




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

Record of Proceedings, 10 December 2024

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (12.41 pm): I want to start by firstly acknowledging the traditional custodians on whose ancestral lands we are gathered: the Turrbal peoples north of the Brisbane River and the Yagara peoples to the south. I acknowledge their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge all who are present today. I want to take this opportunity to pause and reflect on the millions of footprints that have travelled the dreaming pathways and to pay homage to the ancestors who have walked and cared for this land for thousands of years.

I thank Her Excellency the Governor for her attendance and participation, receiving the royal salute and inspecting of the guard. I would like to congratulate Mr Speaker on his selection as Speaker of the 58th Parliament and extend my congratulations to all of the newly elected members of this House. I acknowledge my former colleagues who are no longer with us as members of parliament, having lost their seats in the most recent election, but who I know will continue to fight for what is good and right for Queensland. It is incumbent on all Labor members who retained their seats to attempt to stay in touch with these former members. I know that many of them will continue to fight for their communities and for the betterment of Queensland as their commitment to the people of their former electorates.

I would like to warmly welcome our three newest Labor members to the House, one of whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years: Bisma Asif, the member for Sandgate; Wendy Bourne, the member for Ipswich West; and Dr Barbara O'Shea, the member for South Brisbane. I also want to thank Terry Wood, my campaign manager, for his work on this and earlier campaigns and the entire campaign committee, who worked tirelessly. I would also like to thank everyone who donated to my campaign, who attended my functions, who made bids at auctions and who bought tickets. Every little bit helped.

My election is due in no small way to the combined efforts of many volunteers. I have a thriving multicultural community in Toohey, and this is reflected by the people who volunteered—the people who put their hand up for pre-poll and polling day, made phone calls, manned street stalls, erected street signs and did the hundreds of other things that are essential to a successful campaign. Though time does not permit me to name all those who assisted, I ask them to please know that I am grateful for all of their hard work.

It goes without saying that I am eternally grateful to my diligent and hardworking staff in my electorate office. As we all know, the interaction between your staff and your constituents forms a large part of an elected representative's success. These daily interactions helping the people in our electorates are vital to our electoral success. I would like to acknowledge the work done by Meredith Newman, William Wu and Jan Sheppard. Thank you. I would also like to thank the union movement for its continued support over many years, in particular Rowan Webb and Ann-Marie Alan from the AMWU and Alex Scott from the Together union.

I would like to thank my children, James, Katy, Grant and Joe, and my wife, Kerri, for their love and for supporting me in all of my endeavours. I should make special mention of my eldest son, James, who on election day travelled from Adelaide to be my chauffeur and helped to hand out how-to-vote

cards at polling booths. Grant and Joe also joined me on the Warrigal Road election booth in the closing hours of election day but I understand with some reluctance. They turned up at Warrigal Road in red 'Peter Russo' hats and shirts with cousin Lisa. Grant then proceeded to instruct his dad on what he should be doing on the polling booth. It was good inspiration and motivation from my 13-year-old.

As I prepared my address-in-reply speech it was raining on the south side—and, for that matter, around the state—for most of the week. Every time it rains I know that the people of Rocklea face the unpredictable risk of having their homes flooded by a heavy downpour running into Stable Swamp Creek. I just want to assure the people of Rocklea that they are not forgotten and I will always fight for them.

I would also like to mention a great asset in my community: the Toohey Forest Park. It is named after James Toohey, an Irishman made wealthy in the California goldfields. He selected these lands in 1872 and his family held the forests until the council gradually acquired the land after 1945. It is an open eucalypt forest and is home to over 400 species of native wildlife and plant species. It is only 10 kilometres from the CBD and offers a variety of walking tracks, shared-use trails for walking and cycling, and a bikeway which is enjoyed on the weekend by many of my constituents. I realise how important this forest is to the environment and to the wellbeing of my electorate.

As I commence my political journey being elected for the fourth time, I have to embrace what it means to be on the opposition benches and both the challenges and the opportunities that presents over the next four years. I feel very privileged and humbled to have an opportunity to serve the people of Queensland for a fourth term. I am sincerely grateful that the people of the electorate of Toohey have put their trust in me to represent them in this House again. I will honour that trust by ensuring I work hard to represent them for the next four years.

