



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard Tuesday, 10 May 2005

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE

DEATH OF HON. SIR JOH BJELKE-PETERSEN

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (9.44 am): I rise, along with the Premier, to extend my sympathies and those of the National Party to Lady Flo and the Bjelke-Petersen family. Johannes Bjelke-Petersen was born on 13 January 1911 at Dannevirke in New Zealand. In 1913 he moved with his family to Kingaroy and settled on a property, Bethany. The property produced a variety of agricultural and pastoral pursuits including beef cattle, peanuts and maize. Sir Joh passed away on 23 April 2005. He was the son of Carl George Bjelke-Petersen and Maren Poulsen. Carl Bjelke-Petersen was a Lutheran pastor before becoming a farmer. He had a younger brother, Christian, who died at the age of 22 years, and a sister, Agneta, known as Neta.

Sir Joh was educated at Taabinga State School until aged 13 years. Between the ages of nine and 11 he suffered the effects of polio. On 31 May 1952 Sir Joh married Florence Gilmore and they had four children: John, Ruth, Margaret—otherwise known as Meg—and Helen. Sir Joh left school at the age of 13 years to work on the family farm. In 1933 the family acquired a second property on which Joh Bjelke-Petersen set about clearing the land and planting crops which were mostly peanuts.

Sir Joh was quite an inventor. He developed a peanut harvester and other agricultural equipment and raised capital from working as a contract harvester to farms in the surrounding district. In 1937 Joh Bjelke-Petersen applied for a patent on his apparatus for sowing peanuts in the shell. Two years later he patented a mechanism called a chain and bucket elevator for shifting dirt and refuse while peanut threshing.

Joh Bjelke-Petersen took up flying as a means to expand his contracting business and he bought his first plane in 1949. Sir Joh and his sister Neta formed a company for contract land clearing and later expanded to aeroagricultural operations such as aerial crop spraying and seeding. Sir Joh's disabilities suffered from polio prevented him from joining the Australian Defence Force during World War II. Sir Joh's community activities included being a Sunday school teacher in local parishes of the Lutheran Church. He was elected to the Kingaroy Shire Council in 1946.

On 3 May 1947 Sir Joh was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly as the member for Nanango representing the Country Party. In 1948 he opposed wage rises for members of parliament and refused to join the parliamentary superannuation scheme. On 29 April 1950 he was elected as the member for Barambah. On 26 September 1963 Sir Joh was promoted to Minister for Works and Housing and remained in that portfolio until 8 August 1968. In January 1968 he was voted in as Deputy Leader of the Country Party. On 2 August 1968 he was voted Leader of the Country Party after the death of the Country Party Premier, Jack Pizzey, in July 1968. Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was sworn in as Premier on 8 August 1968 and remained in that position until 1 December 1987. Between 19 August 1983 and 1 December 1987 Sir Joh also took on the responsibilities of Treasurer.

His life was an extraordinary one. Sir Joh was a great man—indeed, in my estimation, Queensland's greatest. If anyone doubts Sir Joh's popularity and standing amongst Queenslanders, they should reflect for a moment on the *Sunday Mail* 'Your State Your Say' survey in 2000 which voted him the greatest Queensland of all time, putting him ahead of Wally Lewis, Cathy Freeman and Greg Norman.

Sir Joh, or just Joh as he was affectionately known by thousands of Queenslanders, had a deep and abiding faith in God and an absolute commitment to his family. This strong Christian faith and absolute commitment to his family underpinned and guided the values which Sir Joh not only believed but also practised in his day-to-day life either in his early upbringing with its associated pre-depression hardships, his battle with polio or his daylight to midnight work ethic, which he practised as a young man and later as an MP, minister and Premier.

Sir Joh believed absolutely that you mean what you say and you do what you say. These values drove an enormous energy which achieved extraordinary things within the community, whether it be local, state or national. He was this state's longest-serving Premier, and that was no accident. Sir Joh was the architect of modern Queensland. Sir Joh became Premier in the year that I was born and was the Premier for the first two decades of my life. Therefore, his effect on me was profound. I, like many of my colleagues, was drawn to his values, his no-nonsense, get-on-with-the-job style. Even if you disagreed with him, you respected him because you knew where he stood on every issue, and on balance you could be assured that what he did would be good for Queensland and would be good for Queenslanders.

In the last few weeks, the usual grab bag of historical revisionists who questioned Sir Joh's contribution in life continued to question it after his passing. If they are having trouble understanding his success, it is as simple as this: Sir Joh knew what was important to everyday Queenslanders and delivered what was important to everyday Queenslanders. This grab bag of historical revisionists would never accept his success because it was outside their self-cloaked paradigm of intellectual and moral superiority. These intellectual revisionists and historical revisionists who will never achieve even one per cent of his extraordinary legacy should never be taken seriously. The only people who never make a mistake are the people who never do anything. Sir Joh did lots and left a mark to prove it.

