




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (3.41 pm): I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today, the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. I am proud to be a member of the Palaszczuk Labor government that will implement treaty with our First Nations peoples. This is a great opportunity to resolve unfinished business arising from, and a consequence of, the colonisation of Queensland and the ongoing and devastating impact on First Nations people. Treaty will provide a process that advances reconciliation and justice between First Nations people and all Queenslanders. Queensland as a state has the maturity to confront our history and provide a pathway forward to enhance the lives of First Nations people—together.

The story of First Nations people and this land goes back over 60,000 years. My story with this beautiful nation began only a hundred years ago. It started with my dad, Giuseppe, Joe, coming to Australia as a migrant with his mum at eight years old. My grandfather, Nonno, had come to Australia as an economic refugee just after the First World War. He had worked as a horse-drawn cab driver back in his native Sicily. Nonno could not feed his family on his earnings.

In North Queensland Nonno cut sugar cane and was a cook for the cane-cutting gang. He saved up his money so he could bring his wife and son to Australia, which happened several years after he first arrived. My story is framed by stories of racism my father told me. These values guide me to this very day. Dad was not able to attend the local community dances in his town. There was segregation between us, the Italians, and the white Australians. I feel very strongly about racism and try to speak out against it whenever and wherever I can.

The local white Australians were openly very jealous of my grandfather, who was able to purchase a cane farm from a soldier-settler who could not make a go of it. After the Second World War there were restrictions on who could have cars. My dad told me about the police questioning him about why he had access to a motor vehicle when he was a barber. It was his dad's car and farmers were able to have cars. It was disgruntled locals who had reported dad to the police.

My mum was a registered nurse and I was the eldest of six children—the proverbial good Catholic family. I have very fond memories of being ferried around in mum's grey, two-door Morris Minor with six of us in it being taken to church on a Sunday night. Both mum and dad were a big influence on who I am, how I perceive the world and what motivates and angers me. I want to share what was a pivotal moment for me.

It was the late 1990s and I was living in my mum's basement. I had just opened my law practice and I drove a creamy coloured Gemini and owned one very ugly brown suit—so I have since been told by my wife. Mum always had a keen interest in current affairs and would always be happy to discuss world events. On this particular night we sat down to watch TV and an unfamiliar face appeared on our screen. Pauline Hanson was being interviewed. Mum was angry and I was angry.

When listening to those narrow-minded views of Hanson I thought back to the stories told to me by my father and the prejudice he and my grandfather faced and I began to question if we as a nation had matured. What this person proposed for Australia would take Australia back 50 years. She wanted to abolish multiculturalism, she wanted to change Australia's immigration policy and she disgracefully warned that we were in danger of being swamped by Asians.

I was infuriated to see her showcase this racism on national TV and to see the media giving oxygen to these diverse and xenophobic opinions without a counterview being presented. I was concerned Hanson would get a hold in the Australian political scene. I was afraid this would lead to a divided Australia. That is when I knew I needed to stand up and be counted and so I made a plan. I sought out allies in the fight against racism and engaged in the political process. The plan led me to join the Labor Party.

In many ways it made perfect sense to make the Labor Party my home. It is in my DNA. My great-uncles on mum's side were part of the great Shearers' Strike which led to the formation of the Labor Party. Personally, I do not believe being elected as a political representative was a call to leadership. My belief was being involved in politics gave me the opportunity to have influence and to help make people's lives better. I would hopefully be an agent for change. Looking back at that moment in my mum's living room, the challenge presented to me to act against the hate speech of another was answering a call to leadership.

Today I stand here as a proud member of the Labor Party and the member for Toohey. The electorate of Toohey is a very multicultural and diverse socioeconomic community. There are suburbs with public housing and emergency crisis accommodation, factories, high-tech industry and restaurants worked by people from all over the world. I want to champion them, draw on the success and failures of my own migrant ancestors, see our way to economic recovery and see people find gainful employment.

We need to be unified in our communities. Queenslanders are at their best when we bring our diverse communities together, celebrate our differences, unite on common values and work towards a shared purpose. Leadership comes in many forms, and I would like to acknowledge the tremendous help both Meredith and William have been to me in dealing with everyday issues that arise in my office.

