




Speech By
James Lister

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (5.42 pm): I rise to make my contribution to the address-in-reply. I acknowledge His Excellency's speech at the opening of parliament and confirm my continuing allegiance to the Crown, this parliament and to the people of my state, country and, in particular, my electorate of Southern Downs. I thank the people of Southern Downs for rewarding me with the opportunity to be their representative again. It is a great privilege and honour that is held in the hands of the people of Southern Downs. I thank them one and all for the privilege of being their member.

I was very pleased to see that there was a 10.5 per cent primary vote swing to me in the electorate. I hope, but cannot be sure of course, that at least part of that was because of the hard work that my staff and I have put in over the last three years. Southern Downs is a large electorate and the people there are accustomed to having a fairly intimate relationship with their member of parliament. They want to see them around the place. They want to be able to meet me in my office in Stanthorpe or in Warwick and to have me to go to the events and the happenings around Southern Downs that are important in the life of the communities there.

The result that I achieved could not have been possible, however, without the help of those who have supported me in the LNP and those who are not members of the LNP but nevertheless helped in my campaign. I would like to first acknowledge some of them. Of course, I cannot possibly mention everybody who helped because we had about 35 or 40 booths in Southern Downs and the task of putting up signs and handing out how-to-vote cards all over the place is a very big one. The core of my campaign were Councillor the Hon. Lawrence Springborg, whom most in this chamber are very familiar with. Thank you, Lawrence. Thanks must also go to Councillor Lachlan Brennan, Dawn and John Scrymgeour, Councillor Vic Pennisi, the Mayor of the Southern Downs Regional Council, Les and Dorothy Keable, Brian Duddy, Joy Phillips, Betsy Turner, Helen Piedle, Melinda and Councillor Andrew Gale, Dell and Maurie Thompson and Ryan Burton-Ree. I make special mention of Jacques Kruger, Annemi Kruger and Andrew Todd, Leisha and Allan Stanton and the Reverend Alan Colyer.

The people of Southern Downs have been remarkably accepting and kind to me as the member for Southern Downs and to my family. It is a job where you are constantly in the public eye, as we would all know. I would like to thank the people for accepting me for who I am and for getting on board with my efforts to make the electorate the best place that it can possibly be.

I need to give particular thanks to my wife and family. Belinda Lister is a Trojan. I think I heard a member on the other side, it might have been Ms Boyd, say that her partner did everything and I can say the same thing in my case. Belinda was essential in doing all of those things that convert the campaign committee's work into something constructive. I say thank you to my wife and express my undying love for her and for our two small boys, Jeremy and William.

The Southern Downs electorate is a largely rural one. It has a remarkable landscape and many communities spread throughout it. Each one has its own specific characteristics, its own bakery and gun club, its own hall and its own culture and life. Getting around the electorate for the last three years has given me some insight into the diversity of society that we have in Southern Downs. Naturally as a

rural electorate we are composed economically of primary production, with some service industries as well. We produce wheat, cotton and grains, as well as beef, sheep, wool and myriad other things—fruit and vegetables in particular on the Granite Belt. We also produce wines, which provide a remarkable tourism experience, and manufacturing in areas such as meat processing. We have the vinegar factory, Australian Vinegar, in Stanthorpe and many others. We do, however, need infrastructure.

The electorate of Southern Downs being a large one does require good roads and good water for us to be able to provide the services and the produce that we are so good at. I have mentioned at length in this House the conditions of the roads in Southern Downs. We have the Cunningham Highway, the Gore Highway and the New England Highway in Southern Downs. Unfortunately in many places the roads do need a great deal of work. I have had positive engagement with the minister and also with the regional director for the Department of Transport and Main Roads in Toowoomba. I thank them for that.

It is no secret that the roads do need money spent on them. Constituents particularly talk to me about the Cunningham Highway between Yelarbon and Goondiwindi where we have quite severe undulations in the road which are made worse by the passage of large trucks which push them in further. Many of the heavy transport operators have told me about the damage that these roads do to their suspension and so forth. That adds costs to businesses and ultimately costs jobs. Throughout this term I will continue to work as constructively as I can with the government to ask for additional funds to make sure that roads like that are fixed.

The Gore Highway, in particular between Goondiwindi and Millmerran, also needs to be fixed. Cunninghams Gap is a bit of a bottleneck. It is an important access for Brisbane through to the highways down to Melbourne and in some cases Sydney. Many, many trucks and travellers use that road. Whenever there is a fire, a flash flood or a rockfall Cunninghams Gap gets closed, sometimes for weeks at a time. When that happens it impacts quite savagely on the businesses in Warwick and nearby that depend on the traffic on the Cunningham Highway.

