



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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ADDRESS IN REPLY

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (3.45 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise today to participate in the debate on the motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply. I would like to congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker, on your appointments. You have already shown those of us in this Chamber the way in which you are going to keep us well under control. I look forward to seeing a very decorous House.

I appreciate the work of the previous Speaker. Although I was not here to see him in action, I appreciate the refurbishment of the Annexe. I think it has been done extremely tastefully and it brings credit to the Parliament.

In 1990, when I participated in this debate, it was to give my first speech to the Parliament. Today I am privileged to be here again to serve the people of Barron River after an absence of some three years. I sincerely thank them for that opportunity. It is an opportunity that is not granted to too many people, as was mentioned by the member for Greenslopes. In fact, I have done some research and I have found some interesting information. In the present Parliament there have been only five other members who have returned after a break in their parliamentary service.

It is interesting to know that of the 1,140 members who have served in this Legislative Assembly since it first met in 1860, 110 have served two or more non-continuous terms. Most of the members in that category were members in the 19th century when Governments changed more frequently. One of the more colourful of those characters was a gentleman by the name of Ratcliffe Pring who served in the very first Parliament. Mr Pring served six non-continuous terms and sat in both the Lower and the Upper House and represented at various times seven different electorates stretching from Carnarvon to Fortitude Valley in Brisbane. I think that probably makes my efforts pale into insignificance. However, I am not sure that I would like to emulate Mr Pring, because the Australian Dictionary of Biography described him in this way—

"... impulsive, vain, hasty in temper, strong in opinion and forcible in expression."

He had to resign his seat in Parliament in 1872 after entering the Assembly drunk, using insulting language to his opponents, assaulting the member for Warwick and trying to arrange a fight outside the Chamber. I hasten to reassure new members of the House that my own leave from the Parliament was not occasioned by such events. For those who decry the present standards in this Chamber, it may be that things have changed and have improved quite considerably. There is certainly room for improvement. I feel very strongly about this matter.

I believe all members appreciate the views of the general community concerning behaviour in this House. When I was doing my doorknocking it was the issue that came up more frequently than any other. People do decry the way that members of Parliament behave in the Chamber during debates. Of course, the issue arises because television focuses just on those robust parts of the debate. However, there is a genuine feeling that people are looking for a change. So many people have said that we squabble like children. That is not something that members of the public want to see. They want to see us solving the problems that affect their lives. We have to be seen to be fulfilling that obligation much more seriously. I believe all honourable members have a commitment to rise to those expectations. I am looking forward to a very high standard of debate.

Getting back here to the Parliament was no easy task. When I left in 1995, I lost by 132 votes, and this time I won by only 230 votes. So I am under no illusions about how hard it is. I would like to thank those people who have helped me to get back here, including the many branch members and supporters who worked with me tirelessly and gave of their efforts—my campaign director, Councillor Brian Down, and all those other members on the campaign team. In fact, it was a very interesting experience—and probably one that is shared by other members—to find that there was a real feeling among Labor people that it was so necessary for us to get back into Government. Consequently, I had many new people joining the party and wanting to get involved. That really injected new enthusiasm into the campaign. I look forward to those people's continuing involvement in the party.

All members know only too well just what demands this job places on our families. I would obviously like to acknowledge—as have other members—the contribution that the encouragement and support of my family makes to me: my husband Ross and children David and Jennifer. They have seen their mother in politics for a very long time, and I think they have managed to survive that experience pretty well. My daughter is actually at university studying politics and law, so there might be an interesting career ahead for her. My son is now 20. I think that his experience has given me some understanding of just how important is the issue of jobs and job security. He has had difficulty finding employment. He is only in casual work at the present time. He knows what it is like to experience knock-backs, and I have seen what that can do to young people. I think that gives me a particular understanding of just how difficult that experience can be.

I also thank my parliamentary colleagues from both sides of the House. I really have had a wonderfully warm welcome back to this Chamber. I do appreciate that. When people see us having a barney in here, they do forget that there can be friendships among members outside this Chamber. There is a lot of mutual respect across the Chamber, and that is to be commended. I also thank the staff of this place. I must say that it has been lovely to receive a warm welcome back from the staff, who provide an excellent service.