I live in hope that this government does not undo the good that we have done over the last 10 years. The early steps taken by this new government give me serious concern that it intends to go on as it has started—operating not from a position of principled integrity but from one of perceived political expediency, irrespective of the cost to those in our community most deserving and most in need of much better. The decision by this government to cease the truth-telling inquiry has caused enormous anguish to many First Nations people and is a backward step away from an educated, modern democratic society. The Premier's slogan that the LNP government would be held accountable for doing 'good' for First Nations people has, by his and his government's very first actions, abandoned any genuine hope of any reconciliation taking place and being held accountable for First Nations people.

It is a further example of governments not listening. Ceasing the inquiry continues the pain that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have felt for the last 165 years. Truth telling and listening are at the heart of healing and reconciling. In my view there was nothing divisive in the language and the intent of the truth-telling inquiry. To the contrary, the terms of reference, and the way in which the inquiry was conducting itself, provided a means to bring Queenslanders together and facilitate healing that is well overdue. Queensland has a long history of past wrongs and the current LNP government are perpetrating the past wrongs by ceasing the inquiry.

Likewise on the matter of pill testing this government is also operating from political expediency and not principle. This government's decision to abandon pill testing is not based on what is right, not based on what is most protective of the lives of young people and not based on what those who are actually experts in the area say. Drug use at some events, despite all reasonable attempts to prevent it, is inevitable. We can be unrealistic and say that we have to be tough on crime or we can save young people's lives. This tragic loss of young lives is preventable.

Pill testing allows people to test their drugs before taking them so they can be better informed about the risks. Pill testing is a well-established harm reduction policy around the globe. The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Portugal, the UK and Belgium have all provided pill-testing services for over 20 years. Canada adopted pill testing in 2019 and we have even adopted it on our own shores in Canberra. There is now an undeniable body of evidence that shows that pill-testing services at festivals and fixed sites drastically reduce drug-related harm. Pill testing has been embraced by health and medical experts, legal groups and police. The Australian Medical Association Queensland has said that scrapping pill testing will cost lives. I was pleased to see that the health minister advised that pill testing was still available during schoolies. We need a further commitment that the pill-testing clinics at Bowen Hills and Burleigh Heads will not be defunded from 2025. These clinics provide important and lifesaving services.

What we strove for in government was reform based on principle. As a member of parliament I have been proud to support and vote for abortion law reform, voluntary assisted dying legislation, coercive control legislation, pill testing legislation and the Path to Treaty. These are only a few of the law reforms that I have supported and will continue to support.

In my previous address-in-reply speech I spoke about the stories of racism my father told me about when growing up in North Queensland and the segregation between Italians and white Australians. Because of these stories of my father I have always had a strong conviction to speak out against racism wherever and whenever I see it. I felt very privileged to be chair of the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee and in 2022 to head the inquiry into serious vilification and hate crimes. Queensland did not have a piece of legislation dedicated to serious vilification and hate crimes. It was clear from the evidence received during the inquiry that people were still experiencing the devastating effects of vilification and hate crimes and more needed to be done to address these insidious problems in our society. As such, the recommendations of the committee included recommendations for legislative change which broadened the rubric of both criminal and civil law to capture these behaviours and impose sanctions in respect of the same. The committee also recognised that what is sometimes needed for healing and a different tomorrow is restorative practices and to that end included a recommendation that the Queensland government develop a restorative justice strategy in consultation with affected communities. I am pleased that the work of the committee contributed to the passing of legislation aimed at reducing vilification and hate crimes.

Through the work of several inquiries, the previous government shone a light on the criminal justice system's failure to meet the needs of victims. In July 2024 the first Victims' Commissioner for Queensland was appointed. The commission is working to identify unintentional barriers within the justice and support system responses, while recognising the complexities and long-term nature of this work.

