



Speech by

STUART COPELAND

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

Hansard 22 March 2001

FIRST SPEECH

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (4.29 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, I offer my congratulations to both you and the Speaker on your election to your most important positions. The position of Speaker in any parliament is absolutely vital to the proper working of government. That will certainly be the case in what is definitely an historic 50th Parliament. I also thank the honourable member for Logan for his kind comments. It was a terrific day we had at the Toowoomba Royal Show, when he was able to visit us a couple of years ago.

I rise today to give my first speech in this House filled with honour and just a touch of fear. I can scarcely believe that I am here, and I am deeply honoured that the electors of Cunningham have chosen me to be their representative. In these times of deep cynicism about politics and politicians, it is somewhat reassuring to look around and see that, for the most part, the members sitting in this House are normal, ordinary human beings. It is a tribute to our democracy that anyone in our society can aspire to be a member of parliament and can achieve that goal.

Knowing that we are sitting here as ordinary people also leaves me just a touch fearful, because in our hands rests so much. Our communities, our state and our nation are faced with many challenges, and those of us who sit in this House have a responsibility to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for the people we represent. We must treat each other with respect. If we do not, we will be ignoring the wishes of those people who put each of us here. As easy as it is to dismiss the views of different parties or individuals, everyone must respect the wishes of the electors who put them here.

Over the years I have made many friends in politics, and not only from my own side. I look across to the government benches and, try as I might, I cannot yet see the devil incarnate, although there are a few that I have been warned to keep an eye on. It would do all of us good to remember that we are all here for the same reason. We just differ on how to get there. We are all committed to achieving what is best for our electorates and for our state. Even though we will often disagree on the best way to get there, we must acknowledge the relevance of the other's point of view.

It has taken a lot of people a lot of hard work and commitment to get me to my place here today. I was preselected by the National Party to contest the seat of Cunningham in October 1999, following the announcement that Tony Elliott would be retiring after many years service—26, in fact. Since that preselection, the Cunningham electorate council of the National Party and all National Party members in Cunningham have been unbelievably supportive of me and my campaign and unified in their purpose to see us successful at the election. Their tremendous hard work and dedication paid off on 17 February, when I retained the seat for the Nationals in very difficult circumstances, both statewide and locally. I faced four other conservative candidates as well as the Labor Party.

I thank Laurie Black, the electorate council chairman, and his wife, Helen, for the incredible amount of time they put into the campaign, both in the lead-up to the election and in the weeks following with the scrutineering. One of the absolute best parts of the campaign was to have late-night campaign meetings at Laurie and Helen's home, just so we could eat all of the food that Helen managed to whip up at some time during the day.

I also thank Paul Antonio, our campaign manager, and his wife, Judy, who manned our campaign office for the entire campaign. It is terrific to have a team brought together by a common interest in a political party but better to stay together in friendship long after the meetings have finished. That is certainly true of everyone on my campaign team and of those others who helped us right along the way.

There are many people who gave us moral and financial support and who worked tirelessly throughout the campaign and on election day, and I thank all of them. There are also those good friends who gave us safe haven every now and again when we just needed to escape. One of those very good friends is a lady by the name of Joy Pugh, and she is attending the funeral of her mother, Mrs Linda Kipper, in Toowoomba today. I should also have been there but, as everyone here knows, sometimes we rely on the understanding of our friends and family, who know the sacrifices we have to make. I send my condolences and best wishes to Joy and her family and especially to her sons, David and Glynn.

Anyone who has had anything to do with politics knows the demands put on the families. It is certainly something people have to consider before they even contemplate a political life. I am incredibly lucky to have a very supportive family who knows exactly what we have let ourselves in for. I pay tribute to my parents, Bill and Joan, who are in the public gallery today. My father was elected to the Taroom Shire Council the year after I was born and spent 15 years as shire chairman. Many members present on both sides of the House would have known him in a previous life, I am sure.

Everything I remember about growing up was in the context of Bill being shire chairman. I learned very early that there can be, and there are, very good people in politics. I saw this through his example, as well as through the example of those he served with and the politicians he associated with. The vast majority are there because they have a deep commitment to their communities and want to play their part in making their communities a better place. That commitment often came at a great personal financial cost, especially in local government, but they served on regardless.

