



Speech by

Mr N. ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR NUDGEES

Hansard 29 April 2004

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (3.55 p.m.): First, I want to congratulate all members on their re-election, or election to this place. I also thank the electors of the Nudgee electorate for once again entrusting me with the responsibility of being their member. I look forward to the next three years and undertake to represent their interests to the best of my ability.

I also thank my campaign director, Peter Marks, and all of my campaign volunteers, including my wife and children and branch members. I also say a sincere thankyou to my electorate officers, Judi, Leanne, Cathy, and Julie, for their continued support and assistance before, during and after the campaign. I also congratulate the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, government ministers, and other office holders and shadow ministers on their appointments.

I want to make special mention of the election of my good friend the member for Mount Coot-tha, Andrew Fraser, who coincidentally is sitting in the chair during this debate. Whereas I can take no credit for Andrew's considerable talents, I am pleased and proud to have played a role in his journey to this place. I employed Andrew in my electorate office in 1996 as a young and enthusiastic student following our association through a university internship program. He subsequently joined the Labor Party and became an active member, which led him to working full time for the party at both state and national levels and also for the Premier and former Treasurer. Andrew Fraser will make a significant impact on this parliament and I look forward to watching his progress and the contributions that he will make in the coming years.

I have been honoured this term with an appointment as parliamentary secretary to the Deputy Premier, Treasurer and Minister for Sport, Terry Mackenroth. I am particularly pleased that the Deputy Premier has asked me to take a special interest in some key areas of his portfolio. My main focus will be in assisting the Treasurer with his oversight of 21 government owned corporations.

The Deputy Premier has also asked me to take a special interest in the public liability insurance issue. In that regard, recently I represented the government at a ministerial council meeting on insurance matters held in Hobart. Graeme Samuel, Chairman of the ACCC, representatives of the major insurance companies and the Insurance Council of Australia addressed the meeting and responded to issues raised by ministers. The ACCC, which has a monitoring role over prices in the insurance industry, tabled its second monitoring report at this meeting. The ACCC report indicated that, in the first six months of 2003, average premiums for public liability had risen marginally by only four per cent. That is clearly out of touch with what most community organisations are experiencing. I took the opportunity to point this out to both the ACCC and the insurance industry representatives present at that meeting. I specifically raised the experience of a number of community organisations in my own electorate where premium increases between 2002-03 and 2003-04 were in the order of 50 to 150 per cent.

State and federal governments have introduced a range of reforms to assist the community sector during the recent public liability insurance difficulties. These include the establishment of a broker based insurance scheme for not-for-profit organisations, stamp duty exemptions on liability insurance premiums for eligible organisations and the creation of an interactive educational risk management web site.

Governments at both the state and federal level have also passed a raft of legislation which has helped create a very favourable underwriting environment for insurance companies. Of concern is the

fact that, despite the recent reporting of increased profits for insurance companies across Australia, they are not passing on the benefits of a significantly improved underwriting environment to consumers, particularly not-for-profit community groups. Premier Peter Beattie has recently written to the federal government urging it to give the ACCC investigative and enforcement powers with regard to the pricing of public liability insurance. Some other state and territory ministers have also supported this proposal. Head of the ACCC, Graeme Samuel, indicated that, if it becomes clear that the insurance industry is not passing on the benefits arising from the insurance reforms, then the ACCC would consider asking the Commonwealth for increased powers. The Queensland government believes that such justification exists now.

There is no doubt that legislative reforms passed by the Queensland parliament and similar reforms passed by other states and territories have directly assisted in creating a more favourable insurance climate. It is time now that insurance companies reflected this in lower insurance premiums, particularly for communities, sporting and other not-for-profit organisations.

In May last year I gave a speech in this parliament which called for community debate about lowering the voting age in Queensland elections. The voting age was lowered to 18 in Queensland and Australia in 1973, and I expressed the view that it was time to review this matter again. I still hold that view and want to take the opportunity at the commencement of this new parliament to put the issue back on the agenda. I do so in the full knowledge that a recent report by the United Kingdom Electoral Commission recommended that the minimum age for all levels of voting in UK public elections remain at 18.

