



Speech by

SIMON FINN

MEMBER FOR YEERONGPILLY

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FIRST SPEECH

Mr FINN (Yeerongpilly—ALP) (2.47 p.m.): I am honoured to reply to the Governor's address and, in doing so, deliver my first speech to this parliament. I begin by acknowledging that we gather today on land traditionally owned by indigenous Australians. I express sorrow for the acts of previous governments in their treatment of indigenous people, and say sorry directly on behalf of my ancestors. I welcome the appointment of the member for Clayfield as the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. Appointing a ministry dedicated solely to indigenous issues reflects the urgent need to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged Australians. I hope that when I leave this parliament I look back knowing that indigenous people have longer life expectancy, reduced infant mortality rates, higher levels of education and employment, reduced incarceration rates and a much better quality of life.

I recognise my predecessor, the former member for Yeerongpilly, the Hon. Matt Foley. Matt served in this House for 14 years and was a minister in both the Goss and Beattie governments. Matt began his first speech with the words 'I come to this place to achieve change.' Matt certainly achieved change. Matt can be particularly proud of his work to promote women and advance the lives of indigenous people. Perhaps Matt's greatest legacy, however, is his thorough and uncompromising commitment to eradicating the corruption that had poisoned government in Queensland before 1989. Let us never return to those dark and shameful days.

There is no greater role for government than reducing poverty and financial hardship. This was fundamental at Federation and remains fundamental today. Until recently, however, issues relating to poverty and hardship had not been at the forefront of the political debate. I am heartened by the recent Senate inquiry into poverty and financial hardship and commend the work of the committee. I draw the House's attention to the recent address by the federal shadow minister for families and community services. Labor is putting poverty and hardship firmly back on the agenda.

I commit my first speech to raising awareness of some of the issues of hardship experienced by Australians today and to giving definition to the issues that will focus my efforts whilst I maintain the confidence of the electors of Yeerongpilly. Governments have talked a lot in recent times about aspiration and achievement. Governments must establish an environment that allows people to aspire and achieve, an environment free of poverty and disadvantage.

Several public figures have spoken of the 'ladder of opportunity' and helping people climb the rungs. But without targeted government strategies to reduce poverty and disadvantage, the first rung of the ladder will remain out of reach to many Australians. The ACOSS submission to the recent Senate inquiry defined an important role of government as drawing attention to poverty and disadvantage, taking action to reduce it and monitoring progress in addressing it. Sound economic policy alone will not do the job. Progress is much more likely to be made when governments make commitments that are tied to performance targets. If we want to get people onto the first rung of the ladder we have to ask ourselves: are we monitoring poverty and disadvantage? Are we reducing it? What are our targets to eradicate it? These fundamental questions must underpin the actions of government today.

There are many aspects of poverty and financial hardship. Today I will draw attention to some of the current issues of national importance in the areas of core Labor values: employment, health, housing and education. I turn first to employment and the labour market. In 1998, the then Beattie-led Queensland opposition set an unemployment target. That target of five per cent was criticised by some people. However, when the promise was made, unemployment in Queensland was 9.5 per cent. Today,

the figure is 5.9 per cent. The Beattie Labor government deserves recognition for developing a bold target and going for it. I remain hopeful that future Australian governments will once again set a national target of full employment and that that target not be undermined by partisan politics.

Employment levels are critical to reducing poverty and hardship, but we must also ensure both security in employment and adequate wages. A brief look at earnings in this country shows that minimum wages have decreased since 1984 and that new jobs are not high-paying jobs. Eighty-seven per cent of jobs created nationally in the 1990s paid less than \$26,500 per annum. Much of this is due to the increased casualisation of the work force. In 2000, 27.3 per cent of the paid work force was in casual employment—more than double the number in 1982. One example is the manufacturing industry, where labour hire firms now cover 19 per cent of the work force with 97 per cent of their workers casual employees. Halting rampant casualisation must be a goal of governments today if we are serious about fixing poverty and disadvantage. Casual workers have poor job security, variable incomes, no paid leave and low advancement prospects.

