



Speech by

**Rosa Lee Long**

**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

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### **ADDRESS-IN-REPLY**

**Ms LEE LONG** (Tablelands—ONP) (4.02 pm): As previous speakers have said, it seems a long time since the election and thanks seem to be a bit belated. I would still like to say that it is a great honour to again have the opportunity of representing the people of the Tablelands electorate. I am humbled by the increased support that they have shown me through the ballot box. I will continue to work hard on their behalf.

I also want to thank those people who helped both through the last term, including my staff, and during the election campaign. I would particularly like to thank those people who turned out on election day to man all 28 booths and to scrutineer, including my daughters, Jacqui, Michelle and Vicki. Special thanks to Peter, May, Joyce and Graham, who put in extra hard yards around election time. I am grateful for all of their efforts.

Recovery is continuing from Cyclone Larry, although in some cases it was very slow due to a number of causes. This was highlighted at a public meeting held in Innisfail at the end of last year. Whilst General Cosgrove issued regular newsletters it was good to hear from grassroots people. They advised that red tape, bureaucracy and trawling through insurance claims was a big factor in delaying progress in many cases. Additionally, the tradesmen shortage meant that costs of repairs and replacements of buildings escalated as the supply and demand factor kicked in. Many tradesmen left as they could not sit around doing nothing while waiting for approvals which were too slow in being made by councils and insurance companies.

Industry wise, dairy continues to fight hard to get back on its feet after Larry in March and Monica in April which dropped heavy rains for months. This continuous rain rotted pastures and, with the cold of winter, there was little or no regrowth. That, coupled with high fodder prices, has placed a heavy financial burden on this industry.

In addition, a large percentage of cows developed mastitis because they went un milked for days after Larry due to power cuts to the dairies. The treatment of this disease is very expensive and many cows did not respond. The significant proportion of once productive herds were sent to the meatworks. Over the following months many more cows died calving due to stress related to the cyclone and from footrot and other reasons relating to those conditions. All of this is at a time when dairy farmers are getting pitiful returns of about 32c per litre for their milk which retails at \$1.70 and more a litre. I call on the Beattie government to release its \$1.25 million election promise to this industry now and not tie it to a federal government matching contribution, as this is a Queensland industry which needs Queensland government assistance now.

Bananas are coming back for those who are still persevering with that crop. Some growers have decided not to re-establish due to high workloads in this industry and the difficulty in finding good, reliable workers. Tree crops such as avocados, lychees, longans, macadamias and citrus, for example, still have years to go before returning to full productivity. These horticultural crops are those which many farmers diversified to after both state and federal governments closed down the tobacco industry and forced deregulation on the dairy industry. There is still a great need here for secure ongoing assistance.

Pawpaws, hydroponics and flower farmers are also trying to get their heads back above water. There has been a bumper mango crop this year. That has been good news. Good, reliable pickers were in short supply. The season is now drawing to a close. I want to emphasise that enormous hurdles do still remain and ongoing support will be needed before they all get back to an even keel.

Cyclones have not been the only things impacting on our horticulturists. A mandatory code of conduct for this industry was promised during the last federal election in 2004 by the then leader of the Nationals, John Anderson, to be delivered within 100 days if they won. It still has not been delivered. Following intense industry pressure during the state election campaign only a half-baked code that still fails to meet industry needs was announced but is still yet to be implemented.

The enduring theme for all primary producers has been the financial devastation brought upon them under the label of free trade. Both Labor and Liberal-National federal governments, backed by every state and territory government, have rammed this globalisation theory down our throats, nailing industry after industry to the cross while promising it would be good for us.

We saw the collapse of the Doha round of international trade negotiations mid last year because neither the European Union nor the Americans would agree to put their primary producers and their farmers through anything like the same kind of grief Australian and Queensland producers have been battling for years. The biggest trading blocs in the world will not wear it but our governments force our people to the wall for it. It is time we stopped this idiocy. We need a Premier who will stand up for our Queensland producers at the COAG quarterly meetings and fight for Queenslanders being destroyed by this policy.

Something we all need is a safe, efficient transport network, particularly with the continual cutting back of rail services in rural areas. The long-awaited upgrade of the Kuranda Range Road needs to be put in place as quickly as possible. This is especially so if we believe in the effects of climate change and the possibility of tidal surges and increased threats of cyclones. This would mean that there is a duty of care to improve this inland link sooner rather than later if for no other reason than for the safety of coastal residents.

This is a major connection not only between Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands but also between Cairns and the cape to the north and Cairns and the gulf country to the west. It is regularly cut during heavy rain periods or when there is an accident. Due to increasing traffic loads, travellers are often forced to creep along at 20 or 40 kilometres per hour for kilometre after kilometre when caught behind the ever increasing number of heavy transport vehicles using this road.

