



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (11.38 a.m.): In rising to speak in the Address in Reply debate I wish to pledge my allegiance to the Queen and to the Governor, Her Majesty's representative here in Queensland. I take this opportunity to extend special thanks to my family for all their support over the six and a half years since I became the member for Charters Towers. I especially thank my wife Kay for all the time and effort she has put in. She has been both mum and dad for our daughter Peta because of the time I have been away from home on parliamentary and electorate duties. We must not forget the amount of work that the wives of parliamentarians have to undertake. They have to handle the constant phone calls at home and the constant questioning by constituents. Unfortunately, they also receive abuse from radicals and people from other political persuasions. Thanks, Kaysie, for all your love and support. I thank also my daughter Tracy and my son-in-law David, who now reside on the Gold Coast, and my son, Robbie, now living in Monto, for all of their support over the years.

I wish to make special mention of my electorate officers—Bernice Gannon at Charters Towers and Rob Hasson in the Clermont office. I do not have to tell members of this House how much we rely on our electorate officers. Bernice has worked in the office for over 10 years, firstly with the Honourable Bob Katter as his secretary, and for five years since my election in 1992. Rob came on board about two years ago and has been of tremendous value to me in the Central Highlands area of the electorate. I thank them both most sincerely.

I extend my appreciation and thanks to my campaign manager, Zara Underwood. Zara put in a huge effort during the campaign, and she has spent weeks separated from her family, who live some 300 kilometres away in Hughenden. I cannot thank enough all of the hundreds of workers who manned the booths right across the electorate, from Capella to Julia Creek, for all of their help and support through a very difficult and different election.

I now wish to turn to many of the issues concerning the constituents of the electorate of Charters Towers. Throughout the campaign and in the months leading up to the election I was constantly reminded of the hurt and frustration of the people living in rural Queensland. I found, though, that most of the discussions I had were about Federal Government issues. I totally agree that consecutive Federal Governments have made life totally unbearable for most rural people.

The Wik issue remains the main worry for all land-holders and mining companies across Queensland. The uncertainty of the legislation still has a stranglehold on many mining ventures gaining leases so as to further develop this growing industry. Graziers and other land-holders are restricted from doing any improvements because of claims already lodged. Road projects have been delayed and in some cases even halted because of claims on those areas. I and many others are sick and tired of these continuous interruptions to our lives, our uncertain futures and the hobbling of future enterprise and infrastructure programs across Queensland.

The Telstra sell-off is of major concern to all people in rural Queensland. It would take a lot to convince the people who live in rural Queensland that they would be better off after the full privatisation of Telstra. All of the rhetoric and promises of improved services may sound good, but the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of services on the ground is the biggest worry. It may be great for the Australian economy in the short term, but we have to look at the future services for all Australians, especially in rural Queensland.

Mr Hamill: Are you opposing the sale of Telstra?

Mr MITCHELL: Yes, of course I am. It will be a great worry to us until it can be proved that we will receive better services than we are getting now.

Mr Hamill: I could not agree with you more.

Mr MITCHELL: I have said that on many occasions.

It was pleasing to read from the Governor's Speech of this Government's commitment to economic growth, development and community services for all Queenslanders, and I look forward to the assistance from this Government that will see many projects in the Charters Towers electorate coming to fruition.

The Rural Living Infrastructure Program has been of great benefit to all smaller local governments, and I am pleased that it remains and will be expanded. Because of the lower rate bases in these shires, the program assists to create employment and to implement further infrastructure in smaller towns that could not otherwise be funded at a local level.

I am pleased also that the Minister for Main Roads is maintaining the five-year Roads Implementation Program, which will further secure the employment of council workers in the Charters Towers electorate. I wish to mention some of the priority roads for completion and continued upgrading. In respect of the Gregory Development Road, a five-year program is in place and has been in operation for a few years now for widening and overlay. Since the bitumen seal was completed on this 400 kilometre section, the traffic has increased dramatically due to increased mining activity, for example.

Some of the sections that have not been widened and fixed up are a great safety concern to me and a lot of other people. The mining trucks are four trailers long and, because of the narrowness of the road, it is very hard for anybody travelling that road to overtake these vehicles or even to pass them when travelling in the opposite direction. I spoke at length to the departmental officers in Townsville, who have been very supportive. However, a lack of funding is holding back these projects. I would like the Minister to look at this issue; I have written to him on a couple of occasions seeking the fast-tracking of this work. I believe that if we were to save even one life it would be worth more than the \$2m that is needed to complete this section, which is only about 13.5 kilometres long. Although we have enough money to complete about 6.5 kilometres of that work this year—and that work will start in June—it will be another two years before the remaining section is completed. I am very worried about the safety of people travelling on this section of the road.

In respect of the Winton road, which is part of the reef to rock concept, only about 28 kilometres of road are yet to be completed. I would like to see that program finished in the next two and a half years of the program. However, some funding has been held back this year, which has delayed this road program. The other day I travelled across that 28 kilometre stretch. Due to recent rainfall in the area, I was very lucky to cross that section in a four-wheel drive. I would like to see that road completed on time, which is only about another two years away. I ask the Minister to keep that money coming.

