



Speech by

Mr S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK

Hansard 5 August 1998

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr ROBERTSON (Sunnybank—ALP) (4.24 p.m.): It is with pleasure that I rise to speak in this Address in Reply debate. First, I take the opportunity to thank the people of Sunnybank for again giving me their support to represent them in this Parliament for the next three years. I also thank my partner and Labor Party organiser, Linda Holliday, for her continuing support and advice; my campaign director, Councillor Gail Macpherson; my long-suffering electorate officer, Ruth Parslow, who continues to put up with my general lack of organisation; and the wonderful people at the local Labor Party branch, including Eddie and Denise Redfern, Steve and Jenny Downie, and Rose Matters and her family, to name but a few of the many workers and volunteers who helped to secure our victory in Sunnybank. I also take this opportunity to thank the many friends I have in the Australian Chinese community, who have been such strong supporters since I was first elected in 1992.

I have always said that it is a great privilege to represent Sunnybank. The ethnic diversity in my electorate is, in my opinion, one of its great strengths. I have always believed that, for those constituents who engage with their new Australian neighbours, a vast array of new experiences open up to them, adding richness to their lives.

It is usual for members to use their speech in the Address in Reply debate to speak about their electorates, which I have done in the past and will continue to do in the three years ahead of me. On this occasion I will use the time available to me to speak about the role of the media—how they report politics in Queensland and the contributions of members, both in Parliament and outside.

Speaking about the role of the media is in some respects seen to be taboo for many politicians, particularly if they are going to take a critical view of the media's performance. There is understandably a concern by some that, should they in any way criticise the media, their profile in the media may suffer. To be perfectly frank, I have played that game for the past six years and I have come to the conclusion that the media coverage of the work that I do in this place and in my electorate could not get any worse, so I have nothing to lose.

I do not want to be misunderstood. This is not the bleatings of a media junkie who judges his own level of self-importance by the number of column inches published with his name in it. What I am concerned about, however, is that the virtual absence of reporting of contributions made in this Chamber by members of the backbench, whether they be in Government or in Opposition, results in a general lack of understanding in the community about what it is that we in this place in fact do. As far as the media and, as a result, our constituents are concerned, we may as well not exist. The fact that we do is a source of wonderment for some people in the community who, after they find out that we are members of Parliament, ask what it is that we do for a living. This is understandable.

I should perhaps draw a distinction between members who represent urban electorates, in Brisbane or south-east Queensland, and those who represent the regional or rural areas. This is because members representing electorates outside the south-east corner have other media outlets at their disposal which have a more local focus.

Mr Seeney: We don't own the Courier-Mail, though.

Mr ROBERTSON: I will get back to that. This allows members to achieve a higher profile and, in turn, be more accountable to their electorates. Those of us in Brisbane—and I appreciate the interjection from the member opposite—

Mr Veivers interjected.

Mr ROBERTSON: The attendance by the media during speeches by backbench members is consistent. Those of us in Brisbane have no alternative to the Courier-Mail and the major television and radio news services, all of which have little interest in electorate specific matters. I should qualify that statement by saying that they have little interest in the contributions of backbench members unless, of course, we stuff up. Any sign of weakness by a member of Parliament then receives the full, undivided attention of the media. If there is a chance to laugh at, embarrass, ridicule or exploit them, our fearless friends from the media will leave no stone unturned to bring to the attention of their readers, viewers or listeners the full extent of that stuff-up, complete with expert analysis by some academic who attaches to it some obscure meaning relating to the future of the Government or the Opposition of the day.

Mr Deputy Speaker, lest you think I am being a little precious, I point out that I was driven to make this speech by an article that appeared in this morning's Courier-Mail. As a regular reader of that fine journal, I always like to keep up with how politics is reported, particularly since I find I am often bemused by the media's reporting of the day's events in Parliament. I often think they are reporting on a different Chamber.

My attention was drawn to an article titled "Beattie to woo Asia on back of ad campaign". In that article I saw the name of my good friend the member for Woodridge, Mr D'Arcy, who made a very valuable contribution yesterday in relation to the immigration debate. That article in the Courier-Mail quotes some of his comments. The article states—

"Labor Woodridge MP Bill D'Arcy yesterday accused some provincial Queensland MPs of deliberately making immigrants feel unwelcome.

In a speech to demonstrate solidarity with the Federal Labor Party's immigration stance, Mr D'Arcy said politicians who attacked immigration levels for short-term political gain were likely to represent electorates in regional Queensland.

'They lament the decline caused by the closure of services such as banks and employment opportunities for young people ... But they hardly roll out the welcome mat to migrants who could well help arrest the decline.' "

Those are fine words indeed. Unfortunately, those were not the words of my good friend Mr D'Arcy; they just happen to have been mine. The fact that the wrong politician's name has been attached to something said in this place demonstrates the general lack of care and attention to detail on the part of members of the media who are tasked with reporting on the activities in this place.

My mind was drawn to another event that occurred one or two weeks into the election campaign. The current Opposition held a media conference down the coast, which featured then Premier Borbidge and then Transport Minister Johnson highlighting a letter that I had written to a section of my constituents. They said that this somehow showed that Labor had put the second highway to the Gold Coast back on the agenda. The matter first came to my attention when I got a call from the office of the then Opposition Leader, who was understandably concerned, asking what I had been saying to my electorate. I relayed to him the context of the letter and assured him that it had contained nothing that I had not been saying in this place—namely, that the HOV lanes that were to be built as part of the South East Transit Project should be replaced by busways; that there was no agenda for any second road to the Gold Coast.

