




Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Tuesday, 5 June 2012

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (2.49 pm): I rise to make my contribution to the address-in-reply to the speech by Her Excellency Penelope Wensley, Governor of Queensland. I congratulate Madam Speaker on her historic appointment as Speaker of the 54th Parliament. I also pay tribute to former Speaker John Mickel for his service and his fairness.

At the March election in Mulgrave we defied the trend and suffered a two-party preferred swing of a little over 6½ per cent. This was a real achievement given the significant state-wide swing that was experienced. There are many things that may have contributed to this result. It may have been the much talked about *NQ Labor* brochure based on the classic drop NQ Lager that told people to ‘choose their MP like they choose their beer’. Locally the LNP and Katter only offered up ‘light filtered’ promises. With me, I promised they would get full strength, premium, double-hopped, 100 per cent pure local. But, most of all, it was a well-run local campaign with strong personal support. I want to take this opportunity to thank all of those people who worked on my campaign, whether as booth workers, volunteers or supporters. I thank everyone who put their name and face to one of my ads—because, despite standing on the edge of the abyss of electoral defeat, they still believed in me and wanted me to continue to be their local champion, in many cases regardless of their politics.

I want to say thanks to my campaign director, Jim Smith, or Uncle Jim as I call him, and his wife, Ros; Diana and John O’Brien for coordinating the Innisfail campaign; Murray Daniel, who despite appearances was a calming influence; in the south, Councillors Mark Nolan, Ian Rule and former Councillor Bill Horsford, and Councillor Rob Pyne in the north, all of whom have worked so well with me on many local projects; local government candidates Leigh Dall’Osto and Zac Murphy and their respective partners Glenn and Sharon; Nathan Lambert from the national office who made a special guest appearance in the last couple of days but still managed to make an important contribution; and the amazing Bronwyn and Mick Hodgkins, who, unlike Tony Abbott, never said no to anything. I want to especially thank my family, Warren and Linda Pitt, Dionne and David Berry, my grandma Doreen Dodd and my father-in-law, Bill Grant, and his wife, Patricia.

Being a minister from regional Queensland with a young family is an enormous challenge. If patience is a virtue, then my wife, Kerry, must be the most virtuous woman on the planet. I thank her so much for her love and support, for being two parents instead of one—essentially a single mum when I was away—and for holding our little home together amongst some very difficult and challenging times. Most of all, I thank her for being the best mum in the world to Tristan and Layla and for keeping my eyes focused on the job ahead.

There has been much commentary on why the election result was so convincing for the LNP including the campaign that was undertaken by the ALP state-wide. Personally, I have always tried to play the ball, not the man wherever possible. In Mulgrave I was determined that the best way to go was to run a positive local campaign based on achievements. I could sense that people were tired of the personal attacks in what was not only a longer than usual eight-week campaign but also the virtual election footing that we had all been on for almost six months.

Not too long after the election, I was walking down the corridor on level 5 at Parliament House and someone asked me how things were going. I said, 'If Parliament House were a zoo, I'd know how it felt to be in the rare and endangered species enclosure.' Being smaller in numbers than the previous opposition does not mean that the job of opposition itself has got smaller. In fact, with the type of government we have seen to date, it could be argued that the task just got a whole lot bigger.

Since the election, the seven remaining Labor MPs have worked closely together and have already formed a special bond. In many ways, we are an unlikely bunch—a blend of experience and enthusiasm all committed to working together to keep this new government to account and remembering our former colleagues who are no longer here. Not always is it great to be part of history, particularly on the losing end, but the 'Magnificent Seven' will by definition be the hardest working opposition in Australia.

We have announced portfolio responsibilities, and for me that means shadow Treasurer and shadow minister for trade, energy and water supply, main roads, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships, and sport and recreation. Here in the parliament I have been tasked with being Manager of Opposition Business. I look forward to tackling the range of areas that I have been tasked with. However, I want the people of Mulgrave to rest assured that I will continue to work hard to represent their needs and, more broadly, those people in Far North Queensland who, let's say, may wish to get a second opinion.

The elephant in the room when it comes to a speech following this crushing defeat is, 'What about the asset sales?' I still believe that the principles that drove some people to protest against privatisation were the same principles that saw our government vote to put food on the table for so many families who benefited from construction work on our unmatched infrastructure program. Yes, tough decisions needed to be made. They may have been necessary due to the GFC, and some will still argue they were the right decisions. But this was about not bringing people into the tent to explain what the options were. In this regard, quite simply, it was a breach of trust. I want to put on the record that I apologise to the people of Queensland for this.

