




Speech By
Hermann Vorster

MEMBER FOR BURLEIGH

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr VORSTER** (Burleigh—LNP) (8.53 pm): Surely there are few honours as great as rising in this place to represent one's community. To do so on this first occasion is, of course, humbling and yet I am overcome with a keen sense of anticipation, knowing that there is work to be done. For me, politics has always been about the art of the possible and community service the fulfilment of potential. This parliament—a gift of our Western traditions and forebears—is the nexus between the two. It is a place of debate and a place of decision. It is where matters are settled and the government is stirred to action.

I intend to use my time in this place constructively, faithfully representing the community of Burleigh while holding fast to the values learned from my family, earned by experience and reinforced through a career of community service. Above all, I hope to repay a debt of gratitude and honour the opportunities Queensland gave me: a two-time migrant who arrived on the Gold Coast to chase a better future. My journey here was not straightforward and relied on my parents and grandparents taking extraordinary leaps of faith. To explain my values and share my story, I need to share some of theirs. Let me begin with my grandfather.

Towards the end of the Second World War, my grandfather was a young boy living in a rural town in southern Sicily. Liberation was at hand, but the moment was chaotic and desperate. One day my grandfather, Francesco Bellavia, set off on foot with his father and others to the provincial capital of Agrigento. They carried eggs they hoped to trade with the Americans. Along the way they were beset by bandits who wanted their goods and their lives. Shots were fired and, in the panic, everyone ran towards the safety of home—everyone but my grandfather. Despite the danger and the uncertainty, he ran towards Agrigento and the opportunity to provide for his family. He made the trade and bravely returned home with those provisions.

There is much more I could share about his courage and love of family but, suffice it to say, he took every opportunity to work, and when there was no work he created his own opportunity. In time, that saw him recruited to work in the mines of South Africa. Beginning without a skerrick of English and little education, he worked for five years to send money back home. He returned to Sicily to marry my grandmother, Antonia, before she, too, pregnant with my mother, made the arduous journey to South Africa to help build a new life. I was born in Boksburg, South Africa to my parents, Hermann and Anna. It was a turbulent time in that country, but both my parents moved mountains to provide a better future for me and my brother, Frank. They took risks by starting businesses in unfamiliar industries, putting their little amount of capital on the line.

When times were lean they made deep personal sacrifices but always, always kept going. Enterprise for them was never for its own sake. Our family unit was their project, and in 1994 they made the decision to walk away from what they had built and start again for the sake of their children. We arrived in Auckland, New Zealand in the middle of a rainy night. There was no-one waiting for us and everything felt alien. The closest I have ever come to describing that period is to say that it felt like experiencing a small death only to find a new life. With no social security net my parents would, yet again, take responsibility for our family by putting everything on the line to start yet another business.

My father saw a gap in the market and, with no engineering background whatsoever, he designed, developed and manufactured an underfloor heating system. At first it was just him, a trailer and the brochures he printed on his ink jet printer. Mum handled the books and administration and my brother and I helped by packing boxes, spooling cable by running up and down our driveway and, at times, even with installations. The smell of drying concrete, sawdust and wet clay on those countless building sites will be with me forever. I count myself lucky to have seen the dignity of hard physical work. I also saw the other side of the construction industry: the power imbalance between large builders and small contractors all too often used as cheap lines of credit; regulations that put small businesses perpetually on the back foot; and rent-seekers who claimed to speak for industries but do not speak for those with the most on the line. Even as a child I felt the injustice of it all, and here, in this place, I will do something about it—to help those mums and dads providing for their kids, for the young tradies going out on their own and, for goodness sake, to help ease the pressure on home prices.

Looking back, only now do I realise how hard it must have been for any own parents to break new ground and juggle so much. For years we walked on bare concrete in a home with no paint on the walls and where the TV stood on milk crates so that my parents could balance the family budget and focus on trying to get ahead. Their sacrifices paid off, their businesses grew and eventually they began exporting enough product to Australia to justify another great leap of faith.

