




Speech By
Tim Nicholls

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Record of Proceedings, 24 March 2021

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr NICHOLLS** (Clayfield—LNP) (11.49 am): Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask that you pass on my congratulations to the Speaker on his re-election to the 57th Parliament of Queensland. I have known Mr Speaker since he first entered parliament. We have served on committees and been opponents on political matters, but I think I am right in saying that although we have been in the past fierce opponents we have never been on unfriendly or unpleasant terms and, indeed, we might have shared a few of the same travails together, whether that be his Mythbusters or, indeed, the Strong Choices program. I look forward to his ongoing efforts at impartiality in this place, his enforcement of the standards set last term, his judicious and sparing use, I should say, of standing orders 252 through to 253A, particularly as regards myself—although I must say last sitting week stretched the friendship a little bit—and his occasional pearls of wisdom from Yoda and *Star Wars* and perhaps some of the more modern spin-offs of the *Star Wars* franchise, including the *Mandalorian*, when, after making some of his decisions, he might end with the exemplary explanation that ‘it is the way’.

I also want to take the opportunity today to congratulate all those LNP members of the class of 2012 who are going to be celebrating their fourth term in this place. It was, indeed, an exciting time in early 2012 with the election of a government that swept away the cobwebs of a tired, disinterested and failing Labor administration.

It was a Labor administration—and we heard stories about health this morning—that had a fake Tahitian prince that ripped them off millions of dollars; a Labor administration that had ambulances full of patients that could not be seen by the doctors at emergency wards that they were turning up to; a Labor administration that could not even pay the doctors and nurses—they failed to do that; a Labor administration that could not organise a good time in a brewery with a fistful of fifties; whose own Premier said she was going to have to take—I think the expression was—a meat axe to the health department, split it in two and send it all their own different ways; and a Labor administration that sold billions of dollars worth of assets and still saw the debt increasing and fees, taxes and charges increasing.

It was also a Labor administration—and I see my good friend the member for Kawana here—that dithered over building the Sunshine Coast University Hospital for the better part of half a decade. It had three separate sets of plans and still had not signed a contract when we came into office. We got it sorted within the first three months. The Sunshine Coast University Hospital was courtesy of the LNP and the member for Kawana who campaigned, who walked in marches, who made sure it happened. It is, of course, great to be able to acknowledge the hard work of those members elected nine years ago as part of an administration that actually got on with the job of fixing the problems.

I thank His Excellency the Governor for delivering the formal speech opening the 57th Parliament. I congratulate the Premier and her government on the recent success in an election that was one of the most unusual we have seen in decades, an election held in the midst of a worldwide pandemic at a time when executive government here in Australia was, and still to a remarkable degree is, able to exercise almost wartime-like powers to control every aspect of our civic life. Far more than the global financial

crisis of 2008-09, which affected mainly but not exclusively institutions and markets, the COVID-19 virus stretched its tentacles into every corner of our daily lives. No-one looking at the election result could deny the influence the COVID-19 pandemic had on the results. No-one reading a paper or listening to a news report could deny its total dominance of our lives for the eight months leading up to the election on 31 October 2020.

I am sad that we in the LNP lost some good members in the election, but I am glad to see the new member for Whitsunday join the LNP team. I want to also thank the member for Nanango and the member for Everton for their efforts as leader and deputy leader respectively of the LNP. They put up a fierce fight and proposed many practical and long-term policies for the good of the people of Queensland.

Only those who have been in the position of opposition leader know the full impact it has on your life. From the waking moment to the end of the day an opposition leader must be not only a leader but a counsellor, a strategist, a tactician, a media performer, a fundraiser, a party peacemaker and also, and perhaps most importantly, a family member. I congratulate the member for Broadwater on his election unopposed to the position of LNP leader and I hope that what I have just said does not make him regret his decision, although knowing him as I do I doubt there is anything that will curb his enthusiasm for the mammoth task over the next almost four years, assisted by the member for Toowoomba South and, indeed, the entire LNP parliamentary team.

I am looking forward to taking up the cudgels in my role as shadow Attorney-General and shadow minister for justice, an appointment to a portfolio that I have actively avoided for all of my time in this place. Strangely, and given my earlier life as a practising lawyer, it is a role I have not held before. I must say though that it is a role I am enjoying, only to be surpassed by enjoying the role of actually being the Attorney-General and minister for justice in almost four years time. I look forward to meaningful and sensible debate over issues in the portfolio. So far we have seen a number of challenging issues raised, from concerns over youth justice to the current debate on coercive control and domestic and sexual violence. I will continue to support the principles of a legal system that is impartial, fair and responsive to the demands of our increasingly complex and diverse society.

