



Speech by

## Hon. Nita Cunningham

**MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG**

Hansard Wednesday, 19 May 2004

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### ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

**Hon. N.I. CUNNINGHAM** (Bundaberg—ALP) (12.13 p.m.): On 7 February this year the people of Bundaberg elected me for the seventh time in a row—the first four elections at local government level and the last three for this state parliament. I feel humbled by their support and I thank them sincerely for their continued confidence in my commitment to listening to their concerns and in my ability to deliver better facilities and services for our residents, increased opportunities for our city and a better quality of life for us all.

As other members have said, it takes enormous support from a wide range of people to win a state seat. I take this opportunity to thank my husband, Elvin, son, Glenn, daughter, Anne, and their young families for their total and unconditional support and encouragement throughout my 16 years in public life. As I have said many times, family support and a sense of humour are essential if you are going to cope with the pace, the challenges and the demands of public life. I am also fortunate to have the support of my mum, my sisters and my brother, and my late dad, who was my mentor in politics and taught me how to stand up for my beliefs, would have given me the greatest encouragement.

Today I would like to place on record my thanks for the unwavering support of my electorate officer, Marcia Courtice, undoubtedly one of the best in Queensland; Mr Dennis Carswell, who has been my campaign director for all three state campaigns; Mrs Evelyn Quinn, who is always there when we need help and spoils us with her home cooking; a former member for Bundaberg, Mr Jim Blake, whose political astuteness and wisdom is invaluable; branch president Jim Emery and all of our branch members; and John Faircloth and Michael Edgar, who were on the city council with me and have remained good friends and supporters. I thank Milton Dick, who was again an enormous help with my campaign; Ken King, who came from Gladstone to help; Bill Ludwig and the AWU; and the many Labor Party members in Bundaberg and Brisbane who together ensured that I would again have the honour of representing Bundaberg here in this 51st Queensland Parliament.

I congratulate all members on their election and re-election and place on record my disappointment at the loss of Trevor Strong, who was a very capable and well-liked member for Burnett and a valued member of the second Beattie Labor government. Trevor has since been elected to the Burnett council, so the people of Burnett have not lost him entirely.

Once again, the people of Queensland have chosen a Labor government to provide the basic right of all Queenslanders—open and honest government. I congratulate the Premier and fellow cabinet ministers for providing the leadership and the policies that led Labor to another outstanding win.

Following my first election to this House in 1998, my maiden speech highlighted the many attributes of the beautiful city of Bundaberg. I spoke of the importance of our sugar industry and the growth occurring in our horticultural industries, at our port, in our clubs, in special events that boost our economy and at our new university campus, where 72 per cent of the earlier enrollees were the first members of their families to ever have a university education.

During that speech I also emphasised our main problems—the desperate need for a major water storage in place of the Kallawa dam that was promised in the 1970s and never delivered, and our massive unemployment problem. I said in that speech in 1998—

If we are ever going to provide jobs we need new industries, we need expansion of existing industries and we need water to service those industries.

I went on to say—

But we must have that dam to provide ... for the economic stability of our entire region—its industries, its people and our future.

I am very proud to say that we are now getting that dam.

I also spelt out some federal government issues that were impacting badly on communities across Australia—unemployment and job security, the continued sale of our assets, the rising costs of health treatment, the concerns for the welfare of our elderly and the concerns for our young, for their education and for their future. Sadly, six years later those problems are still there, and they gained very little mention in last week's federal budget. While the money flowed freely in that budget, the major issues of education, health, housing and roads missed out badly. I am sure that these issues, together with the future of Medicare and Telstra, will figure prominently in the coming federal election campaign.

However, in my past two terms in this parliament much has been achieved for Bundaberg. The dam we have so desperately needed is being delivered by the Beattie government. It is the biggest Queensland government project under way anywhere in the state. It has already lifted confidence in our city, will give our economy the boost it has needed for so long and has put Bundaberg on the positive pathway to a stronger future. It is the first dam to be built in Australia under the current rigorous environmental standards, with \$17 million to be spent on environmental management and protection, monitoring programs and fishways. The new approach roads and bridges are a huge benefit to those shires, as is the workers accommodation village, now completed in Childers. A \$500,000 allocation will start recreational programs for the completed dam.

Under our government unemployment in Queensland is now at its lowest level for 20 years, and we are securing stronger economic and employment opportunities for Bundaberg. As I have just said, the \$200 million dam is well under way, with 150 workers now on site and economic benefits flowing on to local companies and suppliers; four companies are preparing to move onto the new food precinct; the new Salmat call centre is employing 130 men and women; scallop, hemp and mining proposals are progressing well; further expansion is occurring at our port; and our state development centre has identified possible investors for the Austoft site.

The building industry is booming. Our state government is providing financial incentives to local manufacturers, and more than \$7 million has been spent on training programs and providing jobs for some 1,200 apprentices, trainees and our unemployed. While I am encouraged by the drop in unemployment in Bundaberg in these past two terms, there is still a long way to go, and this new term in parliament will be one of challenges, opportunities and hard work as we move to secure industrial growth in Bundaberg and provide the jobs that are still so badly needed in our city.

