



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

Hansard 5 August 1998

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (11.50 a.m.): It is with a great sense of honour and enthusiasm for the tasks ahead of me that I stand to make my inaugural speech in the Legislative Assembly of Queensland. Getting to this position is one of the biggest team efforts that I have ever been involved in. As I progress through this speech I will pay tribute to the many people who have made this achievement possible. I also commend the members who have delivered their first speeches this week for setting the high standards that the public expects. This is a first step in restoring public confidence in our parliamentary system.

I rise to speak in this Parliament at a time when cynicism in politics seems to be at an all-time high. Philip Adams saw the writing on the wall in warning us all that—

"The wheels are falling off Australia's Parliaments, and if you think the current voters are angry and alienated, just wait until the next generation get the vote."

On 13 June this year all of us would have seen first-hand the many long or angry faces as many hundreds of people unwillingly fronted up to vote. Many people throughout the world, and women and indigenous people in our State, have fought hard to get the right to vote. Now, many in this State want to give it up. This lack of faith is understandable but very concerning.

It is critical that we all work actively to reduce the unemployment and hardship that is underpinning much of the frustration and anger. In addition, we must maintain high standards of accountability. Expectations on us all are high. Finding solutions to complex problems among competing interests is difficult. We face significant voter backlash, but there are few quick fixes and simple solutions to the problems that exist.

Our task as elected representatives is to stay in touch with all people and groups, assess the varying points of view, cooperate—in spite of our differences—where we can, negotiate, and make responsible and fair decisions. In addition, we must review and change our decisions if they prove unhelpful or if they are not fair and effective.

We live in a State that has abundant natural beauty and resources. We have strong economic growth. We can be doing more to ensure that life in the Sunshine State shines for all of us. I want to treat this first speech as a kind of job appraisal. I want to set out what I see as three of the essential criteria for this role—three criteria that, if met effectively by all of us, ought to help restore public confidence in us as elected representatives. I stress "all of us", because it takes only one ministerial scandal, one misuse of travel funds or one undignified public action to bring us all into disrepute. I will also make some comments about how I am likely to "stack up" against these criteria that I have set.

What are the essential ingredients for this role? I am sure that all honourable members would agree on the following criteria—

- (1) Integrity and fairness.
- (2) Good ability to represent the interests of our constituents—our electors, the broader public and our party. An understanding of and strong connection to our electorates.
- (3) Knowledge of economic and social trends and issues and the ability to develop and implement positive change.

I will deal firstly with criterion (1) integrity and fairness. There has been a call for more ordinary people to seek the honour of being politicians as one way of ensuring that we remain "in touch"—that we act fairly and with integrity. At the risk of offending some honourable members, as I look around the Chamber I believe that mostly we are fairly ordinary people. We have families, we have good times and we have faced tragedies. We are former builders, farmers, small business operators or professional people. One of the great features of our country is that with opportunities, with support and with our initiative we can all generally have a go at most things in life.

We must strive to maintain equal opportunities in education, in employment and in all facets of our community to achieve a fair society. This will mean that those who have fewer resources, fewer opportunities or experience great hardship must be supported. Similarly, it means that those who seek business and investment opportunities will also have a fair go. That is why our Governments allocate millions of dollars each year to industry assistance, rural adjustment programs, trade incentive schemes, education and training, income security programs and indigenous housing programs. All people benefit from those forms of Government intervention.

Many people are critical of recipients of Government welfare payments, but most of us will receive some form of Government subsidy or welfare during our lives. The safety net and social wage available to us all is one of the fundamental hallmarks of our civil society. These must be defended at all costs.

I am appalled at the growing inequality in our community and concerned at the challenges ahead of us. Consider some of these challenges. Queensland's population is ageing. This is great news in terms of improved life expectancy, but it means health, housing, income support and other services will need to keep pace with this demand. Already there are plenty of signs that supports are not keeping pace with demand. One of the signs was drawn to my attention six months ago when some seniors in Archerfield were treated to lollies but were told not to eat them. The lollies were letters they had received under the Home and Community Care program saying that they were eligible for subsidised home help but until more funds became available they would not be able to receive a subsidy. In the meantime, a list of private contractors offering fee-for-service support was supplied for them to follow up. This is no way to treat our seniors. These people were not needing "big bucks"—just a few hours per week of home support. I know that the HACC program experiences excessive demands, but why give out lollies that stay in their wrappers and cannot be eaten? I will be working hard to ensure that seniors get better care.

Another disturbing fact is that 13% of Queenslanders live below the poverty line. This includes more than 365,000 children in this State. I know that many of those families live in Archerfield, as well as being scattered throughout more affluent areas of the State. We also have entrenched homelessness in this State. Despite improved housing programs, 18,723 homeless people were assisted through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program in Queensland in the 1996-97 financial year. In Queensland, SAAP agencies were able to assist only about 48% of the people requesting assistance, turning away an additional 20,150 homeless Queenslanders.

