



Speech by  
**Mrs NITA  
CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG**

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Hansard 4 August 1998

**FIRST SPEECH**

**Mrs NITA CUNNINGHAM** (Bundaberg— ALP) (12:29 p.m.), who was received with Government "Hear, hears!", said: I move—

"That the following Address be presented to the Governor in reply to the Speech delivered by His Excellency in opening this, the first session of the 49th Parliament of Queensland—

'May it please Your Excellency:-

We, the members of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland, wish to assure Your Excellency of our continued respect for the Crown and loyalty to the system of government in this State and to tender our thanks for the Speech with which you opened the first session. The various measures to which Your Excellency has referred and all other matters that may be brought before us will receive our careful consideration, and we shall strive to deal with them so that our endeavours may contribute to the advancement and prosperity of the people of this State.' "

I am proud to have been given the privilege of moving this motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply to His Excellency's Speech and even more so rising for the first time as the representative of the people of Bundaberg. Mr Speaker, I extend my congratulations to you on your elevation to such high office—an office to which you will surely add dignity and wisdom. I congratulate the Premier and the members of his Ministry for providing the leadership and the policies that led Labor back to Government after the Opposition's very short term in office.

Once again, the people of Queensland can have confidence in the parliamentary system to deliver democracy in the best Westminster tradition—open and honest government; the most basic right of all Queenslanders. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who made it possible for me to be here today. I know that any election campaign is arduous, but this campaign, preceded by my 10 years in local government—seven of those as Mayor of Bundaberg—placed a huge burden on my husband Elvin, our son Glenn, daughter Anne and their young families. They have borne the brunt of family disruption during this hectic time and it is to their credit that they have taken it in their stride. Without their support and encouragement I would not now be the member for Bundaberg. I thank my sisters and brother for their support, my mother for her patience and my late father for teaching me to stand up for my beliefs, even in the face of opposition. I must also thank my tireless campaign committee, the many Labor Party members in Bundaberg and Brisbane who helped with the campaign, those friends and non-party members who gave their time, finance and effort in a wonderful vote of confidence, and the people of Bundaberg for their support and for the honour of representing them here in this Queensland Parliament.

This great State and, indeed, our nation are at a crossroad. The 13 June election result demonstrated a deep unease in our community. There are grave concerns about unemployment and

job security, the continued sale of our assets, the blind pursuit of Hilmer reforms that have not brought better services or lower costs yet have resulted in thousands and thousands of people being put out of work, the sad effect that economic rationalisation has had on services, the lengthy delays and rising costs of health treatment, the concerns of the elderly who no longer feel safe in their homes and the concerns of our young people for their education and for their future. There is widespread concern that economic rationalism has become more important to Governments than the welfare of the people.

One hundred and thirty-five years ago, Abraham Lincoln was president of a deeply divided nation. When invited to speak at the dedication of a war cemetery, he spoke for only two minutes but in just 269 words he left all America with the task of bringing about a new freedom. His words did not end the conflict and division, but they did begin the process out of which a new and better nation was made. I do not intend to disappoint my colleagues on both sides of the House by speaking for only another two minutes. However, I believe that such fine examples of statesmanship are worth recalling—those few words that changed the direction of a nation. In respect of many of our current issues, it is time that we had the courage to say, "Stop! We are going the wrong way." Indeed, this is the time for us to begin that process out of which a new and better nation will be made.

Let me say that I am delighted to be part of the Beattie Labor Government whose policies have the capacity to achieve that aim—a Government that will get Queensland moving again; a Government that will make decisions and will work with determination to achieve its ambitious employment targets and restore job security, the very basis of family life, a strong community and a strong State.

I turn now to my electorate of Bundaberg. Bundaberg is a modern, progressive and very beautiful city in the heart of a rich sugarcane and small crops belt. It is renowned for its wonderful climate, its superb quality of life and the hospitality of its residents. Bundaberg's diverse economy is based on the sugar industry with four sugar mills, a refinery, distillery, sugar experiment station and bulk sugar port in close proximity. The Millaquin complex is still the only one in the southern hemisphere where sugar is milled and refined and rum distilled at the one complex.

