



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 5 April 2001

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (12.16 p.m.): I am somewhat gratified to have the opportunity to make a small contribution to this Address in Reply. Firstly, I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your election to that office, and I ask you to convey my congratulations to the Speaker on his re-election to that high office.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Premier and his ministers and, indeed, all of the members who make up this Labor government. I am enough of a competitor to acknowledge that we were well and truly beaten. I am enough of a competitor to acknowledge that the Labor Party in Queensland has won a mandate to govern this state for the next three years. I wish the Premier, his ministers and all of those members well in that task. It is a big responsibility, and we will be watching closely to see how they perform with that responsibility.

I am proud to be a part of the National Party opposition. No-one wants to be in opposition in this parliament, but we have taken on the role of opposition, and it is one that we will perform with vigour. It is also one that I hope we can use to ensure that the mandate that the people of Queensland have given to this Labor Party government is respected and that the promises that the government has made and the platforms on which it has been elected are well and truly delivered to all Queenslanders.

It is gratifying to me personally to be elected for the second time as the member for Callide. To be elected as a member of parliament once is a thrill for us all, as so many of the new members of this parliament have enunciated and described here in their maiden speeches. To be elected a second time carries its own degree of self-satisfaction. To see one's primary vote climb in areas over which one has had responsibility for representing is, I believe, a source of enormous self-satisfaction to those of us who get very little public reward for the jobs that we do. But for every member of parliament, probably the most satisfying thing that we can hope to get from this job is to see reflected in the electoral results an acceptance that the job we have done for particular communities or particular areas of our electorates has been appreciated and that we have been recognised for that over time. I would certainly like to thank all those people who supported me in that endeavour to be elected for a second time as the member for Callide.

Callide is a very difficult electorate to represent. It is a very large electorate, not in terms of square kilometres—as the electorates in western Queensland are—but in terms of communities, in terms of diversity and in terms of community of interest. Demographically, Callide probably would be one of the hardest electorates in Queensland for any member to represent adequately.

The new electorate boundaries meant that the electorate was extended from its traditional home, if you like, in Biloela south almost to Gympie—about eight kilometres from Gympie. Now it extends from Taroom in the west almost to the coast at Wallaville. It includes about 21 towns and a whole lot of other smaller communities and areas.

There are a number of very clear and distinct communities of interest in that area. The area to the north around Biloela and the Callide Valley relates to central Queensland and the regional centre of Rockhampton; the area to the east around the Kolan shire, and to some extent some of the Burnett shires, relate to Bundaberg; the area to the south relates to Maryborough; and the South Burnett is a community all of its own. In fact, the Callide electorate splits the South Burnett community in half. The South Burnett is a very close-knit community, yet the Callide electorate splits it in half. I understand the angst, frustration and the dissatisfaction that that caused a lot of people in the South Burnett. Of

course, the area to the west, the Wandoan and Taroom area, relates to the central west and to the regional centre of Roma. It is a very difficult situation when there are, for all intents and purposes, four or five different and distinct communities of interest within the one electorate.

Representing a rural electorate is very different to representing a city electorate. I travelled almost 70,000 kilometres last year representing this electorate. I do that gladly. I know what is involved in representing an electorate like Callide. I knew that when I took the job on and I am certainly not mentioning it here today to in any complain about the situation. However, I do so to point out to the people who represent city electorates the huge difference in representing an electorate here in an urban area and representing an electorate such as Callide with so many communities, so much diversity and so many issues in each community. Every town has its school, its hospital and police—has each of those areas of state government interest—and for those people their issue is the most important issue.

It is almost three years since I stood here in this House to make my maiden speech. As result of moving offices because of the rearrangement that was necessary after the election, I actually found a copy of my maiden speech. Three years on it was interesting to read my maiden speech. I hope that some of the members who have made their maiden speeches here this week will have that opportunity—to read their maiden speech three years on.

It is interesting to look back and realise the innocence that new members of Parliament bring to this place. It was interesting for me to look back at my maiden speech and to read what I said about some of the major issues that were current in my electorate at that time. It is interesting because some of those issues that were identified then are still issues now.

I spoke about the fears that the dairy industry had at that time—three years ago. Anyone who has followed Queensland politics of late, and indeed the debate in this House today, will know that the fears of the Queensland dairy industry did not just eventuate, they eventuated much worse than anyone ever imagined they could at that time.

I spoke about the pork industry, which at that time was suffering a huge downturn. It is gratifying for me to know today that the pork industry is in a much healthier state than it was then. I think that goes to illustrate the cyclical nature of the industries that make up the economic base of my electorate and so much of the rest of Queensland. I think it is important that decision makers understand the cyclical nature of those industries and it is important that we take a long-term view towards the management of public policy that affects those industries. There can be no greater illustration of that than those two industries and the way that their fortunes have ebbed and flowed over the last three years. I hope that some day historians may reflect upon the difference in those industries in the three years between when I first stood in this place and the debate today.

The electorate of Callide and indeed that part of south-east Queensland is still very much an area of small holdings and small businesses. That was another thing that I identified when I first spoke in this House. It is an area of small holdings and small businesses all of which have been unduly impacted on by a series of federal public policy decisions, foremost amongst which would be national competition policy. At times it grieves me to travel through my electorate and to see the economic pain that is being caused to a whole range of small businesspeople, not just small land-holders, but small businesspeople in all of those small communities. I think it is important to realise—and it is quite often forgotten—that all of those areas were settled as a result of government policy. The land structure and the community structures were put in place as part of a deliberate government policy to settle people on the land, to settle people in those areas and to build communities in those areas. Those government policies were not put in place because that was the best economic alternative that was available, they were not put in place because that was the most efficient model to be competitive in a world trade situation. They were put in place to give people a lifestyle; they were put in place to allow people to have a life, to have a job and to run a business.

