



Speech by

KEN TURNER

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr TURNER (Thuringowa—ONP) (2.30 p.m.): For me, last night was a very long night. I was struggling to come to grips with what I might speak about today to catch the importance of this momentous occasion in my life as I, a professional fisherman and Santa, begin what I am sure will be a very long period of office in this solemn Chamber surrounded by all the telling memories from our history. When dawn broke this morning, my time to prepare a really great speech was running out. In panic, I thought about the many significant events that have come my way in the past years and I decided to speak about the topic closest to my heart: people with a disability.

One might say that I came here with one prime purpose in mind—to issue a challenge to one and all in this House: can you care to care about people with a disability? I mean, really care to care! I can assure my other electors that they are not forgotten and that I shall make them the centre of attention in this House in the days to come. My electors already know me well. At Christmas time as Santa I average a photograph every 90 seconds and my photograph appears in almost every home in our twin cities. I thank my electors for allowing me to come into their homes, hopefully to give a little kindness when kindness really counts and when kindness is really needed, and I also thank them for repaying me with the compliment of electing me into this House with what really is their message: can you care to care? I would like to share with you, the people of my electorate and the members of this House, my thoughts on and my experiences with people with disabilities.

One of my greatest joys is to watch little children grow into fine citizens who are a credit to their families and the community, but it is heart wrenching to watch little children struggle with a disability as they grow; and yet they, too, grow into fine citizens who are equally a credit to their families and the community. The disabled just have to go the long way round. We—you and I—are in a position to provide all the short cuts for the disabled. But again, can you care to care?

There is one particularly lovable little seven-year-old girl who really touched my heart and whose courage and fortitude knew no bounds. She came to visit Santa, climbed upon my knee and asked for all the things every little girl asks for: Barbie dolls, teddy bears and toys. Cautiously she felt my beard then asked, "Are you the real Santa?" She softly drifted her hands across my face, my hair, my hat, my ears and whiskers. Then she smiled and, for the first time in her short life, she could really see Santa. That made me realise that this little girl could see more with her fingers than most people can see with their eyes. I think real happiness is doing good for others rather than others doing good for you—giving a bit of light where there is only darkness; saying to those less fortunate that life is worth living and that one has only to reach out to others and dust off the dirt and grime of despair and frustration to allow the silver lining to shine through. Disability is not a person with a hearing aid or in a wheelchair or with a guide-dog. Disability is the state of mind of those who look in from the outside. The hearing aid is just another pair of ears, the wheelchair just another set of legs, the guide-dog just another pair of eyes. But the mind behind the broken eyes, legs and ears is often as active and free as that of anybody one might mention. People with disabilities are people.

I have a little friend called Daniel. When Daniel first visited Santa he wore callipers on his legs. The next Christmas he had both callipers and crutches. You see, Daniel is afflicted with spina bifida, and as he grows older his legs will not support his weight. But Daniel has, I sensed, a fighting spirit—a Daniel in the lion's den of disability. He was always adventurous and, in spite of his crippling disabilities,

he yearned to experience the adventures and pleasures that we, the abled, accept as second nature. I enjoyed Daniel's visits as much as he did. As Daniel and I laughed and joked and swapped stories, I talked to him about the North Pole, polar bears and mischievous elves, and he happily told me about his life of limited activity.

During the next year, I heard of Daniel's need for an operation. The day before he went into hospital I called him on the sea phone to wish him well. The sea phone is like a radio party line, and everybody on any boat within a great distance of land can listen in. "Daniel, it's Santa here", I said. The sea phone at times can be very scratchy, and Daniel asked, "Santa, what's all that noise?" "That's the snow falling, Daniel", I told him; "We've got a real snowstorm raging here." The questions and answers continued, and when I looked around I was surprised to see there was not a dry eye on the boat. The crews of fishing boats are pretty tough, but these blokes just broke down. That little boy touched the hearts of hardened sailors and fishermen up to 70 miles away, and more than a dozen calls from other boats came in afterwards. The message was the same: that little bloke had heart. He had a spirit that was as adventurous and alive as that of anybody without a disability. His light was as bright as one would ever see.

