



Speech by

MIKE REYNOLDS

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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INDIGENOUS REGIONAL BUSINESS ADVISORY UNIT, PALM ISLAND

Mr REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (12.19 p.m.): Today it is with a great deal of pleasure that I inform the House that Palm Islanders are driving economic change in their community with the help of the Beattie Labor Government. In my capacity as the Premier's representative in north Queensland and the member for Townsville, I inform members that the State Government has agreed to fund a pilot Indigenous Regional Business Advisory Unit within the Palm Island Aboriginal Council. I understand this is the first time that such a step has been taken in any Aboriginal community in Queensland, and I commend Palm Islanders for recognising the importance of economic change as a stimulus for the further development of their community.

In the Palm Island Vision Plan, which I will expand on shortly, the Islanders identify the links between suicide, injury, substance abuse and domestic violence and underlying socioeconomic issues such as 85% unemployment, welfare dependency and the lack of opportunities in the Palm Island community. Palm Island is the largest indigenous community in Australia, with some 3,500 residents. That is why I have been negotiating hard with State departments to secure start-up funding of \$75,000 for the Indigenous Business Adviser to begin work within the council on marshalling commercial and tourism opportunities that will create productive jobs. Contributions of \$25,000 each are being made to the pilot by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Department of State Development and the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development.

At last Thursday's launch of the business unit in Townsville, the chair of the Palm Island Aboriginal Council, Councillor Peena Geia, welcomed the funding, describing it as the first important step in creating generational change on Palm Island. Mrs Geia stated—

"The community strongly desires generational change and has put enormous effort into establishing the foundations for a stronger, healthier Palm Island community."

She went on to say that she understood that it is vital to break the unemployment cycle if the community is to lift individual self-esteem and create a more positive community spirit.

The pilot will operate for six months, but if outcomes and performance measures are met—and I am confident they will be—there is provision for the initiative to run for three years. In addition, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet is now working on streamlining the delivery of Government services to Palm Island. The vision planning process has signalled the need for State and Commonwealth agencies to rethink their approach to designing and delivering programs and services for Palm Island. We need more integration and we need to maximise the public sector's contribution to community renewal.

I will now expand on the vision planning process, its importance to Palm Island and its linkage with the economic business unit being provided within the Palm Island Aboriginal Council. The new vision planning process is harnessing the energies and interests of the Palm Island community, enabling issues such as substance abuse, domestic violence, self-harming practices and youth suicide to be addressed in the Murri way. In my capacity as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier in North Queensland, I am very pleased to say that the Office of the Premier in Townsville is helping to facilitate the process. Today I wish to give credit also to Queensland Health, because much of the work is being done under its auspices. In particular, today in the Parliament I recognise the contribution of Neil McLeod, an employee of Queensland Health, and his efforts in this process.

I wish to emphasise that community ownership and self-help are the keys to the success of the new Vision Plan for Palm Island. What we have is a whole community working towards generational change. Over the past 12 months, enormous effort has gone into establishing the foundations for a stronger, healthier Palm Island community. I commend everyone who has been involved in that process.

Palm Islanders have identified five principal reasons for the substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviour occurring within the community: firstly, unemployment; secondly, a lack of opportunity; thirdly, a lack of parenting and family skills; fourthly, the absence of self-determination; and, fifthly, the poor condition and lack of housing. The vision planning process seeks to address these underlying causes by providing economic opportunities, and encourages the growth of community self-worth and positive identity. The Palm Islanders have established the business unit to provide a core of financial and commercial expertise on which local and new businesses can draw. I know the community is excited by the opportunities that that business unit will provide for the Palm Island community. The opportunity exists to develop enterprises strategically within a discrete, managed economic environment. Industries identified in the draft economic vision plan include construction, eco and ethno-tourism, Murri culture, flora and fauna farming and creative manufacturing.

The Vision Plan Action Committee, which is an open community-based forum with 70% indigenous representation, is driving that key planning process. The committee recognises that economic development and social change on Palm Island must go in tandem. I emphasise the nexus that we have between economic development and social change and how they must be driven in tandem. The subcommittees of the Palm Island Vision Plan Action Committee deal with family and youth issues, health issues, alcohol and drug issues and also economic development. There is a partnership in the drive to improve the community and the way of life on Palm Island.

The vision planning process has signalled a need for State and Commonwealth agencies to rethink their individual and collective approach to designing programs and projects for Palm Island. There is a real need for the Commonwealth Government to be involved with the State Government in this process. One of the things that I will be doing in future months is talking to the Federal member for Herbert and looking at ways of building on this partnership that we have between local government—through the Palm Island Aboriginal Council—and the State Government. We need to enhance that partnership by involving the Federal Government.

Service delivery on Palm Island involves local government, State Government, Federal Government and community agencies. There is a distinct need for a holistic approach to providing physical and social infrastructure, health services, community building and service delivery. I look forward to working also with the Federal Government in making sure that the three spheres of government and the local community have a strong role to play in this holistic approach. Each of those spheres of government must meet this challenge if we are to bring about generational change on Palm Island.

Much has been said in the past. The announcement of the economic development unit within the Palm Island Aboriginal Council is a marvellous step forward, and I welcome that change. I will be working hard to bring about major change in the way in which public agencies and institutions work in with the Palm Island community. In a foreword to the draft economic vision plan, the chairperson of the Palm Island Aboriginal Council, Councillor Peena Geia, stated—

"Few outsiders, who visit our islands, can see the wounds which lie in our heads and in our hearts. Fewer still have stood beside us and sought to work with the Community, through Community Vision, to find the true path ... I pledge myself and all my strength and prayers for the Community, until we realise our Vision and are truly proud to call ourselves The Great Palm Islanders."

Today I recognise those great words of the chair of the Aboriginal Council on Palm Island, Councillor Peena Geia, who is working tremendously hard to improve the lifestyle of and service delivery for Palm Islanders.

Clearly, at the end of the day what matters most is social justice and equity for Palm Islanders. The Vision Plan that I have articulated in the Parliament today defines a path ahead which can bring about generational change and arrest the terrible toll on human health and dignity exacted by dubious public policies of the past. Let me say in the strongest terms that I support the Vision Plan, and I will be promoting partnerships within the community and with Government to give the Vision Plan every chance of success. It is vital that people on Palm Island feel that they have options and avenues for improving their lives. The announcement of the Indigenous Business Advisory Unit on Palm Island is one such avenue.
