



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 30 July 1998

MOTION OF CONFIDENCE

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (5.23 p.m.): As the only newly elected coalition member, I am deeply honoured to be able to deliver my first speech in this Parliament as part of this debate on the motion of confidence in the new Labor Government.

My electorate of Callide covers 14 towns—14 communities—from Biggenden and Wandoan in the south to Monto, Biloela and Baralaba in the north, extending west to Rolleston. It covers the area known as the central and north Burnett on the eastern side and the Callide and Dawson Valleys to the west. The electorate of Callide's greatest asset is its people, and I am here on their behalf. I am very proud to represent the people of Callide, and it is about them that I wish to speak tonight. I wish to use some of their words to convey to this House what is essentially their message.

I am the fifth generation of my family to have lived, worked and raised their children in the Burnett Valley—five generations over a period of 150 years since the area was first settled. Like so many other people, some of my family have taken up small land-holdings, especially when the area was opened up to closer settlement in the 1920s. Today Callide has many such small land-holdings—a legacy of the closer settlement schemes—and Callide has many small businesses, a characteristic of the many relatively small communities.

I come to this role with the right background to understand the people I represent. My first job when I left school was as a labourer with the Monto Shire Council. I have worked as a stockman and as a contractor, and I have built up my own agricultural and marketing business from scratch. I know all about the challenges of balancing big mortgages, the needs of a growing family, and an active involvement in community life. Immediately before coming to this role, I was the Deputy Mayor of the Monto Shire Council for five years.

Monto Shire is one of eight shires that make up the Callide electorate, and I recognise tonight the role that local government plays in our communities. I pay tribute to all of those people who serve in those local government roles, most of the time for very little financial reward. Many other people also work for the future of our communities in a voluntary capacity, for example, on economic development councils, progress associations, committees and local organisations of a hundred different sorts. I recognise and congratulate all of those people who contribute to the communities of Callide in this voluntary way. Our communities are better places in which to live because so many people are prepared to give their time and effort for the common community good.

The 14 communities that make up the electorate of Callide are not just physical infrastructure, nor are they corporate entities; they are about people. They have a spirit and a soul. Our communities have a culture and traditions of their own. These communities are all similar in some ways and yet they are all unique in others. Our communities are very different places in which to live compared with the large urban centres. They are very much better places to live in some ways and very much more deprived in others.

It is no exaggeration to say that today the spirit of so many of our rural communities is somewhat jaded and they are sick in their heart. It is also true to say that the overwhelming emotion in many of our communities at the moment is frustration and uncertainty—even anger and cynicism. It is an emotion that I can well understand and one that I share. It has been too tough for too long in rural Queensland. It has been too tough for too long for many reasons. Some of those reasons are the

direct result of Government policies. Some of those reasons are beyond anybody's control. But all of them have a cumulative effect that is wearing down the legendary resilience of the people who have lived in rural Queensland for generations.

In common with other rural areas across the State, our most valuable export in Callide is our children—strong, healthy, intelligent, capable children—who invariably leave when they reach their late teens for regional or capital cities in search of elusive work and job opportunities. With them goes our future and our very reason for being. Our communities are fighting back. All too often it seems we must fight those who should be helping us. How can the people of Callide have any confidence in this Labor Government when they have not yet recovered from the tragic effects of the last Labor Government in this State? Many members of that Government are still here today.

In the six years from 1990 to 1996, the Labor Government in Queensland combined with the Labor Government in Canberra to tear the heart and soul out of rural Queensland. They gutted so many of our rural communities as they rationalised and regionalised or simply closed every Government service they could. The threat to close the railway network became the symbol of the withdrawal of rural services, and I was involved in the fight to save the Burnett railway line in July 1994. I experienced at close range the anger and frustration of normally quiet, ordinarily placid people as they mobilised to force the Goss Government to back down. In 1994, those people, many of whom had never demonstrated about anything before, hanged in effigy the then Transport Minister in Monto's main street. Today, that member is still here and is in this Government. I hope he reflects on that experience when he considers how his decisions as Treasurer will impact on rural and regional Queensland.

