




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mrs KIRKLAND** (Rockhampton—LNP) (4.29 pm): I am very honoured to give my first speech in the 58th Parliament of Queensland and I am honoured to represent the communities of Rockhampton and Central Queensland. Cognisant of the mantle that is being placed upon my shoulders, I will bring the voices of Central Queensland to the ears of this government, determined to deliver results that will secure a better future in both this generation and the next.

Mr Speaker and honourable members, I thank you for this opportunity to now share a little more of who I am and how I came to be here talking with you all today. What is the one thing that we all have in common? Time. It is appointed to every man a time to be born and a time to die—mums and dads, business owners, Public Service people, tradespersons, professionals. In fact, all individuals are in this race of time and it is what directed me here.

My story begins as a child overhearing conversations where particular words jutted out against the blur—‘No, we can’t afford it’, ‘It’s all the government’s fault’, ‘We need help’, ‘I wish they’d do something’, ‘Everyone is struggling’. The sand started flowing from the top of my hourglass when my parents were working as low-income earners—a hospital domestic and a bowling club greenkeeper—in a small country town, struggling to make ends meet. My parents, Marcia and Ray, now manage life living week to week on their age pension—the same as 17 per cent of Queenslanders today. They live week to week with no savings and no assets after a lifetime of paying taxes, along with life’s ups and downs, birthdays, weddings and funerals. Each night they now relax in their recliners commenting to each other as the news broadcasts to them what the government of the day is—or is not—doing.

I recall conversations from my youth around the dinner table where my father, who always prefers to look on the bright side of life, would challenge or, should I say, chastise us by saying, ‘Don’t whinge about your circumstance unless you’re willing to do something about it. Be a part of the solution.’ Of course, that was then, but his words stuck with me. Looking at our hourglass of time, it is always amazing how fast the sand flows from the top to the bottom—from full to empty—and then at some point, if you are so blessed, a quick glance reveals and reminds that you are rapidly running out of time. I say ‘blessed’ because that realisation can motivate you to get cracking on the things that are priorities such as family and future generations and the legacy that you should be leaving.

What does it mean when someone says they felt called to do the job they do? Be it teaching, nursing, construction worker, coalminer, beekeeper, grazier, truck driver, homemaker, family carer or Olympian, how do you know what your fit is? I would say to you: it is when your heart is so moved that you feel an irresistible draw towards your action within that particular space.

One of my very first jobs was cooking burgers and fries for \$3 an hour, sweat dripping from my face, scald marks on my arms from splashed hot fat and the smell of burgers through my hair. I was grateful to have the opportunity to earn independence and become a productive contributor to my community and to save, provide and prepare for the journey ahead while at the same time engaging in the great exchange of commerce for the little things like my very own fan to keep my room cool at night.

I remember my first bank account, my first car, my first house and my very own Medicare card. I would learn firsthand about the health system as I enrolled in a Diploma of Science at Armidale CAE when I held down three jobs to pay the bills whilst studying. A decision to move locations denied me the opportunity of completing that diploma, though, working in the role as a nurses aide, I honed a special skill passed on through the ages by Nurse Nightingale: compassion, empathy and attention to detail.

I have worked in a functioning health system and now see the sacrifice of our frontline health service providers struggling to accommodate the needs of our ever-growing communities. With its geographical positioning, Rockhampton Hospital should be the health hub of Central Queensland but, rather, it has been touted as ground zero for the health crisis that has gripped our state, with aged facilities, overly cramped conditions and chronic staff shortages all contributing to the highest emergency ramping figures in the state—the highest on record and indeed the highest in the country.

Deficiencies in speciality services mean that the already sick are forced to travel to Brisbane, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. I have had community members share with me how they bring a pillow and sleep in hospital toilet amenities during their treatment as they cannot afford accommodation, while others are one of those in the tents we see in our Brisbane park areas—and then there are those who simply opt to not go and get that life-saving test or treatment. Central Queenslanders deserve access to health services when and where they need them.

As a small business owner now for over 30 years in the male-dominated industry of motor vehicle repairs, I have learned the struggles of family operated business, where surviving week to week is called success. Queensland small private business enterprises represent 97 per cent of all businesses and employ 42 per cent of the private sector workforce. These business owners look to government to support them and to enable them to grow and flourish, creating industry, economic security and future employment for Queenslanders. Businesses within the regions particularly are calling for a reduction in broad-stroke regulations that hamstringing them, suffocating capacity and profitability. They, too, need a voice.

In 2016 the local government elections were on. My husband and I, along with family, were sitting around the dining table, where our conversations revolved around cost of living, rates, local roads, parks—all things that local government could be doing better—and a still, small voice echoed, 'You should run for council.' So began my journey in politics following the lesson learned from my father to be a part of the solution.

During my term of office as a local councillor for Rockhampton Regional Council from 2020 to 2024, I became increasingly aware of the separation of responsibilities between different levels of government. At community events and in connecting with individual members of our beautiful region, it became clear that the main concerns of families and businesses being discussed around their dinner tables were not necessarily under the remit of local government. Residents were asking me to do something about the increasing levels of break and enter, to get easier access to health services, to help with housing shortages. For me to be a part of their solutions, I would need to change lanes.

I will take a moment here to highlight the significance, strength and resilience of community. During my time as a local government councillor I received a particular call amongst a number of similar calls. This one stood out; it captured my heart. It was a call from a woman with five children—three adult dependents and two younger children—who had been homeless and living out of a car for 12 months. Grace was nervous over the phone as she pleaded for help. She was already on the waiting lists with local housing providers and real estate agencies and we were coming into winter, and now she was desperate. Her two younger children had been removed and placed into care until she could find a permanent place of residence and she had a job offer with a local business once she had a permanent place of residence.

