


Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.52 pm): I begin, as so many have done before me, by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet—the Jagera and Turrbal people—and their ancient culture, traditions and lore. I stand here on their land and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty has never been ceded—that this parliament sits on stolen land. If we are to make amends for the colonisation and the dispossession and genocide of the last 230 years—and we should—clear recognition of first nations' sovereignty and the negotiation of treaties with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be a priority for our state, country and community. I pay my respects to elders past and present and I thank them for their ongoing custodianship of this vast and unique continent. I lament that since invasion we have not only disrupted your connection to country but fallen far short of following your example and fulfilling our duty to care for this land and preserve it for future generations.

It was a great honour to have local elder Uncle Des Sandy attend as my guest for the opening of this parliament. We discussed that I was not only the first member of the Queensland Greens to be elected to this chamber but also the inaugural member for the newly created seat of Maiwar. He asked me a question that surprised me: 'What does Maiwar mean?' As I understood it, Maiwar was the local Indigenous people's name for what we now call the Brisbane River, but Uncle Des's response spoke volumes to me about the depth of his understanding of and connection to his country and just how much we have to learn from our first nations people. He said, without hesitation and in a perfectly matter of fact way, 'Nah, there couldn't be just one name for the river. Too many different peoples lived on and around it for there to be only one name. Maybe 10,000 or 15,000 years ago, before the ice caps melted and the sea rose, and the mouth of the river was way out past Moreton and Stradbroke islands, maybe then there would have been just one local group around here that used that name.' I am now careful to note that Maiwar is the name used by some local Aboriginal people for what we now call the Brisbane River.

My personal and professional backgrounds are in different ways both unusual and typical precursors to a career in politics. I have only quite recently become involved in party politics, having grown up in Toowoomba in a family that could scarcely have been less politically engaged. I was incredibly lucky to grow up with the love and support of a community of friends and family—in particular, my parents, Craig and Jan, who are here today, who have always fostered self-reflection and moral introspection and a deep sense of civic duty, the duty to use my privilege to improve the lot of society's most underprivileged people.

I do recognise the privilege that I have chanced upon—I am a straight, Anglo, well-educated, middle-class, sixth generation Australian man brought up in a safe, nurturing home where I never wanted for anything but learned the value of hard work watching my parents struggle to make ends meet running a small business. My dad works in TV. I can only just remember him working as the local TV newsreader at 10/4/5a when we first moved to Toowoomba, but he gave that away so he could be home at dinner time with his young family and ultimately took the brave step of running a tiny TV

production business from home. Mum did the books, ran the house, chased after me and my two brothers, David and Paul—Paul is here today too—and has worked most of her life as a secondary school teacher. Her high regard for education is evident in the paths that both my brothers and I have taken in life. I cannot thank my family enough for all they have given me and continue to give.

I am so lucky to have two happy, healthy kids who are my ultimate motivation to be here, making the case for their future. To my little 'Miss Six', Bonnie Rose, and 'Mr Eight', Noah Lee: you are what gets me out of bed every morning, literally and figuratively. I love you both more than I can tell you, and it is your love that keeps me going every day. I think you understand what is going on in our lives and in this building better than most people would give you credit for. Thank you so much for putting up with such a busy dad and for still being my biggest fans.

To my amazing, inspiring, political tragic of a partner, Daile. I love you so dearly. All I can say is thank you for keeping me in one piece over the last little while. Every one of us here understands the personal sacrifice that we make in politics and that inevitably, to some extent, we impose this on our families and loved ones, and my family have felt this sacrifice as deeply as any. There are no words for the gratitude I feel for the support that I have been given by my family, my friends and my loved ones.

