



Speech by
Murray Watt

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard Wednesday, 22 April 2009

MAIDEN SPEECH

Mr WATT (Everton—ALP) (4.35 pm): Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your election to your high office which you richly deserve. I also wish to acknowledge at the outset the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

Mr Speaker, I come to this House determined to make a difference—for my electorate, for my state and for the world around me. It is an enormous privilege to have been elected by the people of Everton to represent them in this House. Each of us is extraordinarily fortunate to be one of only 89 Queenslanders each term to be given this opportunity. I will never forget what a privilege this is.

I am conscious that my election comes at a time of great economic uncertainty for Queensland and the world. One thing I am certain of is that this means there is no better time to enter this parliament, to step up and help my constituents, and Queenslanders as a whole, negotiate the stormy seas so that they all may share in our state's bounty and all may contribute to its development. I humbly pledge my willingness for this task.

As with all new members, there are countless people on whom my election depended. I want to begin by acknowledging the support and guidance of the previous member for Everton, Rod Welford. Throughout my campaign I was constantly reminded of the affection with which local residents hold Rod. On many doorsteps I was regaled with tales of Rod's past assistance and his involvement in local community organisations. He leaves very big shoes to fill.

I know that Rod will also be missed by his cabinet colleagues for his thoughtful contributions across multiple portfolios. To this day, I respect the insights, the progressive values and the eloquence that Rod brought to the task. On the other hand, I need to hose down any expectation that I will follow his practice of swimming 2.5 kilometres every morning in the Everton Park State School pool. I often point out that while I am about 15 or 16 years his junior he is about 15 or 16 times fitter than me! I can, however, promise the residents of Everton that the famous Rod Welford billboard will be replaced—and this time with the head of a member with hair. And there he is in the gallery.

I also pay tribute to the former member for Kurwongbah, Linda Lavarch, who also retired at the recent state election. Following last year's state electoral redistribution, the Everton electorate picked up the suburb of Eatons Hill from Linda's electorate of Kurwongbah. Linda was an exceptional local member. She was a tireless advocate for community groups and individual citizens of her electorate, and she served all too briefly as Attorney-General of this state. It is a measure of the woman that in her brief retirement she has already visited the Kingdom of Bhutan to promote health care for young women. I have no doubt that she will continue this contribution to the wellbeing of others in her post-parliamentary life.

I wish to thank the many local branch members, some of whom are here today, who tirelessly supported my campaign week in, week out for months. I will always be grateful to the many members of the Albany Creek, Everton Park and Mitchelton ALP branches for taking a punt on a young bloke and for backing it up with months of hard work on the street corners and hills of Everton. In particular, I wish to thank Mary Nash, Bernie Douglas, Laurie Nugent, David Hunt, Carolyn Healy, Rebecca Michael, Damian Barry, Ted Farnsworth, Cassie and Trent McCartney, Jayden Dixon, Scott Casey, James Gillard, Jill

Mason, Barry Welch, Fiona Hartley, Dimitri Glianos, Ian and Barb Hungerford, and Scott and Petrina Reichman—all of whom contributed week after week throughout my campaign.

Of course, no campaign can be run without some key individuals calling the shots and determining overall campaign strategy. For this I single out Bob Hartley, David Nelson, Alana Tibbits and Tom McCartney. Each of these people went well beyond the call of duty. I know that firm friendships were forged in the heat of our campaign and that these will last for many years to come.

I was very grateful for the substantial support I received from a number of trade unions in my campaign. As a former employment lawyer, I can vouch for the fact that without the efforts of trade unions thousands of Queensland families would be struggling to make ends meet tonight and every other night. I especially want to thank the AMWU, the LHMU, the miners union, the QPSU, the FSU and the QTU for their generous assistance in my campaign.

Having been an active member of the Labor Party for nearly 20 years, I cannot possibly mention by name each member of parliament, party member, official or supporter who has encouraged, advised or supported me. I simply thank you all, as I do the many personal friends who assisted my campaign and who remind me regularly of the world beyond politics.

The one person whom I do want to mention individually is our Premier, the member for South Brisbane. As many members know, I served as the Premier's chief of staff for nearly five years across a range of portfolios beginning in education. I am proud of the many reforms we worked on together. I am prouder still that my election coincided with hers as the first elected female Premier of Australia. I know of no more intelligent or dedicated person in politics, nor one with as much integrity. These are the qualities that I intend to display in my own conduct as a member of parliament. It takes a special kind of person to lead a state through these tough economic times, and I know from personal experience that Queenslanders could not possibly have anyone better in that role.