Most people would know the Fisher Park roadhouse, operated by Frank and Jenny Orazio. It is the first service station you come across after you cross Cunninghams Gap. They lost weeks of business when Cunninghams Gap was closed last year. Bestbrook Mountain Resort, also on the Cunningham Highway, is run by my good friend Ray Vincent. He was affected very savagely by the lack of passing traffic when Cunninghams Gap had to close, as were many others. Over the coming years I will be advocating for a real improvement to Cunninghams Gap. We need a solution that will involve placing the road off the side of the mountain. I believe that is the way to get the road connected and to stop rock falls, fires and floods from cutting off my electorate from the rest of South-East Queensland. If Toowoomba can have a second range crossing then I think Warwick can have a third range crossing.

Mr Stevens interjected.

Mr LISTER: I heard a slight titter from my honourable friend the member for Mermaid Beach. I know that he fully supports me in that and that he would be happy to sacrifice any infrastructure on the Gold Coast to let me have it.

Mr Stevens: I wish you the best of British luck.

Mr LISTER: Of course he does and I thank him very much. I turn to COVID-19, which obviously was the defining event of the past 12 months. In my electorate of Southern Downs I was able to deduce that the people were not interested in opening the borders. They wanted the borders closed where necessary according to medical advice and I supported that all along. However, the government did bungle a number of moves, specifically in my electorate. On some occasions the closure of the borders had to be done at short notice and without much planning or consultation, and I get that. However, there were other closures and restrictions imposed that hurt my electorate needlessly. On that point my beef with the government is that I was not consulted and the mayors in my electorate were not consulted about some of the impacts that we might experience because of the closures and so on.

There were examples of iniquitous decisions. For example, coastal Queensland had a ban on access to waterways and fishing overturned within a day or two when the government changed its mind. I tried, without avail, to get the then minister for natural resources, mines and energy to reverse the same decision or get Sunwater to reverse the same decision for the inland lakes in my electorate of Southern Downs, such as Coolmunda Dam and Leslie Dam. That did not happen.

For weeks, without explanation, small businesses that depend on the tourist trade and the fishing trade—selling tackle, accommodating people and so forth—were disadvantaged. Wineries that offer wine tastings were subjected to the same restrictions as pubs. I can understand that, at short notice, a decision might have to be made that pubs and licensed establishments have to be restricted or closed. However, it took way too long for the government to recognise that the act of wine tasting is very distinct

from operating a pub, a disco or something like that. The hardworking small businesses in my electorate that are involved in wine production, wine tasting and associated accommodation and retail sales were hurt.

All of those small businesses work very hard. Their owners invest their own money with no certain outcome in order to create wealth, to grow a business, to make a living for themselves and their families, to provide employment for the people who work in their businesses and also to raise taxes—the taxes they themselves pay and the income taxes that their employees pay. We in this House should not forget that those taxes pay our salaries and they pay for police, nurses, teachers and hospitals. They pay for roads and so forth. We need to remember where the money comes from. If a government needlessly disoblige those who are working hard to create wealth for our society, it is doing the whole of Queensland a disservice.

I ask that, in future, whenever a decision regarding restrictions to do with COVID or border closures is being contemplated, unless it is an urgent matter, there be some consultation with myself and other affected local members, such as my honourable friend the member for Currumbin. It is very difficult to represent your people when they find out from Twitter or a *Courier-Mail* feed, before you do, that something is going to happen. There were many cases of people who had needless economic costs imposed on them and were subjected to stress and inconvenience because decisions were made that could have been different had they consulted people with local knowledge, such as the local member for parliament and the local mayors.

The other night I gave an assurance to the House, and I am prepared to repeat it now, that, should the government consult me in advance for anything that it wishes to do, I will not politicise the matter, I will not use the information against it and I will cooperate to the best of my ability. However, I would appreciate it if the government would extend to me, as the duly elected member for Southern Downs, the courtesy of consultation—the same consultation and access that they provide routinely to Labor Party members of parliament, especially on a matter as overwhelming and comprehensive as lockdowns.

Like many other Queenslanders, the people of Southern Downs have sacrificed a great deal in the fight against COVID. When the borders were shut there were great distances between checkpoints. I have written to the state government and the Premier and asked for more border crossings to be opened, staffed with police and Australian Defence Force personnel to be sure. I have never received a satisfactory answer on that. As a result, my constituents and the many New South Wales people who share a community interest with the people of Southern Downs were potentially denied ambulance, police and fire brigade services if they were needed. There can be no doubt about that. If an ambulance, fire truck or police car has to travel an additional 20 kilometres each way to reach a checkpoint, a person can die in that time.