I would now like to speak about some of the developments that are close to my heart in my electorate. The first is the QEII expansion project. The QEII is an important asset for our community and the car park and expansion project are invaluable investments that will benefit both the health of our community and our hardworking health heroes at the QEII. I know that finding a car park is a big frustration for patients, visitors and staff, but the lack of parking on the QEII grounds is also creating a great deal of angst in the community with people parking on the roads around the hospital. My office fields a number of phone calls and emails each week around this issue. The new eight-level car park will deliver 1,379 car parks and is critical for the major expansion that is currently underway to deliver a new five-level building and 112 beds. The expansion project will also deliver 1,120 construction jobs during the building phase. The multilevel car park is expected to be completed in early 2027 and will include sustainable features, including solar panels and a water tank as well as bike spaces, showers and lockers.

Then there is the Eight Mile Plains Satellite Hospital. This facility, with its state-of-the-art equipment, is taking the pressure off emergency departments, including the PA, QE11 and Logan hospitals. This allows these hospital emergency departments to deal with major illnesses and injuries. The more than 100 healthcare workers recruited to staff the hospital has been a great boost to local jobs and provides benefits to the local area. The hospital provides an alternative healthcare model for managing emergency care and chronic disease in a community setting closer to home. This facility offers kidney dialysis and related services, a cancer day unit, outpatient medical services and nursing and allied health services.

The minor injury and illness clinic provides treatment for unplanned, non-life-threatening conditions such as simple fractures, simple infections and minor burns. Minor injury and illness clinics are open seven days a week, do not require an appointment and are free for Medicare card holders. Between opening and September 2024, the satellite hospital had 6,076 patient arrivals, completing care for 98.8 per cent of patients within four hours, with an average length of stay of 79 minutes, and handled 3,218 outpatient appointments. I have heard great reports from constituents, and even my own staff who have attended the Eight Mile Plains Satellite Hospital, about how quickly they have been seen and the great care they have been given. For example, I was told of an incident where a small child fell and hit their chin on a table at 7pm at night. What started with a small cut under the chin soon widened when it began swelling. Rather than a 35-minute trip to the hospital, trying to find a car park, the walk to the ED and a long wait to be seen, they took a five-minute trip to the Eight Mile Plains Satellite Hospital, parked out front, were immediately seen by a nurse and, after treatment by a doctor, were on their way home within less than an hour. Being able to seek treatment closer to home is very important to the community, especially for parents.

Turning now to the Coopers Plains crossing, in my maiden speech that I made to the 55th Parliament on 5 May 2015, I spoke about issues that were important to the former electorate of Sunnybank and now electorate of Toohey. One of these was the Coopers Plains crossing. The crossing has been a big issue for not only Coopers Plains but also the south side for more than 40 years. I am particularly proud to be able to stand up today and say that we have achieved the funding to remove the Boundary Road level crossing and build a new overpass and that work is due to start in mid-2025.

The new Boundary Road rail crossing will include an overpass over the existing rail line at Boundary Road and elevated three-way intersection connecting Boundary Road and Orange Grove Road to improve safety and reduce congestion; new active transport facilities, including on- and off-road bike riding connections and dedicated and accessible pedestrian paths to improve connectivity for pedestrians and people riding their bikes; and improved local access, including new traffic connections.

The new overpass will mean no more stopping during busy peak travel times. New paths for pedestrians and bikes will mean more options for active travel, taking more cars off our busy streets. This overpass will deliver a safer, faster commute, rail reliability, reduce congestion and, as I have already mentioned, a pedestrian overpass and dedicated cycle lanes. This project will not only assist the local community of Toohey but also reduce the travel time for all of those who travel east or west on Boundary Road without having to wait for the trains to go past. The total investment of the project will be \$399 million with the federal and state governments contributing equal funding and the Brisbane City Council contributing \$40 million.

I am proud of the things we were able to achieve in our time in government and I look forward to continuing to achieve for my community. Mahatma Ghandi, an anti-colonial nationalist who employed non-violent resistance to lead the successful campaign for India's independence from British rule and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world, said strength does not come from physical capacity; it comes from an indomitable will to be better than yesterday. I can assure the people of my electorate that every day of this 58th Parliament I will strive to be better than yesterday.