Unemployment in Queensland has consistently exceeded 8.5%. Youth unemployment in Queensland is the highest in Australia, at around 30% in the Wide Bay-Burnett region alone. Underemployment is also emerging as a major issue, with Queensland leading Australia in the proportion of the work force employed in part-time or casual jobs. The very disturbing trend in Queensland is the consistently high rates of long-term unemployment—those who have been unemployed for 12 months or more. As at November 1997, 47,900 people were long-term unemployed. That represented a 24.7% increase from the previous year. High levels of unemployment and economic hardship are also a recipe for high levels of family breakdown and child abuse. Reducing unemployment and hardship must be the priority for Governments.

We are far from a fair country, even though we are fairer than others. National income statistics released last month showed the top 20% of income earners received almost as much as the combined total of the remaining 80% of households. It is this quest for fairness that led me into 15 years of community service work and has made me unashamedly pro-union, pro-reconciliation, pro-economic justice and pro-social service.

I believe that learning about fairness and integrity began very early in my life. I was raised in the Archerfield electorate by my mother Ann. From her early twenties she raised four children on her own. She picked up work where she could but mostly she struggled along on what was then termed a deserted wives pension. For those who denounce single mothers and foolishly believe that life on a pension is desirable and a choice for women, I say that these are the people who are out of touch. Many of the most self-reliant and courageous women I know have been sole parents. They deserve our admiration for the job they do, not condemnation. I pay tribute to my mother. I know she feels proud as she sits in the gallery today.

Another significant adult who showed me first-hand what a fair go is all about is Joan Cox, my neighbour for 15 years. Joan is one of those people who has a truly generous spirit. Don Whitehouse,

who is the current principal at Marsden State High School, also had a profound impact on me. As my athletics coach and English teacher at Salisbury State High in the seventies, Don mentored me as we ran endlessly around the oval, and he inspired me to achieve great things.

While I am on this criterion of fairness and integrity, I would like to express my appreciation to Len Ardill, the former member for Archerfield. Len was well regarded for his fairness and integrity. Upon Len's retirement this year, his one great regret seemed to be that he would not be part of what he considered would be a true Labor Government: a Beattie-led Labor Government. I am very proud to serve under our Beattie Labor Government. At the risk of being the class of '98 crawler, I would like to say that Peter was inspirational at 3 a.m. last Friday morning when replying to the confidence motion. I feel confident that he will, through his leadership, play a big role in restoring public confidence in the Parliament.

My second criterion relates to our electorates and how well we serve our electorates. Firstly, I thank the people of Archerfield for their support, and I give my assurance that I will be a strong advocate for our area and for the individual concerns that people raise with me. I would also like to thank my ALP branch members in Archerfield for their hard work and support. I am leaving out many people who gave generously of their time and moral support, but I particularly want to thank Steve Griffiths, John Wheeler, Frank Freemantle, Merv Barrie, Raelene Di Re, Doug and Rita Harris, Robyn and Kevin Bianchi, Thelma Noe, Marie Klajn, Rae Young, Greg Bell, Bob and Eileen Bird, Wendy Grant and Dr John Flynn, who was the member for Toowoomba North from 1989 to 1992.

Archerfield is a diverse community with a large proportion of older, working-class suburbs, such as Coopers Plains and Acacia Ridge. There are also many new, developing communities, such as Forest Lake and Calamvale. Forest Lake, for instance, is a well-planned community, with the developers taking an active role in the development of social infrastructure and community activities, but it will be important for services to keep pace with rapid development in these areas. On the outer perimeter of Archerfield sits Forestdale. This is a community of acreage allotments established around 20 years ago. Many Forestdale residents feel left out in the cold on the boundary of Archerfield, and they have been keeping me on my toes already to ensure that they are brought in from the cold. I am well aware that my initiation to hard local politics may well be in Forestdale, where industrial development is encroaching on the bushland that surrounds the suburb. Juggling competing interests and finding positive resolutions will not be easy, but I give my assurance that I will be accessible, diligent and reasoned in my dealings with community members.

Some of the priority issues on which I am taking action, and on which I will need to take action, in Archerfield include unemployment. Unemployment exceeds the State average in suburbs such as Acacia Ridge at 10.2% and Forest Lake at 10%. I remember as a kid the GMH car factory closing down in Acacia Ridge. That seemed to break the back of the community, and in some senses I do not think it has fully recovered from that major blow. I commend Peter Beattie for being obsessed with job creation and having achievable job strategies. Being obsessed about jobs is much more helpful to people in this State than the obsession some people have with putting up barriers to immigration and reconciliation, and obsessions with guns. I trust that all of us within this Chamber can become obsessed with job creation and work together to achieve this.