In 2001 our family arrived on the Gold Coast. Like so many before, it was where we holidayed but ultimately where we wanted to live. My parents knew it was a place with excellent schools and on the doorstep of a much larger economy which could offer my brother and me so much more. I started year 11 at Somerset College where I learnt Italian and then quickly turned my mind to university and my own career. While studying IT was my goal, I had to get there under my own steam. In those days FEE-HELP did not exist. Modelling the example of my parents, I knew that hard work could overcome almost any obstacle and I set out about securing a scholarship. Not only did I secure that scholarship, but so did a formidable young woman, Melissa, who would later become my wife.

Education changed my life and I believe in firmly giving parents choice and giving all children access to the best facilities to reach their potential no matter their circumstances. While I graduated with degrees in IT and commerce and had plans to pursue a career in IT, I could not escape my roots and so I joined my parents in that family business. In that crucible I experienced both the joys of success and weathered times of deep disappointment. It was an education I could never have received from a textbook.

It was in that season I begin to appreciate the impact of government decisions on the economy and how the economy, in turn, impacted families just like ours. In the early 2000s Australia felt safe, confident and relaxed and I felt no doubt that the Howard government would be returned. Election night in 2007 came as a personal reckoning. I learned democracy was not a spectator sport; it demanded full participation and nothing could be taken for granted. Just days later I joined the then Liberal Party and was hooked. Politics was the answer to the question I was reaching for my whole life. The rest, as they say, is history. With my parents' blessing I left the family business and accepted a position with then Moncrieff MP Steven Ciobo. I volunteered where there was a need, ran campaigns and finally rose to become the Young LNP president.

Shortly after the 2012 election I was ready for a new challenge and accepted a role with the City of Gold Coast in a community engagement position and later as a media adviser. It was a privilege to provide advice but I was eager to draw on my experiences and find ways of serving my city directly. To speak up on behalf of small and family businesses, I was appointed to the CCIQ policy committee for the Gold Coast. There I championed the reduction of red tape and fought for our fair share of infrastructure. To keep our family safe in our first home, I led efforts to expand Neighbourhood Watch into our area and worked with some incredible people to help found Gold Coast District Neighbourhood Watch Incorporated.

My own leap of faith came not at all and then all at once. In 2015 with a mortgage and two very young children, I resigned from council so that I could attempt to become a councillor myself. There were things that I wanted to fix, things I wanted for my community and, as I had learned, I could not achieve any of that as a spectator. It was an extraordinary risk to take on a 25-year incumbent and I was hoping to be the youngest ever councillor elected on the modern Gold Coast city council. For seven months I walked the streets with my friends and volunteers. As fate would have it, on two occasions our new Premier even lent a hand distributing flyers. That campaign left me an utterly changed man and up-ended some of my youthful political sensibilities. I had started that journey sharing my vision, but I quickly found that the best ideas were found at the doors. I learned the role of representation is not to remake a community, but to speak up for it, champion it, fight for it and enliven its aspirations. That means listening more than speaking and then doing what you say.

Serving as the division 11 councillor was an incredible honour and so was my re-election in 2020. I did not agree with every decision of council, but I always respected my colleagues and their role sharing the responsibility. Together, we achieved great things and I hope the Gold Coast was left a better place for my time at council.

While local government and state government are notionally separate, in truth they are pretty tightly coupled and co-dependent. From the inside of council I saw a bad state government missing opportunities to deliver outcomes by hand-picking its stakeholders and ignoring those most invested in the Gold Coast: locals. I found it cruel and enraging, and it was not just me. The community, too, could sense something was broken and that they were paying the price. They were raising it with me all the time. In Burleigh, much of which I represented as a local councillor, frustration reached boiling point on the issues of policing, housing and the environment. The community wanted change, but I knew it could not be taken for granted. I would need to make change happen. In October 2023 I was preselected by the LNP to succeed retiring MP Michael Hart, whom I consider a great friend and a champion for the southern Gold Coast, as is his wife, Sally.

I retired from council and embarked on a mission to knock on every single door to hear from locals about their priorities. It was gruelling but joyous. The blisters and the sunburns were badges of honour. I heard from those in the pits of despair and the evergreen optimists. Every story, every person left an impression on me. They painted a picture of an ambitious, protective community with a deep connection to their natural areas, a profound love of family and a desire to knit together a recognisable community in the face of population growth. My mind and my heart were shaped by thousands of conversations, and I want the community to know that I will muster every ounce of strength and draw on all of my experience to represent them.

