




Speech By
Bree James

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Record of Proceedings, 28 November 2024

MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Ms JAMES** (Barron River—LNP) (2.46 pm): Humbled by the privilege of delivering this speech, I introduce myself to this House with no more qualifications than someone who believes in actions rather than words. I take this seat representing the people of Barron River as a passionate North Queenslander who fell in love with my home town more than 20 years ago and I will use every day in this role to improve our community.

I hold this seat on trust not only in the sense that I hold it for Barron River where my children and their friends will hopefully raise their children, but in the sense that the electors of Barron River entrusted me with this responsibility. I am no different to many, if not all, in this chamber: we the few who were elected by the many to represent their hopes, their dreams and their ambitions, to respect that we come as the voice of the voiceless and though we stand here in this place on our own two feet, we stand on the shoulders of many.

Over the past two weeks I have given deep thought to the journey that led me here. Parents, particularly mothers, will understand the constant feelings of inadequacy and guilt. They simply come with me today against a different backdrop. I do not have a professional background that would traditionally qualify me for this job. I am not an accountant, I am not a lawyer or a local councillor and I have never worked in the Public Service. I am a proud small business owner.

I started a magazine that helped new mums and dads and established parents navigate parenthood. In a way it is the perfect grounding for this role. Every edition was tough, I had to fight for every dollar and there were many days when I wondered whether or not it was making a difference. However, every time a reader came up to me and told me how much it meant to them, it made it all worthwhile. Every time I received an email thanking us for our work, it reminded me that we are helping families which, in turn, helped our community. It also helped me to be comfortable with those feelings of inadequacy and guilt not only as a parent, but as a small business owner. It made me proud to figure out things in my own imperfect way and be comfortable with the fact that in reality I have never really fit in, although it took me decades to be okay with that.

I have to remind myself in moments of self-doubt that from a very young age I was driven by service and purpose. Having been raised on a single mother's pension, I can say that life was always about needs, not wants, and my childhood taught me respect for money and the value of working hard towards your goals. I believe that the tougher your beginnings, the stronger your resolve. We should never let excuses outweigh our ambition.

No matter the cards you are dealt, you can still win the game if you play with skill, courage and conviction, so I was the child who sold the red noses, who did the 40-hour famines and who wanted to rescue all of the animals, and if there was an opportunity to dress up I would be a businesswoman while the other girls dressed as princesses and fairies. I struggled in the classroom academically and socially.

Almost daily I would go home in tears because I was bullied as I did not fit in with my peers. I spent my lunchtimes in primary school helping my teachers by cleaning their storerooms and photocopying instead of playing, but organising and helping my teachers gave me my first taste of purpose.

Watching my mum's daily struggle to put food on the table and, at times, miss meals so her children could eat is something I will never forget. I would not bring home the school excursion notes just so I did not have to see the look in her eyes, wondering where she would be able to get the money to send me. I had a strong sense of responsibility for my life and the lives of others from a very young age and my entrepreneurial journey started very early. When I was 10 years old I started selling handmade artwork and convinced my dad's girlfriend at the time to sign me up as an Avon representative, so I sold Avon to my teachers and my neighbours and I did very, very well. It was at this age that I decided to throw my first big event. Using some of the money that I had earned, I decided to throw a surprise 40th birthday party for my mum and a bunch of her friends. Still to this day she cannot believe that I pulled it off without her knowing. Since then I have done countless events for free for my community.

By 14 years old I was singing and playing saxophone in clubs and pubs with my dad's band and by 18 I started my first official business when ABNs first came out in 1998—an events and entertainment business that I have had for over 25 years. Bringing families together and uniting them through events and music has brought a lot of joy to the local families I reside near and, in turn, to me. I have always loved what I do and it never felt like work. The more gigs and events I did, though, the more I realised I had a marketing problem. Parents always told me they wished they knew when the shows and events were on. In these times there was no Facebook, hardly anyone had the internet and websites were few and far between, so in 2007 I decided something needed to be done about it. I had an idea that I would start a 'what's on' magazine for families to share the things happening in our region, but had I ever worked in the print industry? No, I had not. Had I ever sold advertising? No. I must have been an A-grade English student? My teachers would certainly disagree on that one. I must have had a journalism background or experiences or qualifications? No, I did not. Well, you would think that I was at least drawing on my own experiences and frustrations as a parent, which would have been great, but at that point I did not even have a cat, let alone children!