When we were first in COVID shutdown, I concentrated on making calls to my electorate, and I continued the phone campaigning in the electorate up until pre-poll in October. I acknowledge I had tremendous help from over 140 Labor volunteers and supporters on the campaign trail. I did not win this third term on my own. I say a big thankyou to everyone who came out to help and a big thankyou to John Prescott, who was on pre-poll with me every morning for set-up and then again to take down the marquees every night for two weeks.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the support and friendship of my union comrades. Thank you to Rohan and Ann-Marie from the AMWU, the RTBU, UWU, CPSU and Together who all helped. We know 2020 gave us COVID-19 along with unique challenges, including people wanting to visit relatives across the border. I thank Maddie Cunnington in the former health minister's office, who responded to an enormous number of inquiries from my office.

We wait for overseas students to return. The toll on business has been multipronged. Students work in restaurants, they rent and they contribute to our local economy. Griffith University has been hit hard due to international students not yet returning to study. My community is anxious to have these students return.

My state government provided grants to support small businesses to respond to the impacts of the pandemic. Businesses in my electorate availed themselves of the grants. I was grateful to visit some: Chipmunks MacGregor, Crank Indoor Climbing, Digital Travel, Grace Education, Fortune Well restaurant, Sunny Flower Florist, the Brisbane Spine Clinic, Zarraffa's Coffee Sunnybank Plaza, Red Chilli restaurant, Thomas Meat, iThai restaurant and many others. All were very appreciative of the support provided by government. Owners told me that the funds paid for advertising. Chipmunks Playland paid outstanding electricity bills. Digital Travel explored new ways to engage with existing and potential customers. All were going to pay for vital functions to stay open.

The RACQ has deemed the Coopers Plains level crossing the most dangerous crossing in South-East Queensland. Since I was first elected I have campaigned with the Coopers Plains Action Group to fix the increasing congestion. It was a great moment during the campaign to announce \$73 million to get these works underway. It is ironic that the LNP came out early and attacked me, supposedly for not being able to secure funding, when the reality is that the LNP made no financial commitment to the project. The Brisbane City Council remains silent on increasing its funding share, which is short by some \$25 million. I await the council's commitment.

As an MP, I am proud to support the right-to-choose legislation. This much needed reform to support women's health was led by community activists such as Children by Choice and, in this chamber, former member for South Brisbane Jackie Trad and Shannon Fentiman, member for Waterford and now Attorney-General. They lobbied to see this important social reform passed into legislation. They did this in the face of bullying and scare tactics led by Cherish Life and supported by the LNP through donations and support from federal LNP members. Their campaign was designed to sow seeds of doubt and fear in the community and mislead Queenslanders.

One of the most galling aspects of the election was the personal attacks on candidates. The behaviour of some candidates and their supporters, highlighted in the hotly contested seat of South Brisbane, where my good friend Jackie Trad was standing, were vile and offensive. The slurs were at best objectionable and at worst just downright ugly, dishonest and misleading. Jackie weathered those attacks with grace and dignity—grace and dignity that the opposition has shown it simply does not possess. I endorse the words of Queensland Labor Party Secretary Julie-Ann Campbell when she said that the LNPs 'only achievement' at the October election was getting a Green elected to parliament. I will miss Jackie's participation in our parliament and her enormous contribution to the wellbeing of our state.

The urgent challenge for us over the next four years is to avoid becoming lost in hard economic policy that prevents us from actioning real social change in the areas of youth justice and rising incarceration rates, to name only two. Barack Obama, in a conversation with Bill and Melinda Gates, reflected on leadership. He said—

... in turn requires the public to think that it matters and is important because, unfortunately, what we discover is that most politicians and elected leaders are followers and not leaders. They are called leaders but most of the time they follow.

I agree that leaders see what their constituencies care about and they respond. It was during my first term when the chancellor of Griffith University raised with me the prospect of having a teaching hospital built on the Griffith campus. At the time I thought this was a great vision, so I adopted it as my own. The vision is for a world-class teaching hospital on Kessels Road, connected to the existing QEII Hospital by a bridge. I think that might be one bridge too far. A teaching hospital would provide great benefit to patients, students and the southside community. This will be a pathway for learning, training and employment in the medical fields and will ensure residents on the south side have access to leading-edge medical assistance.

I welcome the rollout of infrastructure projects in my electorate, one of which is the Salisbury station park-and-ride upgrade. This is sound policy. It encourages people to use public transport, takes congestion off roads and makes access to the Salisbury Railway Station community and family friendly. There is a direct link to a healthier environment and shorter travel time to and from work, allowing people more quality family time. Commuters at the station have told me the extra parking is very welcome. The Cross River Rail project will provide upgrades to Rocklea, Salisbury and Moorooka train stations, resulting in better access for people with disability, the elderly and families with children and prams.