I mention also the Kennedy Development Road, north of Hughenden, which is a very important link to the tablelands. I believe it will play a big part in the future of north and north-west Queensland, especially in light of the proposed fast train project from Melbourne to Darwin. The tablelands grows a lot of produce. That road would provide quick access, given that it is only about 300 kilometres from Hughenden, to that proposed train, which in turn would allow for faster delivery to markets, including South East Asia. A road of this size will take in the vicinity of 10 to 15 years to complete. However, I would like to see it placed on a program for commencement so as to be of benefit to the people in that area.

Another very important road is the Wills Development Road from Julia Creek to the Three Ways and to the Century mine. Once again, this is one of the old beef roads, consisting of very narrow bitumen. The road is experiencing increased traffic to and from Century Zinc, and that will increase over the years once the mine is up and running. A lot of people seem to think that the main section to be used will be from Cloncurry to this area. However, that is not the case. The Wills Development Road will mean that anybody carting goods from Townsville or the coastal areas to Century will be saved a 300 kilometre round trip. We know which road they will use. That road is not safe, especially for heavy vehicles. It is also unsafe for commuters, especially farmers and other property owners, who use that road to access Julia Creek. We have spoken at length about this issue and we still do not have any confirmation that any great amount of work will be done. I would like to think that the Minister will continue to look at this road, because its usage will eventually increase.

The most important work is the continuation of the widening of the Flinders Highway, which is taking place under the five-year plan. I mention also the important Hervey's Range Road link from the Gregory Development Road to Townsville, which plays a very important part in getting produce, especially cattle, to markets in Townsville. Another link that I wish to mention is the Richmond to Winton road. It is another connection in north Queensland that will be of benefit to a lot of towns. My main aim is to look after the future of those towns.

Good roads also play a huge role in the ever-increasing tourism industry in inland Queensland. As I have said on many occasions, tourism is the future for many towns in rural and north-west Queensland. We have so much to offer in respect of tourism, but we need infrastructure, especially sealed roads, to attract more tourists to that part of the country.

Last year I attended the fossil forum held in Hughenden, which generated a lot of interest from all of the towns in the north-west area—from Hughenden through to Mount Isa, including Richmond and Julia Creek. Those towns along that highway need to provide support and promotion for each other. Each and every centre in the electorate has something to offer to tourists wanting to travel the inland. Over many years those small towns have been robbed of many of their services. They have lost workers, and that has had a huge effect on the local economy.

However, I believe that those towns are fighting back through many tourism initiatives. For example, over the past few years Clermont has attracted many fossickers. We put in place a Fossicking Act and designated areas for fossicking. People are coming to Clermont from the southern States and are staying two or three months. We need to attract people to the area so that they can spend their money while enjoying many of our tourist venues. This is working and Clermont is benefiting. Local people have shown some initiative to get these attractions up and running. Charters Towers is well known for its history and heritage as a gold mining area. Bus loads of people from Townsville travel to Charters Towers for the day, mainly on the weekends but also during the week. Charters Towers is now becoming well known.

Mr Knuth: Don't forget the Knuth family.

Mr MITCHELL: Yes, there are still a few of them around there, but a lot of them have moved on.

Hughenden has a growing interest in the Hughenden Dinosaur Centre. It contains one of the first fully fossilised dinosaur bones actually found in Queensland. Of course, they are looking for more money to expand this project. Ever since that fossil was found, there has been an increased number of fossils found in the area. Of course, Richmond is becoming well known, even worldwide, for its fossil museum. If anybody has the chance to actually go there, it is something that they should see. It has been said by a lot of experts that it is one of the best in the world. People are coming from all over the world to visit the museum. They actually produced a video and distributed it throughout America and other places. Based on that video, people have actually made the trip over here to see those fossils for real and not just on a video.

However, I believe that the future of these towns relies on decentralisation and creating new industries to once again enable these rural towns to thrive. To achieve this, there has to be a vision. People have had this vision for many years but were continually stalled by Government decisions. When I talk about water, I refer to it as "liquid gold". We have seen the value of water schemes in many areas in rural Australia. For example, the Ord River scheme was a boomer, and we all saw what happened in the Emerald district in central Queensland once a dam was built there some years ago. It is still expanding even today in the horticultural and agricultural areas.

Mining and rural industries will always exist. Unfortunately, because of the change in scenarios in worldwide commodity prices and trade, those industries will not operate to the same degree as we have enjoyed over the years. We have to give people an alternative to survive in the future. I was very disappointed to hear the Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources state that the Richmond dam project would not be viable. I say to the Minister: do not underestimate the courage and determination of these people in rural Queensland to secure a future in these areas for their families. We believe this will happen. As I have just mentioned, we have seen it in other areas.

