




Speech By
David Kempton

MEMBER FOR COOK

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ADJOURNMENT

Scarth-Johnson, Ms V, OAM

 **Mr KEMPTON** (Cook—LNP) (10.39 pm): Vera Scarth-Johnson was born in 1912 in Yorkshire, very near the birthplace of James Cook. Vera was sent to finishing school in Paris, where she found little of interest except for the garden. Vera later took up modelling to support her studies at both the Leeds College of Art and the St Albans College of Art. She worked for a Leeds market garden until her grandfather, a wealthy manufacturer, by now resigned to her curious choice of career, gave her £2,000 to start a piggery and a market garden of her own.

In 1947 Vera emigrated to Australia, settling initially in the Wide Bay district, where she purchased a small property near Bundaberg and became the second woman in Queensland to obtain a sugar assignment. Vera sketched and painted flowers in her spare time and by the mid-1960's began her long association with Kew Gardens. Vera's collecting trips took her travelling over much of Australia and around the Pacific Islands. Captured by the beauty and rich flora of the Endeavour River Valley, in 1972, at the age of 60, Vera settled in Cooktown and, with the aid of Aboriginal friends from the local Guugu Yimithirr nation, began collecting and recording native plants of the region.

Inspired by the early botanical work of Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander and Captain James Cook's voyage of discovery, Vera set out to complete botanical illustrations of the flora collected by Banks and Solander. I met Vera in 1988 when asked to assist with the documentation of her gift of the collection to the Cooktown community. We became great friends and I would often go to extreme and often dangerous lengths to collect plant specimens for Vera only to see her cast them aside saying, 'I have painted that already.'

I became a trustee of the growing collection and, after nearly 10 years of community lobbying, we secured funds to build Nature's Powerhouse in the wonderful Cooktown Botanic Gardens. Vera was tall, slim, distinguished and very beautiful and was quick witted and quick to speak her mind. Vera did not suffer fools easily and there was no beating around the bush—she made her straightforward views known to all, from high-profile scientists and politicians to farmers, fishermen and children.

Vera was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday honours list in June 1996. A rare shrub, *Argophyllum verae*, commemorates her name. Vera died in May 1999. There are over 160 illustrations in her collection housed in Nature's Powerhouse. I was honoured to travel to Cooktown last Friday to attend the annual general meeting of the Vera Scarth-Johnson Foundation and officially hand over the trusteeship of the collection to them. I congratulate the enormous voluntary efforts of these friends of Vera who have preserved not only her collection but her memory.