



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (7.30 pm): Mr Deputy Speaker Hinchliffe, I ask you to extend my congratulations to the Speaker on his appointment to the chair of this 52nd Parliament. The role of Speaker is central to the conduct and business of parliament and is an integral part of our Westminster system. As such, I look forward to his presiding over the healthy and often robust debate in this House. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate all re-elected members and especially welcome those newly elected. It can be a steep learning curve, but the satisfaction members will get from being able to help their constituents and shape Queensland's future makes it worth while. I look forward to working with all members over the term of this new parliament.

I am sure that I speak for everyone here when I say that the chance to represent our electorate and work for our constituents is a great honour and one that is worth any sacrifices we have to make in terms of our personal and family lives. I will echo the sentiments of many members here today in sincerely thanking my wonderful family for their support, their understanding and their encouragement during the last parliament, throughout the election and as I take my seat in this new parliament. We all know the effect being a member has on our family, and I truly appreciate their tolerance and understanding. I thank my wonderful husband, Ray, our sons, daughter and daughters-in-law and also my beautiful parents, Harold and Val Fox, whom I thank God are still in good health and who regularly listen to parliamentary proceedings on their home computer.

I would also like to express my thanks to the constituents in the Burdekin electorate for their vote of confidence in deciding to again choose me as their representative in parliament. It is no small honour, and I intend to give the best possible service and representation possible. I would like to assure Burdekin electorate residents that I have noted and will be looking to address those issues that they have identified as needing closer attention. I intend to represent all who live in the electorate equally and without favour. In such a diverse region, there will always be competing interests and ideologies, but I will be as fair as humanly possible and deal with each and every issue on its merits and look at how the issues affect those who live within the electorate boundaries.

Although it is certainly not the largest electorate in Queensland, Burdekin is one of its more diverse. It covers more than 18,000 square kilometres and is home to over 34,000 people. It runs from the northern suburbs of Bowen, out to the proud coalmining town of Collinsville, up to the twin towns of Home Hill and Ayr and includes in its northern region most of Townsville's southern suburbs and the Lavarack army barracks. It was designated for many years as mainly rural, particularly in the past, but Burdekin is increasingly being seen as a major contributor to the state's growing mining and export sectors. Abbot Point, north of Bowen, is already one of the state's largest export ports, with future expansion already underway and plans for it to become a major industrial processing and export hub.

We also look for the continuation and the completion of the missing link railway line that will complete the further extensions to Abbot Point. Currently, zinc and copper refineries as well as a meat processing plant are established in the Stuart industrial area just south of Townsville. While I maintain my strong opposition to any further heavy or extractive industry that may be noxious or noisy in the area, Stuart is ideally sited for the expansion of medium and lighter manufacturing and other similar businesses

that can be more acceptably located near residential areas. This is a particularly important residential area and it is growing enormously.

Aquaculture has become an increasingly important contributor to the Burdekin economy. While there are ongoing environmental concerns that need addressing, these ventures will play an increasing role in how the region can diversify and make the most of opportunity. Agriculture and horticulture are still major contributors to employment and growth in the central area of the Burdekin electorate and, despite recent downturns, continue to be the mainstay.

Sugarcane is coming out of a period of severely diminished returns which had a major effect on the towns servicing the industry. This downturn, as severe as it was, still had the benefit of stimulating the search for alternative crops and for the development of by-products, as well as driving the technological change that the industry is already famous for.

More work has been done on ethanol production, on cogeneration, on feedstock supplements for livestock and on other by-products in recent years. Much more work in recent years has been done in these areas than in any preceding period, and all Queenslanders will benefit from this work in the future. I do note the government's promise to mandate for five per cent ethanol, and I will certainly be looking to see the government implement this in the very near future.

Horticulture continues to play its part in the economy, as we can proudly boast of being one of the premier fruit and vegetable producing areas in Australia. Apart from the huge boost to Burdekin's wealth from the value of produce sold, it is a major employer of labour evidenced by the influx of workers from other areas of Australia and overseas during the season. Indeed, such is the effect of this annual migration that many small towns have found their decline reversed as they now house, feed, clothe and entertain their expanded populations. The backpacker market especially has contributed to the health and wealth of the Burdekin, as it has become a major stopover for those travellers looking to make some money before continuing on. Fortunately, this has not affected local people from gaining employment, as there is an ongoing shortage of labour across all sectors. The backpacker market is an enormous area and it is actually becoming a real market opportunity for so many people.

I am proud to say that through innovation, hard work and forward thinking the Burdekin electorate is enhancing its reputation as one of the finest in the state, but that is not to say that this progress has been easy. Seasonal conditions and commodity returns of course play a large part in determining an economy's growth, but for the most part these are out of our control.

What we are able to do, however, is ensure that the infrastructure and services are in place so that this growth can be facilitated and supported. This is the role of the government and, by extension, our role as members. It is our duty to our constituents to see that they have access to the necessary road, rail and port facilities to be able to transport goods and services across the state and across the world; to provide them with the services and facilities to establish businesses to meet future demand; to build, maintain and efficiently run the schools; to run the hospitals; and to run the emergency department and the police services that every citizen has a right to expect.

Our constituents demand that their future needs are anticipated and met with the supply of water and power and that they are not totally dependent on the vagaries of weather or season. Drought is an historical fact of life in Queensland and it is no excuse for failing to supply even basic water needs. In this modern world, electricity is as vital as food and drink, and planning to meet future demand and the replacement and upgrading of existing infrastructure cannot be determined by a political whim or need. It is the responsibility of government. The responsibility of government is to ensure that all residents share equally and that essential needs are met, regardless of geographical location, political affiliation or demographics.

