



Speech by

Mr B. LITTLEPROUD

MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 6 August 1998

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs— NPA) (3 p.m.): I am quite proud to be part of this 49th Parliament, which promises to be very different. Madam Deputy Speaker, I note your return to the House. I listened to your comments yesterday and I congratulate you today on being made a Temporary Chairman. I will pass on my own congratulations to the Speaker. He and I have corresponded already with regard to one of his decisions and I am awaiting his response.

I think it is also appropriate that I once again mention my allegiance to Her Majesty and ask that His Excellency the Governor pass on that allegiance on behalf of me and my constituents. I pay tribute to His Excellency the Governor. During the last Parliament I had the honour of being a member of the Executive Council. I served with the Governor at close quarters and I came to recognise the fine qualities of the man and the service he has given to Queensland. I also acknowledge his wife, Barbara.

This is the sixth time I have been elected to this House. This most recent campaign was probably the strangest I have been involved with. There were three candidates for my electorate. Only one said anything publicly, and that was me. One bloke said nothing and lost 25% of his vote. Another bloke said nothing and picked up 35% of the vote. It is pretty hard to work out how to counter those sorts of tactics.

When I was first elected to this place I succeeded the eminent late Vic Sullivan. He was good enough to be my campaign director and made sure that I was able to follow him into this House to represent what was then the seat of Condamine. For five elections since then I have had the same campaign director, Graham Vellnagel—a very fine gentleman from Warra. We were joking the other day that we have had six starts for six wins. He has trained five winners himself. I pay tribute to him and to his wife, Joan, for the dedicated way they organise a campaign. It is very sound financially and they also make sure they cover all the bases and take the pressure off the candidate. They have been backed very strongly, especially by Rick Benham, who was chairman of the electorate council for the National Party up there, and by Bruce Head, the secretary.

I also pay tribute to all those people in the branch structure across the seat of Western Downs, because we are an unbeatable force. I think the people have recognised over the years that on the State scene the National Party has done a sterling job of listening to and representing all their wishes. I am very much aware, however, that there is concern afoot right across Australia at the present time. That is reflected in the make-up of this House and in the sorts of things that are being said across my electorate.

The dilemma we have has been worrying me for quite some time. It is well known that the finances of Queensland are in a good state, yet a lot of people out there are struggling in their own individual pursuits. Why is it that we cannot transpose the solid economic performance of the State into something that flows on to all people? I suppose that is wishful thinking.

Since the election I have been trying to get people to enunciate to me exactly what their major concerns are. I listened to your comments yesterday, Madam Deputy Speaker. You also said that you had been listening to people. In fact, I even invited members of my electorate to write in to me or to ring me up. I received only four phone calls and three letters. I put that down to a difficulty on the part

of the people to enunciate their problems and to identify where the blame lies—State politics, Federal politics, weather conditions, the pace of change, global markets or all those things.

I knew even before the election that a significant number of people find life rather threatening. They can see all the assets they have put together in life at risk, yet they would argue that they are good Queenslanders—a valid argument. They work hard and yet they can see that their opportunities are diminishing, while there are others around them who work just as hard but maybe a little smarter. They have read the script and understand how things have changed and are making decisions which mean that they are surviving or even prospering. I think the challenge for us as politicians at the local, State and Federal levels is to see what we can do to assist those parts of Queensland that are hurting the most.

When we sit down either in this House or at the Cabinet table to start to try to address all the pressures there are in the State, it is interesting to note that there are some places that have to face the pressures of enormous growth—the Gold Coast, Brisbane, the Sunshine Coast, Hervey Bay, Bundaberg, Cairns—whereas people behind the Great Dividing Range are facing the rural decline and population drift.

I have lived in this area all my life, and I have to say that the pressures people are under now are not new. All my life in my own district I have seen the amount of pressure on people ebb and flow. It comes in waves. Pressures at the present time result from the severity of the drought, which has lasted for a number of years, the downturn in prices for the primary produce that dominates our economy, together with a shortage of money being directed to our part of Queensland by Governments at all levels because it is being poured into other areas. People coming to Queensland are demanding first-class services and it has all impacted on these people, never any worse than at the present time.

