



Speech by

RONAN LEE

MEMBER FOR INDOOROOPILLY

Hansard 5 April 2001

FIRST SPEECH

Mr LEE (Indooroopilly—ALP) (3.27 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I first congratulate you on your re-election to your office of Chairman of Committees. I would like to begin my first speech in parliament by reaffirming my allegiance to the people of this great state of Queensland and to thank the people of Indooroopilly for giving me this opportunity to serve them in state parliament. There is no greater honour or responsibility for any Queenslander than to serve their local community in state parliament, and it is a duty that I do not undertake lightly. The decisions that we make in this place directly affect the daily lives of each and every Queenslander. I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I will work hard as a member of this parliament and that I will always put our local community first.

I am determined to be an active community voice in this place and I intend to speak regularly in parliament on behalf of my constituents. I know that local needs are always more important than petty political point scoring. I am committed to undertaking my duties with the degree of dignity that befits this office. I am determined to be a local representative of whom my local community is always proud.

I am also determined to take a personal approach to my role as a local member of parliament and to be accessible. That is why I will continue to regularly go door to door to listen to local views. While no-one would suggest that election campaigns are ever easy, my task was made much more enjoyable by the smiling faces which I encountered at doorstep after doorstep. I chatted with literally thousands of people this way, many of whom I can now describe as friends. But I feel that it is my duty to inform the House that the majority of people I spoke with had two messages which they encouraged me to take into this parliament. The first is that they have confidence in the Beattie Labor government, and quite frankly they feel that Peter Beattie is a good bloke. The second message is that they do not believe John Howard is a good bloke. Honestly, considering the GST, the BAS and the price of petrol, you can hardly blame them.

I am also determined to make my Indooroopilly electorate office more accessible to the local community than ever before. By this I not only mean ensuring that the Indooroopilly electorate office enters the modern era with the appropriate physical access for the disabled or people with strollers, I also want to ensure that local residents should feel free to drop by my office to have a chat and a cuppa, or even just to say hello. All local residents should feel free to pick up the telephone and call me, knowing that my door will always be open.

It is not only a great honour to represent the Indooroopilly electorate in the parliament but it is also a great pleasure and, indeed, a great challenge. For what Indooroopilly lacks in geographical size—the entire electorate covers only around 25 square kilometres—it makes up for in diversity. The Indooroopilly electorate is unique, being the only Brisbane electorate to span the Brisbane River, and includes the suburbs of Chelmer, Graceville and Sherwood on the south side while Indooroopilly, Long Pocket, St Lucia, Ironside, Taringa, Toowong and Fig Tree Pocket are to the north. It is primarily a residential electorate, but it boasts a world-class university in St Lucia.

I believe that my first speech in this place is an opportunity to outline my philosophical priorities as a member of parliament. During my election campaign I said that I was determined to put values back into politics. But, in truth, values are never absent from the political process. Everything that we do in this place is influenced by our values. So more accurately I should have said that I wanted to change the values that are dominant in politics.

Cicero argued that the values we need in order to serve our community well include a willingness to subordinate our private interests to the public good, a desire to fight against tyranny and corruption and, most importantly, an ambition to reach out for the noblest goal of all—honour for our country as well as for ourselves. In many ways Cicero summarises all that is virtuous in politics, but still his list is not exhaustive. Cicero fails to explain, as Aristotle does, that politics is inherent in human community.

Politics is desirable, necessary, ennobling and civilising because it is through politics that humanity achieves collectively what it cannot achieve by individual effort. Through politics we make and implement collective decisions; we solve problems and resolve disputes without resorting to violence or war. With a polity we can soar to great heights, unlike those lesser creatures who are confined to anarchy or tyranny or repression. In the words of the philosopher John Locke, wherever law ends, tyranny begins.

