



Speech by

Steve Wettenhall

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard Thursday, 12 October 2006

MAIDEN SPEECH

Mr WETTENHALL (Barron River—ALP) (7.48 pm): Let me start by acknowledging the traditional owners and elders of the lands on which this parliament sits and of the lands included in the electorate of Barron River. It is a great honour to be elected to the Queensland parliament by the people of Barron River in far-north Queensland. Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to convey my congratulations to the Speaker on his election to that high office.

Among the many people it is my pleasure to acknowledge today, my family is foremost. Firstly, my heartfelt thanks to my wife, Amanda Shircore. Formerly a practising lawyer, Mandy lectures in law full-time at the Cairns campus of James Cook University, which is in the electorate of Barron River. She also undertakes postgraduate studies. Finding the time, energy and patience in her demanding schedule to run our household and support my candidature is testament to her selfless attitude and her remarkable capabilities. I also thank our children Daniel Louis Wettenhall and Gabriella Wettenhall who have so far cheerfully forgone family time to the demands of political life. I am very proud of them and I miss them very much when I am away.

I would also like to thank my mother, Esther Wettenhall, who at 83 and battling frailty and ill health is very disappointed, as I am, that she could not be with me this week. Her love, sharpness of mind, courage, creativity and inner strength have never deserted her in the face of many hurdles and hardships. Her core values of loyalty and devotion to family, compassion, respect for others and cherishing our natural environment are an outstanding example to me. Like many people who have moved to far-north Queensland from other places, our children's grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins live far away. Our friends are like our extended family. To all of them I extend my appreciation for their support in such a variety of ways.

I want to acknowledge all of the people who supported the Australian Labor Party's successful election campaign in Barron River. I acknowledge the members of the Marlin Coast and Trinity branches in my electorate, my colleagues the members for Cook, Cairns and Mulgrave and the party members in their electorates who collaborated to ensure each of the far northern electorates were retained by Labor. I acknowledge the members and officials of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, the Construction and General Division and the Mining and Energy Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, the Electrical Trades Union, the Queensland Nurses Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Maritime Union of Australia, the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and the Queensland Teachers Union. I acknowledge all of the members of the Barron River state electoral council and the campaign committee.

I acknowledge my friends and supporters who sacrificed their annual leave and much more to assist in the campaign and Sean Purcell and Carmel Ybarlucea, who is in the gallery tonight. I acknowledge our valued postal vote coordinator Sue Toms. I acknowledge my colleagues in the legal profession and, in particular, Mr Rowan Silva with whom I have worked for the last 10 years. Another colleague of mine Mr Jim Gibney is in the gallery tonight.

I acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues the Hon. Premier, the Hon. Deputy Premier, the Hon. Linda Lavarch, the Hon. Margaret Keech, the Hon. Geoff Wilson, the Hon. John Mickel, Mr Simon Finn, the Hon. Rob Hulls, Mr Brendan O'Connor, Senator Jan McLucas and Mr Alan Griffin. I acknowledge all the members, officials and staff of the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party, especially Mr Milton Dick, Ms Linda Holliday, Mr Chris Forrester and Mr Terry Wood. I acknowledge everyone else who contributed to the campaign to retain Barron River for the Labor Party and my electoral staff who I am delighted have decided to continue on in the electorate office of Barron River, Ms Cathy Lovern and Alana Davison.

Of this honour roll my biggest thank you is extended to my campaign director, the former member for Barron River, Dr Lesley Clark. Lesley was first elected in 1989 and served five terms as the member for Barron River and before that was a member of the Mulgrave Shire Council. After 20 years service to the people of the far north there was no-one better qualified to direct our campaign.

She is, of course, very well known and respected for her dedication, hard work and many achievements. Locally, she was instrumental in the development of the Trinity Inlet management plan and the creation of the Smithfield Conservation Park. She was a great friend of the local schools and the Cairns campus of the James Cook University. She was also a strong advocate for women in the parliament and in the Labor Party. She was a parliamentary secretary to the Premier, member and chair of the Parliamentary Committee for Electoral and Administrative Review and chair of the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee. I endorse the recommendations of the most recent report of that committee which are aimed at encouraging young people to take a more active role in our democratic processes and traditions. As a new member of that committee I look forward to contributing to its important work.

On behalf of all of the people of far-north Queensland and on behalf of the Labor Party and her former parliamentary colleagues I take this opportunity to acknowledge her contribution to this state, to the Goss and Beattie Labor governments and to the parliament. I wish her and her husband, Ross, every success in their life after politics.