I have worked very closely with the seven local governments in my part of Queensland to try to identify what we can do. We know that the people themselves, in their own individual pursuits, have done all sorts of things. They have produced more per acre; they have gotten big or got out. When people have had farm build-up and they have gone and bought the next-door neighbour's farm, it has meant survival for them, but it has been no good for the community because the cumulative effect is that there are fewer farmers. That means that the people in town who are servicing those farmers have a smaller clientele and their cash flow decreases. We have brought about our own downfall by answering the marketplace and becoming more efficient and having fewer people involved or each person producing more. People in retailing even buy out their competitors.

There are now better roads, and people are prepared to travel 100 kilometres, or two hours, from Chinchilla to Toowoomba to shop because of the marketing skills of the major retailers. Going to Toowoomba to shop makes for a day out—it is a day's entertainment—as opposed to just going down the street and buying where there is not as big a range of products and, in many cases, higher prices. It is also not the same social experience. All of those things are impacting on us very badly, and deliberate action on our part is required.

I have listened very carefully to the statements made by the Premier. He was on about jobs, jobs, jobs. When he first started in the election campaign he mentioned the figure of 5% unemployment. Since then he has dropped the 5% and now it is just "jobs, jobs, jobs". Just yesterday or the day before he started putting in a let-out. People were saying, "The Asian crisis is going to impact on us and things are going to be tougher than we thought, but the main thing is that there was a commitment there." Labor was going to be a Government to try to generate employment and it was going to be a Government for all of Queensland. I hope that is the case.

I will now concentrate on an issue that has been identified by me and by the leaders in the community, including local governments—that is, how we can do something about bringing to my part of Queensland greater cash flow and more opportunity. People are putting in irrigation systems and are producing more per acre, and that helps those few people. Some of the retailers have got themselves a new line of business and have perhaps created a bit more employment.

We have identified three things. The first is the use of modern communication technology to bring some of those new sunrise industries to the inland. There is no reason why we cannot do that. There is no reason why these industries have to be in the cities. There is an example of this philosophy in Nebraska in the USA. The economy of that State has been changed through the use of modern communication technology in order to attract new industries that will service all of the USA.

I give credit to a regional group called Growforce, which has already identified the value of technology. Some money has come through from the Howard Government—about \$2.5m—to set up a web site to serve the people as a regional unit and also to give them access to worldwide Internet web sites. We must pursue that. I hope that the Honourable Deputy Premier makes sure that that continues.

We have also identified the need for more water. Increasing the water supply gives more surety and leads to increased production. For example, we can change from broadacre dry-land farming to

horticulture or irrigated agriculture. That would lead to more employment opportunities and also provide more inputs for the farm, which would generate increased cash flows for retailers and service industries in the area. The previous Government and the former Minister for Natural Resources, the member for Warrego, identified two dams that it would put in place under the water infrastructure program. We were well along the track of having those designed, and tenders are now out for their construction. However, I understand that those projects are dependent upon the present Cabinet's approval.

Mr Welford: Which ones are they?

Mr LITTLEPROUD: The Nangram weir and the Condamine weir, on the Condamine River. I have written to the new Minister for Environment. He has acknowledged that those dams are under consideration. I hope that the Minister appreciates that those dams are one of only three options that we have to do something to improve the growth of our local economy and to open up opportunities for people so that they do not drift away from the area. That is one of the options and it is strongly backed by all of the local councils and the chambers of commerce.

Another option is the Surat Basin coal reserves. My electorate is lucky enough to have well over one billion tonnes of high-quality coal, which has laid undisturbed for generations. Under the guidance of the member for Burnett, who was the previous Minister for State Development, we have reached the stage of having preferred developers go out there to try to develop those sites. It has been of concern to me that, with the change of Government, this option, which has the potential to provide about 1,000 jobs in my electorate, could be at risk. I have already written to both the Premier and the Deputy Premier and posed some questions on notice to them asking them to recognise just how important this is to us. We do not have very many options. This is one resource that we do have. The coal has low emission qualities which can be used to advantage. I ask that the development not be discounted for environmental reasons alone, bearing in mind that we have only a few options.