This happens to me often. While the heavy transports do eventually pull over, we almost immediately find ourselves behind another one. There is only one lane going down the range and one coming up with limited overtaking opportunities. This is a major highway and is signposted at 80 kilometres per hour. It is high time that we had at least two lanes going each way and it is needed much sooner than the 10-year time frame current proposed. Additionally, the existing Kuranda Range Road is so bendy that it makes ordinary, healthy travellers sick and is not conducive to ambulances taking the sick or injured to the Cairns Base Hospital. That is why we need more health services on Tablelands. But for those who must travel to Cairns for any reason, the sooner the better as far as this project is concerned.

When I delivered my address-in-reply speech after the 2004 election I spoke about the underresourcing of hospitals, about how patients were dying, about lack of staff, ward closures, insufficient doctors, nurses and so on. I hoped then that a massive improvement in the public hospital system was not too much to hope for. But even after Patel, several inquiries, budget increases and so on at the grassroots level of public hospital care, nothing much has changed. At the end of last year I was advised that a lady in her 80s who was a patient at the Atherton Hospital was told that she needed surgery in Cairns. She was told that there was no ambulance available and she would have to find her own way down the windy, bendy mountain range to the coast.

The so-called 'new' Queensland Health system and the Ambulance Service that is supposed to cover all pensioners free of charge, even if it does charge others multiple times, is still not getting it right. Their combined efforts instead produced a result where a Queensland, a lady aged in her 80s, was left to sort herself out. Thankfully, following representation this lady's problem was resolved, but how many others are confronted with a similar dilemma that we do not hear about? And let us remember that this is the Ambulance Service for which we are now being forced to pay a tax on our electricity accounts so, we are told, we can have a world-class service. Instead, ambulance officers are tied up ramping up with patients on board for hours at a time outside the Cairns Base Hospital instead of getting back to their base stations so they are available for any new emergency.

The health minister has said repeatedly that the underlying problem in our health system is a lack of doctors, especially in rural and regional areas, yet this government insists on bonding a mere 50 doctors per year. There are many more than that number leaving Queensland Health for various reasons each year. I was recently approached by a Sydney based Australian trained eye specialist eager to come to the tablelands—a rural and regional area—to establish a practice in cooperation with Queensland Health. His

problem is that Queensland Health will not even partially fund equipment to allow common procedures to be performed in one of our hospitals. This specialist is so keen to relocate that he offered to put a substantial sum of his own cash towards the cost of this equipment. It is hard to see how it could get any better than that, but still Queensland Health refused to move. It makes it impossible to believe then that there are no doctors available. With this example in mind, not only doctors but specialists are willing and are available but yet again it is Queensland Health that is getting in the way and leaving its people to suffer. To make matters worse, this specialist has told me that he has colleagues also keen to move from Sydney to country Queensland who are watching his experience to see how it goes. I do not think they would be at all encouraged by what they are seeing.

Queensland Health also needs to be more flexible in its approach to resolving issues. We in the far north are all aware that the Cairns Base repeatedly suffers from overcrowding and understaffing and has ambulances ramping up for hours at a time. The Mareeba Hospital is less than 50 minutes away by road and should be much more highly utilised. With a speedy upgrade of the Kuranda Range Road, this time frame would be even less. It would be efficient to fund extra services into existing health facilities rather than build expensive new ones in Cairns, and patients facing hours of waiting at the Cairns Base could be receiving treatment at Mareeba in less than 60 minutes. Surely it can hardly be any less onerous for the people of Cairns to make the same trip the other way.

There is an equally clear need for a new hospital at Atherton. The existing facility is ageing and a new facility offering improved services is past due for a growing southern tablelands population. It is not as if there are no doctors and specialists available. Instead, as I have said, they exist and new ones are eager to move into our rural areas with a little encouragement from the Beattie government. Foreign doctors are all well and good in the short term, but many of them cannot speak the language well enough, do not understand our health system and are not adequately supervised, not to mention the inability of patients in pain or distress to understand them.

The related need for extra nurses also needs serious attention. The academic training stream has failed to provide nurses who stay in the system, with the average age of nurses at 42 proving the academic system is not working. We should not have to rely on imported nurses. Most people firmly believe that we need to return to the ward based training system that served us well for decades to work in tandem, if necessary, with the university based system. Queenslanders cannot wait for the federal government, so the Beattie government must bite the bullet and spend a substantial amount of the \$9.7 billion on health giving scholarships to hundreds more of our own youth. The health and lives of Queenslanders deserve better than they have been getting.

The Beattie government has been telling us for years about the shortage of tradesmen which we are experiencing in this state. This was again highlighted by the task of rebuilding after Larry. There is a tremendous need for training initiatives which are currently not there to further encourage small business to take on young apprentices. This would be much better than keeping kids at school unnecessarily when many of them would be much better served by getting hands-on experience topped up with the normal block training. The existing lack of tradesmen proves that none of this government's previous efforts have so far worked. There is no excuse for young Queenslanders to face a future of casual and part-time jobs and poor job security while at the same time we are talking about importing workers because of a lack of a skilled workforce.