I also acknowledge the role of my late father Peter Wettenhall in developing my interest in politics. He was an avid follower of current affairs and politics and would rarely willingly miss an ABC news bulletin or current affairs show, usually heard with the volume turned well up. He even subscribed to *Hansard*. It was impossible to grow up without sharing his interest in what was happening in our world. I know he would be proud that I stand in this parliament today to continue a family heritage of public service that started in Victoria 123 years ago and now spans four generations.

My great grandfather, Holford Wettenhall, first rose to speak in the Victorian Legislative Council in 1883. He moved the address-in-reply. Referring to the favourable economic conditions of the time he lauded the construction of great public works of the colony. He could have been talking about Queensland today. Ironically, amongst the business of the new parliament was a bill about water conservation.

In 1920 my grandfather, Marcus Wettenhall, delivered his first speech as the member for Lowan in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. He argued for the development of regional infrastructure and advocated more and better equipped schools in country areas to encourage people to settle and remain there.

Like each of my forefathers I represent a non-metropolitan constituency and it is my job just as it was theirs to make sure that equity in the provision of government infrastructure and services is maintained across our decentralised state. I am very proud of Labor's modern, rural and regional policies such as the Blueprint for the Bush. I look forward to taking part in the regional ministerial forums that will have an important role in their implementation.

People in the Barron River electorate live in the rapidly growing newer communities in Redlynch valley and along the northern beach communities of Cairns know as the Marlin Coast. They live in and around the sugar cane farms on the coastal plain, in older suburbs like Stratford, Edge Hill and Freshwater and up the range into the World Heritage rainforests around Kuranda where I lived for 12 years. We come from many cultures and work in a variety of occupations. Both the university and the airport are located in the electorate.

Tourism, primary industries, aviation and services are the main stays of the local economy. Although many young families like my own are proud to call Barron River our home, our population is also ageing. Both old and young will benefit from the government's commitment to fund a new neighbourhood centre on the Marlin Coast, and a new neighbourhood centre at Kuranda is under construction. Both these projects have my total support as they demonstrate Labor's unswerving commitment to those in our community with special needs.

It is well known that this Labor government is passionate about education. There are many projects in Barron River as a result. For example, under construction is the new primary school campus at the high school site in Kuranda, stage 1 of a new high school campus adjacent to the primary school at Redlynch

and new learning areas at Freshwater State School, including designated areas for music practice and tuition, which is a personal passion of mine.

But education is much more than facilities. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of teachers in both the public and private schools in Barron River and around this state. I do not agree with recent commentary that our students are brainwashed by left-wing propaganda masquerading as curriculum in our schools. On the contrary, in studies of society and environment taught between years 1 and 10 in the state of Queensland I am glad that my children will be taught to appreciate the different perspectives people have of values and how cultural and other differences can influence these perspectives. I want them to learn about the democratic process, social justice, ecological and economic sustainability and peace. And I certainly do not want my children made subject to a 'one size fits all' national curriculum imposed by Canberra.

The electorate we now call Barron River encompasses the traditional homelands of many diverse Aboriginal groups and languages. Aboriginal people comprise a significant population in Barron River, especially in the township of Kuranda and in the nearby communities of Korowra and Mantaka. I will work with Indigenous people in a joint effort to find solutions to unemployment and a range of legal, health and housing problems that stubbornly persist. I hope the experience I have gained over 14 years providing legal assistance to Indigenous people not only in Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands but throughout Cape York Peninsula, the Torres Strait and the Gulf of Carpentaria will be helpful in this new challenge. Because of the success of Murri courts in Queensland and similar jurisdictions in other states, I would be very pleased to advocate for the introduction of a Cairns based Murri court should that be a project that finds support in the local community.

The electorate of Barron River has an estimated population of 48,000 and is situated in the local government area of the Cairns City Council. The combined population of the surrounding local government areas of Atherton, Cairns, Cardwell, Douglas, Eacham, Johnstone, Herberton and Mareeba is predicted to grow by around 30 per cent over the next 20 years. Growth of that magnitude in an area of such environmental sensitivity must be carefully managed. Accordingly, I am particularly pleased that the government made an election commitment to develop a statutory regional plan for far-north Queensland to be modelled on the south-east Queensland plan. Over 8,000 individuals enthusiastically took up the opportunity to take part in the development of the south-east Queensland plan in one of the largest community consultations ever undertaken in this state, and I expect similar enthusiasm for this process to be demonstrated in the far north.