In the main, loadings for casual workers has barely increased over the past 30 years, but what has happened at the other end of the spectrum? In 2001, the top 100 Australian CEOs earned 65 times the federal minimum wage. One year later, they had jumped to 89 times the federal minimum wage. This group of Australian CEOs now earns in excess of \$38,000 per week. The widening gap between the rich and poor and the increasing number of people in poverty are what the Prime Minister should consider when he says that the poor are not getting poorer.

Any consideration of disadvantage in the workplace must also look at pay equity and work and family issues. It is shameful that in 2004 women still earn on average \$130 less per week than men. I particularly acknowledge the work of two trade unions, the LHMU and the ASU, who continue the struggle to increase income levels for women workers. Their work in the child care industry must be highlighted. Childcare workers are among the lowest paid and yet have the day-to-day responsibility of looking after our children. The reward that they receive is simply not commensurate with the responsibility that they bear. I also recognise the work of the trade union movement for their focus on work and family. Access to paid parenting leave is at the forefront of work and family issues in Australia. Sadly, there are few opportunities for parents to secure adequate leave following childbirth. It is no wonder that women believe that they will lose job security if they have extended leave. A 2001 OECD survey found that Australia had the lowest employment rates of mothers of children under six, the lowest employment rates for lone parents and we ranked 15th in the work force participation of mothers in couple families. Currently, paid maternity leave is available to only 35 per cent of women in the work force and low-income earners are less likely to have access to paid leave. Only 30 per cent of women earning between \$20,000 and \$29,000 have access to paid maternity leave compared to 65 per cent in the \$50,000 to \$69,000 range. Many paid maternity leaves are inadequate. Almost 40 per cent of certified agreements with paid maternity leave are limited to two weeks leave. A further 20 per cent are limited to six weeks leave.

It is time for a modern policy. Governments must have a target that 100 per cent of the work force will have access to paid parenting leave and the ILO's recommended minimum of 14 weeks leave must be our benchmark. Not only is paid parenting leave essential for the health of the mother and child, it provides opportunities for parents, including fathers, to provide family support and bond with the child in the first three months of life.

It is with great disappointment that I stand here today as the federal Australian government dismantles our universal health care system. The decline in bulk-billing and the rising cost in basic health care means that fewer people who need health care will get it. This is not a better system. A better system is when fewer people need health care, not simply when fewer people use it. This approach of the federal government should come as no surprise. The current Prime Minister in 1987, when talking about what he would do in government, said—

We will get rid of the bulk-billing system. It's an absolute rot.

He went further to say—

We will be proposing changes to Medicare which amount to ipso facto dismantling. We will pull it right apart.

He is certainly doing that. In 1996, 80 per cent of GP visits were bulk-billed. Last year, that figure had fallen to 69 per cent. This trend must be reversed. In the years to come, we must look back on this period as a flesh wound for the universal system, not as a death knell.

Waiting lists are a key indicator of a performing health system and are integral to reducing poverty and disadvantage. If surgery is required to reduce pain or increase mobility, then the longer it takes to have that surgery, the longer the potential dislocation from the work force. The Beattie government is to be commended for its health platform with a focus on shortening waiting lists. We are already injecting funds to reduce waiting lists and our independent audit will inform the development of targets for waiting times and strategies to achieve these targets.

The right to equal access to a full range of health care services must be protected. The government must maintain and advance this right not only through funding a universal system but also by ensuring that access to health services is neither limited by the Criminal Code nor by moral majorities of law-makers. Queenslanders must be able to make their own decisions about their health care within a system that allows them to do so with dignity.