Politics is about making decisions for our community not because it is the will of the market or of the rich and, no, not even because it is the will of the educated; politics is about making decisions because they are the will of the people exercised through our democratic processes. The community is angered by the priorities shown by our policy-making elites over the past 20 years. The political elites that are encouraging globalisation are convinced that they are the modernisers of our era and that the trends towards liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, commercialisation, internationalisation and so on are an inevitable and irreversible force. They are wrong.

We have lost more than we have gained by accepting these impositions. We are entitled to experiment, to judge for ourselves and to be different if that is what we want to try. We are entitled to significant regional cross-subsidisation, employment and income security, fiscal equalisation measures, rural marketing schemes, community cohesion, social welfare, and a wide range of policies and unorthodox institutional arrangements. These have, until recently, protected the population from risk, uncertainty, loss and powerlessness.

We have politics and policies precisely in order to allow democratic and popular opinion to influence, if not determine, our standards of living. It would be quite wrong in political principle—and intellectually misguided—for politicians and policy makers to imagine that the mature economies of the advanced societies must conform to a textbook model of how an ideal global marketplace might operate. Quite simply, we are entitled as citizens to insulate ourselves from those global forces which we collectively experience as unacceptably destructive of our communities or industries or jobs.

We cannot resist all change and we would not wish to. The past was not a utopia and some practices, industries and protections, even if they provided comfort, incomes and solidarity, may on occasions need to be dismantled. But we must always be vigilant to the possibility that inappropriate policies are being thrust upon us in the name of improvement. We need, as a polity, to give ourselves the capacity for judgment concerning which policies really warrant 'reform' and which are worth preserving.

The research suggests that there is much more political room to manoeuvre than our mainstream advisers allow. After 25 years of higher than OECD average unemployment, it is surely time for Australia to acknowledge that what microeconomists see as desirable has, in fact, wrought much damage not only in provincial areas but also on the structure and performance of the economy itself. The public sphere can do more to create satisfying employment and living conditions for all people; it need not set them to fend for themselves in an environment where most new jobs are of low quality and most managerial practice degrades citizenship and most reform increases inequalities.

We have been bewitched and impoverished by our acceptance of quite abstract doctrines of competitiveness and efficiency, which were always insensitive to democratic opinion and societal coherence. We would all be much richer and safer if we had had full employment for the past quarter century. A figure of 600,000 to 700,000 unemployed have been kept unemployed by a public refusal to use public policy processes to expand industry and by official refusal to manage structural change more in sympathy with the great social experiments and social achievements of Australia's past. The Howard government ought to be ashamed of itself.

Hundreds of thousands more feel demoralised by the threat of job loss and by the stresses in their families and communities. I fear that, if we do not address this very understandable and recurrent problem—how to limit the destructiveness of economic change—this parliament, our credibility and perhaps the democratic political system itself will be permanently discredited. Our nation's democracy rests upon free and fair elections and equality before the democratic process. But a nation that continues to give credence to the policies of economic rationalism and deregulation will surely put all of that at risk.

A society that tolerates persisting inequalities of wealth and a situation where many of the very rich are abundantly renumerated for little work while many are poorly renumerated for strenuous work is a society that not only rejects democracy's fundamental premise of equality but also suggests to

working people that their labours are without dignity. As humans, we derive a fundamental dignity and happiness from work. Work not only allows us to satisfy our material needs but also satisfies needs inherent to our human spirit. Indeed, I do not believe that it would be out of place to suggest that the right to work for a fair wage and with fair conditions should be considered a basic human right.

Historically, it has been the trade union movement that has sought to protect and promote the fundamental rights of working people to fair wages and safe conditions. We are all familiar with the sheer venom with which the Howard government and often our opponents on the other side of this chamber have sought to limit their ability to do this, but that is a debate for another time.

Today I want to speak briefly about working people's only other protection, whether they toil with their brains or their brawn—education. Aside from the gift of life and of love, there is no greater gift that any parent can give to their child than the gift of education. These days it is almost appropriate to follow this government's commitment to 'jobs, jobs, jobs' with the message 'learn, learn, learn'. Nowadays there are virtually no employment opportunities for those who refuse to learn.