I come from a very strong Labor family. My father, Neville, and my mother, Kathy, are the kind of hardworking, caring and honest people that our society depends on. From birth, they instilled in me and my brother, Glen, the importance of looking beyond your own self-interest and thinking about the broader needs of those around you. They were and are wonderful parents and are now continuing that tradition with their four grandchildren. I thank them and Glen for their constant love and support.

My extended family were also responsible for my political leanings, primarily by subjecting an impressionable boy to discussions—or, more accurately, tirades—about the corruption, injustices and disdain for democracy of the Bjelke-Petersen National Party government. The grandparents, uncles and great-uncles who bestowed those words of wisdom can take great credit for the values of fairness that I hold dear today.

I also wish to acknowledge my wife, Cynthia, and our son, George, who turns two on Thursday. Many members are familiar with Cynthia through her years of service as a ministerial adviser in the Beattie and Bligh governments. They know well her fierce intellect and political passion. What they do not know as well is the love, strength and support that she bestows on her family each and every day. Watching Cynthia become a mother has been like watching a beautiful flower blossom, and she grows further and further every day.

Like all fathers, I believe George is the smartest, most beautiful child ever born, and I demonstrate exhibit A in the gallery. He has been making regular contributions throughout the day and no doubt will continue. Every single day he brings joy to our lives. Being George's dad is the best thing about my life and I look forward to what each new day with him will bring. Our family is already becoming familiar with the sacrifices that public life imposes. However, we all went into this with our eyes open and we are taking great care to carve out family time as well. Cyn and George, I love you and thank you for everything.

Of course more than anyone I thank the voters of Everton for their trust in me. I absolutely loved campaigning—primarily because it gave me the opportunity to meet thousands of local residents, each with their own story to tell. I met some fascinating people during the campaign and I relish the prospect of being Everton's voice in parliament over the next three years, and hopefully beyond.

I grew up in the suburbs of Brisbane and I am very pleased to have now returned to the suburbs, both to settle with my family and now as an elected representative to this House. Everton is largely a residential electorate. While it does contain some light industry and plenty of small businesses, more than anything it is the kind of electorate in which people choose to live and bring up a family.

One of the big advantages of a largely residential electorate like Everton is its abundance of community groups. I had a lot of contact with the electorate's schools, P&C associations, chambers of commerce, churches and seniors, sporting and community groups throughout my campaign. It is in these groups that you see the best in human nature—people prepared to give their own time to foster their community and to nurture the children, older people and the environment that benefit from their time. To date, I have been able to assist a number of these groups obtain funding or negotiate the maze of government, and I am looking forward to building that relationship further in the years ahead.

It is not surprising given Everton's residential character that the kinds of issues that were raised with me during and since my election campaign are those that impact on people's quality of life—roads, traffic, public transport, schools, safety, housing and the need to preserve remnant bushland, parks and creeks. I am looking forward to helping improve Everton's quality of life through determined advocacy on these issues in the years ahead.

There is, however, one issue that was raised by Everton voters that I would like to specifically mention—the government's commitment to build a new Queensland Children's Hospital. While in electing me a majority of Everton voters endorsed the government's position, it is undeniable that on election day a large portion of the electorate held serious concerns about that position. I respect those concerns, and I think they reflect the high level of satisfaction with the care provided by the Royal Children's Hospital over the years. On behalf of Everton families, I pay tribute to the skill and care of all of the staff at the Royal.

Sadly, however, local residents had been misled about the new Children's Hospital for months by dishonest scaremongering by the LNP and by some in the media. Inaccurate claims were made that bed numbers would be reduced and that the Royal was about to be closed. This made it very difficult to have a discussion based on facts. But the facts are that almost all international research shows that consolidating hospital resources in one site delivers better care than splitting those resources between two sites which are only four kilometres apart.

As a parent of a small child, I completely understand the desire of parents to have a high-quality medical facility nearby. We have all made those rushed trips to the hospital in the middle of the night and I know well the fear that accompanies them. That is why the government's commitment to build a dedicated children's emergency department at the Prince Charles Hospital is such good news for families in Everton.

High-quality emergency care will be available for Everton children within a few kilometres of their home from 2012 when the new emergency department will open. This will be backed up with a world-class, single Queensland Children's Hospital in South Brisbane. I give one anecdote to demonstrate the benefit of this commitment. At a function shortly after the election, I met a specialist who currently splits his time between the Royal Children's Hospital and the Mater Children's Hospital. He pointed out to me that on that very day he had driven from one hospital to the other six times to treat patients and that this was not unusual. Think about the extra children he could have treated that day in the time he spent in his car. Think about how many extra children that adds up to over the course of a year. Just this one example I think demonstrates why building a single children's hospital will lead to better health care for Queensland kids.