Having grown up in Toowoomba, I am acutely aware of the interdependence between the city and the bush. The food we eat, the water we drink and the resources we consume to build our bridges and suburbs all come from beyond the city's limits. While many may have pegged me as the typical 'urban environmentalist' type that we have heard about in this chamber previously, I very much understand our connection with and reliance on the natural world, and my perspective rests on both a deeply scientific and pragmatic recognition of this connection. Perhaps it is this backdrop that led me, having moved to the big smoke as a young man, into a career as a public interest environmental lawyer, where I have endeavoured to use the law and existing systems of governance to support rural communities in their fight to protect the environment, their farmlands and our groundwater, and especially towards trying to preserve the climate that supports and now threatens both natural and man-made systems across our state, our country and our world.

I am willing to accept the truism that there are too many lawyers in politics, although there is no shortage of ex-police officers and ex-service people in the chamber, I note, as well. I will accept that truism, but my political world view and path to this place have been indelibly shaped by years of struggling on behalf of communities trying to achieve real, sensible and necessary environmental outcomes within a system of ineffective environmental laws. Like so many others in my party though, I recognise that people from the city or the country cannot be expected to care for or respond to broader social justice or environmental concerns if they are struggling to simply put bread on the table and keep the lights on.

Year on year as inequality grows it has become clear to me that our political system is ineffective and broken, and it is letting people down in every facet of their lives. That is what has brought me here. That is what I am fighting for.

I want to acknowledge specifically and thank the member for Cook. Although the first speeches of all new members have been outstanding, hers was an important first and I am both proud and dismayed that in our great state's history it is only in this 56th Parliament that we are achieving so many firsts—the first Greens member elected, the first Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander MPs, the first baby breastfed on the floor of the parliament, and the first time both government and opposition parties have been led by women. All of these things are positive signs of the times we live in.

Returning to the member for Cook's speech, I want to borrow a common metaphor that she and others have used in their first speeches: I too stand here on the shoulders of giants. It is simply not possible to acknowledge all those people whose efforts over many decades here in Queensland and nationally have led to the Greens finally breaking through and winning this seat. Our movement has deep roots, a colourful history, and a bright and powerful future.

All who have contributed to our grassroots party should rightly feel ownership of this achievement, but I will mention and thank one person specifically. He is known to so many inside and outside the party for his tireless effort and advocacy. He has fought for the rights of average Queensland battlers and for better environmental stewardship. Drew Hutton was the original Greens campaigner in parts of what is now Maiwar. He was absolutely integral in the genesis of our party and has done as much as any person to stand up for rural Queensland in the fight against corporate interests. Thank you, Drew, for being here with me a few weeks ago for the opening, for all your past and ongoing efforts, and for the mentorship you have given to so many of us. I do have to give a shout out to former Senator Waters, who is here and who has been an inspiration to me for years.

While I cannot possibly thank everyone who worked and volunteered on the Maiwar campaign, I hope the House will indulge me while I list some of those most integral to our success. I note that a number of them are in the gallery. There are so many people here, and for those whom I will not name I am sorry. Sinead Canning, you are an absolute powerhouse and you have such an exciting future in politics. Don Sinnamon, thank you for always being there to lend an ear and sponge a lift.

A huge thanks to everyone who worked in the campaign office and on the campaign committee—Hannah, Stirling, Stannah, Andy, Libby, Travis, Jake, Christine, Lenore, Andrew, Roxanne, Gemmia, James, Rubina, and I could go on and on. The personal investment from all Greens doorknockers and volunteers in this campaign is immeasurable. The dedication and passion of each of those people got me here, particularly Ralph, an indefatigable doorknocker who seems to have come up in conversation with Bardon residents every other day since the election.

The party's state office and strategic staff coordinated an incredible statewide campaign. There were Greens candidates for all 93 seats across the state who deserve credit for representing the party and giving every Queenslanders the opportunity to vote Greens, but I will single out Amy MacMahon and Kirsten Lovejoy for their extraordinary efforts in the seats of South Brisbane and McConnel. Thank you for your hard work, passion, comradery and ongoing friendship. You continue to be a source of inspiration.

