



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard 5 April 2001

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (4.05 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, at the outset let me relay, through you, my congratulations to the Speaker on his appointment to that position. We look forward to working with the Speaker to keep this parliament as a robust democratic institution over the next three years. Also, I acknowledge and thank the Governor for his speech in opening parliament just a few days ago. I thank him for his words. It is an honour to rise in this Address in Reply debate to acknowledge that speech and to make a few relevant comments.

It is indeed a great privilege to have been chosen as the National Party representative of the people of Southern Downs. This is, in fact, the third seat that I have held in parliament since I was first elected in 1989. Hopefully, I will not preside over the abolition of another seat in the Queensland parliament. I was the final member for the state seat of Carnarvon, which was abolished in 1992, and I was the final member for the state seat of Warwick, which concluded its time as a seat in this parliament in the year 2001. That was somewhat sad, because Warwick was one of the original seats created when Queensland first became a state almost 150 years ago, and to see an historical fact like that go into the record books in Queensland is unfortunate, but it is something that does happen from time to time.

The seat of Southern Downs takes in the majority of the former seat of Warwick, some of the former seat of Cunningham and some of the former seat of Warrego. Basically, it comprises 5,000 additional constituents and is double the geographic size of the former seat of Warwick. I am very pleased that, in the circumstances, I was able to maintain a reasonable margin in my electorate when there was such a significant swing against the conservative cause in Queensland. It behoves us all to recognise and realise that, but for the grace of God, there go us all.

I know that there are a lot of very enthusiastic people in this parliament, particularly on the other side, who believe that they have been elected to this place as a consequence of their own good looks and hard work. But we probably need to reflect upon the fact that, come another election or the election after that, things can happen; and regardless of how good we may or may not be, circumstances can change to take us out of this place. That is the thing about democracy; there are many sobering things, and I have seen a lot of sobering things in the almost 12 years that I have been a member of this state parliament.

As most other members have done during the course of their speeches in the Address in Reply debate, I wish to thank a number of people. Firstly, I thank my campaign committee, so ably chaired by Peter Blundell. I am not going to name each and every individual person, but under Peter's chairmanship we had an absolutely fantastic campaign team which, in an electoral sense, kept the home fires burning while I had to be travelling around Queensland so much in my capacity as the then Deputy Leader of the Opposition and shadow Attorney-General.

One of the great problems that parliamentarians have is that, when we take on an office position in this place, it often takes us away from our electorates. People want us to achieve. They want us to become ministers or shadow ministers, but they also want to make sure that we will be there at their beck and call at all times, because we are their local representatives. And when one represents a

sparse rural electorate—even though mine is not as great as many others—it certainly can take one away from home on many occasions.

It was extremely important to me to have a campaign team which understands and feels what is happening at the local level and was able to work with me to run an appropriate campaign in the circumstances. I thank Peter, all the team, all the people who donated and all the people who handed out how-to-vote cards and worked with us to secure what I thought was quite a good result in the circumstances. To my electorate staff, Ian Jackson in Stanthorpe and Jane Grieve in Warwick, I would like to very much thank them for their tolerance and looking after my electorate in my absence and for working so ably with me to do the administrative things that are important in my electorate.

Also to my family—my wife Linda, my children Megan, Jens, Laura and Thomas—I thank them very much for their tolerance. I was married just before I came into this place in 1989 and we have had four children in the time that I have been here. As I say to a lot of people, my wife has had four children and I get home occasionally. She does an absolutely marvellous job in looking after our family whilst I am away. On many occasions, I am away for five, six or seven nights in a row and I know that that can be extremely hard on a family living in a fairly remote rural area. Communicating by telephone is a challenge in itself as well. You learn some very interesting things when you talk to children on the telephone, particularly as they are learning to express themselves verbally for the very first time. Trying to understand what they are on about can be a challenge. I still have that joy, that privilege, every night. I just say to them: thank you very much.

To my mother and father, Edna and Norman, I would like to say that I think when I left school my father thought that he had a farmhand who would be able to work with him for a long time into the future, but then I decided to go into Parliament. I note that he has had to assume a lot of that responsibility that he thought I would have been able to take over in the time that I have been in Parliament. I am very, very grateful for the work done by both my father and my mother that has allowed me to pursue my political career.

