



Speech by

# Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard Tuesday, 31 October 2006

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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

**Mrs CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—Ind) (3.11 pm): At the outset I congratulate the Speaker, the Hon. Mike Reynolds, on his election to the office and wish him the very best in his endeavours to work impartially and fairly. And I congratulate you, too, Mr Deputy Speaker Moorhead, as a new deputy speaker.

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to those who assisted in my campaign. To Wendy, Trish and Floss, thank you for your tireless efforts. To Alan, Denis, Don, Kitty and Ken, thank you also for all the work that you contributed. To all those who rostered at the polling booths and as scrutineers, thank you for your willingness to be a necessary part of the election process. Your generosity is valued greatly.

To my husband, John, my daughters and their husbands and to other family members, thank you for your unfaltering support. Our families are directly impacted by the demands of this work and, while we as representatives accept the time constraints and imposts, our families wait for us to make that important time for them. Their generosity of spirit directly affects our ability to give to our community. I am truly blessed.

Each election brings its own style, and I would have to say previous Labor candidates Jenny Ellingsen and Julianne Grice ran campaigns which were robust but reasonable. The same cannot be said, I believe, about this election. Rumours were spread about my personal health and lifestyle which were untrue and unwarranted. These rumours, spread by people close to the ALP candidate, were unnecessary and hurt those in our families who care for us through thick and thin.

Workers in my electorate were given information intended to frighten them in relation to their security of tenure, penalty and overtime rates and the like. While it is true that there are genuine concerns in relation to job security, unfair dismissal, safety nets and the like, the threat is from the federal government legislation, not from the state. The ALP candidate and some union delegates stated to workers that if I were re-elected they would lose job entitlements and protection. Even on election day some booth workers were intimidating voters with 'Remember your job and your family,' as they entered the polling booths. That is disappointing because engendered in young family members is a concern about job security that we as state legislators cannot address because it is brought about by federal legislation. In the last week or so I have noticed an increase in campaigning against the federal WorkChoices legislation and those concerns are appropriately being aired.

The electorate of Gladstone is dynamic and energetic. Its community of visionary people work tirelessly to ensure current and future prosperity. From my electorate's perspective, that prosperity is assured provided we have fair support from state and federal governments in the areas of infrastructure and services to support growth and development. With the major growth that has happened in the past and that is planned for the future, it is imperative that the state government, in tandem with the federal government, properly funds both the built and social infrastructure for the electorate. Gladstone is one of the top 10 fastest growing areas in the state.

Part of the attractiveness of the region to industry is the deep water port, the state development area footprint for building, water and access to competitive energy. It is imperative that the ability of the

Queensland government to offer cost-effective process inputs such as electricity is retained. While currently decisions are being made about the sale of assets in relation to contestability, it is critical that the ability to negotiate process inputs is retained.

Social infrastructure is also critical. We saw only a week or two ago strikes by the Department of Child Safety in many electorates, and that included mine. This is a specialised area of work and one that I frankly—and I have stated in this chamber before—would find very, very challenging to be involved with. While I look forward to working with the newly appointed Minister for Child Safety, staff in these offices face incredible emotional and physical challenges in addressing the needs of children and families. In my electorate, the increase in the number of young families is well documented and early intervention to prevent family breakdown is essential to avoid these destructive events. Often the staff of the department are so heavily committed that they lack the time to properly work with families to avert the worst possible consequences—the loss of children and the breakdown of parental relationship.

In every electorate there are some fundamental areas that require government support to ensure the quality of life and amenity for those who live in the electorate. Health is one such portfolio. I commend the staff who work at the Gladstone Hospital and, in conjunction with them, staff who work closely at the co-located Mater Hospital. When I was first elected, the Gladstone Hospital was under the umbrella of the Rockhampton district. In those early years it appeared, with some justification, that the peripheral hospitals—that is, hospitals other than Rockhampton Base Hospital—received the dregs. Over time the districts were redefined and Gladstone became a district in its own right, and I believe it had a greater ability to administer the funds allocated to it.

Now that the districts have been redrawn, with hospitals at Gladstone and Biloela being caught back under the Rockhampton umbrella, I believe that it is imperative the government ensures that residents in the Gladstone electorate will not experience any diminution in services. In fact, already my community wishes to see increased access to specialists at the Gladstone Hospital precinct in order to avoid travel. I am very impressed with the manager at the Rockhampton Base Hospital, Dr Beresford, who has talked very positively about extending specialist services to hospitals in the region rather than having people travel to the Rockhampton Base Hospital. I look forward to discussions that have already been arranged with him.