Sadly, the Howard federal government seems almost ideologically committed to making educational opportunities as limited as possible for all but the wealthiest in our society. Rarely a month goes by without more teaching staff from the University of Queensland in my own electorate being slashed because of federal funding cuts. We are all familiar with the shameful and inequitable way in which the Howard government is determined to allocate funding for schools. The divisive way that the Howard government has run its educational agenda is diametrically opposed to the Beattie government's positive education policies. I am proud to be a part of Education Minister Anna Bligh's education legislation committee, and I look forward to working as a part of this Labor government to increase educational opportunities for all our children.

I am also fiercely proud of my electorate's schools, and I would like to speak briefly about them. While the schools of the Indooroopilly electorate share a common zeal for academic excellence and have strong parental support, each school is in its own way unique. The Sherwood State School, for instance, proudly boasts of its wonderful choir and instrumental music program and the commitment that the teachers have to the children. Graceville State School is dedicated to becoming a 'community school'. It is quickly becoming a school that reflects the people in its surrounding community. While the teachers at Graceville State School are exceptional, the school is continually looking for ways that it can utilise the expertise that exists in the surrounding area.

Christ the King Primary School is paving the way for quality education initiatives. The school has just started a middle schooling initiative for years 5 to 7. This has been implemented to aid students in the transition from primary to high school. Christ the King Primary School also plays a terrific role in promoting culture. Their Japanese language program continues to excel, and their Waru Dance Troupe plays a vital role in promoting indigenous culture in our community.

The Holy Family Primary School is playing a vital role in developing its students' education in the arts. The Holy Family Primary School's arts program has been integrated into each student's education. As recently as Saturday, students from the school participated in the River of Light Festival. Their float showed a great appreciation for Australia's Centenary of Federation celebrations, and it was something that our community can be proud of and is testament to the achievements of this wonderful school. Their high school neighbour Brigidine Secondary College has a long tradition in the inner suburbs of Brisbane and is in the first stage of a major college refurbishment. The college has for the first time had a group of students complete a traineeship program. Not only that, but the girls of the college can also boast a state indoor soccer championship.

Just down the road, Indooroopilly State High School has new and enhanced facilities because of this government's Secondary Schools Renewal Program and is well known for the creative way that the curriculum is delivered. To its great credit, Indooroopilly State High School also has university entrance figures that are dramatically above the average.

Toowong College is also benefiting from funds from the government's Secondary Schools Renewal Program. The college is particularly proud of its six OP1s last year out of its 78 eligible students. Toowong College is one of just three new multi-path colleges and as a result is providing not only day education but also separate year 10 and senior certificate courses for adult students. St Peter's College currently has a building program under way and, with government assistance, looks forward to new classrooms and a resources centre. The college also boasts 10 students who represent Australia in netball and a St Peter's student has been named captain of the Queensland under 19s netball team.

Fig Tree Pocket State School has gone from strength to strength over the past five years. In this short time, its student population has risen dramatically from 280 to 446 children. This is testament to the great facilities and teaching staff that the school has to offer. To cater for this extraordinary growth, the Beattie government has been able to provide Fig Tree Pocket State School with three extra double

classrooms over the past three years. It is my intention to help this school continue to grow and enjoy continued success.

Ironside State School has always achieved good academic results. The school has a unique take on multiculturalism in that children attending the school come from around 40 different nationalities. Indooroopilly State School is proud of its music program and has a strong swimming club. Most important to it is the involvement of the parent body, and that is what makes the school great. Chelmer's Milperra State High School has a truly remarkable story to tell. The school regularly prepares its students to become Australian citizens. Currently, Milperra has students from over 35 countries speaking over 40 languages. I am proud to say that last year the school prepared 300 Queenslanders to become Australian citizens, an achievement, I am sure, that is unparalleled throughout this state.