In recent years, sugar has been challenged by small crops as our major industry, and the enormous variety of fruits, nuts and vegetables grown in our district boosted our income last year by more than \$126m. A busy fishing industry is based in Bundaberg providing seafood locally and for export. The Bundaberg Port Authority has expanded its operations to take general cargo. It has developed a trawler base where major fish processing plants have been recently established and a new marina will soon open. It has been working hard for some 18 months to gain a coal loading port just south of the city.

Bundaberg is recognised worldwide for its Bundaberg Rum and Austoff Harvesters and is known in many countries for its Wide Bay bricks, Electra brewed drinks and Jabiru planes. Our manufacturing industries can produce from small parts to the largest sugar mills in the world, and the Bundaberg Foundry was recently project manager for the new Tableland sugar mill, built for Bundaberg Sugar near Mareeba—the first new sugar mill to be constructed in Queensland in 73 years. Our city is the southern gateway to the Barrier Reef, with the islands of Lady Musgrave and Lady Elliott close by. Tourists can enjoy surfing, diving, fishing and whale watching. Nearby Mon Repos beach is the largest and most accessible turtle rookery in Australia. Because of these attractions, together with superb sporting facilities in most codes, Bundaberg now hosts many State and national sporting events and conferences. Our annual Agro Trend has become the largest subtropical primary industry exhibition in Australia, and redeveloped clubs such as Brothers, Across the Waves and the new Burnett Club provide conference facilities equal to the best in capital cities.

We are proud of our heritage. Hinkler House, the English home of our most famous son, Bert Hinkler, was brought back to Bundaberg in pieces and rebuilt in the botanic gardens. Fairymead House, a very old home that played an integral part in the early days of Fairymead sugar mill, has also been moved to the botanic gardens where it has been restored as a monument to our sugar industry pioneers and opened as a sugar museum. The city boasts many other beautiful old buildings and churches.

In recent years, Bundaberg has seen enormous growth and development in its industries and commerce and in its hospitals, schools, sporting clubs and housing developments. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to say that that growth escalated during the years of the Goss Labor Government. In that time, Bundaberg gained its second traffic bridge—a bridge that had previously been promised by the coalition prior to every election for almost 20 years. We gained land and funds to establish the

Central Queensland University campus in Bundaberg. It is again to that Labor Government's credit that 72% of the students currently enrolled at Bundaberg are the first members of their families to ever have the opportunity to enter a university. Just four years after its opening, enrolment numbers have grown so rapidly that funds are now urgently needed for building expansion.

Those were very productive years in Bundaberg. We also gained a DPI regional centre and the commitment to build the new district police station. Our hospital gained a renal unit, a breast screening unit and a mental health unit, and massive hospital extensions were planned. The irrigation scheme was finished, albeit after decades of procrastination and changed plans that totally abandoned the essential Kallawa dam. The people of Bundaberg owe a debt of gratitude to Wayne Goss, Premier Peter Beattie and those other members on this side of the House who were members of that Labor Government.

I am proud of the achievements of the Bundaberg City Council during that time—a time when the city gained an enviable record of achievement in environmental management. Our progressive programs included the redevelopment of the CBD, which is the most successful in regional Queensland; a new library; a recycling centre; the sugar museum; an arts centre; a rollerblade park; and massive beautification programs that have given our city a totally new image and our residents a renewed sense of civic pride. I would like to place on record the loyal service of the council work force, numbering almost 400 men and women, whose pride in their work and in Bundaberg allowed so much to be achieved in such a short time. I count them all as my friends.

Having described the beautiful City of Bundaberg, I must now draw the attention of the House to its problems. The two major problems facing Bundaberg are unemployment and the need for a major water storage. The level of unemployment in Bundaberg is more than double the national average, with more than 5,000 people unemployed and 30% of our young people unable to find work. Clearly, we need the assistance of all three levels of government to overcome the enormous economic and social problems that are resulting from that unemployment. Bundaberg has always been a wonderful city in which to raise a family. But now, many families are breaking up as parents, brothers and sisters have to move away to find work. This is not good enough!

If we are ever going to provide jobs we need new industries, we need expansion of existing industries and we need water to service those industries. With the level of usable water in the Fred Haigh Dam down to 3.5% of its capacity, water allocations to all farmers have been drastically reduced. The current crisis not only threatens existing crops but also puts expansion of farms out of the question and is an insurmountable obstacle to industrial development. Studies are being undertaken on sites for a new dam—an alternative to the Kallawa that was promised in the 1970s and never built.