Important aspects of the UK analysis of this issue need to be understood in making any judgment on whether its findings are directly relevant to the situation in Queensland or, indeed, Australia. The first distinction is that the issue analysed by the UK commission was whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 in the first instance. My submission is that it should be lowered to 17, with consideration given to lowering it to 16. I also believe that should this occur, whereas voting would be compulsory, the choice of enrolment at these lower levels should be at the discretion of the individual, as it is now for 17-year-olds under the Electoral Act. Whereas I support voluntary enrolment for 17-year-olds, I am still a strong supporter of the concept of compulsory voting.

Another factor which distinguishes Queensland and Australia from the UK is that voting in the UK is not compulsory. The age at which a person can stand for public office is also 21, albeit the commission has now recommended that this be lowered to 18. Additionally, the UK commission notes in its report that the majority of the 7,500 responses to its consultation were of the view that the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Young people today are better educated. They deal with a more complex and changing world and, through my observations, they are generally more articulate and understanding of complex community and national affairs than earlier generations. Many are actively involved in their local community's affairs, in my mind, demonstrating that they are ready to directly participate in our electoral processes. For more detail on my arguments in support of this initiative, I invite members to refer to my speech to this parliament on 27 May last year.

In addition, however, there is another basis for supporting the lowering of the voting age and that is the rapid increase in the rate of the ageing of our population. In 1981 the median age of Queenslanders was 28.9. In 2001 it was 34.8 and in 2021 it is predicted to be 40.3. As the age profile of the voting population rises, it is important that the views of younger Queenslanders be directly acknowledged in our electoral system. One way of facilitating this is by increasing the proportion of young people who participate in our electoral processes. Lowering the voting age will support the objective of ensuring that decisions of this parliament reflect the needs of as many Queenslanders as possible.

As I said in my speech to this parliament last year, one of the most common arguments against extending the vote to younger people is that they may be susceptible to the pressures of their parents or others when they cast their vote. This was one of the main arguments used by men to deny women the vote in the early 20th century. That argument was wrong then and it is wrong now. It is also argued that many young people are not fully aware of or familiar enough with the political processes or the broad range of political issues for them to make an informed judgment of the worth of a particular candidate or political party. In the first instance I reject this proposition and, secondly, if that was a criterion for allowing people the right to vote, it would exclude many adults who are currently over the age of 18. A healthy democracy is one in which as many people as are able directly participate in its democratic processes. Accordingly, I commend to the House once again the idea of lowering the voting age in Queensland elections.

I want to take a short time to highlight some key initiatives in my electorate in the areas of health and education. The government's education and training reforms were a priority in the last term of government and will deliver more opportunities for young Queenslanders to complete their education. A preparatory year of schooling will be introduced from 2007. I am pleased that Geebung

State School in my electorate is participating in the trial of this initiative. In addition to significant policy changes in education, my electorate will also benefit from some current and planned capital works projects.

The creation of Earnshaw State College at Banyo is well under way with the completion of the middle and junior schools. This \$8.8 million investment complements the \$6 million the government made in support of the relocation of the Australian Catholic University to Banyo, situated just across the road from Earnshaw State College. Other significant capital works planned in my electorate include a \$1.7 million upgrade at Boondall State School. Works include a \$1 million upgrade of the administration block and \$0.6 million for a new music facility.

Virginia State School will soon have a completely refurbished administration block and Zillmere State School will receive a \$100,000 technology centre for its students. I am particularly pleased with the commitment to Zillmere State School. It is a small school which has performed above its weight in recent years. It does not have the fundraising capacity of larger schools, but with determination, strong community support and the professionalism and dedication of its staff it has provided a supportive and secure learning environment for its students.

Health is another significant issue for state governments. Recent announcements about capital works and service enhancements will deliver major benefits and improvements for my constituents. The government is committed to constructing a \$5.6 million community health centre in the Nundah area. During the election campaign the Premier announced that a new emergency department and an additional 120 beds were to be established at the Prince Charles Hospital at Chermside. This will complement the existing emergency service already available at the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

These commitments in both education and health will ensure my constituents and their children will have access to first-class health and education services within their neighbourhood. I am pleased that a re-elected Labor government will commence delivering these significant improvements over the next term. I extend my congratulations again to all members on their election to this place and I look forward to another three years of positive reform by a rejuvenated Labor government.