The ongoing issue of public liability continues to plague businesses, community groups and the public. More needs to be done to help break the suing society mentality as the impact is still far too high and the burden far too great on the majority of ordinary Queenslanders. Another long-term issue is that of water supply and management. The reluctance to build dams for ideological reasons has left not only the south-east but even the wet far north with insufficient storage for existing demand, let alone our continued population growth. As the present floods demonstrate, water is there but the dams are missing. All far northerners will be looking for swift action on the promised \$6 million start for the Nullinga Dam project. This dam will help secure water supplies for the future of a large productive agricultural area while also helping ease the pressure on urban supplies.

We need to remember that using water for irrigation is not some kind of environmental crime. It is vital to all of us that it be as secure as possible. However, security of supply is becoming an increasingly difficult issue for many farmers in my electorate. For example, there are farmers who the department told could drill for water in a particular part of my electorate. They were given an undertaking that should sufficient water be found they would get a reasonable allocation. Some farmers invested amounts of up to \$350,000 each putting down bores. Water was found and notification has recently been received by those farmers of the allocations, which, considering the undertakings they were given and the expense incurred, were far short of expectations.

Additionally, under the latest management plan, the Barron water resource plan, an extra 4,000 megalitres available in the area known as above Tinaroo Dam is still unallocated. Under the same WRP, area based water licences are to be converted to volumetric licences. There is still a conflict with the department after years of consultation on the right rate of conversion regarding these licences. It is

imperative that this conversion rate is right and the Beattie government has a duty of care to make sure that that happens as it could mean the difference between a livelihood or no livelihood for many of these farmers who have mostly produced between two to four crops a year on this acreage.

One dairy farmer I was speaking to the other day waters his acreage—he has 17 hectares—all year round. He has to fertilise it heavily and water it all year round just so he can continue with his dairy farm. That would mean that he is using much more than 6.6 megalitres per year. That would amount to something like 25 megalitres per hectare or more. The department has suggested 6.6 megalitres per hectare, but this will produce on average only one crop. Two crops would take 13.2 megalitres and three or more crops around 20 megalitres or more. The farmers feel that they have fairly compromised on a conversion rate of 10 megalitres per hectare, but that certainly would not be enough for the dairy farmer I mentioned. Farmers also feel that departmental officers are not listening to them. It needs to be remembered that this is not extra water being given to these farmers; it is simply supposed to be a recalculation of the water they are already using. It certainly should not be a way to push them out of business and should not be taken out of the extra 4,000 megalitres that was supposed to be on top of existing licences. I emphasise that it should be completely separate from the extra 4,000 megalitres which should be allocated to those who drill for bore water and those who are underallocated.

There is so much publicity around these days about climate change and greenhouse gas emissions from coal-fired power stations and so on. The Tully-Millstream hydro-electric scheme in my electorate must be put back on the table and reconsidered. It beggars belief that the Beattie government is investing in more and bigger coal-fired power stations and is exporting more and more of this non-renewable fossil fuel while saying no to a clean 500-megawatt hydrostation because it would affect a minuscule bit of the Wet Tropics which could, I am sure, be exchanged for a comparable area elsewhere. It is past time that the narrow, blinkered and extreme green view against this project was overturned. It makes no sense at all to save a few hectares of forest while pumping hundreds and thousands of tonnes of greenhouse gas out of coal-fired stations every day to provide an equivalent amount of electricity. It is hypocrisy to support the continued mining and export of shiploads of this polluting mineral and spending millions trying to make it clean while refusing to fund such an environmentally fantastic project as the Tully-Millstream.

It is also hypocrisy to try to make ordinary Queenslanders feel guilty about the greenhouse gas emissions that are caused by their normal daily activity while rejecting this kind of clean hydropower generation in the wettest part of the country. It is like the ludicrous idea of allowing all of our rivers to simply flow out to sea without dam storages, then trying to separate the salt from the sea water through expensive desalination plants and then having to decide what to do with the excess salt. That is not smart at all.

I want to register my opposition to the long running and increasing power grab by Canberra. In the recent few months we have seen it stretching out its hands and trying to grab water, education, health, ports and universities away from the states, further eroding states' powers. I note the Premier's ministerial statements of late last year and recognise the serious changes that have occurred, particularly over the past 40 years, which have gradually and seriously impacted on the three-tiered Westminster system that was introduced at Federation just over 100 years ago. Australia is still made up of a federation of states and while many of us might complain that we do not get a fair deal from Brisbane, under a centralised government in distant Canberra, I believe that it could be much worse.