




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (10.28 pm): I rise to speak on the address-in-reply. Firstly, I would like to say that it is with great humility that I stand in this House re-elected by the electorate of Mount Isa. It is something which makes me very proud. It is an area that I enjoy and I value the people that I live with out there and represent. It is very flattering to be returned with an increased majority by those people that I represent in what is a very vast electorate.

I need to thank all of those people who helped me in my campaign including Del George, George Ryan, George Tipping, Steve Wollaston, Steve Malone, Les Carter, Garth Power, Wayne and Diane Reeves, and Steve Borthwick. Many people worked tirelessly on the campaign. I especially would like to thank my family, particularly my mother, Susie, and my sisters and their children who came up to help me. It was a good time and I was very pleased to be returned with an increased majority.

I would like to reflect on the result of the election. I think it caused a lot of interest, going from such a large majority of the previous government. I would like to make the observation that the one thing that stood out to me in the election and progressively since I have taken an interest in politics is that people are becoming cynical with the system. A significant poll was released before the state election saying that people are becoming more disengaged with the process. I share this parliament with many well intentioned and very good members of parliament, but I think the system is failing us. I truly believe that. In a unicameral system, which we have inherited here in Queensland, I think it is unhealthy to have a system dominated by two parties. We have a very diverse range of interests.

The two-party dominated system is being rejected in other parts of the world because it does not deliver for the individuals effectively. Despite the best interests of everyone in this House and the virtues of each party that I would agree with, there is room for more parties in here and more robust debate. It is my proposition that that provides greater longevity to legislation that passes through this House. If there is more competition in the House then there is more chance of legislation having longevity, and we would not experience what we are experiencing now where we had a record majority before, ramming their agenda through unopposed, and now we are spending the first six months or 12 months of this term repealing it. I do not think that is delivering for people. I think that is the reason they are becoming disengaged and they are not inspired as they were by the parties. Despite our best efforts, I think the system that we have inherited is failing people.

I will reflect on some parts of that in terms of my first experience here in the parliament. I would have to say now that a lot of it was pretty unpalatable. There were a lot of personal attacks experienced in my first term in parliament which I think was a good awakening as to how it can be in here. I think that had a lasting effect on me. I will reflect on some negative issues from my first term in parliament. An example of where the system is failing is when the fair milk mark legislation was introduced into this parliament which was virtually cost-free legislation that delivered for dairy farmers. I visited the public hearings just to listen to farmers saying, 'Please deliver this,' and the Queensland Dairyfarmers' Organisation saying, 'Go for it, fellows. This is good stuff. This could save a dying

industry.' It really broke my spirit that night to see the parliament vote against the fair milk mark bill. It was not going to cost taxpayers much money at all, if anything. It would have given a lot of dairy farmers out there a chance to survive. But because no-one wants to support the crossbenches or a minor parties' bill, the major parties did not support it. That was the only rationale you could apply to that, so it did not happen.

We might be accused of playing politics with the ethanol bill, but we reintroduced the LNP's bill on ethanol to see that not even make it into the House from the committee system which again demonstrates that there is a failure there if policies that people agreed with previously are not backed because a crossbencher has introduced the legislation into the House. That is evidence that this system is failing people and is not delivering good outcomes. I think that is only going to come with better competition. You are only going to get better competition in this parliament if you break up the two-party dominated system that we have that the rest of the world is starting to reject. We are leaving the voters with a binary choice and they are voting governments out; they are not voting governments in.

Another part of the two-party system that I believe is destructive is the corporate interests. We have heard the LNP tonight criticising the ALP for being dominated by unions. But people critical of the LNP would say that they are dominated by large corporate interests as well. We saw evidence of that in many activities that came through in previous parliaments. Again, the way around that is to break up the interests with other parties so there is better competition for legislation in this House. I truly hope that I can be part of a change in this parliament in my time.

Other aspirations from my time in parliament are to focus more on development, particularly in the regions. It is not very obvious to people that there is a geopolitical bias. We are looking at doing the boundaries again. There are not many seats out there. I think I have a 10½ hour drive to get to the edge of my electorate. I really do try to get to all of those towns because it means a lot to people for me to get to those towns. I ran out of my travel money a few weeks ago, so I am left to drive everywhere at the moment. Both I and the member for Dalrymple spend nights sleeping in cars and at little outposts because we have to try to get around the place. That gives us less time to be in the office reading emails, reading legislation or dealing with issues. So we are already at a disadvantage when we come down here to debate bills, and that makes things very difficult. We are already trying to represent a smaller and diminishing group. The flip side of that is the gross regional product per person in the Mount Isa region is \$180,000, whereas in Brisbane it is \$60,000 per person. So we are of a lot of value to the state.