My pleasure at being back here has been diminished somewhat by not being joined by the previous member for Mulgrave, Warren Pitt. I am sure that members would recognise the tireless work that he has carried out. His efforts on behalf of the residents and constituents of Mulgrave will not be forgotten. Who knows, he might be like the member for Greenslopes and me and return to this Chamber.

When one has an experience such as mine and when one loses an election very narrowly, one obviously thinks very carefully about what it was that went wrong and what one might have done differently. There are some lessons that I want to share with members. Anyone who has lost an election knows that it is a painful experience, but it is also an important learning experience. A lot is said about the need to listen. I think I have had a very important lesson in that regard.

Some particular things led to my losing the election. One of them was a public housing issue. Members on this side of the Chamber know my commitment to those sorts of issues. My background involved being raised in public housing in England. So when there was a very strong objection to a public housing development—in fact, in the suburb where I live, Freshwater—I was inclined to make only some minor concessions insofar as seniors, instead of families, being housed in that development. I suppose that one could say that I pretty much stood on my dig about that issue and was not prepared to make too many concessions. But on reflection, I should have listened, because those people really did feel that their quality of life was going to be changed. Even if I did not share that view, I believe the lesson for me was that that was something of which I should have taken more recognition. In fact, I wrote to the people of Freshwater during the course of the election campaign along those lines, and I believe that I was rewarded in that I won the Freshwater booth. So that was a lesson for me, and it is one that I certainly intend to take very seriously.

The other message that I got was from the green movement. People who know my electorate know its environmental sensitivities and its World Heritage values. They also know of my past commitment to that issue in this House. So when I lost the support of the green movement, one could say that once again that was a message to me as to how important the environment was. The irony there is that I really did not need that message. I knew that already, and I think that subsequently I have been proved right. The development that was of most concern at that time, that is, the Sky Rail development, has won awards as a tourist attraction and an environmentally sensitive attraction. Those members of this House who have not had the experience of going on the Sky Rail up to Kuranda should try it.

But that was the message, and I heard that message. In the past three years I have continued to support the environment movement, serving on management committees and being involved with Tree Force, a tree-planting group. I also served for a period on the Wet Tropics Management Authority. I have certainly continued my commitment in that regard. It has been encouraging that Drew Hutton of the Green Party has recognised that the coalition Government did not deliver as he expected or hoped that it would. He finally had to recognise that the coalition Government was far too much of the view

that there should be development at all costs. So I am pleased that the green movement was prepared to support Labor and to support me at the last election. Their preferences did indeed help to elect me.

Members may think that as the election result was very narrow in 1995 and, once again, very narrow in 1998, not much has changed in Barron River, but that is not the case. There have been quite significant changes that I believe present new challenges to me as the current member for Barron River. When I came here in 1989 there was a recession due to the pilots dispute. Now there are other problems facing far-north Queensland, particularly in relation to our economy. I refer particularly to the Asian economic crisis, the recession and the downturn in tourism. As the member for Cairns said, the retail sector is finding life very difficult at the moment. So there are very real challenges for us in far-north Queensland over and above those others I have mentioned. People throughout Queensland and, indeed, throughout Australia are feeling the pressures of the lack of job security, and the general feeling is that those issues of employment are the pre-eminent issues concerning people today. That was what directed our overall State campaign, and we have made that our priority. I believe that the unemployment target of 5% is the target for which we should be aiming. We should not be saying that it is all too hard. I am pleased to say that the actions that the Labor Government has taken already are addressing those issues in far-north Queensland by providing additional money for tourism promotion and ensuring that tourists will continue to visit and their numbers will grow once again. A range of strategies is being put in place to ensure the continuing prosperity of Cairns.

I turn now to health care, education and law and order—very basic issues that have occupied people's minds. My 12 months or so of doorknocking has reinforced that with me. The very basic building blocks of our community are the ones that we must address. I am not saying that the environment is not very important to the people of far-north Queensland. It is still important to me. However, we have to be mindful of where people's priorities lie. We cannot forget the environment in north Queensland, because it underpins the success of our economy. That is the whole point about it. Unless we care for it and protect it, we will be destroying the tourist industry that we need so much.