I now turn to affordable housing. The link between affordable housing and hardship is that affordable housing allows households more income to be spent on essential services. Of critical importance is the percentage of income households spend on housing. The 2002 ACOSS housing blueprint reports that 35 per cent of households receiving rent assistance—and they are the poorest households—spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent. Nine per cent of these households spend more than 50 per cent. These levels are much too high and all Australian governments must urgently develop strategies to ensure housing availability for low-income earners that meets the international benchmark of affordability, considered to be a cost below 30 per cent of income.

All members in this House would have been approached by people seeking public housing and there is clearly more demand than there is supply. To address some of the unmet demand, we must set a target for increasing public housing just as we set our unemployment target. ACOSS recommends a national target of six per cent of households living in public housing—double the current Queensland component. However, the real problem in public housing is that funding under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement is declining. Base grant funding under this agreement has fallen 54 per cent over the last 10 years. It is not acceptable that federal governments trumpet massive surpluses while cutting the funding agreement that provides shelter to low income and disadvantaged people.

In addition to public housing, changes are needed to the taxation system and government and private investors must work towards agreements with mutual benefit from the construction of affordable housing. As Brisbane grows and house prices increase, ensuring that people on low incomes can afford housing will be one of our biggest challenges. The partnership between the states and the Brisbane City Council that is currently providing affordable housing must continue to expand.

Of course, when we talk about housing, the greatest problem is homelessness. In a prosperous country such as Australia we still have unacceptable levels of homelessness. The 2001 census found that there were 100,000 homeless people in Australia, and sadly more than half of these are children or young people. Australia is a wealthy country; we can afford to make homelessness a thing of the past.

I turn now to education. Access to a quality education is the key to addressing poverty and disadvantage. Education provides pathways into employment. However, entry level jobs now require a greater skill base and the completion of secondary education is a basic requirement. The ACOSS submission to the Senate inquiry describes an Australian labour market where secure, full-time jobs are increasingly being rationed to those with the highest skills. People with limited formal education and vocational training are disadvantaged. Government investment in early childhood education and increasing school leaving ages are critical.

The long-term impact of government investment in early childhood education was recognised in the report of an earlier Senate inquiry that estimated that every dollar of early childhood spending is likely to save \$7 in later expenditure on remediation. The Beattie Labor government knows the importance of investing in education. Our education and training reforms for the future involve a massive injection of funds into education and training and include the introduction of a preparatory year of schooling and school retention strategies. Queensland children will be starting school at a younger age and will be earning or learning right through to at least the age of 17.

However, whilst Queensland ensures that every child has access to education and training, access to university gets harder. It does not take a university degree to work out the link between financial hardship and debt, but it does take a mean-spirited government to burden our young people leaving university with massive debt. Since 1996, the Australian federal government has cut funding to higher education by \$5 billion. At the same time it has allowed universities to increase HECS fees by up to 25 per cent and allocate 30 per cent of places to full-fee paying students.

It is very disappointing that some universities have felt pressured to increase fees to gain a perceived marketing edge based on a premise that a higher fee equals greater prestige. The federal government has created an environment of slashing funding, promoting education for the rich and pitting universities against each other. In effect, this has shifted the burden of providing education directly on to students, a group whose average annual income in 2000 was \$12,500. HECS fees are simply massive taxes with deferred payment options imposed on people with low incomes. For many, particularly women, the reward for attending university is financial hardship caused by long-term massive education debt. Supporters of shifting this burden onto students should look closely at what is happening in New Zealand. More than half of New Zealand's home loan institutions are now taking higher education debts into account when determining home loan approvals. Burdening people with lifelong debt and hardship is the logical extension of Australia's current higher education policies. The

ideal of free education and recognition of the incredible boost this country received following the Whitlam government abolishing university fees must drive government higher education strategies.