It will be our job in opposition to ensure the government lives up to its promises, is answerable to Queenslanders and delivers a bright future, a future that does not burden coming generations of Queenslanders with the legacy of unrepayable debt or higher taxes, fees and charges and a legacy that delivers a less prosperous state, fewer job opportunities and a state in the doldrums. Having read the Auditor-General's financial audit report tabled in this place last week, I, like many Queenslanders, am not convinced that this will happen.

Importantly, the Auditor-General notes that debt is being used to fund the government's operating expenses for the first time in eight years. It was the LNP government that reversed this trend after the 2012-13 budget when we started the fiscal repair necessary after Labor's debt explosion from 2006 to 2012. The Auditor-General's report shows that operating cash deficits of \$6.6 billion will be experienced this year and almost half a billion dollars next year. This shows the government has well and truly let the debt genie out of the bottle.

Debt in the non-financial public sector increased by a staggering \$8.9 billion in 2019-20 and of this \$8.1 billion was in the general government sector—the day-to-day operations of government. That is an increase of 27 per cent in one year alone and double what was budgeted for in 2019-20. Importantly, this cannot all be laid at the feet of COVID-19. As the Auditor-General says—

... the financial performance of the Queensland Government had reduced over the previous two financial years, with expenses incurred increasing at a greater rate than revenue ...

The Auditor-General also bells the cat on page 14 of his report when he highlights that Queensland's net worth has actually gone backward. It has declined by \$8.6 billion. The Labor government's argument that borrowing is being used to build infrastructure clearly does not stack up. If it did we would see the assets supposedly being built with the increased debt show up as a positive on the balance sheet, but they are not.

Question marks remain over the government's Queensland Future Fund and the value of assets to be transferred to it. As I have previously said, all Labor's Queensland Future Fund proposal does is simply shuffle the deck chairs. Transferring assets from one entity to another simply denies the department that is losing the asset of its income as well as the value of the asset and transfers it to another, in this case the fund. It does not make any more money or generate any new revenue that was not or could not be already generated.

Labor, despite all the warnings, continues to plunder the investments held to meet the superannuation entitlements of the defined benefit scheme. We now see the results of Labor's raids on the DBF. It started in 2016 and has continued ever since. It is a pot of gold too tempting for Labor to

resist and follows in the footsteps of that failed treasurer, Wayne Swan, who completely raided all the funds that had been put aside—the education fund and the science fund—undoing a decade’s worth of the best work that the coalition had ever done.

Wayne Swan never delivered a surplus despite promising it year in and year out. He never saw someone else’s money he could not plunder, and that has been carried on by this Labor government as they greedily turn their eyes to the funds that have been husbanded for decades to pay the superannuation entitlements of our hardworking government employees, and others now. They have not been able to resist it. Andrew Fraser was able to resist it and we resisted it, but not this mob. They came straight in.

What is the result of the pirate raids by Labor on other people’s money? On an accounting basis the long-term investments are insufficient to fund the superannuation liability to the tune of \$1½ billion. That does not take into account the need to make the insurance payments following the 2011 flood claims that are also met from the assets held by the Queensland Treasury Corporation.

No-one sensibly argues that there should be no debt or that debt properly used cannot be beneficial, but wanton debt increases with no substantial plan to tackle the causes of the need for more borrowing is bad government. As the Auditor-General says—

Over the long term, the state must be able to fund its operations and a significant portion of its capital program from the revenue it earns. This is to ensure that a burden of debt is not unduly placed on future generations without the benefit of supporting assets and the services they provide.

I have long argued for the need for Queensland governments to prepare for the unexpected and to do so by ensuring enough strength on the balance sheet and in the operating statement to respond to calamities and disasters, because they do happen and they happen regularly—about every five years. However, in Queensland under Labor the magic-pudding belief endures and debt increases, net worth declines, expenses increase and the burden on future generations of Queenslanders gets even greater. Today’s debt is still tomorrow’s tax no matter what anyone else says.

In the opening address his Excellency delivered the government’s agenda both courteously and clearly. It is not the manner of its delivery but its content that is my focus. Much of what it contained was neither new nor inspiring. Many of the commitments were rehashed or empty rhetoric with little or no concrete action outlined, as we continue to see. While that might be acceptable in an election brochure or campaign ad, it is certainly not the material for an opening address. Platitudes are no substitute for action and detail. I regret to say that the opening address contained little in the way of new thinking or new ways to solve some of the state’s most pressing problems. With unemployment still at concerning levels and above the Australian average, state debt ballooning, deficits at eye-watering levels and falls in GST, royalty revenues and other activity revenues, there is little or no attempt to address long-term structural inadequacies facing Queensland.