For a number of years now the patient travel subsidy has been a point of contention with constituents in my electorate and I am sure elsewhere. For over a year now the minister has promised a review of the level of PTS. The subsidy has not recognised that fuel prices and the cost of accommodation continue to soar, and rural communities across Queensland are waiting desperately to have their urgent needs addressed. I acknowledge that it is only a subsidy, but it has not changed for a great many years. In particular, it has not even remotely kept abreast of increased fuel prices.

There is currently a review of maternity services for rural and regional areas, and I sat in on a teleconference in relation to the proposed changes at the CQU. Comments that I received from nurses and administrators in the maternity area said that funding for students must be met as well as resources for their studies—that is, accommodation and travel. Concerns were expressed about the problems of backfilling staff while midwifery students are away doing block studies. There were also some concerns expressed about getting staff in general.

In the last couple of weeks we have heard not only in this chamber but also in the media concerns about mental health. It is an area of health. Whilst I recognise that the government has reconfigured those services to communities, I will be interested to see how that works practically in terms of clinical mental health services and how the Department of Communities and the department of health will interplay. I want to take this opportunity to put on the record the best wishes of everybody in this chamber and certainly my best wishes to Linda Lavarch. She has always been a lady that I have found easy to deal with, and I certainly wish her a speedy recovery. I also wish her the best with her family and I trust that everybody gives her and her family the support that they will require.

In terms of mental health, in Gladstone there is a need for a small secured facility. At the moment there are some difficulties with transporting mental health patients to Rockhampton. There has been a series of articles in the paper about this issue. One was an interview with police and one was an interview with ambulance officers—separate times, separate articles—in relation to the cost to them of transporting patients. While both entities recognise that they have legislated responsibilities, in many instances transportation is required to the secured facility at Rockhampton because a patient diagnosed with mental health problems—and it is almost predictable with some illnesses—fails to take their medications. When these people take their medications for a period of time, the medications work and they feel quite well. However, they then think that they are cured and stop taking their medication.

As a result, a small secured facility in Gladstone would mean that they could be restabilised on their medication. Their behaviour is difficult when the medication is out of their system but—and I say this with some caution—they probably do not need transferring through to Rocky. Their condition could be

discussed with the psychiatrist who works out of Rockhampton and they could have their medication restabilised. It would save the need for them to be transported. It would also allow for family members to support that ill person. A small one- or two-bed secured ward at Gladstone would save a lot of time, a lot of travel and a lot of resources if those diagnoses could be dealt with in Gladstone.

A constituent of mine dropped in a document in relation to health in which he listed a number of things. He assured me that he got this information from well-advised people. However, I am not prepared to identify the people he spoke to. He believes that we need two specialist physicians shared between the two hospitals—that is, Gladstone and the Mater. The two previous physician specialists left two years ago and to date these positions have not been filled. This information was current as at 3 October. There is currently a non-specialist medical service operated by SMOs. However, these people, although doing a wonderful job, are not specialists and already have high demands on their services. Concerns were raised by this constituent about Queensland Health's employment policy with the use of contracts. He said that there appears to be a lack of flexibility in the contract arrangements to attract old or young staff to work in the Gladstone District Hospital. In fact, the comment that he made was that Queensland Health is one of the greatest abusers of contract employment. He went on to explain how these contracts really do not offer attractive opportunities to people to stay within Queensland Health.

This constituent talked about budgets. He says that there has been an enormous increase in funding by Queensland Health over the last 10 years, a lot of which has been absorbed by administration and red tape. He also says that in the last 20 years Gladstone Hospital has been reduced from 120 beds to 54, mostly in the last seven years. He goes on to say that administration has also absorbed a considerable number of staff and it is estimated that another 10 to 20 beds are needed if specialists can be recruited, and he goes on to speak about other concerns.

Another issue of concern in my electorate relates to roads and transport. In any city, roads are essential arteries for a growing community. I do not believe that anybody in rural and regional Queensland would hold the notion that spending should be totally restricted to the south-east corner. Whilst I acknowledge that the population in the south-east corner is growing exponentially, any of us who come down here from rural and regional areas are gobsmacked at the road infrastructure here compared to that which is available to rural and regional communities. In my electorate we have Kirkwood Road, which is an arterial road at the external edges of Gladstone city which would keep heavy transportation out of the middle of the city through the school areas. It would be a critical piece of infrastructure to ensure safe and timely traffic movements. Kin Kora roundabout has become an area of great concern in peak hours. There is a significant backlog of traffic—perhaps not the same as Coronation Drive in peak hours and certainly not some of the backlogs that were experienced with the closure of the freeway recently. However, for the people in my community it is a significant deterrent. Their hours are inflexible or reasonably inflexible, and the Kin Kora roundabout needs to be reviewed in terms of traffic flow. If it were a flyover for those going straight through, that certainly would be one answer.

