



Speech By
Hon. Anastacia Palaszczuk

MEMBER FOR INALA

Record of Proceedings, 26 March 2015

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE

Cunningham, Hon. JI



Hon. A PALASZCZUK (Inala—ALP) (Premier and Minister for the Arts) (9.40 am): I move—

1. That this House desires to place on record its appreciation of the services rendered to this state by the late Hon. Junita Irene Cunningham, a former member of the Parliament of Queensland and Minister of the Crown.
2. That Mr Speaker be requested to convey to the family of the deceased lady the above resolution, together with an expression of the sympathy and sorrow of the members of the Parliament of Queensland, in the loss they have sustained.

Junita Irene Cunningham, better known to all of us as Nita, was born in Bundaberg on 12 February 1939. Nita truly loved Bundaberg and its people, and it was there last month that I was honoured to speak at her funeral at the request of her family. It was an occasion to remember her service to her local community and our state as well as her dedication to the Labor Party. At the 2006 state election Nita retired as member for Bundaberg and I was elected in Inala, so our paths did not cross in this House. However, I met Nita and heard enough from my father, Henry, to be well aware of her contribution to public life in so many areas.

Nita was elected to our state parliament at the state election held on 13 June 1998. On 4 August that year Nita was given what she described as the privilege of leading the address-in-reply debate to the Governor's opening speech for the 49th Queensland parliament. That was her inaugural speech in this House. Her words then give us an insight into the depth of her commitment to her community and our state. In that speech Nita spoke of the need for people to have confidence in our democracy and the need for open and honest government. She called it the most basic right of all Queenslanders. The issues she identified then are all still relevant almost two decades later. She spoke of community concerns about unemployment and job security and even what she described as the continued sale of our assets. One could say some things never change. Other issues she identified were the need for affordable health care, the personal safety of elderly members of the community and the concerns of young people for their education and their future.

Nita also devoted a large part of her inaugural speech to the Bundaberg community, the community she loved so dearly. She described Bundaberg as a modern, progressive and very beautiful city in the heart of a rich sugarcane and small crops belt. She spoke of the Bundaberg region; its wonderful climate and superb quality of life; the hospitality of its residents; its diverse economy; its sugar industry, rum distillery and the variety of fruits, nuts and vegetables growing in the district; its busy fishing industry; its many tourist attractions; and its position as the southern gateway to our Great Barrier Reef. Nita clearly loved her community. Her own words make that obvious as do her own deeds in the service she gave to Bundaberg and our state.

In 1988 Nita was elected to serve on the then Bundaberg city council. She became the first woman to serve on that council and, as she remarked regarding her first term, she was the only woman on the council. However, three years later, at the 1991 council election, that changed

dramatically and the new council consisted of six women and three men. By the time of her 1998 inaugural speech in this parliament, Nita noted that there were then eight women and three men on the council. She remarked it was the highest proportion of women on any council in Queensland's history and possibly in Australia. It is women like Nita who have provided the leadership and inspiration to so many other women in public life. In 1991 Nita was elected as Bundaberg's first female mayor. She was widely regarded as a very effective mayor and she oversaw many programs that gave Bundaberg a new image and its residents a renewed sense of civic pride.

In the local government arena Nita took a wider role than councillor and mayor. Throughout her years of local government service, Nita also held significant positions such as executive member of the Urban Local Government Association of Queensland, chair of the Bundaberg and District Local Government Association and chair of the Bundaberg and Burnett Counter Disaster Committee. Nita served as mayor until being elected to the state seat of Bundaberg in 1998.

During Nita's time in parliament she served as the chair of the select Travelsafe committee from 1998 to 2001 and she was a member of the estimates committees from 1998 to 2000 and in 2004 and 2005. Her local government experience served her well here and she was a logical choice by then Premier Peter Beattie to serve as minister for local government and planning. She served in that role from 2000 until 2004. She was a perfect fit for that ministry and she made an important contribution to the betterment of Queensland during her time in the cabinet.

Nita was also devoted to her Labor Party. Her daughter, Anne Harding-Smith, said her mother loved the Labor Party and she had been a visionary in her public roles. Anne said of her mother, 'She was a people's politician and always promoted Bundaberg, even taking local produce to parliament.' It is true that even in cabinet meetings Nita never missed a chance to promote her local community and its needs. Former minister Robert Schwarten tells the story of how Nita would bring to cabinet lots of those big, red, juicy strawberries grown in the Bundaberg region. Ministers would gratefully eat them and remark on how big and tasty they were. Nita would say, 'You know we can't grow them without water. That is why we need the Paradise Dam.' Finally that lobbying saw the government commit to build the Paradise Dam.

In all the tasks she undertook, Nita Cunningham set high standards for those in public life. In her inaugural speech she expressed her belief that people want politicians with a high standard of ethics to contribute to a more informed public debate. She said they wanted more dignity in the parliament; they wanted politicians who could ensure our environment was protected for the generations to come. At the same time she said that we must ensure that any such protection is not used as an unreasonable excuse to stop progress. These were the fundamental beliefs, the standard of behaviour and the expectations she set for herself.

Following Nita's retirement from the parliament, she remained heavily involved in the Bundaberg community just as she had been throughout her entire life. Nita never forgot her city, its region or its community. She championed them all of her life. We should never forget Nita Cunningham's contribution to the Bundaberg region and to Queensland. She was warm; she was a lady in every sense of the word. She was polite, intelligent, engaging and passionate about her family, her community and her party. I do remember that before the last election campaign I met with Nita and she said, 'Annastacia, wouldn't it be lovely for Bundaberg to be returned to Labor?' Today in this House we have the return of a Labor member for Bundaberg.

I place on record today our thanks for the years of service that Nita gave to the institution of our democracy and to the Queensland community. On behalf of the government, I take this opportunity to extend my sympathy and that of this House to Nita's children, Anne and Glenn, and to the rest of her family and friends.