



Speech by

VAUGHAN JOHNSON

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Hansard 5 August 1998

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (4.04 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, in speaking to the motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply, I congratulate you on your appointment as Chairman of Committees in the 49th Parliament. As I said when speaking to the motion of confidence in the Government, I support and congratulate the new Speaker, Mr Hollis, the member for Redcliffe, on his elevation to that important role in the 49th Parliament. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thought that we may have seen you on the front bench. However, I understand that the Labor caucus decided to give you the role of Deputy Speaker. That is probably in recognition of your great contribution to this Parliament over so many years.

As I speak this afternoon, I must give recognition to many people. First and foremost, I must thank my wife and children for the support that they have given me over a long period and especially over the last eight and a half years that I have been in this place. I recognise the work that Robin does behind the scenes as my wife and also as the de facto member for Gregory. Many members in this House would agree that their spouses are de facto members of Parliament. The member for Warwick and the member for Cunningham mentioned the role played by their wives. The same applies to every member of the House. I make particular mention of Robin and also my daughters, Monique and Tanya, my son, Michael, and my sons-in-law, Tom and Glenn.

Today I heard the maiden speech of the new member for Archerfield, Karen Struthers. I thought it was a very good maiden speech and one that many of us would do well to dwell on. She referred to the family unit and she mentioned that she was reared by her mother, a lone parent. One of the One Nation Party members also referred to the family unit. It is important that we recognise the role of the family unit. There is no doubt in my mind that our most important assets are our families and friends. The family unit is an integral part of the community. I pay tribute to my immediate family. I thank them for enduring the hardships that they have confronted over the past eight and a bit years and for the support that they have given me.

I wish to recognise three other people. Carole Tanks, my electorate secretary in Longreach, has been with me since day one. She is very able and she has done a great job. Sometimes Carole becomes frustrated if I do not ring her every day that I am away. That was especially so during the two years and four months that I was the Minister for Transport and Main Roads. I pay special tribute to Carole for the great work that she has done. I thank her from afar today. The same applies to Julie-Anne Evans, my electorate officer in Emerald. Julie-Anne has been with me for only a short while. She is a very able lady who is doing a grand job. I thank her, too. Suzi Dein was my former electorate officer in Emerald. I thank her for the great job that she did and for all her efforts. No doubt Vince Lester will endorse that, because Suzi was his electorate secretary for many years before she came to me.

I thank the National Party branch members in my electorate for the contribution that they made and their tireless work to have me re-elected as the member for Gregory. We must not forget those people. They showed true guts and forthrightness in standing up and being counted. The same goes for all the members of all parties who support their members of Parliament. I know they cop it from time to time, irrespective of what side of the House they are on. We should recognise their efforts. In particular, I mention Keith and Barbara Morton and Alex Strang. They are fine people who worked

tirelessly with my wife to help me get re-elected. I will not forget those people. I know the people of the Gregory electorate will not forget them, either.

I congratulate all the new members in this House. They have a very important role and a very important function. I think that each and every one of us should remember that. Our role is not about politics; is it about people. Our first and foremost responsibility is to our constituents, the people who elected us. Regardless of what party we represent, once we are elected we represent all the folk in our electorates. I pay tribute to the member for Callide and congratulate him. I thought that his maiden speech was one that we all should dwell on and one that is a great mark for us to look at and analyse in relation to some of the things that I want to speak about this afternoon. I congratulate the member for Callide for bringing those issues out into the open.

I want to make mention of other people, too many of whom we take for granted. I refer to the police; the teachers; the health workers; the officers of the Department of Primary Industries; the pastoral college personnel, both in Longreach and Emerald; Queensland Transport and Main Roads officers at Emerald, Barcaldine and Winton; the people who work within the 12 local authorities of the Gregory electorate; and other public servants throughout the length and breadth of this great electorate. I thank all of those people not on my behalf but on behalf of the constituents of my electorate for the tireless work that they do in bringing about better conditions and better understanding to the people whom I represent.

I believe that the most important factor is to recognise the needs of supporting the grazing industry, the farming industry, the mining industry and related industries and the services that those important wealth generators and employment sources provide. I congratulate the Federal Government on taking a stand yesterday and freezing the wool stockpile. Being a woolgrower, I understand fully the ramifications of the problems that are currently confronting the wool industry.

