




Speech By  
**Aaron Harper**

**MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA**

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**ADDRESS-IN-REPLY**

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (4.32 pm): It is a truly humbling experience to rise today to give my address-in-reply speech in the 56th Parliament as the re-elected state member for Thuringowa. On 20 May 2015, my birthday, I rose to give my maiden speech. Sadly, due to a death in the family, my wife, Amanda, and our children could not be here. However, Amanda, Mitch and Ash are here today in the gallery, so it makes today all the more special in delivering this speech. All members of the House would know just how important it is to have family supporting them in this role, and I will touch on that a little later.

To the people of Thuringowa, I say thank you for backing me in once again. To my constituents, I commit to take up the fight again for the good people of Thuringowa who re-elected me as their state member. They know that I do not back down on any issue and I love giving it to those in the south-east corner, because we are worth fighting for in Far North Queensland. It is an endearing quality that we have in North Queensland. You stand up for your mate, lend a hand and keep fighting for what is right. This was despite coming into government in 2015, having gone through some pretty tough and ordinary times. They were challenging times, with the mining downturn, post Campbell Newman cuts to services and Palmer's QNI nickel refinery collapse. I stood with every one of those sacked workers at every sad and depressing unemployment forum held in Thuringowa. Although those were tough times, in the following months and years those experiences helped define us as a city.

We are recovering slowly. As a city, with strong state government support, we rose to the challenge through a range of funding programs, such as the regional Back to Work program and Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and locally building infrastructure projects that have created 10,000 local jobs since we have been in government. Those jobs are backed in by our Buy Queensland procurement policy. I have worked my backside off in Thuringowa, all with the support of the people of Thuringowa and, of course, my family. We did it and I am pretty happy about that.

Why did Labor back us again in Thuringowa? I believe that my constituents did this after seeing our Labor government deliver the funding required for major infrastructure and job-generating projects such as the \$250 million North Queensland Stadium, the port expansion and the \$225 million water pipeline to deliver Townsville's long-term water security, not forgetting the \$386 million Powering North Queensland Plan. Together these projects are delivering and will deliver thousands of local jobs.

In 2015, we came into government with a 14 per cent unemployment rate. It is now around nine per cent. We still have more work to do. In my maiden speech I spoke about delivering a number of projects in Thuringowa such as stage 1 of the now infamous Riverway Drive duplication project, which is well underway and due for completion in November, supporting over 120 local jobs. This year after the budget we delivered another \$36 million in state funding for the Townsville Ring Road stage 5 project, starting at Riverway Drive—so members will keep hearing about it. With a federal Labor government—we do not know what is going on in Canberra—I know that Bill Shorten is backing us in, so we will get those jobs.

Since coming into government, over \$20 million has gone into our local schools, such as Kirwan State High School for its hall and \$10 million to the Heatley Secondary College, not forgetting the millions spent on major improvements to the Kirwan, Heatley, Weir, Willows, Rasmussen and Kelso primary schools, and—something near and dear to my heart—the \$5 million in funding that we achieved for the Kirwan Ambulance Station redevelopment due to start construction next year.

Let me touch on my re-election in 2017 for a moment. It is especially poignant as some people, particularly some in the southern media, had written me off as One Nation had thrown in a candidate. They based this false belief on the fact that Hanson's One Nation was successful in Thuringowa 20 years ago, but that was 20 years ago. As I intimated to the former member Mr Ken McElligott, who served three terms in Thuringowa, I was up for the fight and was not about to let history repeat itself. I can tell members that Ken is pretty happy that we kept Thuringowa as a Labor seat. As I remarked to many a media outlet, that was then; this is now.

My constituents know that I have worked hard and delivered for Thuringowa since being elected and I will continue to deliver. That is why they chose to re-elect me and that is why Thuringowa Labor won on the primary vote in every booth. None of this would have been possible, of course, without a great team of people. My campaign team included many of the 2015 team, but we had built that up to over 100 people manning booths, doorknocking and helping me make calls. I am going to take this moment to thank them. I also thank my union, United Voice. To Gary Bullock, Jeanette Temperley, Sharron Caddie, Steven, Heath, Matt and Nicole, Cheryl and the many other local UV members who assisted me in my re-election: thank you.

Of particular note, I want to thank my campaign manager, Amy Smith, and her awesome team of CPSU volunteers such as Sebastian, Mick Macdonald, Cathy and many more. We worked hard as a team, led by Amy. She should be commended for putting up with me. We got there with a great team strategy. Thank you, Amy. To my other doorknockers and helpers from the Together union, Norm and Eva, and to my hardworking staff who are always watching—and they are watching today: hello to both Thelma and Roslyn and thank you for your help. We continue to work for Thuringowa together as a team.

To Councillor Kurt Rehbein, Meg Frisby, Cathy O'Toole and her staff: thank you. I want to give a big shout-out to former Speaker Mike Reynolds, who was a great mentor to me. To Dolan Hayes and Michael Baker: thank you for your help—not forgetting QNMU help from Daniel Seage, Katy Taggart, Deb and Kayleen and a special thanks to Dr Carl O'Kane. Thank you, Carl.