I have often told the story of when I was 13 or 14 and home from boarding school over Easter holidays. About 35 kilometres outside of Taroom is a spot called the Glebe Weir, which I am sure the honourable member for Callide would know well. It is one of the best waterskiing spots around and at Easter it is packed with hundreds of campers. This particular Easter Sunday, Bill got an emergency call at home to the effect that the septic system at the camp ground had been blocked up. Of course, being Easter Sunday, the council workers were on holidays, so off he and I went to fix the septic system. Being up to our armpits in raw sewage was an early demonstration to me of the realities of grassroots politics. Some have even suggested that it is an apt metaphor for politics in general, but what it clearly demonstrated was the need to just get in and do the job.

Bill achieved a lot during his career. One of the things I know is that he would never have been able to do it without the support of my mother, Joan. She was a valuable part of the team, with her own talents and skills blending well with Bill's, making them a formidable duo. She is also a great golfer.

I must pay a huge debt of gratitude to my wife, Rae, who some members will also know from a previous life. Without her support, advice and hard work I simply would not be here today. Rae has achieved an enormous amount in her own career and I cannot overstate her contribution to my being here. Even if my being here achieves nothing else, I will be eternally grateful that the National Party provided us with an opportunity to meet.

In June 2000 I resigned my position as chief executive officer of the Royal Agricultural Society of Queensland, which operates the Toowoomba Showgrounds. Since then I have campaigned full time for the seat of Cunningham. I am very happy to follow in the footsteps of Mike Horan, who also held that position prior to his entry into state politics. It is interesting to note that the very first member for Cunningham, a Mr William Allen, who was elected in 1888, spent time serving on the committee of the Royal Agricultural Society, one of the longest-running organisations in the state, being formed in 1860.

The RASQ is an organisation operated largely by hundreds of volunteers. The events it runs, and the magnificent facility it has developed, would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of the many men and women who give freely of their time. In this the Year of the Volunteer I am hopeful that the energy of the Australian people devoting their time to volunteering will be renewed. It is no secret that volunteer organisations of all descriptions are suffering from lack of numbers and have few new people becoming involved. It is a worrying trend for our society, and I hope the trend soon starts to turn around.

I thank all the National Party members of parliament, both state and federal, for all the assistance they gave me throughout the campaign. I especially thank Mike Horan and Graham Healy for their help. I congratulate the member for Toowoomba South on his election to the position of leader of the National Party opposition. I know that he will carry out his duties with sincerity and ability. It is a great disappointment that Graham is not with us to take his place as the member for Toowoomba North. Graham is a great bloke and I wish him well for the future. Having said that, I look forward to working with the members for Toowoomba South and Toowoomba North to make sure we get the best results we can for our great city.

Since June I have doorknocked thousands of houses in the Cunningham electorate. Not only did that give me an opportunity to meet many people; it also gave me a real insight into the things that most people want from their politicians. There are a number of different roles a member of parliament has to play. Obviously there is the important legislative role that we carry out in this place, in determining the overall direction of the State. There is the need to highlight and fight for the major issues that affect not only our individual electorates but also the regions in which we live. A number of those issues have a major impact on the electorate of Cunningham.

The renewed water pipeline from Brisbane is a visionary project that has the potential to deliver huge environmental and economic benefits not only to the Darling Downs but also to Moreton Bay. The project has largely been driven by the Darling Downs Vision 2000 and City to Soil organisations. The progress that they have made is incredible, and it only needs the will of government for it to become a reality. The economic benefits to our state dictate the need for the state to make a capital contribution to the project.

That \$280 million can be found to build a bigger, whiter elephant at Lang Park, but the state cannot find a contribution to put towards a water pipeline which will generate millions of dollars and thousands of jobs over an extended period, is a travesty. I like the league as much as the next bloke, but in these difficult times we need to get our priorities right. \$280 million would be a substantial contribution to that huge income-producing environmental project.

The second range crossing is another project that has been duckshoved by the state government and needs to be promoted up the priority list to enable the federal government to do something about it. The Warrego Highway carries a huge number of trucks right through the centre of Toowoomba. The second range crossing would allow safer, quicker and more economic freight access to Brisbane and the southern states, thereby increasing the potential for such developments as the Charlton Wellcamp industrial estates.

We need to make the Condamine Balonne WAMP work for us and not against us. Should the WAMP proceed in its current form, it will have an enormous impact on the economic and social viability of all the communities in the Cunningham electorate, including the City of Toowoomba. Everyone agrees that the system has to be managed. There is no argument about that. But we must make sure that the process does not penalise unfairly, and any loss of property rights must be fully compensated. The environmental flows in the Upper Condamine are classed as good by DNR, yet irrigators are being faced with cuts to their allocations of up to 93 per cent. That would have absolutely devastating consequences on many of the communities in the electorate of Cunningham.