My bet is that there is a standing brief in Treasury that talks about privatisation and measures for cutting costs right across government. What services can be outsourced? What schools can be closed? But it is ultimately about priorities and making choices. There has been a lot of talk about this being a can-do government. There is nothing special about this. Given the power of executive government in this state, government can pretty much do whatever it likes. However, I think the government needs to start by having a long, hard look at this slogan. It is not just about what they can do; it is about what they should do. That is the sort of government I want for our state, and that is the kind of Queensland I want to live in.

On what quite possibly may have been a turning point in the election in Mulgrave—certainly a day I will never forget—I showed up to work on Tuesday, 13 March to discover that my electorate office had been vandalised. The words 'communist gay, communist nigger loving party' were spray-painted across the front window. The messages were deeply disturbing to all who saw them and particularly upsetting to my wife, Kerry, who is a proud Indigenous woman. The community rightly condemned this behaviour as an act of cowardice. It was not representative of the fine people of Queensland or of Mulgrave. In particular, the use of the 'n' word was most hurtful. We do not ever use that word in our language because we have learned from the bitter lessons in the United States of America of that sort of unacceptable racism.

When I was asked by a journalist why someone would do this, I replied that my office had increasingly been getting hate mail including threats of physical violence against me. Some commentators suggested it was because of my stance on the civil partnerships legislation, fuelled by the Katter's Australian Party television ad that was condemned by so many. Others suggested it was because of me and my family for standing up for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for so long. If it were either of those things, I wear these as a badge of honour and will never take a backwards step.

My mum gave me the best advice in my life: to always speak up for those people who cannot or will not speak up for themselves. This position I hold—the position that all of us hold in this House—allows me to do just that. But whether it is graffiti attacks like this or shameful ads by Bob Katter, this sort of bigotry and intolerance has no place in Australian politics—in fact, no place in Australian society. It is completely un-Australian. I said it at the time, and I will say it again now: 'To the cowards responsible for this: man up and tell me about your views face to face.' We do not resort to this kind of behaviour in our democracy. We settle our differences at the ballot box, and I think the people of Mulgrave did just that.

They say when it rains, it pours—and that is not just because I live in the wettest part of Queensland. Only a day after the graffiti attack, it was my dad's birthday and after being in Brisbane for the day I flew back home to celebrate. When I landed in Cairns I had a message that mum had been taken to the emergency department at the Cairns Base Hospital with chest pains. It turned out to be a mild heart attack. The stress of the election campaign and the incident at my office had taken its toll. But do not for a second think my mum is not tough. She is so tough, in fact, she drove herself to the hospital when she was having the attack. Having been the wife of a politician for about 20 years, for a long time I thought she was suffering from a broken heart from all the time she spent away from my dad. As it turns out, this was kind of

true. Follow-up tests only this week found that she had scarring on the bottom of her heart that indicates she had a heart attack prior to the recent one, but none of us knew about it. All of this is just a sign that she needs to start taking things a bit easier and start looking after herself more instead of always putting other people first. We are all glad you are okay, mum, and we will do whatever we can to make your life just that little bit easier.

I was proud to stand before the voters in Mulgrave at the last election, confident that I had delivered on every one of my funded election commitments from 2009 and more. In the southern corridor of Cairns, work has commenced on stage 1 of the Bruce Highway upgrade—\$150 million to put in overpasses; one at Ray Jones Drive and another at Sheehy Road at White Rock to relieve daily traffic congestion—due for completion by late next year. There was \$5 million towards the construction of a cyclone shelter near Isabella State School, the only one announced for the Cairns area. When it is not being used as a cyclone shelter, it will be an indoor sports centre. I want to see a PCYC in there so that we can give kids in our local area more things to do so they stay out of trouble. It is due for completion before the 2012-13 cyclone season.

There is the \$9.8 million investment in the Early Years Centre at Bentley Park to help young families. There is the fast-tracked \$1.3 million for a 44-place kindergarten at White Rock, one year ahead of schedule. There is the opening of the new Bentley Park Queensland Transport office so people can have services closer to where they live, rather than travelling to Cairns. Plus there is agreement to hand over land at Petersen Park to help the Edmonton Storm Rugby League Football Club. More than 350 kids and over 200 families in the area are involved in this football club, as well as other local rectangular field users, to enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle.

