



Speech by

Linda Lavarch

MEMBER FOR KURWONGBAH

Hansard Wednesday, 7 March 2007

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mrs LD LAVARCH (Kurwongbah—ALP) (9.16 pm): This year marks the 10th anniversary of my election to this parliament as the representative of the people of Kurwongbah. It is the fourth occasion that I have spoken in the address-in-reply debate and, as I have on previous occasions, I wish to place on record my appreciation to the electors of Kurwongbah for their faith in me. It remains a great privilege to serve in parliament, and I will continue to do my utmost to advance the interests of my local community.

The address-in-reply debate is one of the few parliamentary occasions which enables members to address a wide range of issues which they believe to be important. In my period in this House I have used this debate as an opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges facing our state and our nation. It is interesting to note how the public debate has shifted in the last decade, but in many respects the underlying challenges remain with us.

In my first speech to parliament following the Kurwongbah by-election in May 1997 I concentrated on what I believed at the time to be a deep unease in the community about the performance of public institutions. This was not only the institutions of government but also the private institutions such as the church, major business entities, trade unions and the banks. I argued that there was a real sense of disillusionment with these institutions which I thought was symptomatic of a nation which was in a profound state of transition. This transition was from the certainties of the old Australia—what Paul Kelly in his 1994 book *The end of certainty* called the Australian settlement, which featured belief in white Australia, economic protection for industry, centralised wage fixing and the arbitration system and began at the time of Federation in 1901. These initial pillars of Australian public policy underpinned the federation of the states.

This old Australian settlement had by 1997 largely given way to a new policy model based on multiculturalism, economic openness and enterprise bargaining. I argued that many in the community longed for the old certainties and were unconvinced that Australia was on the right track. If this feeling of disillusionment had a name then it was Pauline Hanson. In 1999 I spoke in my first address-in-reply debate. This followed the 1998 state election, which saw the election of 11 One Nation MPs and the narrow defeat of the government of Bob Borbidge and the first term of the Beattie Labor government formed with the support of the member for Nicklin, Peter Wellington. The underlying sentiment of discontent in the mid-1990s had exploded into political action in the form of One Nation.

The problem with One Nation was that it was a collection of views about what people did not like and, as a political movement, One Nation never had a positive underlying core belief. Opposing things will get a fair way in politics, but ultimately one has to stand for something. An old proverb says that he who stands for nothing will fall for anything. Judging by the number of conspiracy theories espoused in the debates in this House during the time of the One Nation members, that could not be more true.

In my 1999 speech I argued that the response to the unease and uncertainty that brought about One Nation required leadership and I explored what leadership consisted of. By 1999 Queensland and Australia were in the seventh year of economic growth and, while unemployment was falling slowly, jobs,

jobs, jobs and the five per cent unemployment rate target were the mantra of the day and of the 1998 state election.

I note that in 1996 in the electorate of Kurwongbah the unemployment rate was 8.2 per cent and at last report in December 2006 it was 3.4 per cent. Kurwongbah reached the five per cent unemployment rate target long before the rest of the state and the nation, and it has enjoyed low unemployment for more than six years. The revolutionary Beattie Labor government Breaking the Unemployment Cycle program, which was introduced in 1998, has created more than 1,300 jobs in the Kurwongbah electorate alone.

In 2001 I used this debate to contrast the differences between the symbolism of our system of government and the reality. The fact that this debate is in response to the speech of the Governor is part of the symbolism of our system. The Governor has no role or responsibility to actually determine the program of the government, yet Her Excellency's speech is couched in terms of 'my government will do this' and 'my government will fund this program'. The reality is very different as, of course, the Premier and the ministers determine the policies and priorities for this state.

The gulf between the reality and the perceptions of what government can and cannot do actually goes beyond the forms of our constitutional structures. The forces of globalisation, the power of international corporations and the inevitable decline of state power compared to federal power means that Australian state governments have limited scope to actually shape events. Members of the public think that we have much greater power than we really have. Sure, we can do good things and help individuals and communities in a range of ways, but real power is not found in the hands of state governments in a small nation.

In 2004, my contribution focused again on the reality of the situation in Queensland and the need to ensure that, as a state, we played to our strengths and maximised our natural advantages. This is the essence of the Smart State strategy and it remains as essential to the government's program now as it was three years ago.