This week it has worried me to hear the way in which questions about the Chevron gas pipeline project have been answered by both the Premier and the Deputy Premier. As a Government, we were also keen to promote that project. I am concerned that, although the Premier has said he will make sure that the Chevron pipeline progresses, he has never said he will make sure that the other projects in the Surat Basin will get a fair go. I have been told by people who are tied up with that project that, based on the Kogan Creek coal reserves, they will be able to generate power more cheaply than power that is generated from natural gas coming from the Chevron pipeline.

If we are to make a judgment on environmental grounds alone, natural gas gets a tick. That can be part of the argument. However, if it gets down to the cost of power, which is the basis of a lot of enterprise and business, that has to be a serious consideration. More importantly, if the Premier is going to be true to his claim of his Government being a Government for all Queensland, he has to recognise that, as a region, we do not have many cards to play. We have coal reserves and we are desperately in need. We have nothing else to play with. This has to be given due consideration. I am concerned to ensure that these people who have already spent millions of dollars trying to get themselves through the hoops to be selected as the preferred developer are not cut off at the 11th hour just because the Government has said that it would rather have the Chevron pipeline project coming down from New Guinea. The pipeline is a good project and I back it. However, I want the Government to understand that we do not have many options and that ours is also a good project that we desperately need the Government to consider, otherwise we will continue to see the same results that we have had over the past 25 years.

As far as that part of Queensland goes, I am a pretty typical sort of parent. I think we breed good children. They are fine young people. About 60% of all the children who attend the Chinchilla State High School—and I think that is representative of the district—go on to tertiary education. I have three kids, but not one will live in Chinchilla. They will all move elsewhere. That is not a very nice way for us to lead our lives. It would be much nicer to have our family around us. But there is no chance of that.

Mr Schwarten: The same thing happens in Rocky.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: Yes, the same thing happens there; the children all live 100 miles away. If we can overcome that, we will have achieved something. Those people have a strong affinity with the people they grew up with and the district. Come Christmas time when those people gravitate back to their families and the district, it is wonderful to see the rapport that they have with one another. When they come back they all swap stories about what they have done. They cope well, but they would rather be gainfully employed in their own region to which they are so dedicated.

In the street in which my mother used to live before she passed away there were about 12 houses. Ten of those were the homes of widows. Not one of the houses in that street contained young, working-age people. We have plenty of school-age kids——

Mr Lucas: Who takes over the property if the kids leave, then?

Mr LITTLEPROUD: I will tell the member what is happening on the properties—farm build-up. I first spoke about it in this House in 1983. In the late fifties, a lot of people came back from boarding schools. Dad had 640 acres. He probably ploughed about a third of it. He could say to the son when he came home from boarding school, "Son, we'll farm here together, because there's a living for both of us." The same dad—and there are only a few of them left out there—generally farms about 2,000 acres on his own now. When his son reaches about 16 or 17 years old, he says, "Son, you'd better go on to university, because I do not have the capital to buy as much land and equipment as we need. It is just not viable. You have to move on." I am the result of that. I grew up on a farm and I have some farming interests; however, that is secondary or off-farm income. These days, if dedicated young people want to pursue a career in the agricultural industry, they go on to university and then they move into the corporate field of agriculture. For example, they are becoming consultants in the cotton industry and working for big corporate bodies rather than being private owners.

It is a bit like small business. The small businessman is being pressured by the techniques and the use of capital by the big fellows. The same thing is happening in agriculture; it is just another form of business. These young people would not mind being out there tied up with agriculture, mining or other trades associated with mining if the jobs were there. They would love it, because it would complement their life and the social fabric of the community. That is my appeal on behalf of the people of Western Downs, the people I am so proud to serve. I ask the Ministers who are in the Chamber today listening—and I have been writing to the various Ministers, the Deputy Premier and the Premier about this—to consider the fact that there are not many options for us out there. We have been smart enough to identify what options are available—for example, firstly, new-age technology in terms of communication; secondly, irrigation water to achieve increased productivity and more inputs; and, thirdly, the development of the coal reserves out there and the construction of a power station, which would be a major employment generator, providing more than 1,000 jobs. If this Government lets that coal project lapse and does not give people a fair go on a competitive price basis, a major part of Queensland will be left floundering.