In the centre of my electorate is Mount Isa Mines. It was voted the most significant business in Queensland's 150-year history at the Q150 celebrations. It has dominated for many years commerce and business and industry in the state. When we say we want stuff for our region, I really believe that people in my electorate do not want streets paved with gold. They do not want brand-new shiny schools. We do not need the best hospitals. We just want a road that works for industry. We want our rail line maintained so that we know that the industry will continue to be there and we will continue to have jobs. That is what people want. They do not want trinkets thrown at them at election time. They can see past that. They really just want good roads and good infrastructure, because we know that that means industry in our area and it gives our kids jobs and there is a future there for us.

The reverse is true. In the last term—and I will pick on the LNP because it was in government in the last term that I was here for—we saw office buildings here in the city, a proposed \$5 billion tunnel, the Royalties for the Regions saw \$21 million go to Townsville for Blakeys Crossing, and Mount Isa got nothing. I do not begrudge people in Brisbane getting that infrastructure. It has some value, but there is not proper competition for where that capital or investment ends up. We do not have the votes out there. There is not the voting power but there certainly are resources, and that has been recognised federally in the great north Australia plan.

Everyone keeps talking about the fact that we need to develop the north. Governments need to get their hands dirty and put their hands in their pocket if that is going to happen, because the hurdle rates are too big for private investment. It is lovely to talk about that. I wish it were true and it might be true in some cases. But it is never really going to happen unless governments are getting their hands dirty and using public debt to make some of these things happen, as has always happened in Queensland's history.

There are many opportunities for that in my electorate, as I am sure there are also in all the other regional electorates. Obviously, I will talk about the Mount Isa electorate. One such road we have spoken about a lot is the Hann Highway, which has, all up, about 100 kilometres of sealed road if we include the Torrens Creek-Aramac Road, which takes traffic off the Bruce Highway. If it were opened up to triple road trains, one triple would take two B-doubles off the Bruce Highway. They

could travel down to Melbourne. This would benefit the banana industry, 90 per cent of which is located in Far North Queensland. Those bananas could get to Sydney and Melbourne eight to 13 hours earlier if they go down the inland route. It would take traffic off the Bruce Highway. It also provides that second route for produce if there is flooding cutting off the Bruce Highway. Figures being thrown around at the moment put the spend for the Hann Highway itself at \$70 million to \$90 million, depending on who is building it. That is a pretty affordable project and that would be a good asset for Australia to have. I might mention that the beneficiaries of that project would be outside of my electorate, but it is something that I believe is a good, strategic spend for any government to undertake. It is not popular because there are not a lot of votes out there, but it does make a lot of sense.

There are irrigation schemes on the Flinders River. Recently I spent the afternoon with Corbett Tritton. There are about five farmers on the Flinders at the moment who have all grown organically. Most of them have been cattle producers. They did not have a lot of expertise. They have worked away at it. They have invested in themselves and they have grown. Essentially, at the time they developed, the government got out of their road and just said, 'Away you go, fellows. Here's your water licence.' They did not cost the taxpayer anything and they built that. They have gone from little cattle properties that employed just the mum and dad to employing five people. If there are three, four or five of those farms in Julia Creek and Richmond they are putting 20 more people in town. That is a huge benefit and costs us in here nothing. That water is just flowing out to sea every few years; there is plenty of it. It is a good innovator and an easy way for us to stimulate those areas.

The ethanol industry—and members are going to hear about it ad nauseam in this parliament—is a cost-effective way for us to stimulate the economy. There will be a lot of debate over how it should be rolled out. It has to be pushed. We cannot just passively say, 'Let's all cuddle and kiss each other and tell the world we love biofuels,' and hope that they use it. There needs to be some force. Today there seems to be a complete aversion to making anyone do anything. Guess what? You have to make them do this because it has to happen. We have to make this happen for Queenslanders. It is an industry that can lead us into the second generation of biofuels and bioplastics, which is a really exciting place. It is renewable and we could be globally competitive in that forever more. Exciting things can come off the back of that but it starts with ethanol and fuel. That is where the technology and the development will start. It provides great opportunities for not just Queensland but also Australia. Queensland can be the champion of that. This parliament can deliver it if we deliver it properly.