I have made it my mission to widen Wrights Creek Bridge. As many know, it is one of the most infamous sections of road in the Far North. This project has been brought forward by more than eight years, and more than \$10 million in funding from the federal government has been secured to fix it, with work starting in the second half of this year.

While all of these things have been delivered, I know that I will need to continue to argue for things just like them to keep pace with our growing local area. I will continue to fight for a southern health facility at Edmonton. Labor went to the 2009 election with a two-pronged strategy that included the Cairns Base Hospital redevelopment and acquisition of land for a new health facility. Both of these were achieved, but the battle now is to convince the planners who say we do not need something until 2021. Despite it being an election commitment for Labor, I want to get the support of the member for Cairns and the member for Barron River to push for the construction of a \$32 million special school for Far North Queensland. There is an identified need and it would make an enormous difference to the lives of so many local families.

Labor's local achievements for the Innisfail area were many, but I am most proud of the \$14 million to replace the Jubilee Bridge, the more than \$40 million to replace ageing sewerage and water treatment plants and \$2 million to restore the library service, which was operating out of a temporary facility since Cyclone Larry in 2006. On this point, I am obviously pleased that the LNP government has agreed to match Labor's commitment. I am very pleased that the questions that I have asked have come through and I want to thank the new local government minister for honouring the previous statements during the election campaign from the now Treasurer's office. Over the past three years Labor increased the number of doctors in Babinda from one to three, ensuring the continuation of the local GP service. In Gordonvale we saw a new \$2 million, 24-hour ambulance station and safeguarding of land for sport and recreation worth more than \$2 million. I will continue to fight for increased police numbers in the southern corridor as well as a replacement fire station for Gordonvale, possibly on a new site near the Bruce Highway to better service Goldsborough and Little Mulgrave.

Over the past three years I have worked hard to show the residents of Yarrabah that I am a person who will stand up for their community with the new \$16.3 million health facility and new ambulance station, \$800,000 to build a new women's shelter, \$1.9 million to build the new Yarrabah Library and \$7.5 million on new and refurbished housing. But there is still much more we can do together—work that I had already begun—like resolving land tenure issues to give certainty to trustees, including sorting through the mess of Katter leases; finalising the town plan with council to bring outside investment into Yarrabah for economic development and local jobs; development of a family-friendly tavern, continuing to reduce levels of alcohol related harm and working towards an exit strategy for alcohol management plans; initiating a joint state-federal feasibility study for water based transport options; transitioning Gurriny Yealamucka Health to a full community controlled health service; and continuing the housing rollout and securing first home ownership under 99-year leases. Despite what those opposite might say, we are months—not years—away from the first person obtaining home ownership under legislation introduced by Labor.

The other thing that I have learnt is that often it is about fighting battles that just have to be fought. I was honoured to work on behalf of the families of Vicki Arnold and Julie-Anne Leahy. I fought hard—and succeeded—in having a new, third coronial inquest opened into the murder case that just about every person I know in the Far North thinks is more than just a little bit wrong. I look forward to the coroner's

response. I fought against my own government on crocodile management issues; worked with the Rail, Tram and Bus Union to save the jobs of two Queensland Rail track workers from Innisfail who had been deemed surplus to requirements; and lobbied to prevent the closure of small schools at Bartle Frere and Bellenden Ker. All of these are examples of what people expect their local member to do—to not take things lying down and to fight for what is right.

Many of those opposite conveniently or deliberately forget that for seven out of the last 10 years Labor delivered surplus budgets in Queensland. The exceptions were the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the GFC and the unprecedented period of natural disasters of last year. Before we hear the usual cries of going bust in a boom, hopefully the experience of being in government is sobering for those opposite and they will realise that the so-called rivers of gold were actually spent keeping up with population growth in this state—delivering more teachers, more nurses and more police officers. Ours is an economic record to be proud of. Right now Queensland is on the threshold of an amazing lift-off due to the work of the previous Labor government with an enormous opportunity for jobs growth. Labor's focus was on delivering for families—people who live, work and go to school in electorates just like Mulgrave. Whether it was through the abolition of the ambulance levy to save 1.4 million Queensland families and small businesses \$113 on their electricity bills, a permanent change that saw ambulance services remain free for all Queenslanders; or the building and purchasing of more than 7,000 new social housing dwellings, providing a home for more than 24,000 people; or delivering nearly 100,000 jobs because we stuck to our building program to keep thousands of Queenslanders employed; or the rolling out of preschool to every little Queensland and moving year 7 into high school—these were all the achievements of a Labor government that, irrespective of the election result, will be well regarded in years to come for the reforms it undertook.

