



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

Hansard 2 March 1999

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (4.40 p.m.): I have met the Governor of this State on two occasions: firstly, when I was dressed in a suit at Government House and, secondly, when I was standing in the bottom of a muddy pit up to my knees in rubbish and all sorts of stuff when he was inspecting our lines at Shoalwater Bay. The situations on those two occasions were incredibly different. It is something similar to the first time I stood up in this House and when I stand up in this House today. I personally did not enter politics lightly and I do not take lightly the responsibility that has been given to me on behalf of the 21,662 people who live on the Tablelands.

Mr Welford: Approximately.

Mr NELSON: Approximately, according to the Queensland Electoral Commission. The simple fact remains that I have to serve those people to the best of my ability and use my voice to represent the issues that affect them, and affect them greatly, I must say, especially over the past few years. I do not see the vote on the Tablelands as a vote of protest; I see it more as a vote for change. The previous member had his failings and the people elected a new member to do a job. I am trying my hardest to do that job.

I do not know what other members do in their electorates, but in my electorate I go around small communities twice a month and have a community meeting. I go to such places as Millaa Millaa, Mount Garnet or Ravenshoe and I pull out a chair and sit in the centre of the circle and talk to people. Millaa Millaa is a small town and some 25 to 30 people came to the meeting to talk about issues.

People on both sides of this House passionately believe in things, and rightly so. Even though I believe in something and someone else believes in something completely different, those beliefs are firmly held. Whether I am right or wrong is a question for history, but the main thing that happens in this House is that politics start to cloud the issue. A few people start to put the party first and their electorates second. I chose not to do that. I chose to put the people who voted for me first and the party that I represented second. That is why I am here today as an Independent and no longer a member of One Nation. It is unfortunate that that has happened. I believe that the One Nation Party had a lot to give but, as I heard one police officer say about the Police Service, it is the party that left me, I did not leave the party. Enough said on that matter!

I am 25 years old and I will soon be 26. I am no longer young. I am officially an adult. As a 25-year-old man, if I was not elected to Parliament, what would be out there for me as an educated ex-soldier? I have a lot of friends who are either the same age as me, or perhaps a little younger, who have very little prospect of ever having a full-time job. That is something that my father took for granted when he was young. My grandfather certainly took it for granted. In my limited experience, a full-time job is the only thing that can make one a full-time citizen. One needs to have the ability to earn an income and support a family and to have some sort of security. That does not happen any more. Many of my good friends—people with whom I grew up and went through school—have idled away at university for a few years, received a degree, and are now either stuffing bags at Woolies or standing in dole queues. That is a shame.

I heard the member for Moggill talking about globalisation as if it was a good thing. I do not care what spin one puts on it, globalisation is an horrific thing. Those athletes that the member talked about do not work with both their hands tied behind their backs. At the moment our farmers and our small businessmen are certainly working with their hands tied behind their backs. On the one hand, these

people are working against the environment. Cyclone Rona is a good example. Farmers have a good year once in a while but then find it is ripped out from underneath them. On the other hand, they are taxed into the deck so that they cannot get a leg up anyway. To top it all off, the Government of the day—no matter what Government it may be—jumps up and cuts their legs out from underneath them by taking away any protection that they may have had. We are not talking about the fact that they cannot compete. Our primary producers are probably some of the most effective in the world, being able to produce on land that people in many other countries would consider marginal at best. What we are calling a level playing field is certainly not level by any stretch of the imagination.

Where I come from, politics is a dirty word. As I said, it is incumbent upon people who come into this House to have beliefs. I understand that, and I certainly have some very strong beliefs myself. However, I believe that everyone in this House, including myself, is guilty of sometimes putting party politics before the electorate, either knowingly or unknowingly. That has to stop. Perhaps the only thing we can take from the vote in 1998 is that people are somewhat sick and tired of party politics and they want to see some real representation. They want to know that their voice is being heard in this House, untainted by any academic spin or party political favour. People want to see their members come into this House and express those views without fear or favour, because freedom of speech is something that has to be protected. If a member feels that he cannot say something on behalf of the people in his electorate, it bodes ill for this House and for democracy in general.

There are so many points that I could bring up about rural decline and so on, but they have all been mentioned previously. Queensland is a decentralised State. We have cities such as Townsville and Cairns and we have areas such as the Tablelands where people have chosen to live. We have people spread out over the whole State. Whether we like it or not, I believe that is a tribute to the Bjelke-Petersen years. The National Party Government at that time worked to decentralise the State and move things away from the State capital. Unfortunately, in the years since Mr Bjelke-Petersen left Government the fortress Brisbane mentality has seeped back into affairs. It has entrenched a feeling of disfranchisement in the area that I represent. People believe that they are not included any more. That anger has been expressed by the election of the 10 people who sit at the back on this side of the House as well as the few Independents who were also elected.

I have heard a lot of talk about the slaying of the One Nation beast. Be that as it may, the issues remain the same. The media does not understand that no matter what it does to One Nation, to me, or to any other political party: those issues remain. Those people still hurt. Those people are still wondering.

I had a very interesting talk with an academic. Let me say that I do not believe that there is any person on this planet more out of touch than an academic. An academic is a person who sits in a university and looks at statistics and is probably the most out-of-touch person in society.

I do not blame anyone for my situation. The people in my electorate do not blame anyone for the situation they are in. If they blame anyone, they blame themselves. I blame myself for the problems that are inherent in the system today. I blame myself because, hey, I voted and therefore I must shoulder some responsibility. Instead of doing some things that I probably wanted to do, I allowed my family to talk me into running for Parliament. Members of my family said, "Shaun, there is a better way of going about making change. Do it through the system." So I ran for Parliament, and here I am trying to make change from within. Unfortunately, I sincerely doubt that I will be able to make any changes to the system. I think that this system is too well entrenched. I believe that party politics is too well entrenched. I believe that the genuine voice of the people has been railroaded within the party political system. Unfortunately, that leaves me with a pretty bad taste in my mouth.