Grace had contacted a number of representatives and members of parliament and now I was her last hope. Our community was struggling with 0.1 per cent rental vacancy rates and a social housing waiting list of 1,200 at that time. Housing is not the usual remit of a local government. However, it is definitely the role of local government representatives to advocate for their constituents. My heart was so moved. There should be more that I could do.

With no significant affordable housing investment build on the horizon for Rockhampton or Gracemere, I made some calls. I knew there would be others in our community like-minded and motivated to produce an outcome to help people like Grace and to help community feel that they too could be a part of the housing solution. I co-founded the Shelter Collective, which has successfully delivered 10 refurbished cottages from what had been abandoned for almost 20 years. These once-loved homes were just sitting there while people needed a roof over their heads. This project was delivered by community for community—10 affordable homes in less than 18 months.

Throughout my working life I have been inspired by a heartfelt drive to serve in various volunteer roles. My own health journey in particular fuelled my passion for raising funds for cancer research through the Cancer Council Queensland and Relay for Life. Over the past decade I have proudly contributed in many capacities: as chair, ambassador, face of Relay for Life and team captain. During this time I was fortunate to be mentored by incredible individuals who dedicate themselves year after year to bring hope where it often seems lost. Volunteering is a selfless act that not only builds character but also strengthens the sense of community. I want to commend all the volunteers across Queensland for their invaluable contributions. The impact that you make can never truly be measured but it is deeply appreciated. Thank you for making a difference.

Every individual has different needs and different goals. We are all looking toward a future and a hope. For each of us, as the sands of time continue to slip away, time can either be our enemy or our friend. We stand here today on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. I acknowledge them for their bravery in standing up for what they believed in and for stepping forward in the hope of making a difference to our communities across this great state. I come to parliament to represent the great electorate of Rockhampton, which includes the township of Gracemere where the residents often feel forgotten. In fact, the regions in general feel forgotten. Across our electorate trains carry to port the coal that drives and supports our state, local industries and our businesses.

One-third of the Rockhampton region is either directly or indirectly supported by the resource sector and it is imperative that we protect this legacy. Like a major artery, the mighty Fitzroy-Tunuba River is the lifeblood of our region. Whilst it is the largest river catchment on the eastern seaboard of Australia, water security continues to remain one of our biggest threats. The Rookwood Weir has been delivered to our region thanks to the incredible advocacy of LNP federal member for Capricornia, Michelle Landry. Subscriptions for water allocations were significantly oversubscribed and today local landholders continue to call on government for better planning and development for future utilisation and management of our water resources. Finding solutions that enable water access to industry, our agricultural sector and local residential growth is high in the priorities of my community and I will be working with colleagues in this space.

Also significant to our region is the need to place greater emphasis on effective planning legislation around renewable energy projects to ensure the protection of our environment, prime agricultural land and waterways for future generations. Agriculture supports 74.83 per cent of the primary industry sector, which contributes more than \$22 billion to our economy. We need to listen to and protect stakeholders across our primary industry sector to promote growth and industry security. Our road networks literally connect us and right now many of our rural and regional roads have been reported as unfit for purpose. The Bruce Highway in particular has been in the news almost every day. For too many families from my community this Christmas will not be the same. One life lost is one life too many, but this year we have already seen more than 40 lives lost. It is now time to properly and with purpose address the poor condition of our state roads. I am pleased to be a part of a government that will be placing emphasis on the priority areas of these roads to improve safety and connectivity.

I would like to thank the people of Rockhampton and Gracemere who put their confidence in me and I look forward to delivering on the following commitments for our community: a high school for Gracemere; 27 hectares of housing land, plus eight hectares of land and infrastructure to accommodate health services, plus 300 extra trades workforce—all part of the new TAFE Excellence Precinct within CQUniversity; stage 1 of the Rockhampton Regional Council multisport precinct; a new health services academy for Central Queensland; a youth specific mental health step up, step down facility; a new community clubhouse for Gracemere junior Rugby League and Gracemere netball; new female change facilities for Glenmore Bulls AFL; new change facilities for Bluebirds United Football Club; support for a continuation of early intervention programs for youth with the Our Space youth centre; delivery of one of our nine Regional Reset early intervention programs; support for the re-establishment of the Capricorn business and start-up hub; one of our five neuro wellness hubs for those who experience epilepsy, dementia, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, muscular dystrophy, motor neurone disease and acquired brain injury; support for construction and fit-out of a new operational hub for the fabulous local men's mental health support program Walk 'n' Talk; and one of our new crime prevention schools. These projects will change the face of our region as we know it.

I am going against speech writers' advice here as I believe in an attitude of gratitude and I have to thank my incredible local campaign team. I would not be here without your help. To my pastor and community of prayer warriors, how good is our God? Premier Crisafulli, ministers and the LNP team, thank you. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my husband, Brett, and my children, who have been my greatest supporters. For all children across Queensland, I pray that in my time here I can be a part of the government that helps to make lives better. Here today before you all in parliament and before the sand in my hourglass has gone too far, I have this week accepted the commission to take responsibility

for those problems and to be a part of the solution: to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, correct the oppressor, to fight for the rights of the widows and defend the orphan, to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves and to speak up for those who are perishing.

I am honoured to be the first female state member for the electorate of Rockhampton and to be entrusted with this mantle to work with and for Queenslanders. I will seek to repair what is broken, to rebuild for our future and to reinforce it for the next generations, to contribute to the fresh start that Queenslanders have called out for and, instead of complaining, to be a part of the solution. Thank you, Mr Speaker.