I would like to talk a bit about productive infrastructure as opposed to populist infrastructure, which was alluded to previously. I get very frustrated personally when debate always comes back to debt. To me it is a very one dimensional approach. I often think to myself, 'What is the point of patting ourselves on the back in five years time saying we've delivered a surplus if we have jobs and industry collapsing everywhere throughout the state?' That is not advocating pure Keynesian economics where we are throwing money at anything. I would not necessarily advocate throwing it at something like the school buildings program or the pink bats program. However, there is so much productive infrastructure out there that can build our competitiveness. Unfortunately, a lot of it lies in those areas that do not have a lot of votes. It is going to take some leadership to deliver that. It is what people desperately need. I really truly believe that if people in metropolitan areas who, in some cases, might take full advantage of productive infrastructure that might be in there, see a government building in these regions where they know there is industry, I think they will be very accepting of whatever debt levels are at the back end of that government knowing that they have a government that is rebuilding Queensland. They are not tossing it against some populist infrastructure in the city; it is hard infrastructure that they can see is going to build industry. I think too many of the projects that are coming out at the moment are touted as being productive. I am sure people derive some utility from them, but on a competitive basis they would not stand up to all the other opportunities that we have out in the regions, some of which I alluded to earlier.

I would dearly love to see a change in the economic agenda. Supply side economics has had its turn, it has had its run and I think it is failing us federally. Supply side economics is not going to deliver us out of the economic doldrums. Synchronising ourselves with the business cycle—we have a slowdown now; the government needs to spend, but it needs to spend wisely. I often use that quote of Dr Ken Henry at an infrastructure symposium when he said—

... it makes perfectly good sense for public debt to be raised to invest in public infrastructure ... Our problem is not that we spend too little. It's that we don't spend well.

There are too many populist decisions made by governments about building traffic tunnels that no-one wants. Brisbane has established itself as the nation's tunnel capital. I think we now have some 19 kilometres of tunnels versus Sydney's 12. We are the champion of populist infrastructure, if you

like, on the basis of traffic tunnels. Essentially, people can see through that. The general public know that if the government is serious about building industry, industry very much lives out in the regions. There are many opportunities regarding that.

The last thing I would like to touch on is the rural crisis. This is a very dark and troubling issue for me because every town that I go into in my electorate is on the ropes. Good families and people that I know, friends I have gone to school with and grown up with are really worried. When they talk to me they say, 'Rob, so-and-so left town. They just know there is no future here.' It hurts me to hear them say that because I know they love the town they grew up in. It is very hard to see the way ahead. I remember talking to a mayor last year. I was talking about the reconstruction board of development and he said, 'Essentially, I agree with you, but that ship has sailed, Rob. I've got 10 to 12 people who haven't paid their rates for a year. Even if we get rain at the end of this year, none of them can afford to buy cattle to get themselves back on their feet and the bank won't lend them that money.' Just in my little shire alone I have 13 people who face foreclosure due to rates alone. If honourable members multiply that by 10, they can see the situation that the banks are facing. We are facing a massive fallout out there. That means that no-one is spending money in the towns. I would suggest that some of these businesses in towns, even the grocery stores, are doing it worse and they are looking for an answer.

I have not been coming down here asking for cash handouts, which I probably should do; I have been asking for a reconstruction board. That is just to stop them haemorrhaging and let them trade their way out of this, which they will. It has been done before in Queensland and Australian history. It is a cost-effective solution to the taxpayer. It is not asking for a cash handout; it will be paid back. It can help these people and it is one of the best ways we can do that. If we cannot deliver that this time, it will be bitterly disappointing to me. I would like to look at it the other way: it is a great thing that this government could offer them. It could demonstrate that they have the leadership to be able to deliver something like that that has not been delivered for some time in Australia. It reeks of industry support, which I think offends a lot of bureaucrats in these positions now, who hate the thought of any industry support because they think that governments should stay out of the marketplace. These people need help and these towns need help, and that is the only thing that is going to help them. It is something that we need to deliver in order to help them out of this rural crisis.