It was a wonderful adventure for little Daniel, but it was a humbling experience for all of us. We were lucky. We could go to sea and enjoy the gifts of nature. Little Daniel had to settle for the sea phone and an active imagination. The experience helped us to understand better the hopes and desires of others less fortunate than ourselves. This story had consequences for me. After that I was known far and wide as "Captain Ho Ho"—a name I carry with pride and appreciation. I carry it for those who are disabled and for those who cannot speak for themselves. I hope that, in the days ahead, my voice in this House will be their voice and that One Nation, dedicated to representing all the people all the time, will not move one iota from that position of independence of democratic representation. I hope this Parliament is a Parliament that cares to care, that sees people with disabilities as real people.

Daniel is now 15 years old and confined to a wheelchair. Now when he comes to visit we no longer chat about reindeer, snowstorms and Christmas presents, but we laugh and joke about school, his plans for the future and his girlfriend. I am very proud of Daniel. He has grown into a fine young man.

I dedicate my maiden speech to the Flynn family, whom I care for dearly, and to all people with disabilities. Helping people with disabilities is often a matter of providing simple solutions for what can be for the disabled seemingly insurmountable problems—simple solutions like disabled-friendly homes; safe access from road to sidewalk; easy transition between floors in buildings; up-ramps and down-ramps; mover-friendly sidewalks and road surfacing.

Our Townsville Mall has received many awards and accolades for its beauty and tranquillity, for its easy shopping and no-fuss parking. But for the physically and visually impaired, the Townsville Mall is a nightmare, with steep slopes, rough surfacing, drain hole grids that catch wheelchair wheels and crutches, shopfront sidewalks that slope into drains, disabled parking on an incline, and ramps into shops so steep that they are virtually unclimbable in a wheelchair. The designers of the Townsville Mall did not inject these dangers on purpose; they simply failed to take account of the needs of all the people—abled and disabled.

When designers are confronted with the needs of the disabled, do they care to care? After all, people with disabilities are people who also need and deserve services provided by Governments—local, State and Federal. We in this House of government should strive to influence positive and equitable changes to policies and procedures that affect the lives of people with disability to ensure that they can realise their potential and quality of life. The Government continually tells us via the media that it is deadly serious about economic development and dollar turnover in the marketplace, but, really, is it concerned? Government policies have contributed to the loss of millions of dollars by restricting people with disabilities from easy access to the cash register. The disabled have to tough out a bad situation that we, the members in this House, can solve, remove and eliminate.

One of the major problems facing people with disabilities is education in our schools, but it is really just a lack of understanding not to put people with disabilities on the same functional level as people without disabilities. The expense for the disabled to receive education, tuition and services can be up to 100 times greater than for the abled. One can buy a good push bike for \$200, but a good wheelchair costs thousands. The price of a pair of reading glasses is around \$300, whereas the cost of training a guide-dog is \$18,000. Primary school reading books can be purchased for just a few dollars, yet the cost to reproduce that same book in braille would be hundreds of dollars. Solving those problems must show that we in this House really care to care that the disabled are people too.

In 1981, Queensland celebrated the Year of the Disabled. So much was achieved and there has been some flow-on from those achievements. There is still so much more to be done that, instead of having a year for the disabled, we should celebrate every day of every month of every year as a day for people with disabilities. My plea to fellow members of this House is to at least consider the issue. That is a start. If we think simple solutions to difficult problems, then anything is possible.

Our system of government in Queensland and the society that supports it must be fairly sound to deliver a member's baton to a working person like me—a man who ended his schooling with a simple scholarship, who began work at 13 years of age, who has moved amongst every class of people and who is at home with the working people of Queensland; yet today I am a member of this select Legislative Assembly. Yes, anything is possible in Queensland. For far too long, people in authority have considered politics their private preserve, that the "club" down south and the "club" here in Brisbane has had an exclusive monopoly on wisdom and Government. Maybe that is why things have gone so bad so quickly. I am here because One Nation has broken the exclusive mould. The exclusive club of silvertails, university graduates and union bureaucrats is not only faced by a fish and chips lady but a fisherman as well—Queenslanders who are not afraid to get their hands dirty with hard, honest work. I have been put here by the electors of Thuringowa and I pledge my service here to them.