Although that explanation satisfied my party colleagues, it somehow did not satisfy members of the media, who basically fell for the stunt perpetrated by the then Government. Without any reference to the author of the letter—that is, me—the matter was the headline story that night on three channels. I think the subtext read something like "Labor in row over second road to the Gold Coast". I read the Journalists Code of Ethics to see what the media are supposed to do. I am still waiting for a call from journalists from Channel 9, Channel 7 and Channel 2 for my comment in relation to that story. I am sure their calls are still coming! When they do, I will be able to hand over a whole range of documents, including past speeches in this place, correspondence—you name it—that will assist them to see through the election stunt perpetrated by the then Government. If it will help, after this speech I might go back up to the press gallery and circulate my phone number, just to give them a bit of a hand.

That is a problem that we face constantly. Fellow members of the backbench on both sides can all tell the same stories. We can all tell of the frustration that we have experienced in communicating with our electorates about the contributions that we make in this place. Unless one is in the first 18 in the Ministry, in the Opposition leadership or has done something embarrassing, one does not exist in the eyes of the media.

The third example that I could use to demonstrate the level of frustration that I have, having been in this place now for six years, is the media attention focused on my opponent during the recent election campaign. I appreciate the fact that there was some newsworthiness with respect to my opponent, a Chinese Australian, and the difficulties that he was having with the Liberal Party's position in relation to the exchange of preferences with One Nation. However, the level of attention given to that

individual basically resulted in the sitting member being sidelined as an observer in his own election campaign. Again, the performance of the media with respect to its duty to represent both sides of the story—and there are two sides of the story to be told in relation to that issue—was, to say the least, disappointing but, more accurately, unprofessional.

As I said, over the past six years I have played the game with the media. As most members know, I make at least one, two or three speeches during a parliamentary sitting week. I play the game and present those speeches in media releases. Following the advice of experts, I have gone upstairs and walked the floor where the media is located and distributed my media releases. The proof is in the pudding: that strategy has resulted in virtually a complete absence of any coverage of anything that I have done over the past six years in this place.

So far I have concentrated on the Statewide media, but I wish also to make special mention of the only local media outlet available to me, which is part of the Quest Newspaper Group—a newspaper called the Southern Star. Over at least the past six years, that paper has constantly used the press releases of members of Parliament or councillors to fill up copy in its newspaper. It deliberately omits any reference to the authors of those documents. It continually runs articles produced by others and then removes every mention of either me, my opponent or councillors. Again, I have read the Journalists Code of Ethics, and I am not too sure whether that type of journalism is mentioned within that code.

There is another thing that the media loves to do. If we are prepared to get on the front foot and organise a story for them, perhaps in relation to a local community event, they will send down a photographer and spend half an hour with us taking photographs with the kids and so on. When it comes to the last photo, they say, "Stephen, could you move aside and we'll just get one with the kids." I can guarantee members that 100% of the time they will use that photo.

Mr Nuttall interjected.

Mr ROBERTSON: I appreciate that I may not be an oil painting, but it does cause a bit of a problem in relation to how members can communicate their role in the electorate. I often wonder whether the cynicism that many people have towards politicians is not in some small part due to the fact that, in the eyes of the media, we do not exist.

Mr Seeney: You've got them there now.

Mr ROBERTSON: It is fascinating, is it not? I welcome members of the media.

Mr Veivers: Tell them your name and address.

Mr ROBERTSON: Perhaps they may be calling later. The reality is that every one of us in this place, irrespective of what side of politics we are on, does a day's work for the community. We are out there on weekends, at night and at other times doing what we can.

For the past six years I have listened to the member for Gregory speak with great passion about his electorate. In common with the rest of us, he loves the electorate he represents. We do whatever we can to make our electorates better places for the people that we represent to live in. However, unless we can get through the message about the work that politicians do, that work and our relevance goes unnoticed by our electorate.

I would like to think that, given this new environment of better behaviour that we are all in, perhaps the media will want to join with us in cleaning up our acts and actually start looking a bit beyond reporting just on question time in terms of what goes on in this place. I would like to put a suggestion forward if I may, which I will communicate directly to the Speaker later on. Most of our constituents do not know the contributions that we make in this place. Perhaps as a Parliament we need to start putting some money aside in the Budget to publicise—whether it be in the Courier-Mail or wherever—what went on in the Parliament the previous day, who spoke on what Bill, who asked what question, and so on.

That would at least give our constituents the opportunity to say, "What did my local member do yesterday? He or she spoke on this Bill. I wonder what he or she said." It seems to me that that is the only way that we can establish some sort of connection between what goes on in here and the real world outside. I must say that I have given up hope that we can rely on journalists to communicate that or to accurately reflect the full extent of the work that goes on in this place. It may well be that we have to end up spending a dollar to communicate that message. I hope not. However, in saying this today on behalf of all backbenchers, I hope that we might see a better performance from the media in terms of the work that goes on in this place and the work that we all do out in our electorates.