To my branchies from Thuringowa, how we have grown. There are simply way too many to mention, but they are a loyal and hardworking bunch. In particular, I want to thank former member for Burdekin Steve Rogers and his wife, Trish; my branch president, Les Moffit; Mick and Evol Keane; Peter and Michelle Dalton; Chris Smith; John Mellon; Dr Martin Doris; Ryan Alloway; Allan Regden; Neville Donnie; James McBain; Colin Deitz; Glynn Jones; Jan Hagerty; Glenn Ford; and many more.

My friends from UFU—the firies—the ambulance and the air wing of Rescue 521 are amazing. Thank you to Greg Huppertz; Deb and Lindsay Rapp from Ayr; Scott and Anita Fry who travelled from Charters Towers; Dave Cole; Brett Maguire; Micky Paulson and Matt Brooks. Special thanks to Jason Dutton for again flying up from Brisbane to help me get the job done. To one of my oldest mentors in the QAS, Eddie Blain, and his wife, Heather, thank you again. To my neighbours Darren and Kelly Habar and Troy and Tegan Tucker, thank you for your support.

Out in the heat and on the tough streets of Thuringowa we had a couple of dog bites, and for one I was Johnny-on-the-spot, whipping out the first-aid kit to Daniel, from QNMU, who would not stop doorknocking and soldiered on. I will table that article from the *Courier-Mail*. We had the *Courier-Mail* with us. As I treated him, I told the old ambo joke, 'It's okay, Daniel, all bleeding stops eventually,' and he kept doorknocking for me. He is a legend. I table that article.

*Tabled paper:* Article from the *Courier-Mail*, dated 10 November 2017, in relation to the member for Thuringowa, Mr Aaron Harper MP [\[1191\]](#).

If I have missed anyone, I apologise as elections are pretty hectic times. As we know, we won in each booth and I am humbled in the knowledge that thousands of people put their faith in me to get the job done.

I came into this place as a critical CareFlight paramedic, having served 25 years with the Queensland Ambulance Service in the northern region. That association followed in the last term of government where I continue to serve as an advanced care paramedic at Kirwan station. They say that you have to hang up the stethoscope at some point, and I made that decision not lightly this year in February. Life as an MP and chair of the health committee became a lot busier.

Coming from a background of helping people has been a good foundation for serving as an MP. We have a number of MPs in this parliament who are also serving officers either from the QPS, the ADF or the QAS including my good friend and now Minister for Fire and Emergency Services, Craig Crawford. I am sure they all get it. After 28 years, the memories never really go away. They do stay with you. I believe how you cope with them is the important part, starting by acknowledging that they are a part of your life. It is natural to recall events. We are all hardwired to do that. Therefore, every time I hit the highway I am reminded of many of the gruesome road traffic accidents or fatalities I have attended or, sadly, on local roads where a child has been hit by a car or, worse, died outside a school. Hence my push to get flashing school lights in front of all schools in Thuringowa. Ask any paramedic and they will undoubtedly say that responding to children and infants represent the most challenging cases. I remember the beautiful faces of babies lost to SIDS or, tragically, drowning, some in home baths and others in backyard pools.

Suicide is also an issue that continues to challenge us. I recall only too well the notes beside the bodies of those who suicided or who attempted suicide and losing some mates in the ambulance along the way. That is why I am glad to see an investment in places like The Oasis and more focus being given to mental health by our government. It is why I continue to support the Townsville Suicide Prevention Network.

I recall the scenes of bloody murders or mangled bodies at car accidents or multicasualty scenes like the Cardwell tilt train accident in 2008, or devastated communities after Cyclone Yasi, or Innisfail post Cyclone Larry in 2006. Such sadness, yet in contrast being a paramedic is a good and noble job helping others. It was not all bad. Some of the most memorable cases involve bringing life into the world or saving the life of many patients suffering heart attacks, asthma, diabetic episodes, seizures or performing amazing and often high-risk aeromedical retrievals. It was a career during which I was very proud to wear the uniform, and I thank all our staff in the Queensland Ambulance Service and emergency services who do this every day. They are ordinary people doing an extraordinary job—heroes all.

I table a letter I wrote to QAS Commissioner Russell Bowles thanking all in the QAS for allowing me to be part of what really is an amazing service. If I can indulge the House for a moment, I will quote one part of that letter—

Looking after people in times of need and crisis has indeed been a very rewarding and challenging career. Often Ambulance officers see people on their worst days and in the most stressful and challenging times of their lives. However I know that during an interaction, whether it's holding someone's hand to someone who has lost their lifetime partner or performing an advanced clinical procedure, paramedics make real change every day and do save people's lives.

*Tabled paper:* Letter, dated 8 March 2018, from the member for Thuringowa, Mr Aaron Harper MP to the Queensland Ambulance Service, Commissioner Russell Bowles, in relation to cessation of association with Queensland Ambulance Service [\[1192\]](#).