I look forward to the role of shadow minister for environment and multiculturalism. Management of our environment is extremely important and there are many issues across Queensland and also within my electorate that I will be addressing. The area of Ayr and Home Hill, where I live, is a wonderfully multicultural area and it is actually that tapestry of the many cultures in the Burdekin that has made it what it is. A possibly unique situation that occurs in the shire of Burdekin is that the three levels of government are all represented by women. As shadow minister for women I am particularly proud to work with the federal member for Dawson, De-Anne Kelly, and Councillor Lyn McLachlan, mayor of the Burdekin. I add that all three of us have also been involved in the sugar industry at some stage in our lives.

An election always brings a rash of promises from both sides of the political fence and this election was no different in this regard. What was different was that many of the promises made by the government were not about new policies and initiatives to drive the state, but instead they were about fixing some very fundamental problems that already exist. Very serious problems still exist in our health and hospital system and they will continue to exist for years to come despite the promises made.

Child safety and education are also areas causing deep concern in the community and need urgent attention. Child safety is one of our very serious community problems. It is not one that wins elections. It

does not win votes. Children are our heritage and until we can address the very, very serious malfunctions that are occurring here and address attitudes across the community—and it is not just a government problem; it is an all-of-community problem—we have a long, long way to go.

At the start of this new parliament I am hopeful that these issues will be addressed and ultimately resolved for the good of Queensland. It is unfortunate that it seemingly took an election to get action on the many problems facing us. As a member of the opposition I will be closely monitoring how the government honours its election commitments. Both sides of the House have lessons to learn from the results of the election, but the government can be in no doubt that it is now on notice. It has had a reprieve but now has to prove that it has the plans and the policies to fix the myriad problems we face. It has to prove that it has the will to acknowledge the endemic culture of bullying that has surfaced in many departments and it has to have the resolve to wipe this out.

For too long the government has failed to plan for the future. For too long our infrastructure requirements and future needs have been ignored in favour of non-essential projects and initiatives. We have had footbridges instead of dams and stadiums instead of hospital beds. But the past has caught up. We are now subject to severe water restrictions in the south-east because of a failure to understand that droughts are an inevitable fact of life in Queensland. We are suffering from a shocking lack of beds for patients and overlong delays for treatment because of a lack of qualified staff, and we are losing more health professionals because of an antagonistic culture within the department.

I sincerely hope that in this new term the government does not again ignore the advice of those best qualified to give it. I expect it will not seek to politicise the issues and instead get on with the job it has been elected to do. The deplorable state of our departments calls for policies, not politics. I can reassure honourable members that the opposition is ready and willing to get the best for Queensland.

For the Burdekin electorate in particular I will be asking questions—questions about the \$8 million shortfall in funding for the Cerito Road project that was supposed to give sealed road access to Bowen Basin coalfields for Collinsville residents. Instead of the promised \$25 million, Bowen Shire Council has been informed that only \$17 million will be made available, resulting in a very expensive and very inadequate gravel-only road.

I will be asking why, after several years and many excuses, the new Ayr Ambulance Station, funding for which was promised in the 2004 state budget, has still not been built. I will be querying just what commitment the government has made to the Water for Bowen project and whether it really intends to build it now that it has been re-elected. This scheme is desperately needed by Bowen farmers facing reduced water allocations and salt intrusion. It is desperately needed to support the expansion of the Abbot Point port, which is needed to allow the Bowen area to expand and grow. It is needed by irrigators from Home Hill to grow their crops and it is still in limbo. It was an election commitment by the government to finally fund the stage 2 environmental impact study, but a curious allocation of \$45 million to a \$120 million scheme means nothing unless it gives a firm commitment to actually build the channel.

Townsville's Port Access road will again be high on my agenda as I seek to give residents in Townsville's southern suburbs relief from increasing heavy vehicle and traffic congestion. With the announcement of the cruise ship terminal for the Townsville port, which curiously did not seem to need an environmental impact study before it got approval, the situation can only get worse for these householders. Those householders who live in the Wulguru area along Stuart Drive experience some very dangerous traffic situations.

During the last parliament I raised the continuing problem of the chronic shortage of beds and staff at the Townsville Hospital and the inordinate delay for cancer patients needing radiation treatment. I also revealed that up to 25 emergency patients were queuing every morning on trolleys in hallways waiting for admittance to a ward. This situation has not changed. This prompted the Premier to promise an additional 100 beds during his campaign, and I certainly mean to hold him to that promise.

I will continue to push for a baseload power station in the north, for better roads, for more teacher aide hours and resources for prep school, for light and medium industry only at Stuart and for the north to share in this state's bounty. For far too long north Queensland has missed out.

I will keep track of the government's progress on all the promises and commitments made during the campaign to make sure they are honoured. This term the Queensland opposition will be intent on making the government accountable. We will be agitating for this government to actually do something rather than express surprise at events and ask for forgiveness for its failures. Failure is simply not acceptable anymore. Queensland needs action and plans for the future and we need them now. The government is on notice to perform, or else. There are no more excuses.

I thank sincerely and say how very much I appreciate my campaign committee members, the many people who worked for me, the National Party and Liberal Party members and wonderful friends who worked so hard during the campaign. I wish I could name them all, but I would particularly like to acknowledge Don Pickard, Jim Gist, Jan and Tom Callow and Terry Williams. A special mention must go to

Robyn Darwen in Bowen. This wonderful lady has motivated and enthused the many new members and supporters in the Bowen area.

It is the level of support from so many magnificent people that really gives me the strength and the courage to keep fighting for north Queensland. I again ask my family to accept my absences and tolerate the disruption to their lives. I reiterate how much I value and appreciate the sacrifices they make that will allow me to represent the Burdekin electorate as effectively as I can in this 52nd Parliament.