Within six weeks I launched the first edition and sold enough advertising to cover the costs. The magazine covered not only what was on but also health advice, parenting advice, education topics and lots more. No-one thought I would last a year, but they were wrong. PakMag printed over 4½ million copies and published 438 editions—numbers unmatched by any other privately owned magazine publisher in Australia. I know the ripple effect the magazine had on countless families, and that is what drove us to do it. When you are raised to earn things instead of expecting them, you work hard, you work smart and you never take things for granted. When you are driven by intrinsic motivators like making people's lives easier and making the world a better place, not extrinsic motivations like financial rewards and fancy titles, you live a life with purpose.

One of the biggest reasons I wanted to have a seat in parliament is for the small business owners, especially all of those parentpreneurs—the brave raising a business and a family at the same time. I believe it has never been easier to start a small business, but it has never been harder to have one. Small and family owned businesses are the biggest employers in the country. They are the ones that sponsor our schools and our sports teams. They are the ones that are here for the community in the tough times. They are the risk takers who invest in hiring more staff and growing the business when times are good instead of taking a pay rise themselves.

Being a business owner used to be a badge of honour. However, now it is a burden for many. So many of my extraordinarily resilient small business friends, many of whom have been in business for more than a decade, are thinking about selling or throwing in the towel because it is just getting too hard. They are working harder than ever for less reward than they ever have. Many business owners are the lowest paid per hour employees in the country, but there is no union coming to fight for them. I promise to be a strong voice for business owners, whether they are a local coffee shop, a solopreneur, a parentpreneur, a tourism operator or even a musician who is losing gigs because one person has made a noise complaint at a venue. I will fight for you.

While all of these things drove me to this moment, I would not be here without the people of Barron River. To the people of Barron River: thank you so much for entrusting me with this massive responsibility. I will never take it for granted. You have my word that whatever issues come my way I will be fair, I will be reasonable and I will always look at things from all perspectives. I will fight for our fair share of funding and I will stand up for what is best for our community.

I am also fully aware that I am not the first or the last who will hold this seat, so to those who have held it before me and even those who have run trying to hold this seat: thank you for your dedication, ideas and passion for our region. To those who will hold it after me in the decades to come: I will work as hard as I can to pass a better Barron River to you than the one we have today. That is why I am here. I want solutions to deliver on a vision for the future for our region.

As a passionate Far North Queenslander, I find myself feeling quite guilty that you all have come to this place from less spectacular regions. I am truly blessed to live in the jewel of Queensland's crown. It is a life blessing to wake every day to the sound of birds in the heritage listed rainforest, to see the exact spot where the rainforest meets the reef and to share the waters with thousands of species of exotic fish, mammals and sea life, but it is more of a blessing to share the region with other Far North Queenslanders. I feel this because I was on the ground a year ago as floodwaters were rising, as so many of our constituents were for days, weeks and months—feeding the now homeless, cleaning the silt, tearing down the devastation and watching the complete look of pathos as the aftermath of a tropical cyclone did its level best to annihilate the spirit of a people who do not know how to quit.

Whatever side of the ticket they vote, at their heart they are amazing people and 'quit' just is not in their vocabulary. They have made lives and forged empires in one of Australia's most unforgiving terrains. For the farmers, tourism operators, entrepreneurs and small business operators who call Far North Queensland home, it is going to take a lot more than a category 5 storm, COVID, the GFC or a number of pilot strikes to knock them out. We are defined by our resilience. We sweat it out in the 37-degree heat and the 92 per cent humidity. You can see it on the Colorbond roofers screwing roofs in November. You can see it in the canefarmers looking over cyclone ravaged crops. You can feel it emanating from the residents of Holloways Beach who are laying brick by brick to put back their houses that were swept away a year ago. It is a mistake to underestimate the determination and drive of Far North Queenslanders, and resilience is a badge that we wear proudly. So how do I honour these people? I work on progress, not platitudes. There is a time to stand here nicely attired and ready to be vocal, but there is also a time for shorts and a singlet and to grab a shovel, a mop or a broom, and generally that time of year is coming up.