I have touched on but a few of the issues associated with poverty and hardship that government must address. In raising these, I recognise that there are pressures on government to fund essential infrastructure and to develop budgets that target service delivery within responsible financial guidelines. I am pleased that there is a federal debate on taxation and the national surplus. We must break the mould of governments that make the community poorer by slashing spending on services to provide individual income tax cuts on the eve of an election. In Queensland we must continue to examine our economic model in order to target expenditure for infrastructure and services that reduce disadvantage and hardship. We must bury forever the populist mantra of the low-tax state constructed by government prior to 1989. Strategies and targets to eradicate poverty and disadvantage will fail if this mantra is allowed to again dominate debate on public expenditure. Competitive taxation models allow Queensland to attract business and investment whilst ensuring a revenue stream to fund service provision.

I also note comments by the Local Government Association of Queensland, the Queensland Council of Unions, Professor John Quiggin and others regarding Queensland's fuel subsidy scheme. Whilst it is neither Labor Party nor government policy to make changes to this subsidy, I believe it is time for it to be examined. QUT's Professor Layton estimates the annual cost of the fuel subsidy at \$500 million per year. Reallocation of at least some of these funds could provide a significant injection to essential infrastructure. Any changes to this subsidy would need to be undertaken with caution, however. Increases in fuel prices will most affect people who travel long distances to work and who do not have adequate alternative transport options. These are often people on low incomes. On balance, however, I am concerned about the economic and environmental sustainability of continuing to subsidise fuel consumption.

I thank the electors of Yeerongpilly for the honour of representing them in parliament. As I begin my representative role, there are a number of local issues which I will advance with vigour in partnership with local residents and community groups. Recent reports of potential passenger jet usage of the Archerfield airport are concerning. Aircraft noise greatly affects the quality of life of residents under flight paths. I will strongly oppose any expansion of the use of Archerfield airport that will negatively affect the amenity of local suburbs or residents' quality of life. Heavy transport usage on local roads will continue to be an issue for Yeerongpilly residents, particularly as the federal government controlled national freight route runs through the electorate. All levels of government must work together to provide better options for heavy transport that reduce traffic impacts on residents. We must provide the necessary transport infrastructure to provide alternatives for passing through traffic and, where possible, reduce reliance on road transport.

In the last term of the Beattie government the Treasurer and Minister for Sport announced a proposed development of the Tennyson power station to include a state tennis centre and residential development. This exciting proposal will provide better sporting opportunities for local people. The nature of the development, however, will need to satisfy local concerns about traffic, river access and the impact of residential density in the final proposal. The dedication of the Oxley Creek Common as green open space provides fantastic opportunities for residents of Rocklea and surrounding suburbs. Together with the Brisbane City Council, local groups and community consultation, this valuable asset will develop into a highly used public space whilst its environmental values are preserved.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the people and organisations that provided the background for the detail of this speech, including the QCU, the Queensland Council of Social Service, the Australian Council of Social Service, the ACTU, the National Union of Students president, Jodie Jansen, and Mr Noel Morris of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union. I recognise with warmth and gratitude the support that I have received over many years from many Labor Party members locally and across Queensland. In particular, I thank my core campaign team of Cameron Crowther, Jo Clark-Jones, Ken Boyne, Alana Tibbitts and my nephew Tom Lembo, who at four years of age provided a special campaigning charm. Those of you who have met him will know all about that charm.

Several trade unions have provided me with support and guidance over the years, particularly during the election campaign, for which I thank them. Trade unions are too infrequently recognised for the work they do in eliminating poverty and disadvantage in our society. Thanks also to my family members, some of whom are in the gallery today, for the support provided me over the years. In particular, I thank my parents for providing me with an upbringing in which curiosity and an awareness of world events was encouraged. I also recognise my late grandfather, Keith Charles White, the former mayor of the city of Williamstown. Keith passed away whilst I was young but still provides me with my earliest political memories. I know how proud he would be seeing me embark on a representative commitment to community service. Finally, I give special thanks to my partner, Terri Butler, both for the love and support she has given me for many years and also, I hope, in advance for coping with the constraints and pressures that accompany life in partnership with a politician.