That is clear enough when we look at the land title structure. They started off as soldier settlement blocks in the more southern areas. They were 160-acre blocks. Later, in some of the closer settlement areas in the northern Burnett and into the Callide Valley, they were bigger areas; they were square-mile blocks—640 acre blocks. There was no way that land-holdings of that size could have provided anything more than a living when they were set up. Indeed, if we look at some of the parliamentary debates from the early 1930s when that legislation passed through this House, there was debate even then about whether or not those land-holdings were of sufficient size to constitute a living area for the people who took them up. There is no doubt that the early ones, the smaller ones, were found to be too small. Even the later settlement schemes in the northern part of the electorate were arguably too small when they were set up. Now, 40, 50 and 60 years later, they are hopelessly too small. They are hopelessly unsuited to competition in a free trade situation, in a global economy. They are hopelessly unsuited to that type of economics.

Of course, along with those land settlement schemes went all the organised and orderly marketing arrangements that made it possible for those people to make a living. Those orderly

marketing schemes were put in place to ensure that those people could make a reasonable living—not so that they could get rich, because they never did; not so that they could become squatters and not so that they could become land barons, because none of them ever did, but so that they could make a reasonable living.

As we reach the year 2001, almost without exception every one of those orderly marketing schemes, every one of those arrangements that were put in place to ensure that people who took up those small land holdings were able to make a reasonable living, have been taken away for economically philosophical reasons rather than practical reasons, I would suggest. All of that support has been taken away, yet those communities that were established as a part of government policy are still trying to survive. Those people who make up those communities, who in a very great many cases are third, fourth and fifth generations of families who have made up those communities, are still trying to survive in a world in which they were never meant to survive. I think that there needs to be a realisation at all government levels that, if these policy positions are going to be maintained, if this philosophy of economic rationalism and free trade and open competition and survival of the fittest is going to continue to dominate Australian politics, then there needs to be something done in a compassionate way to assist those people who have been trapped in a situation that was brought about by the policy positions of earlier governments. I do not believe that governments at any level can walk away from that responsibility. That extends not just to people on the land but to people who make up the communities right through that area of south-east Queensland—from the Brisbane Valley right up through the Burnett and Mary Valleys. They are all involved in land settlement schemes and they all find themselves in those same situations.

In the short time that I have left, I would like to put again on the record some of the issues that are important to the Callide electorate. Without exception, I think the Nathan dam project on the Dawson River is a long-awaited project that is critical to the economic success of the northern part of the Callide electorate. It is important not just for the irrigation development that it will bring to the Dawson River all the way south and well into the electorate of the member for Fitzroy, but it is important for the industrial development of Biloela. The availability of a reliable water supply in that part of Queensland has long been identified as the necessary catalyst for any sort of development. It is regrettable to say that, already in Biloela, we have lost the potential to develop some badly needed secondary industry because we have not had access to that reliable water supply. I hope that, in the term of this government, we can bring this project to some sort of completion. It has gone on now for too long. There is an increasing amount of frustration in central Queensland about the fact that this project has been talked about and talked about for so many years. It would be a tremendous thing if that development could be fast-tracked or brought forward within the term of this government and become a reality.

Water issues are certainly important right throughout my electorate, as they are throughout much of rural and regional Queensland. Recently, the Burnett River WAMP was completed. In the Burnett Valley as well there is a crying need for water storage facilities. There is an equivalent amount of frustration over the time that it is taking to have these issues resolved. It is an issue that I have brought up constantly with the previous Minister for Natural Resources, and the new Minister for Natural Resources can be assured that he will be hearing from me on a regular basis about the need to develop the irrigation potential of both the Burnett and the Dawson Valleys.

For many of those small land-holders about whom I spoke before and for many of those communities about whom I spoke before, the intensification of agriculture is their only chance for survival. To intensify agriculture, to be able to make the move into the high-cost, high-return, high-input industries, they need an absolutely guaranteed reliable supply of water. They need to be able to take control of as many elements in their production cycle as they can. They simply cannot survive when they are at the mercy of natural rainfall. That is why irrigation development is so important. As the economic conditions change, irrigation development is a lifeline to people who are trapped on small land-holdings, who do not have the size and who do not have the scale of operation to cope with the continually falling terms of trade. There are some opportunities out there for some of the new and developing industries such as horticultural development and other types of high-input, high-return industries. But we need that irrigation development in both the Burnett and the Dawson Valleys. We need an emphasis placed on regional development—to explore every possible opportunity for those small towns and those small communities.

I think the community that is probably suffering the most at the moment is the community of Monto. It has been devastated by the deregulation of the dairy industry and devastated by the closure of the Pauls milk factory. I think that it will be a real test of the rhetoric of this government, it will be a real test of its statements about governing for the whole of the state and governing for all Queenslanders; it will be a real test as to how this government handles the situation in Monto and in other communities that have been so badly affected by the dairy deregulation. While, as we saw this morning, it is very opportune for the Premier and other ministers to use this House as a platform to blame each other for being responsible for the dairy deregulation and the rationalisation that has

occurred, I think that we have to deal with the results. The time has come to stop blaming each other; the time has come to realise that every level of government has a responsibility to deal with the results of dairy deregulation. I doubt that there is an electorate in the state that has felt the effects of that deregulation and rationalisation more than has the electorate of Callide.

I look forward to participating in debates in this parliament, I look forward to playing a vigorous role in the National Party-led opposition and I look forward to ensuring that the mandate that the Beattie government has received from the people of Queensland is managed responsibly and that the government delivers on the promises that it has made in the recent election. Once again, I congratulate every person who has been elected to this parliament. It is indeed an honour to be elected to the state parliament. I look forward to participating in this parliament.