My colleague Robbie Mitchell, the member for Charters Towers—and I congratulate him on his 50th birthday today, and I believe that everybody joins me in wishing him well—and my other colleagues who represent the wool-growing areas in this place would agree with me when I say that currently the wool industry is on its knees. I believe that \$500 or \$600 for a bale of wool is far from enough to provide a living for woolgrowers. If those woolgrowers have a substantial debt, there is no way in the world that they can recover with those prices.

We have to look for new wool markets. Freezing that stockpile for the rest of the 1998-99 season will benefit those workers within the industry—our shearing workers, our contractors such as fencers, tank sinkers and transport operators. If the wool industry gets back to a buoyant level, we will find that those people will again become financially sustainable. The shearing industry in places such as Charleville, Blackall, Barcaldine, Longreach, Winton and Cunnamulla—the towns in the heart of the wool-growing areas of the far west of the State; and I know that there are other such areas and towns throughout the State, such as Hughenden and Julia Creek and those places in the north and the south east—is on its knees. Today, it is very difficult to find young people who want to work in that industry. I believe that it is absolutely paramount that we recognise the importance of getting this great industry again back on its feet so that it can sustain its own growth and those rural towns that are connected with it can once again become economically viable.

I would like to take the words used by the member for Barron River in her speech and use them again. Today, tourism is a great venture in the west and it is a very sustainable part of the incomes of many people in that area. However, members should bear in mind that the tourism industry is certainly not going to sustain the living of the many people who are on the land and the businesspeople who derive a living from those western towns in that part of the world.

I want to touch on the issue of rural debt, which is at an all-time high. People are bleeding internally, are doing it hard and doing it hard through no fault of their own—through the compounding factors of drought and low commodity prices. At the same time, many of those people are business people in rural towns who employ young people out of the goodness of their hearts rather than see them thrown on the scrap heap. We are seeing their overdraft go up because they are good people. This situation is applicable not only to western Queensland but also throughout the length and breadth of Queensland. As politicians and as representatives of the people of this State, we have to work together to bring about the change that will bring a better quality of life to those people in question. A couple of days ago, I spoke to the Minister for Primary Industries about the wool problem. I hope that he works closely with the industry to help that change come about.

I pay recognition to some of the great achievements that have occurred in my electorate over the past couple of years. I refer especially to the Barcaldine and Emerald Hospitals. I thank Mike Horan, the former Health Minister, for the hard yards that he put in for bringing about the reality of those two hospitals. Under Labor, for some six years those hospitals were on the Capital Works Program. Now we see those two hospitals near completion.

I thank Russell Cooper for the new police station at Emerald, which is nearing completion. I thank my colleague the honourable member for Southport, my very good friend Mick Veivers, for bringing new ambulances for Alpha, Longreach and Windorah. Some of these isolated and remote centres do not have ambulance services. I notice the Minister for Emergency Services is present in the House. I say to her that such things carry out very important functions for those people in remote areas. They do not ask for a lot, but the provision of such things certainly improves their quality of life. They feel more comfortable knowing that they have them. It is like a security blanket for them. I say to the Minister to please keep up the good work.

I refer to the \$3.6m reticulated water scheme for the gem fields, which was put in place by Di McCauley—a very able member and a very able Minister. She has also been replaced by a very able member. The people of the gem fields are truly grateful for that reticulated water scheme, about which they dreamed for too long.

My electorate boasts some very great tourist icons, such as the Australian Workers Heritage Centre in Barcaldine—the home of the ALP and the United Graziers Association—the wool scour and the memorial to the great Jacky Howe in Blackall and the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach. I just saw some of the people from R.M. Williams, Tom Murphy and Ben Humphries leaving for a meeting for the Hall of Fame. That is a great icon and a memorial to the pioneers of yesteryear. I ask those members who have not visited the Waltzing Matilda Centre in Winton to go and visit it. I remind members of the great icons of the outback in places such as Birdsville, which has the Birdsville races, and Boulia, which is located just outside my electorate. Just a couple of weeks ago, the member for Mount Isa, the Honourable Minister for Mines and Energy, Tony McGrady, and I had the fortune to ride in the desert sands camel races at Boulia. I have to pay credit were credit is due.

Mr Braddy: A great camel.

Mr JOHNSON: Tony showed great guts in getting aboard that camel. I do not think that he had ever been on a horse or camel in his life, but he finished the race. I congratulate him on that. I came third, and it was a great day. It was a big camel. When he stood up, he reached almost as high as this ceiling. However, we got there.