When it comes to deciding whether the new Children's Hospital will benefit children or not, I choose to believe the experts over the LNP. I believe paediatricians not political game players. I am grateful that my appointment as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health will give me the opportunity to play an active role in delivering the new Children's Hospital, as well as the dedicated children's emergency department at the Prince Charles Hospital. I guarantee that, while the care received by local children at the Royal Children's Hospital has been excellent, the new Queensland Children's Hospital will provide even better care.

There are of course a few issues that I intend to pursue in my time as a member of this House that affect our whole state in addition to my own electorate. As I have already mentioned, I have worked in government for several years. The upside of this is that I have gained knowledge and contacts which will help me to get results for my electorate. However, I must admit that working in government you also learn how difficult it can be to get things done, whether because of funding needs, existing policy decisions, political opposition or other factors. Consequently, it can make you overly focused on what is achievable rather than what should be done. It can also distance you from the real world impacts of decisions and actions of government on individuals and communities.

I am pleased to say that campaigning over the last few months really reconnected me with my basic values. It has reminded me of the things that I fundamentally believe should be done as well as those that can be done, which is just as well as I believe it is those values that differentiate the Labor Party and its representatives from the alternative offered by the LNP.

In the time available, I can only cover a few of my personal priorities while I serve in this House. The first is job security. The government's core commitment at the recent election was to protect Queensland jobs, not cut them. One of my other previous occupations was that of an employment lawyer. Day after day in that role, I represented people who had been sacked, often without warning and sometimes without the payment of any of the entitlements that they were owed. I still remember the anguish that this caused people. I pledge to join the fight to protect jobs and the self-respect that comes with it, both in Everton and around the state.

My second priority is to tackle entrenched disadvantage. While recently the economic climate has deteriorated, in recent times we have lived years of plenty and still there remain too many families and individuals with poor living standards and the poor health and housing that goes with those living standards. Those poor living standards are most seen in our Indigenous communities, and they are a

special priority, but we must work every day to give all Queenslanders the standard of living that all human beings deserve.

My third priority is to help improve the quality of education that our children receive. Many of my family have a teaching background. Not surprisingly, then, the importance of a good education was drummed into me from an early age. I believe there is no better vehicle to improve a person's life chances than to provide them with a high-quality education. I have therefore focused much of my time as a candidate and as a member on helping Everton schools obtain the funding they need to give their students the best. This is something I will continue in the years ahead.

Fourthly, I want to play a role in promoting environmental sustainability. I think it is fair to say that the Labor Party has been a late convert to the need to protect our environment. This is understandable given our historic mission has been to improve the material living standards of those less well off and the fact that this economic progress has largely come at the cost of our environment. However, we now understand that the real challenge of the 21st century is to improve living standards while retaining a habitable planet. I think this will possibly be the public policy conundrum of our times, and I look forward to being part of solving it.

Tied to this is another of my priorities and one that is highly relevant to my electorate. One downside of suburban life is its lack of public transport in many cases, and Everton suffers from this problem. It results in congestion on our roads and hurts our quality of life. I pledge to work for better public transport in partnership with federal and local governments in Everton and elsewhere.

Finally, in terms of my priorities I want to assist in lifting community participation in our democratic decision making. In recent years it has been fashionable, particularly on the right wing of politics, to debase the role of government in building a better society. This is possibly best represented by this quote from Ronald Reagan—

The most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'

During my campaign doorknocking, I was struck by how out of touch this view is with the community at large. Far from wanting government out of their lives, Everton residents wanted government to do things. Of course, at times they were critical of things that governments had done, but I saw no sign that people wanted government to cease to exist. What people did want was for government to be more responsive to their needs.

Queensland has a proud record of community participation in democracy. We became the second jurisdiction in the world to publish an official record of parliamentary debate in *Hansard* in 1864. In more recent years it took a Labor government to introduce community cabinets, regional parliaments and e-petitions, but we cannot deny that despite all of these improvements the level of disengagement with politics is growing. The evidence is all around us—low political party membership, falling voting and enrolment numbers, and rising informal voting rates—but contrast this with the strong opinions within the community about what governments should do. We need to hear that people retain strong views about politics and governments but reject using existing structures to communicate those concerns.

I do not claim to be able to solve this disconnect right now. Possibilities may include online referenda and citizens assemblies. These concepts no doubt have their flaws, but I think it is worth exploring how we better engage the community in decision making, and this is something I will undertake in my time in this House.

In conclusion, while Queensland remains the best state in Australia and Everton remains the best place in Queensland, there is much to do to preserve our unique lifestyle, prosperity and environment. I relish the opportunity to help tackle these challenges. We have a great head start with our intellectual and natural resources. We are a tolerant and respectful community. We have excellent political leadership. I believe that no challenge is too great. We can do it. I pledge to use each minute of my time in this House to advance the interests of the residents of Everton to the very best of my ability.