I am not here just because of the efforts of Greens past and present and the phenomenal campaign run last year. I am here because Queenslanders recognise that our political system is broken. Wages are stagnating or in decline for most Australians. Living standards are falling but corporate profits are at all-time highs. Our younger generation has a lower expected quality of life than the generations that came before them. The home ownership and job security that was the pinnacle of aspiration for our parents is an impossible dream for most of our children. They are growing up with greater uncertainty and in the shadow of social, economic and environmental failings inherited from their forebears. What clearer evidence could we need to debunk the oft peddled nonsense of trickle-down or neoclassical economics? The system is rigged. Our governments have failed ordinary people, and inequality is growing relentlessly. It is my honest belief that our democracy has been hijacked by the interests of some extremely deep pockets and major corporations and no longer stands for everyday Queenslanders.

Our democracy has been hijacked and the system is broken. This is the message that the Greens took to the 2017 election, knocking on doors, one conversation at a time. Adani and Queen's Wharf certainly loomed large, illustrating the truth of this message. Its resonance with the community—where an extra 50,000 people chose the Greens this election—has culminated in me standing here addressing you as the member for Maiwar.

It is an incredible honour to be the first-ever representative of the electorate of Maiwar and to be the first Greens MP elected to this parliament. I am so proud and humbled to represent the residents of Taringa, Toowong, St Lucia, Fig Tree Pocket, Auchenflower, Indooroopilly and Bardon—to stand here on their behalf and give voice to their concerns, not beholden to corporate interests. Residents of Maiwar are frustrated that decisions about how their neighbourhood evolves are being manipulated by the big end of town—by property developers, lobbyists and land speculators.

The people have lost control of their city. Brisbane is now shaped by the pursuit of corporate profit rather than by the needs of the people who live there. The residents I represent worry about where their kids will go to school, whether they will be able to get a spot in after-school care and, I can say this without a shred of rhetoric, where their children will play. Unfortunately, they are accustomed to their political representatives not listening, but I have a lot of excitement and optimism about our future because I believe the community can reassert its power and turn our democracy around.

Like thousands of other Greens supporters across Queensland, I have a great deal of hope that we can transform the systems that shape our lives to make our society kinder, fairer, more sustainable and more democratic. The Greens have a vision for sustainable urban development, for better public transport, safer streets, more public green space, up-to-date community facilities and well-designed non-profit housing. We can cover the cost of it all by making big corporations and property developers pay what is fair. We do not have to live in a city with jackhammers for alarm clocks and bumper-to-bumper congestion. We do not have to accept overcrowding in schools. We do not have to lose all connection to the natural world or lose the colour and culture of our neighbourhoods.

We also have a vision for a fairer, more sustainable Queensland run entirely on renewable energy with a diversified economy based on sustainable agriculture, tourism, the arts and creative industries, research and innovation, and high-tech service industries. We envisage a society where no-one is left homeless, with greater stability and stronger rights for renters, and high-quality homes for all.

Here in Queensland we already have the skills, knowledge and resources to achieve this vision, but to this point we have lacked the political will. If we are to take meaningful action on climate change to improve our health and education systems, to provide greater support for those who are increasingly being left behind by neoliberalism and globalisation, we must first take back our democracy from those interests that have hijacked it. Rational evidence based arguments and thoroughly costed futureproof policies count for little if political representatives allow financial backers and major corporate interests to call the shots.

I do not attribute malice or ill intent to anyone in this House, but we appear all too ready to accept the way things are done, and have been done for some time, when our system needs a thorough clean-up. My intention in this term of parliament is to use every opportunity in parliament, my electorate or elsewhere to advocate for greater social equality, meaningful environmental protection and an economically just future. I make a commitment to every other member of the House that I will always be willing to engage in a reasonable, evidence based discussion about making or changing law in pursuit of these outcomes, and I will work tirelessly for the people of Maiwar in doing so.