There is no doubt that the people of Barron River are very concerned about their environment. Consistently high votes for Greens candidates prove it. In the 2006 election Greens party candidate Denis Walls standing for Barron River for the fourth time achieved 14 per cent of the primary vote. A high proportion of Greens voters preferred the Labor Party to the alternatives. Therefore, I consider I am obliged by my constituents to advocate sound environmental policy. Far North Queensland 2025, the statutory plan, offers the best opportunity yet for our community to realise a shared vision for a just and sustainable future for far-north Queensland, and I look forward to taking part in that exciting process. Managing growth in our regions is also about building and improving our schools, our health services, roads and public transport infrastructure. Providing incentives for people to use public transport such as the government's 35 per cent fare reduction are very worthwhile policies. As the population grows, it will be necessary to adjust and extend our existing bus routes and make provision for future express busways and even possibly light rail options.

The issue of climate change from global warming is of worldwide importance, but it is of special significance in the Wet Tropics of far-north Queensland and the electorate of Barron River. Arguably, nowhere in Australia will the impacts of climate change be more dramatic. It is now urgent that we reduce greenhouse gas emissions and take steps to adapt to the impacts of climate change on our community in the north. Rising sea levels coupled with increased cyclone intensity pose a significant threat to the Barron River electorate, particularly to the major settlements that are located on a thin band of low-lying coastal plain that are vulnerable to flooding and wind damage, particularly when heavy and sustained rainfall combines with high tides and cyclonic storm surges.

Climate change is also likely to cause more frequent and intense heatwave conditions and longer dry seasons in the Wet Tropics. Each degree of extra temperature lifts the cloud layer by at least 150 metres, leaving ecosystems like cloud forests on the many peaks of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area high and dry. Not only will this threaten many species with extinction; it will reduce stream flows in the dry season when water for human use is needed most. A one degree increase in temperature which is considered a certainty is predicted to shrink the range of animals and plants found only in the Wet Tropics by 40 per cent. A mid-range prediction of a 3½ degree temperature increase would wipe out half of these species that exist nowhere else in the world.

Already we are witnessing the effects of climate change in our region. Following extended dry spells, fires are burning in areas in my electorate not seen before. Queensland has recently experienced its hottest years on record and Cyclone Larry was one of the most devastating cyclones ever to cross the

coast of Queensland. Climate change is likely to have a major effect on community safety and wellbeing, water supply and the biodiversity of our region. If any of these scenarios are coupled with high sea temperatures that cause coral bleaching events, the twin pillars of the region's tourism economy—the reef and rainforest—look increasingly fragile.

It is therefore vital that every opportunity is seized to learn as much as we can about climate change and prepare wisely for a very uncertain future. The good news is that the world-leading science needed to inform our progress comes from my electorate, and I congratulate all of the scientists who are engaged in this most essential effort, particularly those who are at work at the James Cook University and the Australian Tropical Forest Institute, the establishment of which the government has supported with funding of \$6 million. The Labor government is making many important advances on climate change, none more significant than the historic introduction of the Vegetation Management Act.

I also welcome the government's commitment to establish a Climate Change Centre of Excellence which will build on the Queensland Greenhouse Strategy and the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. It is a great shame that the federal Howard government rejected the Beattie Labor government's proposal to establish a national centre, and it is equally shameful that the federal government still refuses to sign the Kyoto protocol and condemns Australia alone with the United States to the status of an international outlaw on this most pressing issue of our time. But it is not only government that can have an impact on climate change. There are many ways individuals can take action too. I have decided to offset the greenhouse emissions from my air travel on parliamentary business by purchasing carbon credits which invest in Australian clean energy developments. In this way, polluting activities like air travel can become carbon neutral. I also welcome the government's new cyclone strategy, part of which will involve convening a cyclone summit to examine and analyse the response to Cyclone Larry and what may be learnt to improve our preparedness for the 2007 season and our ability to respond to disasters of that kind in the future. I renew my invitation to the Premier to hold that summit in Cairns, which is a place that, because of its topography and settlement patterns, is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of cyclones.

In conclusion, I congratulate all members on their election to the 52nd Queensland Parliament and thank them for hearing me. I thank all of the staff of the Parliamentary Service for their kind and helpful welcome and I commit myself to the peace, order and good government of this state and to the welfare of the people whom I am privileged to represent.