Other major gains for Bundaberg during my first two terms include extensions and capital works to 14 schools. Some \$27 million has been spent on public housing. We have gained 39 extra police, including our first two Aboriginal liaison officers. A daily tilt train service between Bundaberg and Brisbane was initiated very successfully. Our clubs and groups gained more than \$2 million in gaming funds. Our rowing, athletics, golf, BMX and sailing clubs received major project funds. Our Emergency Services gained record new vehicles and equipment. A new TAFE marine college was built. Extensions were made to DNR. Buildings were funded for our university. The sum of \$1 million was provided to build the PCYC building. We provided more than \$2 million in subsidies to the city council, \$4.5 million to develop the food precinct and \$1.3 million for a new aerial ambulance. We increased funds to community services and state subsidies allowed our private bus service to expand.

I worked tirelessly in those two terms to gain better funding for our hospital, better services and better conditions, better equipment and better buildings and shorter waiting times for patients. To name just some achievements, the hospital budget was increased by 35 per cent. The \$27 million redevelopment was completed. We gained a rheumatology clinic. The four-chair renal dialysis clinic was increased to 11 chairs. Mental health buildings were improved. The outpatient clinic was expanded from just six rooms to 14. Modern birthing suites have been added. New staff accommodation is complete, and modern equipment including a CT scanner has been installed.

All medical positions are now filled. Our nurses are highly qualified, compassionate and caring. Up-to-date modern equipment and technology is available, and during the minister's recent visit to the hospital we were met with positive comments from staff and patients. I have a steady stream of residents contacting my office singing the praises of our hospital, the staff and the treatment they have received. This is a very different scene to what was happening during my first term when the then National Party member for Burnett used that hospital mercilessly as a political football. The media reports at that time not only reflected badly on everyone working at the hospital but also made it very difficult to recruit doctors and

specialists. That member's constant and irresponsible statements caused enormous problems for our hospital and an unprecedented drop in staff morale. It was a terrible time for staff, patients and their families, and nobody in Bundaberg wants a repeat of those three years.

I urge the member for Burnett to settle down and have some regard for the ongoing reputation of our hospital and its 860 employees. He would build a better profile for himself if he forgot about crises—I believe he identified 12 in his maiden speech—and started making a positive contribution to his electorate and his constituents. Follow up complaints by all means—that is our job—but follow the appropriate channels available to all members of this House to represent constituents. I urge staff members who are complaining to Mr Messenger to follow the appropriate procedures available to them through their unions to negotiate on their behalf.

I am very proud of my first two terms in this parliament, including twice being appointed to cabinet as Minister for Local Government and Planning. I have just outlined some of the achievements I gained for Bundaberg in that time, and as minister I consider the two most important pieces of legislation I put forward were the tough new laws for the keeping of restricted dogs and the new swimming pool fencing legislation that will save young lives. My most satisfying achievement as minister was to stop federal minister Wilson Tuckey's proposals for the distribution of financial assistance grants to Queensland's local governments that would have seen some 30 councils facing enormous financial difficulties.

I appreciate the thanks and good wishes I have received from the many friends I have in local government, and I will always appreciate the honour and distinction of being part of cabinet and the friendship I enjoyed with fellow ministers. However, this term is going to be a turning point for Bundaberg, and in asking not to be considered for cabinet in this term I gained the opportunity to concentrate solely on my electorate of Bundaberg, its people, its problems and its future. In this term our dam will be completed and growth in our industries will not only be possible but also need to be promoted, encouraged and supported to ensure we gain every opportunity for industrial growth and jobs.

The food precinct will move ahead as growers take advantage of the security of water to expand their horticultural industries and move further into processing and exporting. Our sugar industry that is so important to Bundaberg will face enormous changes in this term. The state government's Sugar Industry Reform Bill that was passed through this parliament just weeks ago will allow that industry to make the necessary changes to move forward, and I look forward to helping this industry not just survive but also prosper as one of our major industries. At this crucial time for the sugar industry I was dismayed to see the federal government's strong focus on exiting the industry in its package, and I can say I was disgusted that every National Party member in this House—some representing major sugar growing areas—not only voted against our necessary legislation but also fought against it for two days.

The Beattie government's third term has started off at top pace, with the three bills introduced on the very first sitting day—the Vegetation Management Bill, the Sugar Industry Reform Bill and the Duties Amendment Bill that will reduce transfer and mortgage duties by up to \$3,000 for first home buyers in Queensland—clearly showing this government is governing for all Queenslanders.

In Bundaberg 10 days ago I had the pleasure of announcing \$840,000 in state subsidies for major sporting projects for Rugby League, cricket and hockey. If added to the recent \$261,000 in gaming funds to 15 local clubs, this government has provided more than \$1 million to sport and recreation in Bundaberg in just two months, and we are already benefiting from the government's election promise to reduce elective surgery waiting times with 50 extra Bundaberg patients to have their surgery by June.

The Beattie government's support for Bundaberg—for our dam, for job creation, for our hospital, for our schools, for public housing, for emergency services, for sporting and community welfare—has been unprecedented and I will continue to work in a positive way for Bundaberg's industries, groups and constituents as we as a government work together to meet the challenges of this 51st Queensland Parliament and gain the maximum opportunities for our electorates.

I joined this parliament in 1998 to get a dam—a dam that no-one had been able to get in almost 30 years—and we are getting it. This has given me the greatest sense of achievement in my 16 years in public life and it has given Bundaberg a future. In closing, I would like to say a big thankyou to the many community groups, service clubs and volunteers who work tirelessly to lift the quality of life we enjoy in Bundaberg. It is my privilege to be patron of 15 of those clubs, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to them all.