Without a sound and sustainable financial base, our state will struggle to employ the teachers, medicos, police, emergency services personnel, health workers and others who provide the services we expect from government. How compassionate is it to introduce voluntary assisted dying legislation but not be able to provide the best in palliative care or mental health services for those in need? How clever is it to say that we will air-condition schools but not employ sufficient therapists and special learning teachers at a time when demand for those services far exceeds supply? How sensible is it to change the laws about consent in sexual assault cases or coercive control but not provide for the courts, health services and counselling that is so necessary for survivors? None of those matters were tackled in the opening address and at best were dealt with in a piecemeal fashion before the election.

I do hope that this four-year term will not be a term solely of spin, media grabs and a failure to act by this Labor government. If it is then those who always viewed a four-year term with suspicion will have their worst fears materialise and those of us who hoped for the time given in a four-year term to be put to productive use and genuine better government decision-making and planning will see those hopes dashed.

Finally, and most importantly, I again thank the electors of Clayfield for returning me for a sixth time to this place. The statewide swing that was evident across most of the state was not replicated with anywhere near the same force in Clayfield. My campaign team and I were able to successfully hold back the tide. It took a lot of hard work and a lot of community action to again demonstrate why the LNP is the right choice for Clayfield.

The campaign was mostly fought in good spirits and with good humour from those who turned up. In that respect I cannot let go unmentioned the total failure to participate by the Greens candidate. What a disinterested performance by Andrew Bartlett! After the original Greens candidate resigned amidst allegations of the Greens rorting JobSeeker while he was employed by the member for Maiwar,

of behaving poorly to female members and of improper fundraising, Andrew Bartlett was parachuted in as a candidate for the entirely cynical purposes of collecting taxpayer funding. So much for Greens' ethical behaviour.

Mr Bartlett showed up once on election day and then only for an ABC radio interview. For most of the election day he was ensconced in his coffee shop in New Farm while his booth workers did the hard work. Not once was he seen at pre-poll, not once at an information booth, not once at a community meeting in the electorate and he was a no-show on election day. Therefore, it was no surprise to see the Greens' attack on Clayfield fizzle out and die, and their vote drop by about another two per cent. In fact, the Greens' and Labor's performances were so average that, by some strange twist of fate, I managed to pick up the highest number of preferences from the pro-marijuana candidate—go figure! That could also have something to do with the abject failure of the Labor Party to deliver any services in Clayfield.

I heard the member for McConnel spouting about education and school halls. The fact of the matter is that the Kedron State High School hall—a school hall built more than 50 years ago when the school student population was 264—has not been rebuilt or replenished. Claims by the P&C, the school and me have been ignored by this Labor government for more than half a decade. Even though 1,400 students now attend that school, what does the Minister for Education do? She can find \$200 million for the Inner North State Secondary College, which has 124 pupils, 50 per cent of whom come from outside the catchment and the catchment of which comes all the way to the boundary of the Ascot State School, but she cannot find \$10 million for a school that already has 1,400 students thus delivering for the people who need it most. That makes a mockery of the education minister's claims. The member for Miller, who occasionally flouted out for a photo opportunity, has been promising an upgrade to the Albion Railway Station for the better part of four years but that is yet to be delivered.

I thank my campaign manager, SEC chair and most importantly friend, Julia Dixon. She is indefatigable. She organised, cajoled, rang up and turned up to ensure that we had the win. Jules is a terrific campaigner and she is passionate about the LNP. She is now heading the LNP's candidate recruitment, development and selection committee and will be playing a big role in the future of the party. My campaign team were invaluable. I want to thank them all, but there are too many of them to name here as I have run out of time, I am sorry to say, and there are some important people I still need to thank.

I thank councillors David McLachlan, Andrew Wines and Fiona Hammond who were a great help and support, as was Trevor Evans MP. The Young LNP came out in vast numbers and helped me. I thank my electorate staff: Katy, Aimee, Calum and Megan did a fantastic job during the campaign.

I want to thank my family. I am eternally grateful to Mary for her support, patience and perseverance. As I said in one of my better social media posts—

27 years married, 3 kids, 8 elections, countless functions and more nights away than I can remember and still putting on a bad fitting t-shirt and campaigning for me! Words are not enough Mary.

I was in no way surprised when in reply I received the comment, 'The only reason heaps of us hang out with you.' It is indeed an honour and a privilege to serve in the 57th Parliament.