I, like so many others I have spoken to throughout the recent election campaign, have held some real reservations about the tenor and utility of some proceedings in this parliament. Much of what I have seen in my short time here has only served to substantiate the public's cynicism and is the kind of conduct that puts at risk whatever interest or respect for this institution is retained in the community.

It is an indictment on parliamentary process that we unreservedly accept the conduct described euphemistically as the theatre of parliament or the institution of the six o'clock scream, which I have only just discovered since being sworn in. In my time here we have passed a number of pieces of legislation, each of which has been before the relevant committee usually twice, enjoyed bipartisan support and was passed without any need for a division, and yet we wasted days and days listening to so-called debate, almost none of which contributed meaningfully to the discussion or influenced a policy outcome.

Government and opposition have more often sought my vote in this House for pointless political motions that achieve nothing for the people of Queensland—motions that purport to relate to real issues like fuel prices, local planning decisions or agricultural water supply but in fact offer no real outcome. It is nothing more than the opportunity to sling mud across the chamber chasing cheap political points. I have heard members on both sides describe it as such, and I do not intend to routinely participate in these kinds of parliamentary shenanigans, not out of disrespect for the parliament but in recognition of what could be achieved if we left these wasteful practices behind.

Mr Speaker, you and my constituents can rest assured that I will continue to diligently watch this kind of debate while working from my office upstairs. I will be immediately on hand if it takes on meaning or purpose, but where base politics is the only objective abstinence seems to me the most sensible and principled use of my vote. The tribalism, grandstanding and unnecessarily adversarial conduct in this place is hampering much needed change and, quite rightly, undermining public confidence in this vitally important institution.

I was driven into politics because I could not stomach three-word slogans, the flagrant disregard for evidence in setting policy or the open hostility towards science that now appears all too common in political discourse. The desire to achieve ecological sustainability, grassroots democracy and social justice by peaceful, non-violent means is not common only to Greens. At our core, I believe these are values that each of us share.

I was driven into politics because I remember from my time working in the service of our state within the Queensland government that, all too often, frank and fearless advice of our public sector was dismissed. I remember the inefficiencies of responding to political whims. As one of the first public servants to be made redundant under the Newman government, I remember seeing that this kind of base politicking is the real drag on efficiency in the public service. I remember electioneering or vested interests winning out over the people of Queensland all too many times.

When I entered politics, I did it with the Greens—a party that I saw actually stood for and with the community, separate from vested interests and committed to actually building a future for all of us. This parliament has so much to work on and so much that together we can achieve for the people of Maiwar and Queensland. An economy that revolves around coalmines and casinos will not provide secure, long-term jobs for workers and is neither resilient nor sustainable.

The politics of fear and division that is created around these industries and developments shows disdain for everyday Queenslanders and harms our community in the long term. There is so much we can do to support workers and future generations.

There is so much that can be done within this state's responsibility to close the gap and address the shocking overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in detention, caught up in the youth justice system, and the disproportionate removal of Indigenous children from their families and the community. There is so much more to do to achieve real equality for the LGBTIQ community despite what has been accomplished recently.

There is so much more to do to give people bodily autonomy, and I am excited that we are closer than ever to removing archaic 19th century abortion laws. There is so much more to do to actually protect our iconic species, ecosystems and the Great Barrier Reef. There is so much more to do to foster the culture and colour of our communities, to support the arts and innovation, and provide the conditions for positive lifestyles—to go beyond and not just focus on livelihoods.

There is so much more to do about the fact that tens of thousands of people sleep rough every night while even more homes than that sit empty. There is so much more to do to return the community's voice in this House as we plan and develop and make decisions vital to the future of those same communities.

Mr Speaker, I stand here for the people of Maiwar and on the shoulders of those giants. I stand before you and beside you, ready to work in this House and across the electorate in service of our community and its shared values of ecological sustainability, peace and nonviolence, grassroots democracy and social justice.