The Milperra school community knows first-hand, however, the shameful way that the Howard government treats asylum seekers in this country. Currently, there are 22 Milperra students on temporary protection visas. TPVs were introduced by the Howard government in October 1999 and are an absolute shemuzzle. Despite many TPV visa holders being declared genuine refugees, their visas remain temporary. They are not eligible for Commonwealth help in finding work or learning English. The Commonwealth appears to be seeking to disgracefully create two classes of refugee. As if this were not enough, more often than not Australia's refugee detention centres resemble modern-day concentration camps rather than the types of places where a civilised government might greet potential future Australians.

There is only one thing that upsets me more than John Howard's vision for our new Australians, and that is his opinion of our oldest Australians. It saddens me that our national leader thinks so little of our great nation's heritage that he would deny indigenous Australians an official apology for past injustices. I am fiercely proud that this was not something that the Beattie Labor government shied away from. Were the Prime Minister one-tenth as good a leader as he is a politician, this nation would never have been forced to suffer through the farce that was Pauline Hanson as a national political player. Our political leaders should never exploit ignorance and should be ashamed of the way in which the One Nation question has been allowed to fester and encourage racial division. Pauline Hanson accurately identified the fears of a section of our community and told them who they should blame. I believe our role as representatives is to identify problems and then tell the community how it is that we will seek to solve those problems. It is our duty to promote cooperation, not to incite discord.

I acknowledge that my time is fast drawing to a close, but it would be inappropriate for me not to acknowledge my own personal background. I grew up in the Irish farming community of Ballyjamesduff in County Cavan in the Republic of Ireland and migrated to Australia with my family in 1989. This great nation welcomed our entire family—my parents, Sean and Mary, and my sisters, Sinead and Triona, all of whom are in the public gallery today. We were welcomed with open arms. It was in a similar fashion that my family welcomed my sister, Rioghnach, into the world in January 1990. She was an Aussie before the rest of the family, as she regularly likes to remind us. The decision to leave one's homeland and seek a better life on the other side of the world is never easy. I pay tribute to my parents for having the courage to make Australia our home. I thank my parents for the excellent education and happy childhood which they gave me. I also acknowledge my wife, Naomi, who is also in the public gallery, and who today celebrates her birthday. Naomi, I thank you for your patience and your understanding. I know that it has not been easy, but nothing in life that is worth doing ever is. We have had many happy times, and I look forward to many more in the future.

I conclude by acknowledging some of the people who played a significant role in my standing before this House today. My deepest gratitude goes to the many volunteers who laboured tirelessly on my election campaign. The bottom line is that they are too numerous to mention, but there are some who deserve special credit: Bob, Loretta and the Moore family, the Alexander family, Simon and the Tutt family, Fiona Wright, Andreas Chai, Judy Timms, Elizabeth Kath, Alister Jordan, Ross Brinkworth, David and Judy Sawford, Tony Glad, Marcus Brown, Jade Connor, Marty Mayhew, Bill Cameron, Anna Jamieson, Marco Ostini, Matt Dwyer, Michael Catchpole, Paul Catchlove, Maureen Todhunter and Tim Shipstone. I also thank Geoff Dow, Pat Bishop and John Kane for providing me with the intellectual nourishment that I know will be invaluable to me during my time in this place.

I also give my sincere thanks to you, Mr Deputy Speaker Fouras, the member for Ashgrove. Without your encouragement I would not have sought preselection. You have been an inspiration to me since I first joined the Labor Party. My campaign manager, Angela Holden, deserves special praise. From the beginning, she was certain that the people of Indooroopilly wanted a change. Her hardworking example was inspirational to everyone involved with the campaign. Angela, I would not be here without you. My friend Martin Hanson also deserves special praise. His words of wisdom have been important to me over the years, and I am sure that they will be in the future.

It is often said that Ireland's greatest export is its people. I will work hard for the people of Indooroopilly to prove that this is indeed so. For the confidence that they vested in me on 17 February,

I pledge that I will be the strongest, and the loudest, voice that the electorate of Indooroopilly has ever had. I promise that with God's help I will not let my constituents or this great Labor government down.