We have to be able to give these other areas of Queensland a chance, and the only way we are going to do that is to actually put some money and infrastructure in there. If that is done, the people will be able to see some of these projects started and completed. That will give them a future. As I say, this dam must go ahead. If the process is delayed now, it will put the project back at least another 10 or 15 years. We have worked very solidly on this for many years, especially over the last five years, hoping that we would have received some sort of positive answer before now, but that does not seem to be the case. I do ask the Minister to reconsider this for the future of the people in that district.

The same goes for the Hells Gate dam on the northern reaches of the Burdekin River. In the Water Task Force Infrastructure Program that dam was listed as a Category 1 project. Charters Towers has survived on the resurgence of goldmining in the 1980s, but unfortunately a life of no more than 15 years is predicted for this industry. For the survival of Charters Towers and the Dalrymple area, it is important that an adequate supply of water be provided to further enhance the current horticultural and agricultural industries in that area. The dam would also benefit Townsville, the Ayr Basin and the proposed Elliott Channel to feed the Bowen area. We have to look at the big picture, not just focus on the coastal plains to supply our produce in the years to come.

Law and order, of course, is still a major issue in all towns in the electorate. The police are at their wit's end in performing their duties when they are confronted by the same offenders after being released by the courts with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. This is a daily routine and the police have actually come to me frustrated, saying, "What's going on?" Charters Towers appears to be harbouring some of the lowest scum—and I feel I am being polite calling them this—in Queensland. They are breaking into old people's houses and even bashing them.

I am talking about people aged 80 years and older. A person broke into a 92-year-old's home, breaking their hip, resulting in hospitalisation, just to steal a few dollars even while they were awake in the house. Others have even walked into the Eventide old people's home, stolen an old chap's wallet and taken the purse belonging to the nurse in charge on the way out. It is getting out of hand. The same thing happened at the hospital. They even decided to take the public phone out of the foyer on their way out. People up there are telling me on a daily basis that, like everywhere else, they are prisoners in their own homes.

One old lady was discovered by a friend, who had not visited for a couple of days, to have been living on bread and toast for nearly a week because she was too frightened to go out shopping for the groceries—even to carry money in the streets. That is how bad it is getting. I can understand the frustration that the police feel because, unless they can actually catch these fellows who are doing these things on the spot, it is very hard to prove it because the money could be from anybody's pocket. We certainly hope that somehow we can get these people arrested or put away. I know all areas of Queensland have a similar problem, but I do ask the Government to act as strongly as it possibly can to rid this rubbish from our streets.

Health remains a concern in rural Queensland. This is due mainly to the fact that it is still very, very hard to attract specialists and even nursing staff to work away from the coastal areas. Further budget constraints are also one of the main reasons for the continued lack of quality patient care in our hospitals and aged people's homes. The HACC people have been advised—and this is a worry to me—that from 30 June they will not be visiting clients on weekends. The Labor Government has always been big on rhetoric about Home and Community Care, and here we have it—the care will be reduced to weekdays only. Please, people, do not get ill on weekends.

Family members have actually rung me about this. They find it very hard to fulfil these professional duties, especially changing bandages, etc. on the elderly. Previously, the HACC program had provided trained people to do that every day of the week and to care for these people. That is what is going to be missing—care. I am also concerned that, with the free ambulance service, there might be an overabundance of trips to the hospital on weekends. I certainly hope that the Minister does look at that issue again. I have also been informed that organisations have been asked to help fund certain medication. That is getting a bit solid when our Health Department cannot even supply medication for these people.

I am also very disappointed that the Labor Government has finally got its way and we will eventually see the close of Mosman Hall in Charters Towers. I feel for those people who have resided in a close and friendly atmosphere and will be shunted to all areas of Queensland. That is exactly what is going to happen. The previous Labor Government introduced the program in about 1993. The coalition Government put it on hold and we were going to actually enhance the building at Mosman Hall, but we do find that it has gone back to how it was. These people are actually going to be shunted away from their families, who actually have moved to Charters Towers to be close to this institution so that they can care for and visit these people. Now it is going to be reduced to about 20 beds, which I believe will eventually go over the next few years. I am concerned for the people there, especially the residents. I visit there pretty regularly. As I said, they live in a very good atmosphere out there, but once they start being shunted from there into different institutions around Queensland—and I am talking as far down as Wolston Park and a few others, and into Townsville—it is going to be a worry for them and also their families.

It has also been brought to my attention that a pensioner has actually volunteered his time to mow the hospital grounds at Clermont Hospital. This is pretty embarrassing. The grounds care was reduced down to a share operation between Moranbah and Clermont. They are 100 kilometres apart, and one fellow was going to do both of them. That is ridiculous. Here we have a fellow who, because of the state of the grounds which he has been used to seeing in immaculate order, has now volunteered his time to actually mow the grounds for Queensland Health.

I call on the Minister to re-evaluate the funding to the health districts to supply equality of service to all Queenslanders, no matter where they live, but especially in those areas about which I have been talking. I certainly hope the Government does take on board some of the concerns that I have outlined to enhance the future services and living standards for the people in rural Queensland.
