost \$10 million was spent to clear the backlog of maintenance funding in our schools in the Warrego electorate, and I commend the member for Surfers Paradise for his work in this regard. As I move around the schools in my electorate, I see that there is more maintenance work to do and I intend to ensure that this work is undertaken.

At some stage this morning, honourable members would have had a cup of instant coffee. If it was roasted and processed by the Nestle company near Gympie, there is a good chance that that teaspoon of instant coffee was produced with liquefied natural gas from the electorate of Warrego and it would have been produced at the BOC micro LNG plant outside of Miles. This plant is one of the first in Queensland producing coal seam gas into LNG for domestic use. Not all LNG is going for export; some is being used in the domestic market. I can see the potential for more of these micro LNG facilities providing domestic gas to other local businesses and industries in the Surat and Cooper basins in the future.

The CSG industry is changing its phase from major construction to asset maintenance. However, due to the slump in world oil prices and the flow-on reduction in the share prices, the industry is going through its own drought, and they too have had to tighten their belts. I am pleased to hear in the maintenance phase that the companies are looking to engage with more local businesses and have set targets on local content. I am keen to engage further with them on how over a period of time these targets can be increased to give greater opportunities to small businesses in the local region.

Another issue which my electorate struggles with is the cost of living. A punnet of strawberries in Thargomindah can cost \$6, but on the same day in Roma it can cost \$2. We have to find ways to bring down the freight costs to these communities, as they are great communities and they have many people living in them. Perhaps better targeting of the freight subsidy contracts to areas where there is market failure would be an option, rather than having freight subsidy contracts in areas where there is existing competition. I will also be keeping a watching brief on electricity prices and the electricity maintenance facilities across my electorate. Electricity costs contribute significantly to a household's cost of living, small businesses, irrigators, farmers and employers in my electorate.

Honourable members, I am pleased to see that there is going to be some form of a Royalties for the Regions type program continue under the current government. Some years ago I researched and wrote this policy, and this program was implemented by the former LNP state government in a very difficult fiscal environment. It is pleasing to see that both the LNP and the ALP governments have seen the value this program provides and it is continuing, albeit with a different focus and reduced funding. Royalties for the Regions is not just about using taxpayers' funds from resource royalties. Used correctly, this program has the ability to attract a lot of private company investment into public assets which are then used by the resource industry and the locals.

Across my electorate, I have many salary and wage earners. These people work in businesses and the service industry. There are also public servants from nearly every state government department. They are the true front-line government workers. They do their best to help the public with their issues with government, and I commend them for their work and for the assistance they give to my constituents.

Over this term, I look forward to working with honourable members of this parliament. I wish to make Queensland and Warrego an even better place for our children and our grandchildren to live and work. I extend a welcome to all new honourable members and the returning members of this parliament, especially the new members for Gregory, Gympie, Gaven, Condamine, Moggill, Burdekin and Redlands. Thank you, Mr Speaker and honourable members, for the opportunity to present my maiden speech in the 55th Queensland Parliament.