Saying these things today helps me close that chapter in my life. I am still married to the job as my wife, Amanda, who was once a student paramedic of mine—and that was many years ago—and is now a manager of clinical education, remains working in the QAS. Amanda is currently Acting Assistant Commissioner of the Townsville local area service network and I am so proud of her achievements in the QAS. I say that as many years ago there were no women in the QAS—then the QATB. Now, women make up 52 per cent of staff in our area. Amanda, you are to be admired as a leader in the QAS of some 23 years. I really do not know how she does it, raising our kids when I am not there and performing her full-time role. She is indeed amazing and an inspiration to me. I love her very much.

I have to shout-out to the in-laws. They often get overlooked, but to Amanda's mum, Myrna, and dad, Colin Bamblett: thank you for your help and support on this journey. I am seriously considering writing a book and perhaps calling it 'Harper's journey: from paramedic to politician'. I can honestly define stress going from the most trusted profession to this one. I reckon it would be a heck of a read full of life's memories. The fact is that I now use my background and experience to help others in my community of Thuringowa, albeit on broader issues.

My experience in the Ambulance Service fuels my passion to deliver funding for Drive It, a unique driver education and motorsport precinct. I want to see a purpose-built facility to help educate people in North Queensland to reduce road trauma, which costs this nation \$25 billion a year. South-East Queensland has these, but North Queensland does not. Adding to that, over the last 15 years in Thuringowa we have lost the dragway, the speedway and now there are restrictions on carting. With 27 motorsport clubs—and North Queenslanders like their cars—I know we deserve such a unique facility that provides both motorsport and driver education, so I will not give up on Drive It.

Along with delivering other important infrastructure in Thuringowa like the ambulance station, I intend to deliver a new fire station—I guess I am going to annoy Minister Crawford—and a new police facility in Thuringowa. I want to be the only MP in Thuringowa who has delivered stations for fire, ambulance and police.

Now for the hard bit. The most important people in my life, my family, are in the gallery today: Amanda; my son, Mitchell, who is 15; and Ashleigh, who is 11. Happy birthday to Ashleigh, who turned 10—11 yesterday. I would love her to be 10. I do not want her to grow up. She is growing up way too fast. I love you very much. I thank you for being there for me through the good times and the bad—for sticking with me through this crazy ride not once but twice.

Mitch, you are growing up to be such a respectful and good-looking young man. I do not know where he got that from—clearly not me. I have a head like a dropped pie. Thank God for his mother. Mitch, I love our time together. At the running festival I am like an anvil around his neck—I slow him down. He can do five kilometres in under 20 minutes; it took me 27 minutes on our last one. He nearly killed me but he gets me along there. Whether it is running or kicking a footy in the backyard, I love it. You are special to me and I thank you very much for letting me win every now and then. You have made us very proud.

To Ashleigh Kate, our daughter, our princess: you are growing up too fast. Slow down. We are very proud of you also. You will always be dad's girl. I know I spoil you too much. I love you, Ashleigh Kate. Thanks for being here today.

It has to be hard on my family as I really consider myself a self-diagnosed work in progress. I continue to try to find time in this crazy life that we lead for a work-life balance so I can spend precious time with my beautiful family—well, maybe not the cat, not Mocha.

With the loss of my older brother, Matt, a few months ago—he was 51—and coming from a broken family, with most now living in New Zealand, I want my family to know just how much I love them and how proud I am that we have our own family. You are all I really have—these are happy tears—you are my life, and saying thank you does not seem to be the best way to describe this moment in time, so I will end it with this. I love you all and I hope that you are up for another go because I am not going to stop because we have more to do in Thuringowa. I am going to keep delivering and keep working hard—now he is crying up there. You make me proud.

We are going to do it again. We are going to keep working because we have so much more to do. There is so much more to do in the youth justice space, in child safety and in everything else in those social aspects. Minister Di Farmer has been an inspiration. The work we are doing is enormous, tackling the causes of why some of our youth are in trouble. I know we have to still hold them accountable, but it takes a tough government to address the causes and stop that.

I want to take a moment to mention the people in this House and the leaders we have, including Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, who believed in me, and Deputy Premier Jackie Trad. To all the ministers who have been there supporting us in Townsville through the toughest of times, I say thank you. I want to make special mention of the regional members. We are a band of brothers and sisters. We know the tyranny of distance. I know I give it to the south-east, but when we are 1,300 kilometres or 1,600 kilometres away it becomes a bit challenging. The regional members are my friends and we have developed to become mates along the way. We share the good times and the bad times, the hard times and the challenging times. I have made friendships now in this job and I look forward to working with them so we can keep delivering for our state.

We should be a proud Labor government for what we have achieved. We have so much more to give and we are going to keep delivering for Queensland. Mr Deputy Speaker Whiting, thank you so much for allowing me the time in the House today to share some of those experiences.