My foremost priority will be delivering on our commitment to establish a permanent physical police presence in Burleigh to deal with antisocial behaviour in the daytime and prevent night-time violence that puts too many lives at risk. I want to thank the Premier for visiting Burleigh to understand these issues and also the Minister for Police and the Treasurer for supporting a commitment to action that meets locals' expectations.

I also intend to reclaim the conservative tradition of conserving and caring for our environment. Locally, that means working with the Minister for the Environment to restore the Burleigh Head National Park and the nearby conservation areas and planning for the future of Tallebudgera Creek. These are sacral places and at times the upkeep has been disgraceful. I am proud that we are committed to supercharging the work of volunteers and to delivering a wildlife bridge over the busy Gold Coast Highway.

We are amid a housing crisis. Pensioners have been pushed to breaking point, families have been torn apart chasing affordable rents and young people have all but abandoned the Australian dream. The former government abandoned Burleigh when it walked away from the amendments to the Gold Coast planning scheme and exacerbated the misery of good people by holding out false hope.

The partnership with local government must be reset to deliver sorely needed housing. However, there must be another partnership and that is with the community, which is best placed to guide outcomes. I am grateful to the Deputy Premier for visiting Burleigh to meet with locals who want to see consultative long-term planning that delivers housing for those who need it and the infrastructure to support them.

To underscore the point, that is precisely the approach I will adopt for major transport infrastructure. These projects touch lives, impact businesses and change futures. Locals are the greatest stakeholders in their futures and I am committed, in the great conservative tradition, to ensuring that they are the centre of decision-making.

I want to acknowledge that, while I am standing here, my place was earned by the contributions and sacrifices of many. I owe so much to my family, my friends, my mentors, my volunteers and the leadership of the Liberal National Party. To the Premier, I say: thank you for your counsel and your guidance over many years. You are a model of servant leadership and your ambition for Queensland will lift us to new heights. When I was just a first-time council candidate, you were there letterboxing Varsity Lakes with me and then again taking the time to share an espresso with my grandparents around the dinner table. You care about people and I am grateful to play but a small part supporting the government you lead.

To LNP president Lawrence Springborg and LNP state director Ben Riley: thank you for running a principled, values-driven campaign in very trying circumstances. You were ably assisted by Michael Negerevich, Steven Mammarella, Sam Jackson, Jock Power and all the secretariat team and on the Gold Coast by Trent Belling. To my own campaign team: thank you for surrendering a year of your own

lives to help give Burleigh a voice in the new government. To Rita Fellows, Doug Anderson, Ben Dillaway, Greg Ingram, Leon Rebello, Rhys Macfarlane, Rob Clarke, Cormack Anning and David Rogers: thank you. To my friends in the rough and tumble of politics—Steven Ciobo; the incisive Fadden MP Cameron Caldwell, and his lovely wife, Lauren; Jack Piggott; Karly Abbott; Kyle Shapland; and Gary Mays: thank you for your wise counsel. To Kristian Marlow, who was there for the hundreds of kilometres walked and the bleary-eyed mornings: thank you. You are a dear friend and I wish you every success in your next chapter. To Brett Nordstrom: thank you, mate. You were right there from the start and responsible for opening this world to me.

My greatest thanks are to my wife, Melissa, and to our three young children, Lucia, Hermann and Maxwell. Melissa, you are an incredible woman and the best partner I could have asked for. You are just, you are compassionate, you are discerning and you are by far the best judge of character I know. It is a blessing that we found each other so early in life and have been able to grow together as we have both grown up. I love you. To Lucia, Hermann and Maxwell: I want you to know that your mum and I love you more than anything in this world. This work may take me away from you from time to time, but just know that it is to give you and your children a better future.

Finally, I want to close by acknowledging that parliamentary representation can be a tough game—tough on ourselves, our families and our communities; tough on each other—but I firmly believe this institution is a force for good, and so even when the times are tough I will hold to the words in Paul's letter to the Romans—

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope ...

Let us all shoulder the burden of this calling—this vocation—so that together we may all give Queensland hope.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!