Sir Joh cherished Westminster principles, which he exemplified when he acted to preserve and entrench the Queen in our state's Constitution. Sir Joh also had an electoral system that ensured a government needed greater than 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote to form a government. The area where the historical revisionists have been busiest in is undermining Sir Joh's electoral legitimacy. For the record, let us look at facts. Wayne Goss won power in 1989 with more than 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote—the first time that Labor had achieved that since it lost office in 1957. Following that election, Labor held 54 seats, the Nationals 26 and the Liberals nine. Just three years later, following the full state redistribution and the abolition of the so-called gerrymander, the votes received by each of the parties were within 1.5 per cent of the 1989 election results, yet all those parties won exactly the same number of seats. History's revisionists, or, as I call them, distorters, will never tell you this: Sir Joh and the Nationals held the least populated seats in the country and the most populated seats in the cities, including on the Gold and Sunshine coasts and also in Brisbane. To spell it out in simpler terms for those who wish to reconstruct history—and these figures are in primary vote terms—in 1983 Joh and the Nationals received 39 per cent of the vote for 50 per cent of the seats in state parliament. In 1986 they received 40 per cent of the vote for 55 per cent of the seats in parliament, which contrasts with Labor's 47 per cent of the vote for 71 per cent of the seats in parliament in 2004.

In September 1986, frustrated by their failure to discredit Sir Joh on his policy and infrastructure achievements for Queensland, his opponents in the Labor Party resorted to personal attacks. Commissioning two British researchers to analyse Sir Joh's psychological health and wellbeing, they concluded and highlighted 'the Premier's rapid and public mental disintegration'. Their personal attacks failed, and Sir Joh and the Nationals went on to win the state election two months later with an increased majority.

The SEQEB strikes of 1985 still resonate for many Queenslanders. The debate in recent times has been very one-sided, focusing on the experiences of the sacked workers. Many people were affected during those strikes including Queensland families and businesses that just wanted the lights to stay on and the hospitals to keep operating. The personal impact on their quality of life and the destruction of businesses are never mentioned by history's revisionists. Who could also forget the harassment by the unions of those electricity workers who wanted to exercise their lawful right to work and to return to work? The people who supported Sir Joh's stance on this issue are generally silent and in the majority.

Sir Joh knew that to be successful in politics you must understand what people actually want, have an affinity for them and with them and deliver for them. Sir Joh was a man of the people who delivered like no other Premier for the people. During Sir Joh's premiership Queenslanders wanted safer communities. Sir Joh delivered safer communities. During Sir Joh's premiership Queenslanders wanted a free hospital system that was efficient. Sir Joh delivered a free hospital system that was efficient. During Sir Joh's premiership Queenslanders wanted a low-tax state. Sir Joh delivered a low-tax state. During Sir Joh's premiership Queenslanders wanted Sir Joh to build dams, roads, bridges and railway lines. Sir Joh

delivered. He built dams, roads, bridges and railway lines. Sir Joh's numerous achievements also included defying the doomsayers and abolishing death duties in Queensland, forcing all other Australian governments to follow. For this alone the whole country should be eternally grateful.

During Sir Joh's term as Premier he oversaw the construction of Griffith and James Cook universities, and he secured Expo 88 for Queensland. The one and only Indigenous person ever elected to the Queensland parliament, Eric Deeral, was elected as a member of the Nationals in 1974. The first woman cabinet minister, Yvonne Chapman, was sworn in. South Brisbane's vast cultural precinct—including the Art Gallery, Performing Arts Centre and Museum—was constructed. Sir Joh trebled the area of Queensland's national parks and properly managed them. He passionately promoted the Sunshine State as Australia's prime tourist destination and as a great place to live. He also opened up the state's enormous mineral resource potential. Sir Joh introduced the deed of grant in trust legislation to ensure greater autonomy for Queensland's Indigenous communities. It is an act of parliament that is still with us today. He saved half of the Torres Strait from being reliant on Port Moresby when the Whitlam government was prepared to hand it over—an action many of the region's residents are still grateful for today. To the eternal gratitude of many Australians, Sir Joh also saved them from the excesses of the Whitlam government.

Sir Joh also achieved much, much more. Sir Joh did not just govern Queensland; he built Queensland. By anyone's estimation, the mark of a successful premier is to leave an indelible print on your state. Sir Joh has done that, and he has done it for the better. Sir Joh's failed 'Joh for PM' bid and the early stages of the Fitzgerald inquiry hastened his political exit and finished a remarkable political career, which spanned four decades. For Queenslanders, Sir Joh and Lady Flo were a great team—an unbelievable partnership in marriage, in family, in politics, in service and in the community.

Sir Joh has not been Premier of this great state for almost a generation, yet he is talked about by Queenslanders, including young Queenslanders, as though he was Premier just yesterday. Most politicians, including premiers, are hardly mentioned even a term after their departure from the political stage. That was not the case for Sir Joh; his name is still there, larger than life.

Whilst he sadly no longer graces use with his physical presence, Sir Joh's great contribution to this state, to his local community and to his family will live on for generations to come, and for that Queenslanders will be forever grateful. To Lady Flo and the Bjelke-Petersen family I simply say: thank you for letting Queenslanders be a part of your life in the good times and the sad times.

The constant dignity and politeness that Lady Flo and the Bjelke-Petersen family displayed during the intense public and media interest in Sir Joh's health and well-being over the years is the real indication of the core beliefs and values of this remarkable family. To them I simply say again: our thoughts and prayers are with you.