It is incumbent on me to make sure that the people of Archerfield benefit from our Government's jobs strategy. The new construction and skills centre being developed in Salisbury offers further opportunities for young people in our area. It is also incumbent on me to ensure that other local issues are attended to. The horrendous Boundary Road rail crossing at Coopers Plains must be one of the worst crossings in the State. We must eliminate the possibility of serious injury and deaths which will result unless lasting solutions to the traffic congestion at this crossing are implemented. Len Ardill assures me that money was set aside in the eighties for an overpass, but the residents of Coopers Plains have not seen an overpass. The members of the Coopers Plains Concerned Citizens Group deserve commendation for their efforts to keep this issue alive.

Major traffic congestion problems exist in Archerfield as it includes some of the heavy transport routes through the southern suburbs. Attending to these will also be a priority for me. Continuing growth at the QE II Hospital is also critical. Some of the QE II staffers seem to be spreading the view that Labor will let QE II run down. Pardon the bad choice of words, but over my dead body. The Labor Government is committed to maintaining high standards of care at QE II.

New State high schools to service the growing suburbs of Forest Lake and Calamvale are also on the must-do list. A further priority is ensuring that more resources are allocated for the older, poorly resourced State schools. The kids at these schools ought to have the same kinds of facilities as the kids who attend schools in the more resourceful areas. I commend the innovative school models established at private schools, such as Forest Lake College. I will contribute to their successful development, and I will be watching with interest to see what elements of these might be usefully applied to the State system and how resources may be shared.

Tackling crime with positive strategies is also an area that will receive plenty of my attention. This will include efforts to achieve a strengthened police presence, youth programs and jobs in the Archerfield electorate. Crime prevention has, in fact, been one of my longstanding priorities. Governments have continued to plough millions of dollars into the wrong end of the crime problem. More jails will not solve crime. I fully support Labor's policies to get tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. I look forward to putting innovative anti-crime projects in place in Archerfield. In fact, I welcome the day when we can have significant bipartisan support on anti-crime strategies. This continual auction on law and order—seeing which party is the toughest and who can frighten the public the most—is irresponsible. It is totally irresponsible to fuel public fear when we desperately need to have rational and effective strategies that will reduce risk and allay fear—fear that is no doubt real, but immobilising for many people and well out of proportion to their risk of being victimised. Many of us can pick the kids who are at risk of becoming serious offenders. Our anti-crime efforts must focus on early intervention, not costly actions that come too late.

I also applaud the anti-violence programs around the State that are reducing crime. Domestic violence initiatives, youth programs, alcohol and drug strategies and school-based anti-bullying programs are some examples. The domestic violence initiatives in Queensland, for instance, have been groundbreaking in their efforts to drag out into the public arena a crime that was hidden behind closed doors, with more effective police action and support programs now in place. Congratulations to Hazel Eivers, Heather Nancarrow, Betty Taylor, Meeta Iyer and many others who have devoted more than 10 years to this very positive change.

Restricting access to guns is also a courageous and necessary move in reducing community violence. There is no place for militiamen in this State. The gun buy-back scheme has attracted encouraging responses. By 16 May 1997, almost 400,000 firearms had been handed in nationally. We will not stop tragedies such as the one that occurred at Port Arthur, but we must restrict gun access to those who have a legitimate use for them. We must make it extremely difficult for the emotionally enraged husband to grab a gun and threaten the lives of his wife and children. We must make it difficult for distressed young adolescents to end their lives by squeezing a trigger.

My third criterion is the economic and social trends that we are experiencing. We seem to be experiencing a rise in the working poor—small business owners, farmers, blue-collar workers—as well as a significant rise in the numbers of unemployed. Unless we politicians, business leaders and other decision makers can tackle structural unemployment, financial insecurity and the emerging view that we are losing our national/State economic independence and identity through globalisation, we will continue to witness the rise of hardship and protest politics. The sad fact is that the market is not providing everyone with employment. Given that many people cannot gain employment in a market-supplied role, there has to be significant Government intervention to generate public interest employment.

Finally, to Councillor Mark Bailey, Wendy Turner, Geoff Allan, Cath Rafferty, Anne Warner, Peter Shooter, Steve Bredhauer and Anna Bligh I say a heartfelt thankyou. I give special thanks to Mark for his hard work locally and to Wendy Turner for setting off the initial spark. As my electorate officer, she now has to stick by me through the fireworks. Jeremy Sollars and Amanda Currie have also been great sources of support to me.

I close on this parting message: if we lose the drive or capacity to achieve positive change, if we lose sight of our own ordinariness and our humanity, our time is up in this Parliament.