I also believe that we must champion the cause of refugees. We have had refugees stuck in a motel in Kangaroo Point, many held in detention for seven years. These circumstances arose when they were brought to Australia for medical treatment. Their housing was not in the community; they were detained in this arbitrary detention facility. These are people who have not committed an offence. This is cruel and totally unnecessary. We need to highlight this with the federal government and, at every chance, call out the federal government on its inhumanity. The community organised to support these refugees with a 24/7 protest at Kangaroo Point. During 5 am coffee runs, I was inspired by their dedication to this important cause. Their efforts paid off and, thankfully, some of the refugees are now housed in the community. However, I understand that they are not receiving any financial assistance from the federal government.

We cannot ignore climate change and how it affects us and our nearest neighbours. At the Bar Association of Queensland's annual conference in 2020 I heard artist Ben Quilty speak at the welcome function. Ben spoke about Cubbie Station and the devastating impact its operations have on the environment. Cubbie Station was created by amalgamating 12 floodplain properties, providing Cubbie a total of 51 water licences. This has allowed Cubbie to amass a water reserve the size of Sydney Harbour. This water reserve is not subject to restrictions because its dam height is kept below the height requiring restrictions. Cubbie Station is the largest irrigation property in the Southern Hemisphere. The water garnered by Cubbie Station offsets the water flowing into the Murray-Darling River. For tens of thousands of years the river has provided spiritual and physical comfort to First Nations people who lived along its banks. The Murray-Darling River provides waters for important wetlands, providing shelter and breeding grounds to migratory birds and native fish. I want to stress that this is not the sole responsibility of the Queensland government; it is also the responsibility of the governments of New

South Wales and South Australia and the federal government. Cubbie Station cannot be permitted to steal critical water supply for profit at the expense of our environment. Now is the time for the government to step in and take action.

I am grateful to Stella Miria-Robinson, from the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland, for her continued friendship and support and for briefing me on climate change in our region. The Pacific Islands Forum is an intergovernmental organisation enhancing cooperation between countries and territories of the Pacific Ocean, including the formation of a trade bloc and regional peacekeeping operations. Stella is a true advocate for our region. In August 2019, the Pacific Islands Forum met in Tuvalu. During the forum, the leaders of the Pacific nations affirmed that climate change is the single greatest threat facing the region.

This issue for the Pacific Islands is no longer political; it is one of survival. There is no time to delay commitments for transformational change. Kiribati, as an example, is already unable to grow traditional foods due to rising sea levels, and the water table is undrinkable because of salinity. The forum noted that Australia's stance on climate change was 'untenable in the Pacific'. This inability to meet Pacific Islands' expectations erodes Australia's influence and leadership credentials in the region and allows opportunities for other countries to grow influence in the region.

On 27 December last year we lost a very special woman, Catherine Louise Burchill, aged 40, to breast cancer. Catherine started her legal career in my office. She sent in a handwritten letter explaining how she was supporting herself through university. In the letter she wrote about her family living at the time at Sippy Downs. I was impressed with Catherine, so I gave her a start. Catherine was a keen hockey player and had a black belt in taekwondo. Catherine was and will always be remembered as a person who lifted the room whenever she was in it. She was kind, generous and honest and the very epitome of the best a lawyer can be—hardworking, smart, compassionate and dedicated. Catherine took on the hard cases, often as a separate representative for children or in child protection matters. As her husband, Marty, said to me, she put her heart and soul into her legal practice, so I am disappointed that Catherine's practice will cease to exist. Catherine is a role model for all lawyers. She was a close friend, a support and a confidante. Her light will continue to shine for her husband, Marty, and her daughters, Phoebe and Ayla, and her legacy as a mother, wife, daughter, friend and lawyer will be remembered as an example for us all.

I want to take the time to express my heartfelt thanks for the continued and ongoing care, advice—yes, even about the ugly brown suit—love and friendship I receive and cherish from my wife, Kerri. She keeps me grounded and on track and it is due to her continued support that I am here today. I am also continuously grateful for the joy my four children—James, Katy, Grant and Joe—bring into my life. I look forward to the day when Joe sleeps in his own bed! I want to conclude by quoting Theodore Zeldin CBE and Oxford scholar—

It is in the power of everybody, with a little courage, to hold out a hand to someone different, to attempt to increase, by even a small amount, the quantity of kindness and humanity in the world.