



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

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SERVICES TO RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (11.30 a.m.): In my opinion there are two Queensland—the Queensland of the south-east corner and coastal regions and the Queensland of the interior. I grew up at a time of telephone party lines and 110 or 32 volt power. Therefore, I am quite used to those services.

Recently I went out west from Townsville, as well as out to Glenmorgan and Meandarra, to speak to literally hundreds of Queenslanders in the bush. I am most concerned about the whole range of services being offered, be it television, telephone, electricity, roads or Government services. The standard of those services indicates quite clearly that there are indeed two Queensland.

A lot of people in this place probably do not know—and I would say from the noise in this place that they obviously do not care—that there are some people out there in the bush—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! I ask honourable members leaving the House to do so quickly and quietly.

Mr COOPER: I think some members would be quite surprised to learn that there are people who cannot even get free-to-air television and who have to either get pay TV or go without.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There is still too much conversation in the House. Those honourable members leaving will do so quickly.

Mr COOPER: It would be good if a lot more people went out to those areas and found out these things for themselves, as I have. During the 1960s, when television, electricity and automatic telephones were becoming commonplace, in the bush there were telephone party lines, no electricity and no television. Modern technology created these things for people to use. As I said, people in the south-east corner and in the cities have no problem. Even today in the west—in 1999—some people still cannot get free-to-air television. That is astounding.

I think a lot can be done about it. The technologists say that these services can be provided as long as Federal and State Governments do their job and actually take into account the needs and wishes of the people. If we in this place do not say what the problems are, they will not be addressed.

I think people would be astounded to know that Channel 7 from Sydney has replaced Channel 10 in these areas. It beams across western Queensland. What good is Channel 7 from Sydney? It screens Sydney news. Residents of western Queensland cannot even get local news any more. There is also a lack of sporting events being televised. Those services can and should be provided.

Telephone services are second and third rate. It is normal for problems to take a week to fix. People cannot use a fax with their phones and south of Dalby you can forget about a mobile phone service. These are the sorts of things we in the south-east take for granted. People out west know that they simply cannot and will not get decent mobile telephone coverage. In this day and age, that is an utter disgrace. We have to wonder whether the total sell-off of Telstra will make things worse, because only partial services are being provided now. I believe that after the whole of Telstra is sold there will be no service at all. That concerns me greatly.

In regard to electricity, there are endless blackouts, brownouts and power surges. That is common and normal. People expect that to happen. I received reports only last week that people can run only two or three household implements at one time, even with 240 volt power. It is absolutely astounding that such shocking services are still being provided. I know that we can do better.

Recently, we went through north Queensland to assess flood and cyclone damage. They are the sorts of things people living especially in north Queensland expect, but the damage done to roads is quite staggering. Over 200 years those roads have not been built appropriately. Of course, they always go under when floods occur. That is the sort of thing we should have corrected long ago. Facilities have to be built accordingly. We also found that the natural disaster relief arrangements must be reworked. They do not fit the problems of the day. Those are things that should be attended to.

The sort of vision we once had has gone. It is my belief that the Snowy Mountains scheme was done for this nation and for the everlasting benefit of the eastern parts of Australia. But I do not think there has been much vision shown since then. There are so many aspects of that project that people could take on board and actually carry out. I believe that water security is one of the most vital issues today. We are so complacent about water in this country. In the light of the Ord River/Lake Argyle scheme in the north-west of the nation and the pipelines that seem to be able to cart oil and gas all over the place, it is really quite extraordinary that we cannot seem to put water into lines to deal with dry and arid areas and to ensure water security. There is no reason on earth why something like that should not have been done long ago. The Snowy Mountains Authority should never have been disbanded.

Here in Queensland, the recycled water from Luggage Point now goes out into Moreton Bay—160,000 megalitres a year. That water should be directed via pipeline back up to the Lockyer Valley and out onto the Darling Downs to provide water security for producers there. We can just talk about these things, but they can and should be done. It is high time we addressed these areas of vision. They are not just pipedreams; they are real and doable, and they can and should be done. I believe there could well be wars fought over the issues of water supply and water security, which have become so vital.

The Melbourne to Darwin railway line is something Governments could take more interest in. I know that private enterprise is involved and interested, and it should be encouraged. It is no use saying that these sorts of projects are too expensive. Over 50 or 100 years they do pay for themselves and they generate employment and active industry. It is a question of attitude. It can and should be done.

We once had forestry workers actually tending our forests. Unfortunately, during the Goss era a lot of those forestry workers were taken out of the forests. They should be put back. We talk of jobs, jobs, jobs. There are real and genuine employment opportunities there. They would be doing something really useful, not just picking flowers and catching butterflies and the sorts of things that it has been suggested to us could replace timber management. We need to see forestry workers actually in the forests and tending to them.

Similarly, national parks need more rangers. It is not a question of just declaring more national parks. We need to look after them. The best way to look after them is to put rangers in there. There are plenty of national parks and plenty of available officers to do that sort of work. That should be done not just for the sake of providing employment but for the sake of looking after the national parks.

There is a dramatic shortage in the number of stock inspectors in the cattle industry. I am not just saying that we need stock inspectors for the sake of it. There is a definite need. As with a lot of other Government services, we have said that it is not just a case of putting everything back the way it was; it is a case of recognising the very real need for expert people to fill these positions.

Before I finish, I recognise those people who live in the west and north-west of the State. They simply do not have the services we take for granted. I think that is an utter disgrace in this day and age. I do not point the finger at one particular political party or another. I am saying that based on the experiences I have had and what I have lived through. In this day and age there are a whole lot of people in a vast area who simply cannot get the services we take for granted, be it television, telephone, electricity, mobile phones and so on. Every one of us should try and remember that. Queensland is still divided when it comes to the provision of services. The way to make Queensland one is to ensure that people in western Queensland get the services the rest of the State has.