From this short trip down memory lane, I think I can make some observations about the shifts in the public debate and the challenges confronting this state. Firstly, a further 10 years of economic growth, falling unemployment and a vibrant private sector have impacted positively on the mood or sentiment in the Queensland community. The disenchantment that led to One Nation's success in 1998 is still present, although to a much lesser degree, and at least unemployment is not feeding into the problem.

However, in 1997, hand in hand with high unemployment rates came strong feelings of job insecurity—that is, those who were unemployed were uncertain that any jobs would be there tomorrow. Ten years on and the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation has once again undermined the confidence of workers. Insecurity is now felt on two fronts: job security and security of maintaining working conditions. Twenty-six March marks one year since the WorkChoices legislation was introduced and as we celebrate International Women's Day tomorrow I am mindful that it is the women of Queensland who are at the greatest risk from the erosion of their working conditions by virtue of the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation.

I believe that there is still much to be done to build public confidence and understanding in our system of government and our public institutions. Just as importantly, the system needs reform. Before I speak a little more about the reforms of our system of government, I want to touch on public perception and the reality of those who make up our parliament, that is, all of us here—the elected members euphemistically known as politicians.

In my first speech in 1997, I said that the election of each of us here is not a victory for the individual or the party to which we belong, but it is a victory for democracy. While we come here from different backgrounds and with different beliefs and values, I would like to believe that we have one thing in common—a commitment to our free democratic society. I would also like to believe that we have each stood for public office not for personal aggrandisement but because politics and being a member of parliament gives us the chance to do good, to make a difference in our communities and to improve our state. Of course, the paradox is that while Australians and Queenslanders uphold and cherish our democracy, politicians are scorned. In other words, we love the system but hate the people whom we elect to ensure our democracy. But the system endures to provide our freedoms and opportunities, and that is the promise of politics.

However, the question remains that, if government is a chance to do good, how do we close the gap between the promise of politics and the negative perceptions of politics and politicians in the community? Of course, we are each responsible for our own behaviour and the image we project as members of parliament, and we are only trustees of our democracy. It is our individual actions as trustees that will determine the health, wellbeing and shape of our system of democracy for future generations. We owe a fiduciary duty to our electorates and future Queenslanders to make the best decisions possible for the right reasons and for the public good.

If the first point is about the role of government, the second is about how we govern. Someone once said that state governments in particular campaign in poetry but govern in prose. If one stops and thinks about it, that is very true. Through the grab for power by the Howard federal government, the most centralist federal government since Federation, state governments are finding themselves more and more relegated to service delivery agents. State governments are and should be more than just about service delivery. State governments are community builders.

Returning to my previous point about the need to reform our system of government to ensure public confidence and understanding, I take this opportunity to endorse the Premier's call for a constitutional convention. The WorkChoices decision of the High Court confirmed that the reach of the federal government in areas initially given to the states really means that we need to revisit our constitutional structures and, in particular, the division of power between levels of government. The federal government can effectively legislate in all areas of life in Australia. Be it through the use of corporations power, the interstate trade and commerce power or by acting on international obligations, the national government has close to unfettered power.

For one, I do not think that that is a bad thing as Australia needs a powerful national government. However, it is not a good thing to be without a corresponding counterweight to balance that national power. A balance of power between the states and the Commonwealth was the central design feature of the federal compact and, if states are now unable to counterbalance the national government, some new mechanism needs to emerge. That is why the Premier is to be commended for his foresight and leadership in promoting the constitutional convention.

It is said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore, it is critical for the health and prosperity of our nation that there be checks and balances on power. Our federation has served us well to diffuse power and ensure that we have a balanced system of government, and it is imperative that we retain those checks and balances on absolute power.

Along with the Premier's proposals which go to counterbalance strong federal powers, I would add that at the proposed constitutional convention consideration should be given to a federal bill of rights. A bill of rights operating at a national level could be a further mechanism by which a diffusion of power is achieved. For the good of all Australians it is critical that John Howard commits to such a convention. I look forward to observing the work of the 2008 proposed constitutional convention.

In conclusion, over the past 10 years I have been privileged, humbled and honoured to serve the electorate of Kurwongbah. Since 1998 when the Beattie Labor government came to power, Kurwongbah has seen a frenzy of activity in the provision of state government infrastructure and services. I will continue to lobby hard to get results for my electorate. I thank my campaign team, my family, my electorate staff past and present, and good friends and family for all their support.