At the same time as the State Government was stripping rural Queensland of essential services, the Federal Labor Government drove a policy agenda which destroyed the viability of many of our farming businesses and our agricultural industries. These were industries that have provided a sound economic base for our families and our communities for generations. Good solid people have fought helplessly as their ability to provide for themselves has been lost and their much prized independence and self-reliance has been eroded.

So many of us who live in Callide have felt our security being eroded. We have felt ourselves losing our ability to control our own destiny and we have felt our ability to provide for our own future slipping away. It is entirely understandable that anger and frustration should increase in such circumstances. We in Callide share the anger and frustration of much of rural and regional Queensland. We are people who are traditionally loyal and slow to anger, but our anger when aroused can be a profound and all consuming thing, and so it was on 13 June.

Over the past two years Queensland has had a major injection of resources into rural and regional areas. We have had a major injection of resources into the electorate of Callide—a major attempt to turn the tide, to correct the mess left by years of Labor Governments. That injection of resources was only just starting to have an effect. Because of the lead times involved, many of the projects planned and developed in the past two years in the Callide electorate are still in advanced planning and early construction stages.

In March 1998 the Borbidge coalition Government announced a \$3 billion Surat Basin development project located in the Callide electorate to generate jobs and growth for the whole central Queensland region. This project includes the \$120m Nathan dam on the Dawson River, rail construction, power stations at Wandoan and Callide C, new coalmines to access some 4 billion tonnes of thermal coal in the Surat Basin and the opening up of 20,000 hectares of new, irrigable agricultural land.

The water infrastructure task force set up by the then Minister for Natural Resources, Howard Hobbs, identified infrastructure projects across Queensland. The coalition Government committed \$1 billion to water infrastructure construction to be supplemented by another \$1 billion of private sector funds over a 15-year period. Millions of those dollars have already been spent in Callide to progress the essential impact studies and the necessary planning processes for the best of the projects identified on the Dawson and Burnett River systems.

In many of the communities that make up the Callide electorate the local authority is the major source of local jobs, and these local authorities depend heavily on Main Roads construction work. During those two years, funding for roads all over the State was increased by the then Minister for Transport, Vaughan Johnson. Commitments were made for major road construction projects on the Dawson and Burnett Highways as well as increases in essential maintenance funding. Almost all of those extra roadworks in Callide were allocated to local authorities. This created jobs locally and provided security of employment for local government work forces as local governments were exempted from the more extreme National Competition Policy requirements, some of which would have decimated their work forces.

Nearly \$5m to improve substandard town water supplies was shared between Gayndah, Mundubbera, Eidsvold, Thangool, Goovigen and Wandoan. Funding was also provided for a new

million-dollar bridge at Theodore, a swimming pool at Eidsvold, a new hospital and a new library at Mundubbera, a million-dollar upgrade for the Biloela Hospital, QCAP offices throughout the region to give back to people access to Government departments, school and kindergarten upgrades throughout the electorate, sport and recreation club funding, and so the list goes on.

None of this would have happened, none of this would have been delivered if the coalition had not won Government in 1996. This record of infrastructure and service delivery stands in stark contrast to what happened in the six years of Labor Government—six years when services and infrastructure in the Callide electorate, as in the rest of rural and regional Queensland, were either withdrawn or allowed to run down.

Any attempt to repeat the gutting of rural Queensland, any attempt to delay or whittle away the projects planned for the electorate of Callide will provoke a savage reaction from the people I represent. They were angry in 1994 when their communities were gutted by the Goss Labor Government, and they are a whole lot angrier and ready to fight now. We want to reverse the decline in our communities. We want to build a better future in those communities for ourselves, our children and our children's children. We can do that with projects such as the Surat Basin development. We can do that with projects such as the Nathan Gorge and Paradise dams.