My priorities for the next three years will be in those broad areas that I have discussed. I would like to touch on some of them specifically in my own electorate. When we are talking about jobs and job security, I believe that our most important task is to strengthen the tourist industry. I am working very closely with people in the Kuranda Chamber of Commerce to try to ensure that, when there are problems with the tourist industry in Kuranda, there is increasing unity among the tourist operators and small businesspeople and that we try to put in place the strategies necessary to retain the authenticity of Kuranda as a village in the rainforest. That is vitally important if it is to continue its success.

Ecotourism is obviously a growing industry in far-north Queensland. I was able to obtain a commitment from the Government to inject an additional \$3m into the Barron Gorge National Park to upgrade visitor facilities, to provide a world-class walking track system and to make improvements to the Barron Gorge lookout at the railway station. On the northern beaches, which is the other part of my electorate that is vitally important for tourism, there needs to be more work done on beach erosion problems. I will be working very closely to ensure that the State Government and local government form a partnership to guarantee the quality of our beaches.

As to the economy of far-north Queensland—we know it is vital that we diversify our regional economy. We cannot rely just on tourism. I have a particular interest in higher education. I have been involved with the James Cook University Cairns campus for a very long time. It is exciting to see the growth of that establishment. We now have over 2,000 students. I was very pleased that very early in the election campaign Peter Beattie made a commitment to an interest-free loan of some \$10m for the establishment of a new academic support building or library. That will be made available to the university while it is waiting for Federal funding—which is committed—to be provided. As a result of the growth that is occurring on that campus, we need another academic building for teaching and research. It will be my very high priority to try to obtain the support of the Federal Government for that. The university also has some very exciting plans for a science and technology precinct adjacent to the university. There will be very many opportunities to expand and diversify our economy with information technology and environmental management, for example. That is certainly a project on which I am working very closely with the university and the State Government.

Film and television is the other key industry that I want to be involved in personally to ensure that its contribution to our economy grows. A lot of exciting things have happened in that industry so far. No doubt members are aware that attempts are being made to persuade Leonardo Di Caprio to have the filming of his next feature film done in far-north Queensland. As we have such a great location, that industry has a lot of potential. However, we need equipment, such as sound studios and movie stages, so that we can have the production and post-production facilities to get the industry moving. I will be taking a very keen interest in that.

Members have discussed how vital health care is. When I was last a member, I was instrumental in getting an ambulance station in Kuranda and in the planning for community health centres that are finally being opened. I was very pleased that the Minister for Health visited my

electorate and made a further commitment to extra funding for the community health centres in my electorate and one to the south of Cairns. The last Government provided some \$400,000 for operating costs, with no additional funding provided for staffing. What sort of nonsense was it to build a community health centre without providing for adequate staffing? I was delighted that the Minister saw how vital that was and allocated another \$300,000 for that.

As to education—one of the projects on which I worked really hard was obtaining land for the Kuranda State High School. I am pleased to see that that has now been built. I will have the pleasure of opening that with the Minister later in this term. I have a particular interest in special needs students. I returned to working in schools as a guidance officer for the last three years. I could see at first-hand the additional resources needed for students with special needs. I am working with community groups to have a seating clinic established in Cairns rather than having to rely on a visiting service.

Law and order is one of those key issues with which we all grapple. My past and current commitment is to work both at crime prevention and ensuring that the Smithfield Police Station, whose police force I managed to raise from six to 16 when I was last a member, is further enhanced. I think we all recognise how important it is, particularly for juveniles, to have sound law and order policies.

Transport issues will be a real challenge as the demand by people to go to the tableland increases. As part of our regional plan, we will be proposing to move population there. The upgrading of the Kuranda Range road, which goes through a World Heritage area, will be a real challenge. I do not know whether it can be realised, but my preference is for a tunnel. However, knowing that the State and Federal Governments will probably never have the money to build that tunnel, I am proposing that it should be a private sector proposal with a toll. I know that my colleagues in the south east probably get the horrors when I mention the word "toll", but I am prepared to have some discussion about that in the public arena to see whether that might not be the way to go.

I am looking forward to the challenges ahead of working with the people and for the people of Barron River again on the issues that affect them personally as individuals as well as those strategic issues that I mentioned, such as the technology park and the Kuranda Range road. I will be listening and responding to the very best of my ability.