We have great tourist attractions in the outback and I ask members to come and visit them. As I have said in this House, the outback represents some of the real legends and real culture of this State. I have said it before and I will say it again: it represents the liars, the larrikins and the legends that are cultivated by our culture. I am proud to be associated with that heritage. The former Government made the Waltzing Matilda Centre at Winton possible from a \$600,000 profit from the Indycar race.

In the seven minutes that I have available to me, I want to touch on a subject that many of my colleagues have touched on already, and that is the National Competition Policy. I say to members that that has been a harsh measure for the people not only of this State but also of this nation. In common with all the other electorates throughout this State, the Gregory electorate has suffered as a result of National Competition Policy. In many areas, the NCP has oppressed the people in order to gain some advantage and to win contracts. On behalf of local governments in some of the isolated and remote areas, I say that the NCP has really oppressed people in those areas. Small businesses have also suffered. I say that we should not keep oppressing people in some areas so that other people who are in a more fortunate situation can gain an advantage. Certainly, a lot of people have suffered as a result of National Competition Policy during the time that the coalition was in Government and previously when it was signed off by the Federal Labor Government and the former Labor Government in this State. I have been in total opposition to it. I am going to be relentless in attacking the NCP until such time as we have common ground, where common people can compete fairly and at the same time not be screwed down to a level from which they will never recover just because one night somebody dreamed up—and I am talking about Professor Fred Hilmer—the National Competition Policy.

We know what it has done to transport. We know what it has done in a number of other areas—in relation to contracts from Main Roads, local authorities and private contractors. I say to my colleagues on the other side of the House: take this by the throat and throw it out, because it is detrimental to growth and to what we are trying to gain for the people of this State. This is certainly not something that my fellow Queenslanders want.

Something I opposed vehemently when I was Minister for Transport was the deregulation of the taxi industry. We must keep that industry a stand-alone operation. Many operators own cabs as a form of retirement security. It is their superannuation. We must make absolutely certain that, whether it be the taxi industry, pharmacies or newsagencies—mention was made yesterday about the dairy industry—there are regulations in place to protect those industries. If we do not do that, we are not true to our convictions and we are not worthy to represent the people of this State.

The coalition in Government played a most important role in bringing about capital works infrastructure. We put the \$750m Pacific Motorway project in place. A lot of people say what a great program that is. I will inform the House of a few of the good things about it. Currently, 750 people are

directly employed on that project. That project has touched 3,000—as far north as Bundaberg and Hervey Bay and as far south as Coffs Harbour—in the sense of supplying materials and other associated infrastructure. Again we see the flow-on benefits. It is paramount that the Labor Government carries on with the capital works programs that the coalition Government put in place. This year the portfolio of Transport and Main Roads had a budget of \$2.14 billion, which accounted for 43.8% of the capital works programs for this State. That equates to some 16,000 jobs.

I certainly support Labor's endeavours to reduce the unemployment rate to 5%. We have to work together to make absolutely certain that the prime factor in decisions is the reduction of the unemployment rate. To do that, the rights and the responsibilities of the private sector have to be embraced, in conjunction with those of the public sector, so that we can get that infrastructure in place.

The coalition Government had another great winner in the Road Safety Strategy. I endorse the programs that the former Police Minister, Russell Cooper, and I put in place. This State's road toll in 1995 was 456. In 1996 it was 385, in 1997 it was 359 and so far this year we have a road toll of 152, which is 59 less than at the same time last year. This is not a political issue; this is a social issue that affects every one of us in this House. We do not know from day to day when we are going to be touched by a fatality or by some serious injury. If we can reduce the road toll by working together, we will do that. I ask those in Government and the new Minister for Transport and Main Roads, Steve Bredhauer, to please pursue this, because we certainly will pursue it with them.

This morning in the Chamber the Minister for Fair Trading made mention of fuel equalisation. People in Brisbane pay anywhere from 60c to 65c a litre. In my electorate of Gregory, people currently pay 79c a litre. Petrol is 90c a litre at Boulia. People can easily work out the number of dollars we are paying for petrol. When I was buying petrol at Urandangie a couple of years ago, I could see the litres and the dollars ticking over together. How would people in Brisbane cope with that? They would not.

We have to work together to get costs down. I believe that by doing this we can achieve equality for Queenslanders—through the education system and the health system, and by carrying out capital works infrastructure programs so that we can employ our youth. The greatest export earner that we in rural and remote Queensland have today is our kids. We rear them in the west and they have to be exported to the coast to get a tertiary education and to find jobs. I believe that, if we can get those capital works programs going in rural and remote Queensland, we can really say that we have done it well together.

Time expired.