During the final year of last term, my life and workload changed dramatically when I was elevated to cabinet as minister for disability services, mental health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships. To serve in cabinet is a responsibility and a privilege experienced by very few and I am proud of the things that I, along with my office and hardworking departmental staff, achieved. During this time I oversaw and continued many initiatives. These included the launch of the Learning Earning Active Places, or LEAP, Strategy to close the gap for the nearly 80 per cent of Queenslanders who live in urban and regional areas who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and Just Futures, the Queensland government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander justice strategy, to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system. September 2011 saw the biennial Queensland Disability Conference come to Cairns where I released Absolutely everybody, Queensland's groundbreaking 10-year disability strategy, as well as the Carer Action Plan 2011-14 which focused on the varying needs of carers. I was proud to finish the work started by my father many years ago by introducing the Forensic Disability Bill 2011 and the Forensic Disability Service which provides a therapeutic model of support for those people on forensic orders with a sole diagnosis of intellectual or cognitive impairment. I was elected chair of the national Standing Committee on Community, Housing and Disability Services and relished the chance to be a member of the COAG select council working with the Australian government to lay the foundations for the National Disability Insurance Scheme to help put an end to the postcode lottery that can dictate funding for people with a disability in this country.

As Queensland's first minister for mental health, I talked often about the one in five Queenslanders who will experience mental health issues every year. Over a lifetime it is nearly one in every two people—that is, your friends, your family, your workmates. It touches nearly every person in our community. I jointly launched the antistigma campaign Change Our Minds, which recognised that a person can treat their mental illness but they cannot help how they are treated because of it. This was followed soon after by the launch of our new mental health community services plan Supporting Recovery 2011-2017—the first comprehensive plan of its kind in Australia. It was all about developing a person-centred and recovery oriented mental health system that aimed to stop the need for a person to end up in a clinical setting and stay in the community in their own home where they are most comfortable. I was honoured to lead the development of what we hoped would be the first Mental Health Commission for Queensland. This was about giving the issue of mental health the funding it deserved and the status to reflect the prominence of this very important issue in our community. Our plan meant that every dollar of the nearly \$1 billion spent on mental health services would be better targeted and better managed, not simply managed within Queensland Health. But most of all what I loved about all of these portfolio areas was that they were all about people and each and every day I was honoured to meet Queenslanders who may have been written off by some but still had so much to offer.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all of my former ministerial office staff for their tireless work, in particular my chief of staff, Meg Frisby, who I still contend was better than anyone at what she did. Meg was aided and abetted by my electorate staff Andrew Talbot and Coral-Leah Kemp based in Gordonvale. Thanks for your friendship, hard work and for believing in me enough I guess to keep all of our jobs.

Call me old fashioned, but I have always been about underpromising and overdelivering. The LNP has raised the expectations of people with its promises and now it is in government it must finally reveal the detail behind the policies and actually deliver on them. That is why we have argued so stridently our concerns about the bypassing of the committee system for its election commitments, because the details

are not always understood or put front and centre during an election campaign. This House has a job to do, and that job is to scrutinise legislation and argue a case for and against that legislation. Many people would have noticed that, when it came to new commitments during the campaign, Labor ran pretty lean because of our goal to bring the budget back to surplus a year early by 2014. All eyes will be on this government as to what the true cost will be to fund its election commitments. However, the impact has been made abundantly clear to those already on the receiving end of cuts.

There is no doubt that the people of Queensland have spoken. There are very clear messages for Labor from this election and unless these are heeded we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. People tell me that what they expect from their local MP is that they work hard and that they are willing to stand up for their local area. I hope that I have been able to consistently do both of these things. In short, I have unfinished business and I want to take this opportunity to thank the people of Mulgrave for again putting their faith in me to get on with the job. I will continue to be a fierce advocate for my local area and, as ever, I am optimistic and excited about the future of Far North Queensland and our great state.