Today I would like to make a couple of points relative to the new electorate and relative to issues in general around Queensland. I note that the Premier has indicated that members of Parliament will be given an additional assistant electorate officer. For that, I am extremely grateful. However, I would like to raise a couple of matters concerning that issue. We have to make sure that that person in our electorate office is well-resourced. We need computers and the other information technology necessary for them to be able to work alongside our main electorate officer.

The other issue that does concern me—and I would like to pass this on to the government as they consider the final make-up of the workings of this proposal—is that it is extremely crucial that our full-time, senior electorate officer is provided with relief when he or she goes away. It is somewhat unjust to expect a junior electorate office assistant to slot in and take over the senior position. There are certainly some issues there of seniority that the government very much needs to consider. There is also the issue of replacing the senior electorate officer while he or she is absent on sick leave or long service leave. It is asking too much to expect a member of Parliament to ask a new, assistant electorate officer to perform the duties of the other position. A number of us in this parliament have electorate officers with 15 or 20 years' experience and significant amounts of long service leave and accrued sick leave which they at some time may need to take. To have an assistant electorate officer to slot into that position without relief for the main electorate officer is problematic and something that the government needs to consider. I am not suggesting that we should have relief for the assistant electorate officer, but I think that we should be having the same relief arrangements that exist currently for our full-time, main electorate officer.

I would like to talk briefly about a few perceptions that I have garnered in this place over the last decade or so. One is the role of government in contemporary society. I am very much concerned that government seems to want to abrogate its responsibilities on a Commonwealth and also on a state basis. Government has to realise that the role that it plays is to level the playing field. It is not a corporation, it is not out there running as a free enterprise company; it is out there trying to put a degree of egalitarianism, a degree of equity, into our society. It is about making sure that those people who are not able to look after themselves are able to be looked after by government.

I must admit that I am somewhat concerned at this growing and hastening trend towards deregulation, corporatisation and privatisation. Government is not about running as a company; government is about running for all sorts of social policy reasons. At the end of the day one thing that we need to consider is that the most important thing for government is people. People are what matters to government and at the end of the day they should not be considered as some figure on a spreadsheet. People are not something to be cast aside because they do not necessarily stack up as a part of some economic program, some form of economic rationalism or some form of changing economic basis in our society.

At the end of the day the people should be the most important consideration of members of parliament. We can have graduates from the London School of Economics or the Chicago School of Economics sitting in our Treasuries and running the country as they see fit. At the end of the day they do not have to suffer the chill winds of change that they want to force on everyone else because they can write the redundancy packages that suit themselves or the job descriptions that suit themselves, but there are a lot of people in our society who are not able to do that and who are the victims of this experimentation. I think that is something that we need to be very, very cautious about. That was the lesson learnt at the last state election.

The last decade has seen a great deal of change not only in our political process but also in our society, and people have had enough. They are hurting; they sent a message, and it behoves us all to listen to that message. It is happening not only in this state and this nation but world wide as well, and I think that if we do not listen to that message from the people we will suffer not only a greater degree of political instability but a greater degree of social instability as well.

Another thing that has concerned me very much is the role of our government departments and the way that they go about delivering services to the community in general. They have become so inwardly focused on delivering services that they are not matching and meeting the needs of the people they are supposed to service. They call them clients; we have output budgeting; they write their own performance standards. It is very easy for them to establish a process by which they can give themselves nine out of 10 when the people who are using those services out there would, in fact, give them two or three out of 10. I think the real challenge for government—whether it is this government or any other government throughout Australia—is to make sure that our government departments are focused externally rather than internally.

If members do not believe what I am saying, they should go out there and speak to the ordinary person in the community and see what their view is of public servants and the other people they deal with across the counter. I am not saying that there are not good people who are doing their job well, I am saying that generally they are so much more concerned about the processes being written and jumping through the hoops. The fact is that it can take so long to get anywhere and often those who need assistance are told that they cannot be helped anyway. The process has become so much about covering people's backs rather than delivering to those people who are most important—the constituents we represent.

In my electorate an area of great concern is the dairy industry deregulation, which has impacted so significantly not only on dairy farmers and their families but also on the people who supply their products and services as well. It has gone right through the community. We have had a number of debates in this parliament in recent times about this issue. There have been questions asked and there has been a lot of buck-passing going on. However, at the end of the day we have seen the product of economic rationalism, of national competition policy and also of the Victorian dairy farmers themselves voting to deregulate in their state, which had the flow-on consequence for Queensland. It is up to us to pick up those pieces.