By ignoring the message and not listening to what I am saying today, what has been said over the past two months and what will be said over the next two years, honourable members are alienating people like me. I am no longer in the minority. Many people in my electorate feel exactly the same way I do. Whether members like it or not, 44% of the people in my electorate gave me their first preference vote. That is a lot of people. Taken right across Australia, we see that a lot of people do not agree with the way in which things are being done. I am the first to admit that 65% of the people in my electorate did not vote for me. However, the situation remains the same. Dramatic change is needed, and that change needs to be at a party political level. Parties have to look at what they are doing and at the direction in which they are moving and say, "Either we have moved away from the people or the people have moved away from us." Either way, those changes need to be made at a base level.

I wish to speak about a few local issues, some of which I have raised previously with Ministers. The first issue is quite important to me. A Vietnam veteran in my electorate lost his daughter to toxic shock syndrome. Under parliamentary privilege, I can make a few comments about the coronial inquests into this matter. Personally, I believe that the findings of those coronial inquests were wrong. Based on the information given to me, I believe that those findings were made so that Johnson & Johnson would not be held liable for her death. I know that is a dramatic thing to say, but the simple fact is that the coroner has made a fundamental error of judgment in slighting these people. I know that

the loss of a loved one is something that we cannot rest on; the loss will not go away. I will be asking more and more questions about this matter. I have corresponded with the Attorney-General and I have received what I consider to be two non-satisfactory answers. I suggest that he find out a bit more about it and make the changes that need to be made. This is a very important issue to me and to this constituent in my electorate.

The second important issue is the completion of the bridge at Herberton. Its completion date and construction have been delayed such that it is taking months and months to finish a simple bridge inside a town in my electorate. I would like the Minister for Transport to look at that matter. I have raised two issues with the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Environment and Heritage. One concerns a logging parcel in Ravenshoe and the other concerns the State Emergency Service.

A final issue of interest to me concerns a farm outside of Ravenshoe that used to be owned by a man called Sweetman until it was purchased by an Aboriginal group in Ravenshoe. I have held meetings with that Aboriginal group and representatives of the corporation at the farm. To cut a long story short, these people became involved in this farm to try to do something good. They took steps to advance themselves instead of just sitting around taking handouts. They have been cut off from funding. Every attempt I have made through ATSIC to get funding for them has failed. The community has incurred large debts. This is a perfect example of ATSIC not meeting its responsibility to the people whom it is supposed to represent. We must not let people get into this situation and then just leave them behind. I hope this is a message that will get out. It is certainly an issue that I will be running with over the next few months.

I wish to raise another issue of genuine concern to me. Honourable members may have seen a movie on TV the other night called *A Time To Kill*. It basically portrayed a man in the southern United States who was totally frustrated with the justice system. Believing that nothing would be done, he took the law into his own hands—rightly or wrongly—and shot the perpetrators of a violent crime against one of his loved ones. I will tell the House right now that, if I was in that man's situation, I would do exactly the same thing without any hesitation at all.

Mr Reynolds interjected.

Mr NELSON: The honourable member should make sure that he does so.

This issue goes to the heart of what the member for Ashgrove was speaking about earlier. I do not believe that fine defaulters should go to prison. That is a ridiculous waste of time. I do not think that people should go to prison for not voting at a State election. However, there are certain people whom I believe should go to prison. There are certain people for whom I believe rehabilitation does not work. For 16 years I have watched my father fight crime. To say that it has been an uphill battle is probably one of the biggest understatements I can make. I have seen him bring people before the courts time and time again, and those people have received suspended sentence after suspended sentence or have not had a conviction recorded. The courts now use the recording of a conviction as a punishment: "This time we're going to record your conviction." I can tell members now that, whether they like it or not, that message is getting out into the community and people are now committing crimes because they know they will not be punished. Zero tolerance is not the issue. The problem relates to penalties and sentences.

I was brought up to believe that if you do the crime, you do the time. I know that people have beliefs that are different from mine. I believe that some people cannot be rehabilitated. I know people in my electorate who have been victims of violent crime or whose family members have been murdered. Members should put themselves in their position and see things from their perspective. I know what I would be doing in their situation. I can judge the issue only on what I would do in their situation. I do not believe that violent criminals—people who murder, rape and pillage their way through our community—can be rehabilitated. If someone takes a life, I do not believe that person can be rehabilitated. I do not believe that is the way to go. I do not believe we should be arguing for that in this House. If you rape and murder, you should be punished.

People are completely and utterly dissatisfied with our justice system. People are sick and tired of having their houses broken into, their daughters raped and all sorts of other emotive things that I could mention. People are genuinely sick of it. My house has been broken into. The perpetrator will never be caught. I am a law-abiding citizen. I do my best to abide by the laws of this State. People in my electorate handed in their firearms even though they have never committed a criminal offence in their lives, yet people committing crimes get a suspended sentence or two years. This, in addition to everything else I have spoken about this afternoon, is a real issue.

Some members of this House have only just come here. Others have been here for 20-odd years. Some have come from working-class backgrounds similar to mine. For however long I am here, the biggest thing for me will be not to forget where I came from, who I represent and what I mean to do in this place. During the condolence motion this morning we heard about two men I had never met and who were members of this Parliament before I was born. Interestingly, one of them had said that

perhaps there are too many academics in this House. I agree; there are far too many academics in this House. This House needs to take a reality check, and soon. I am here to tell the House now, as a representative of all dissatisfied people, that their dissatisfaction is on simmer and it will not take too much more for it to boil.