If there are any further border closures I urge the government to ensure that, whatever the cost, people's safety is taken into account and that there are adequate crossings, not just for safety but also to ensure that the folk good and true of Southern Downs and the communities south of the border near my electorate are able to get to the shops and get their kids to school. We have to make sure that farmers can tend their fields without having to put their tractors on low-loaders for a 200-kilometre round trip to harvest their cotton on the other side of the border.

In my electorate the fight against COVID has been beneficial in some ways, particularly for the Granite Belt. Although initially hit hard by the local lockdowns, the tourism industry flourished once Queenslanders were able to travel. I thank the people of Queensland for coming to the Granite Belt in particular, and to other places in my electorate of Southern Downs, to experience what we have to offer. Their visits and their patronage have injected much needed funds into an electorate that, over the past three years, has suffered the ravages of drought, bushfires and now COVID.

Mr Hinchliffe: Hear, hear!

Mr LISTER: I thank the Minister for Tourism for that acknowledgement. It has been a particularly hard couple of years, so it is nice to see that the economy is improving around the Granite Belt. God willing, we will get some more rain and the agricultural economy elsewhere in Southern Downs will improve.

I cannot speak about the agricultural economy without mentioning water. Water is very important to us on the Southern Downs and not just in terms of the supply of drinking water in the towns. I acknowledge the state government's generous commitment to trucking water from Warwick to Stanthorpe to keep the town of Stanthorpe supplied with drinking water. This is also about irrigation infrastructure. The only real project on the go at the moment is Emu Swamp Dam, which I know members here will be familiar with because on most occasions last year it was the reason I was thrown out of the chamber.

I thank the state government for coming to the party and providing its share of funding at \$13.6 million, along with the federal government's \$47 million and \$23 million from the growers to build Emu Swamp Dam. We are not there yet, but when we are the dam will provide a 20 per cent boost in production on the Granite Belt. It will result in 700 additional full-time jobs across all industries. It will provide certainty to enable the farmers, most of whom are small family operators, to invest and to plant crops knowing that if it gets dry they will still have enough water from the Granite Belt Irrigation Project to finish off those crops and fulfil their contract obligations with the supermarkets and whoever else is purchasing their produce. I hope to see Emu Swamp Dam completed during this term. I will be very pleased to be present on the day when some fortunate person manages to cut the ribbon.

I acknowledge the work of local government in my electorate. The Southern Downs Regional Council, the Goondiwindi Regional Council and parts of the Toowoomba Regional Council cover my electorate, which runs from the Great Dividing Range to about 140 kilometres west of Goondiwindi.

The mayors—Paul Antonio, Lawrence Springborg and Vic Pennisi—are fighting for the things that are important for their communities. They have joined together in an alliance of councils along the New South Wales-Queensland border, on both sides, to argue for improved water infrastructure and to secure our future not only for irrigation but also for the towns. I will be writing to the Minister for Water in due course to commend to him the efforts of those councils to achieve water security for their towns, and I request that the government give them every possible assistance in doing so in order that the towns, communities and industries of my electorate of Southern Downs can continue to grow.

The councils do a great deal of work. It is no small thing to provide municipal services in today's environment where the rates bases of these councils are relatively low and there are a lot of onerous requirements that councils must fulfil, many of which originate from state government. I would ask the state government to, wherever possible, administer local government in the most efficient way possible.

I would like to express my misgivings over the reforms that occurred last term to local government inasmuch as it seems to have paralysed some councils. Councillors and their followers are able to use complaints mechanisms anonymously to frustrate debate, to exclude people from chambers, to conduct a political war with those with whom they disagree politically or personally. That has been a poor step. I have spoken to many local government people around the place who have given me that view.

Local government does best when it is open and the people are able to judge what councillors are up to. Whilst not at all diminishing the concerns which led to the Belcarra reforms—there were some outrageous acts by former local governments—I think it does local governments and the communities no good service when they are hogtied and always chasing their shadows.

I would like to sum up by saying that I wish every member of the house of parliament a successful term. I enjoy a lot of interesting and fun banter with members from all sides. I hope that that will continue and that while each of us do our jobs in this chamber, however pugnacious that may need to be, we can still always have a beer and a yarn afterwards, because that is something that I really appreciate.

I wish you all well. I hope that your families see as much of you as possible. I share, I know, with every other member in this House in thanking my own for letting me be the member of parliament for Southern Downs, leaving them fending for themselves generally five nights a week. Thank you very much.