We have an abundance of natural resources which can be sustainably developed to provide opportunities for our future. The key to that future is water—water for agriculture and water for industry. Agriculture has always been and will always be the economic base of the Callide electorate. Other industries such as mining—especially coalmining—power generation and tourism also make major contributions to that economic base. Together with agriculture in all its forms, they provide the Callide electorate with a huge potential for the future. For that potential to be realised, the priority must be the provision of the infrastructure needed to ensure those adequate and reliable water supplies.

To its credit, the previous Government recognised this and put in place the Water Infrastructure Task Force and made that billion-dollar commitment to investment in this type of infrastructure. Nearly 50 submissions were received for projects from within the Callide electorate and that clearly indicates the need that exists for water, which is the catalyst for all other development—development that can provide real, sustainable jobs and real income from export-focused industries.

The largest and most ambitious of those infrastructure projects is, of course, the Nathan Gorge dam, but there are equally important projects on the Burnett and Auburn Rivers where the citrus and horticultural industries already exist. There already exists in the Burnett Valley a huge resource of human skill and ability and a large amount of private capital investment in industry infrastructure that is currently being restricted because of the lack of the development of those water resources. These infrastructure projects must proceed to fruition and not be held up by green minority groups staging media events or a Labor Government reluctant to invest in rural Queensland. We must be prepared to learn from the past and develop the potential of these resources in a sustainable way. We cannot let past mistakes be an excuse for not doing anything in the future.

We must also recognise and change the economic policies that have proven to be a terrible mistake—policies that have stripped away the viability of so many of our rural industries. We must abandon forever the law of the jungle type economic policies. We must abandon the discredited level playing field concept. These concepts have and will inevitably destroy family farming operations and family businesses and the jobs they provide across this State and this country.

My electorate of Callide is almost all about family farms and small family businesses and the people they employ. We who own those family farms and small businesses increasingly face the threat of being destroyed by the predatory corporate giants who hold all the market power or being destroyed by the unfair competition from overseas. As I stand here tonight, many pork producers in my electorate—many of my friends and contemporaries—are trying to determine how they will survive another month of disastrously low prices, which are well below the cost of production, in the face of the importation of over 1,000 tonnes per month of foreign product.

Many dairy farmers in my electorate, many of whom are my friends and contemporaries, will spend tonight contemplating their inevitable financial ruin if the National Competition Policy inspired deregulation scheduled for 1 January 1999 produces the same reduction in farm gate prices as it has already done in New South Wales. That was a reduction in milk prices to the farmer which did not end up as a benefit to the consumer, but rather went to boost the profits of the big retailers.

In Callide, as in the rest of rural and regional Queensland, we believe that in a world of economic rationalism people matter, too. We do not believe and we will not accept that our families and our communities are expendable in the big picture politics of globalisation. We will not accept that our future should be forfeited to powerful corporate giants and the law of the jungle economic policies. We will not accept that our future should be sacrificed on the mythical level playing fields. We do not believe that it is fair and just for our efforts to build a better future for our communities to be continually

frustrated by single-issue minority groups. We do not believe that it is fair and just for our future in rural Queensland to be denied by yet another Labor Government with an urban and coastal focus.

I do not believe that the answer to the problems that we face in rural and regional Queensland lies in some sort of regression to the past. I have no doubt at all that the oversimplistic solutions and the shallow wish list type policy position of the Far Right would see us much worse off within a very short space of time. But we in Callide, as in many other areas in rural and regional Queensland, want the chance to build a better future for ourselves in today's world. As we approach the year 2000 we want the chance to be able to build a better future for our families and a better future for our communities within the realities of the 21st century. We want the next generation to have the chance of some security on our family farms and in our small businesses, and we want our children to have a decent chance of getting a secure job in rural and regional Queensland. I have to say that we in Callide have absolutely no confidence that the task we face will be made any easier by the election of this Labor Government, but we are ready to fight every inch of the way for a fair go.