The minister for transport has declined again to have boom gates placed on the Mercury Street crossing. This is a crossing that reflects the same situation as Whitney Street, where there was a fatality a couple of years ago. The boom gates there are now in place because the Gladstone City Council has installed them. I would certainly ask the minister to review his decision on the relocation of the boom gates from the Callemondah overpass so that they could be efficiently placed at Mercury Street to afford a higher level of safety.

The dredging of the Boyne River mouth has been an issue of concern to my community before I was elected as a member of this place, and I will be seeking funding from the minister for an updated hydrological study to show not only the tide patterns—the flow patterns—but also the commercial and recreational use of the Boyne River to validate the need for that dredging. Everybody who uses the Boyne River mouth knows that no validation is needed. However, to date we have been unsuccessful in having the Boyne River dredged and certainly the hydrological study would highlight those needs.

On a number of occasions now I have written and spoken to the Premier about water rebates, and in the chamber last sitting he stated that he would advise in a week or so from when I asked the question as to the timing of the rollout of rebates across Queensland. I received anecdotal information—verbal information—that that announcement will not now happen until November and perhaps December. I would have to express disappointment that the announcements will take so long. There are many responsible water users in my electorate, as I am sure there are in many rural and regional areas. They would benefit greatly from water rebates to assist them in the installation of necessary waterwise equipment and the purchase of tanks.

In any fast-growing community affordable housing is one of the basic necessities for families to develop and prosper. We face extra pressure when there is a development boom because not only does the price of housing for purchase go up but rentals also increase exponentially. In the past the minister for housing has blamed the federal government. I believe the responsibility is on both areas of government—

both federal and state. I believe it is critically important that issues of affordable housing be addressed for the community because, while there may be some segments in every community that are reasonably affluent, the vast majority of people are on modest and constrained incomes—that is, they do not fluctuate. Therefore, their ability to afford inflated housing prices is diminishing, not increasing.

Access to lifestyle packages in communities is essential. In my electorate many families have for long periods cared for children and adults with disabilities ranging from mild to quite significant. Those families have talked to me about the onerous amount of paperwork that is involved in applying for lifestyle packages and that very few new packages are available. Previously, I have written to Minister Pitt about this matter. I have also said in this chamber that I have no doubt about his genuine concern for people with disabilities. I look forward to working with him to endeavour to meet the needs of those families who face incredible physical, psychological and emotional challenges on a day-to-day basis to ensure that their family members receive an acceptable quality of life.

The police in my electorate do a tremendous job. My electorate has a Dog Squad and water police, which is relatively new. Those police are welcome. However, Tannum Sands and Boyne Island are growing communities. Although staffing levels at the police station in those areas have increased, the station needs to be open 24 hours. Response times to these areas from Gladstone are, at the minimum, 20 minutes. However, often only one or two crews are in Gladstone and very often, owing to staffing levels in Gladstone, call-outs to Tannum Sands cannot be managed in what the community would regard as a timely manner. The communities in those areas feel particularly vulnerable. I call for the police station for those areas to be open 24 hours.

In my electorate petrol pricing continues to be a bone of contention. Petrol is landed at the Gladstone port. A couple of weeks ago I had to travel to Brisbane and then up to Mackay. I found that Gladstone remained one of the dearest places in which to purchase petrol. The price of petrol at Carmila was cheaper at about \$1.12 a litre when the price of petrol at Gladstone was about \$1.18 a litre. Give me a break! I heard the member for Keppel talking about petrol prices. On a number of occasions I have written to the ACCC about petrol prices and it has refused to investigate. It has either said that it does not have the power or the matter is not within its jurisdiction. Somebody needs to get organised and review the level of profit that is made out of petrol prices. The petrol price in my electorate is down to about \$1.14 litre, but recently when I was in Brisbane it was 98c a litre. Some of that price difference could be caused by quantity, but all of it cannot be caused by quantity. For a number of weeks petrol has been down to below \$US60 a barrel. The price of petrol needs to be reviewed. I have a great electorate. I look forward to working with the people of my electorate in this term.