We must also help our rural industries to survive the terrible drought conditions, high input costs and low prices that they are currently experiencing, and try to address the long-term future for primary producers. Although there has been some rain to relieve the situation, the ongoing cash flow crisis is still present. The effects are felt not only by farmers but also by the communities and businesses in the region.

In the Pittsworth Shire, for example, in 1999-2000 agricultural chemical seed and fertiliser sales were down by 28 per cent, farm equipment sales were down by 42 per cent, and mechanical repairs were down by 28 per cent. This provides a snapshot of what is reflected right across the electorate. We must also assist with progression planning to assist a younger generation into primary production.

One industry currently in turmoil is the dairy industry. That is no secret. What has happened in that industry since deregulation is an absolute tragedy—a needless decimation of a viable industry. Not only has the industry been viable, but it has contributed to the social and economic fabric of many of our communities. The Labor government must accept its responsibility to the dairy industry and ancillary businesses and not just watch as they close down.

We have to make sure that the fuel tax system is streamlined to take the burden off the end user and to look at why there is such a differential in fuel pricing between metropolitan and regional areas. We need to ensure that small businesses are allowed not only to survive but also to prosper. We must not allow them to be completely swamped by the major retail chains or allow the majors to increase their market share. Producers, processors, small businesses and consumers will be the losers if that occurs. I personally believe that the only way to limit the growth in market share now is by limiting any further extension of trading hours. Small business plays a vital role in our community in terms of jobs and in terms of its support of community organisations, and we must protect it at all costs.

There must be a focus on education at all levels to ensure that our children are being properly prepared for the world that lies ahead. Toowoomba has a well-deserved and highly envied reputation for its education facilities. The aim of Queensland as the Smart State is commendable, as is the introduction of a ministry for innovation and IT. But in Toowoomba, we are already living it. The University of Southern Queensland is an undisputed world leader in distance education and online learning, and it is recognised worldwide for its programs. What is more, it is doing it in regional Queensland in the electorate of Cunningham. The USQ currently has approximately 20,000 students enrolled, of which 25 per cent are international students. Of those 20,000, 75 per cent study from a distance. The potential for what the USQ can continue to achieve is enormous and deserves every support that we can possibly provide. I hope that the new minister will consider what that institution is achieving.

In addition to such major issues, members of parliament have another very important aspect to their job. We are there to help the people of our electorates in their everyday lives, and quite often we are their last point of call for assistance. It is this role of being a good local member that is perhaps the most important role that we can fill: helping to fix the things that go wrong in people's lives every day—things like making sure that the health system in Toowoomba and the smaller towns is delivering the best possible service to everyone, and so that someone is not waiting six months for a cancer operation which was incorrectly diagnosed as non-urgent surgery and not a priority on waiting lists;

making sure that a disabled man classified in the highest category of need is able to access an adult lifestyle support package through disability services and not be turned down; and making sure that parents have the choice of which school to send their children to, and not be forced to send them elsewhere because they cannot afford the bus fare. We should not have in place a school transport policy that creates a situation in which schools are discriminated against and entrenches the slide in the student numbers at those schools.

We must make sure that parents can access juvenile detoxification programs for their children who have been drawn into the awful world of drug addiction. The horrors of drug abuse and the problems it causes affect all of our electorates, and we must be vigilant in our attack on the problem. It is a multilevel problem, and it needs multiple programs to address it. Throwing our hands in the air and giving up is not an option. Making it easier or legal to access the drugs is also not an option.

We have to make sure that the police do not have their hands tied behind their backs when pursuing criminals and make sure that the court system is able to deal with them properly. One of the disappointing things about doorknocking is seeing how many people of all ages are locking themselves in their homes through fear. It is terrible to see houses with their outdoor furniture bolted to the wall so that it will not be stolen.

All of these issues are ones that people raised with me before I was even elected. They are typical of the problems that people face and with which they need help. Being a good local member in Cunningham has some different challenges from most. It is one of the most unique seats in the state because it is split almost in half between a major city and residents of rural areas. We must take this opportunity to enable young people to stay in those rural and regional areas if they want to do that.

As someone who grew up in a family on a cattle property and who did not have that opportunity, I want to make sure that there is an economic viability in our regional areas that allows young people to stay in all our rural areas, and the electorate of Cunningham is one of those. It is a fantastic part of the world, and I pledge to the residents of Cunningham that I will work hard to represent all of them, regardless of where they live or what they do. My 100 per cent commitment to the electorate will continue. I look forward to working with them to ensure that we achieve those things that make living there so wonderful.