I am absolutely honoured to be given the responsibility as assistant minister responsible for Far North Queensland, and to do that as part of a team led by our Premier, who is a North Queenslander, is an absolute honour. All of the aspects of my assistant ministry are very close to my heart. Tourism is the lifeblood of our region and the creative industries have been in my blood since I played in those bands with my dad a very long time ago. Together, the Far North Queensland economy would not survive without these two industries and Queensland as a whole would be a much lesser place. They are also industries made up of small businesses that make up the fabric of our communities. Given my background in founding and building the little magazine that could, I am passionate about early learning and early years development.

I stand here today because I draw inspiration from many of you in this room who supported me on this journey to get here. To my new LNP family: I am so grateful to each and every one of you not only for inspiring and paving the way for many of us to be here today but also for your humility, loyalty, integrity and work ethic. As I sat in the room with the new MPs I realised that our experiences and differences are what make us a strong team ready to make a big impact—from the youngest woman elected to this place to new members who have put their hand up time and time again to represent their community and some who are driven to strive for a better Queensland in part through moving personal stories and moments. We do not share a uniform political origin story; we share an unpolished drive for a better Queensland starting in our local communities. Ten weeks into my campaign, my part of the world got hit by a one-in-100-year flood after Cyclone Jasper in the lead-in to Christmas, and many of you went over and above to help me and the FNQ community. During tough times, leaders do not disappear; they rise. Thank you for all you did during that time and all you did to support me to get here today. I am honoured to be part of the LNP team.

In particular, I would like to thank the member for Bonney, who was a patron of my campaign. Your guidance was and continues to be a great source of comfort. To my Barron River campaign team manager, Sue, and her husband, Wayne—my campaign parents—who are upstairs today because they are that dedicated: thank you for the incredible sacrifices you made and your dedication to me and the LNP to run such an incredible campaign. Some 421 days ago, we started an extraordinary mission. Our campaign journey included fun things like doorknocking and calling thousands of homes, countless events and mobile offices, energetic roadsides and drive-through 'meet the candidate' roadsides. I patted hundreds of pets. I even cable-skied. Certain people in this room dressed up in Barbie and Ken outfits to raise money for the local children's wards. I had two dogs nip me and I saw way too many naked people—it is clearly very hot in Far North Queensland! I even lost one toenail. I would not be

here today if it were not for the very persistent Fred, who nominated me; my campaign team; and all of my incredible Barron River supporters, donors and volunteers. Thank you so much for going over and above and agreeing to all of my crazy ideas. I could not have done it without you.

Lastly, I want to thank my incredible family. I am forever grateful to my two wonderful and resilient parents who have been there, believed in me and encouraged me to give this one precious life all I've got. To my beautiful friends, who I have hardly seen in the last 14 months since I fell into this world: thank you for your grace, your care and for dropping me food. Most of all, I want to thank my wonderful husband, Trent, and my two amazing sons, Jordan and Sean, who are also upstairs. Thank you for encouraging me to step into this world despite the sacrifices it means to our own family. My biggest blessing in this world is you. During this campaign you took stepping up for your community to a new level and I am so proud of you. Thank you to all of those who supported me and believed in me for all you did to get me to this moment. I am so deeply humbled and grateful.

This place is full of history, but it is the future that will drive me while I am here. If I am here for four years or four terms, I will commit everything I have to representing the people of Barron River every day. While the flight down to parliament will be exciting, I will look forward to the flight home because I get my energy from the beautiful place I live in and the people who live in it. That is where my heart is and always will be. Thank you, Mr Speaker.