At the end of the day, I say this: I believe in a regulated society and I believe in regulated processes. I say: what is the problem with letting a wage earner know that they can take home a set salary or a wage so that they can budget for their family and so that they do not have to go through all of that insecurity that the member for Indooroopilly spoke about a little while ago in his maiden speech? So if you believe in a regulated system for the labour market in this country, what is wrong then with believing in a regulated system for other people who go out there and toil very hard? I suppose that is why I am at loggerheads with economic rationalists, because I believe in a regulated platform for a whole range of people in our society. At the end of the day, it provides them with the security that they need to be able to afford to raise a family, to be able to afford to invest in things for their future—a car, a house, a property, or whatever the case may be. I just pass that message on as a general observation.

Throughout my electorate, an issue of significant concern is the water allocation management planning process. That is really worrying a lot of primary producers and businesspeople through the southern Darling Downs, the Darling Downs and right out into the Warrego area of this state. The government should be very cautious as to how they go about this, because people's livelihoods are going to be very much affected by it. In terms of the border rivers, it will probably be September this year before we see a draft WAMP.

Already many people are going bankrupt because the financial strategy that they put to their bank is not able to be achieved because they have not been able to go to the next stage of their development. They are going to walk off those places and the banks are going to sell them up. This is happening. If members do not believe me, they should go out and talk to the bankers at Goondiwindi, or the solicitors at Goondiwindi who are representing these people, or to the Granite Belt, which I represent, and talk to the people there. It is an extremely important issue and one that is really affecting

those people's livelihoods. These people are ringing up and breaking down and crying. The wellbeing of their families and their employees is at stake.

I would like to also mention this government's disastrous bulk end user scheme, which was introduced in this parliament late last year. It has been the most disastrous administrative nightmare for bulk end users in the state of Queensland that you could ever hope to see. Whether they be transport operators or whether they be farmers, they have to go through such an administrative process to account for every litre of bulk fuel that they purchase and use that many of them are basically now not even bothering to apply for it. The government has a windfall. It has the use of their money for three months, but if those people owe anything to the government, they have to pay it within 10 days. That is totally wrong. I call on the Beattie Labor government to do something about addressing that problem that they have caused for bulk end users in this state.

Telecommunications is extremely important. This government needs to be working with the Commonwealth government to ensure that we are able to provide equity and technological access to telecommunications right across Queensland. I noticed something in the paper today about the inland rail. That has really provided a focal point for the people of rural and regional Queensland as they go about looking for opportunities in the future. I know that not only the Queensland government but also the governments of New South Wales and Victoria and the federal government are very supportive of it. I would like to encourage the government to do what it can to clear the way to make sure that that rail link happens.

I turn now to some specific areas in my electorate, such as Stanthorpe—the Granite Belt. As I said, it is extremely important to make sure that the water allocation management plan process is expedited in that area. A new dam is needed for a domestic and urban water supply as well as for an irrigation water supply. At the moment on the Granite Belt, 20,000 megalitres is all the water that they use, yet they produce about \$100 million worth of produce each year. That is somewhat significant. That supply needs to increase by only 50 per cent, which is equivalent to one major irrigation ring tank for the entire Granite Belt. That includes the urban water supply. We need to clear the way very quickly to enable that to happen.

A reliable electricity supply is a real concern for many people in the western part of my electorate. Each night, we regularly go into our houses and flick the switch. We have very few blackouts, even though we probably grumble when we get one every now and then. At the moment in my electorate, those people who are serviced by North Power from New South Wales as part of a franchised area in Queensland have an extremely irregular electricity supply. Brownouts are happening all the time, which affects electronic equipment. As a member of parliament, I will make sure that I pursue North Power and also the government, as necessary, to make sure that those people get a reliable electricity supply. That area may never have the same supply as many other areas around Queensland. However, people demand a consistent supply, and I will be working towards enhancing that supply very significantly.

Mr Nuttall: When are you running for the leadership?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I am happy to be running as the member for Southern Downs. The minister is the proof that dreams can come true.

Crime and cross-border jurisdictional issues are a cause for major concern in places such as Goondiwindi. We have major problems with car theft and vandalism. Often the people involved are arrested over the border, but they cannot be extradited to Queensland. I call on the Premier and the relevant ministers to make sure that those stupid cross-jurisdictional issues can be overcome. The other day we had five cars piled up along the Macintyre River, and nobody wanted to take responsibility.

Time expired.