The sugar industry estimates that, if construction of the proposed Paradise dam were approved now, production could increase by one million tonnes per annum, adding an additional \$50m to the district economy annually and providing more jobs. The fruit and vegetable growers estimate that their crop would escalate from \$126m to in excess of \$170m annually—again creating more jobs. With water available, those value-adding industries and manufacturing industries that have been turned away in the past because no water was available will be able to establish in Bundaberg—again creating more jobs.

These initiatives, together with a commitment to the proposed coal loading port at Coonar and the Labor Government's plans to employ more apprentices and trainees, would give Bundaberg industries the confidence to expand and place Bundaberg well on the way to economic recovery. But we must have that dam to provide affordable water for the economic stability of our entire region—its industries, its people and our future.

The people of Bundaberg share the concerns of most communities in Queensland at the declining funds that have been made available in recent years for health, education, safety, aged care and emergency services and at the heavy load that is now being placed on carers and volunteers. I pay tribute to the fine work of groups such as our pensioner and senior citizens groups, which provide a wide range of activities for senior citizens; to those who work unpaid in respite centres and with the disabled; to church and community groups that provide programs for youth; and to those who give their time freely to help others. Such bodies deserve our support and encouragement.

My decade in local government has made me very aware of the problems facing most councils in this State. It has given me the opportunity to listen to people from all walks of life and, through my association with so many mayors and councils throughout Queensland, to share the concerns of local government:

the disastrous Integrated Planning Act, which recently came into force without the t's being crossed or the i's dotted—a total confusion that puts in doubt a council's right to impose standards in its own local government area;

National Competition Policy that is now threatening traditional council business and income and will bring an end to service to the public that has been synonymous with local government since its inception;

the new revenue raising proposals that have the capacity to financially ruin a council; and

so many other issues that I know the Minister is already addressing.

On a lighter note, some members may be aware that when I joined local government in Bundaberg in 1988 I was the only woman on the council. Three years later, six women and only three men were elected. We now have eight women and three men on council—the highest proportion of women on any council in Queensland's history and, I believe, in Australia. I would like to assure members of this House that I am not planning a similar coup here in State Parliament.

The start of a new Parliament is a good time to reassess the role of the politician. People are wanting politicians with a new set of values and a high standard of political ethics to contribute to a more informed debate on the issues confronting Queensland. They want more dignity in the House, as the Premier said last Tuesday.

Politicians must ensure that the environment is protected for the generations to come but, in doing so, we must also ensure that that protection is not used as an excuse to stop progress. Competition is healthy, but not when it is being used as an excuse to turn a publicly owned monopoly into a privately owned monopoly.

Community consultation is necessary but should not be used to cover up a Government's inability or unwillingness to make a decision. The people do not want long lists of regulations, reports, drafts, submissions, committees, subcommittees, white papers and green papers. They do not want to lose their businesses or their jobs. They do not want long hospital waiting lists or to wait three years to see a dentist. The people want politicians who will once again make decisions, provide services, provide a better quality of life, look after the people and restore our State's credibility and its economy.

While the Premier's target to reduce Queensland's unemployment rate to 5% over the next five years is ambitious, it is also achievable, and his determination to provide jobs and job security is certainly a ray of hope in comparison with the defeatist attitude of the coalition, whose recent Budget promised that unemployment would rise even further.

During this term of Parliament, God willing, we will all have the opportunity to see this great State move into the 21st century. I sincerely hope that that momentous occasion will be marked by progress, achievements and stability and that, at that moment in history, by working together, we will all have good reason to feel proud of our contribution.

I am acutely aware of the trust that has been placed in me by the people of my electorate. I pledge my efforts towards the goal of getting more water, industries and jobs for Bundaberg and a more just and fair society for Queensland—socially and economically. I thank my supporters for their confidence and for this opportunity to work towards those goals. As I take my place in this Legislative Assembly I repeat the words of Carmen Lawrence, who, on gaining office as Premier of Western Australia, said—

"I hope to bring to this position some of the attributes that underlie the contribution of all women in the community ... a willingness to listen, a commitment to hard work, a generosity of spirit, and lots of old fashioned common sense."