




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (8.16 pm): I welcome the many government members who are here to bear witness to my address-in-reply speech. It is lovely of them. I begin my address-in-reply speech by acknowledging that we meet on the unceded—

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Order! Pause for a moment, member for Maiwar. Members on my right, I cannot hear the member for Maiwar. Please leave the chamber quietly.

Mr BERKMAN: I begin my address-in-reply speech by acknowledging that we meet here, as we always do, on the unceded sovereign country of the Yagara and Turrbal people and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I make clear that this acknowledgement is not intended as the shallow rote statement that it seems to have become for so many people in so many contexts. Instead, it is intended as an expression of my solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people everywhere and a recommitment to doing all I can to work alongside First Nations leaders and communities to address whatever wrongs we still can following 237 years of colonisation and its impacts. It is a statement of solidarity with people everywhere who are enduring the ongoing impacts of colonisation, like the Palestinian people who are still facing war, violence and genocide at the hands of the colonising Israeli state and now the prospect of direct intervention and dispossession at the hands of our supposed ally, the USA, and the despotic oligarchs who now occupy the halls of power there.

We should not have to be reminded, but I take the opportunity to remind members of the direct role that this parliament has played in supporting and funding the manufacture of weapons that have killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians in Gaza and in other foreign conflicts. Through our federal government's support of the US strikes on Iran, no matter how meek and muted their response might have been in recent days, we seem to be complicit in pushing ever closer to a global conflict of a scale that I suspect none of us in this place have ever borne witness to.

I remind members of this parliament and the other institutions of government in Queensland that, since their inception, we have engaged in a program of systemic racism, violence and genocide against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the systemic racism and violence continues. We see it in the seven-year gap in life expectancy. We see it in the world-leading overrepresentation of First Nations people incarcerated in Queensland. We see this parliament itself continue to entrench racist policies and pass racist legislation, as it has done with youth justice legislation in recent years under both Labor and the LNP and as it has continued to do most flagrantly in the early months of this parliament, the 58th Parliament. Frankly, there is no other way to dress up this government's legislation to abolish the Path to Treaty and to legislate, with Labor's support, to ensure that more black children are locked up in Queensland.

I have taken issue in this place before about the way we soberly and very quietly bow our heads at the start of each sitting day for the Lord's Prayer and then sit down and more members than not begin a conversation during the acknowledgement of country. In this term of government, for reasons I

cannot understand, the acknowledgement of country has been watered down almost beyond recognition. How is it that this House could conflate an acknowledgement of traditional owners with an acknowledgement of past members of parliament and, quite literally, just about every person who lives in Queensland? It boggles the mind. It is the acknowledgement you give when you want to be offensive. Since this change of government, the acknowledgement has been watered down, I believe, to the point of being insipid, offensive and feigned.

Like thousands of people across Queensland, I was dismayed that the LNP government cancelled the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry and cancelled the Path to Treaty process. We were one small but really significant step closer to healing the centuries of trauma and facing up to the dispossession and violence that we have seen here in Queensland since colonisation. The Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry was going to open a pathway to share and acknowledge the true history of this state. Instead, we have taken a step backwards—one that has caused immeasurable harm along the way. I again urge the government, whether it is a waste of breath or not, to listen to First Nations people, to reverse this decision and to start moving towards genuine truth-telling, healing and First Nations justice.

I am genuinely humbled and grateful to have been returned as the member for Maiwar. It truly is incredible. I use the word ‘incredible’ deliberately. It still does not seem real at times that I have been elected to this place to continue to represent the people of Maiwar in Auchenflower, Bardon, Fig Tree Pocket, Indooroopilly, St Lucia, Taringa and my home suburb of Toowong. I am so grateful for their endorsement at the election and to be here to continue to represent them.

I am incredibly proud also to represent the 10 per cent of Queenslanders who voted green. It is a quite absurd feature of our electoral system that more than 307,000 voters—10 per cent of the state—can vote in support of a party yet only one of 93 members is elected. Nonetheless, it is the system we have. With that, I genuinely congratulate every member who has been elected to this place. It is a privilege we all share, and I hope we all discharge our duties to the best of our abilities and with the best of intentions, whatever that looks like for each of us.

Congratulations to you, Mr Deputy Speaker Krause, for your election to that role and, through you, to the Speaker. It is something of a poisoned chalice to have the task of keeping this rabble under control. I wish you the best of luck with that.

This is obviously the best, if not the only, opportunity to offer thanks to all of those people in our lives who support us and allow us to carry on with the work that we do in this place. I suspect just about every member in their address-in-reply has acknowledged the sacrifices that our families make to support us. They are simply inevitable. They are a by-product of being in public life.

I need to start first of all by thanking and expressing my love for my wife, Daile, whom many of you will know. You may have encountered her over the years as a leading abortion advocate in the state of Queensland. She is an absolute boss, a true rockstar in her space and an incredibly supportive wife. Last year she made her way overseas as a Churchill Fellow to research abortion advocacy models for government policy change to increase access. I should have brought a copy of that. I could have tabled it. I reckon the government could take a few hot tips from it to see that we actually continue to improve reproductive rights in Queensland. That research took her to Belgium, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the USA and Canada. It was a really amazing experience for her.

The timing was great for her purposes but it saw her overseas for all but two weeks between August and November, which clearly created a few issues for me in an election year and for the family, which leads me to my next thanks—my parents. They have been an incredible support. I might be the only 44-year-old prepared to stand up in this place and celebrate how excited he was to live with his parents for a few months in the year 2024. It really was a lovely time to have with them and with the kids. I mention that especially because my mum has been dealing with some really rough health issues lately. She has had multiple cancer diagnoses and recurrences over the last couple of years, so it has been really tough. Nonetheless, they are supporting us every step of the way. They are the most hands-on, beautiful grandparents you could ever hope to have in your kids’ lives. Thank you to them.

Recognising that I was going to be making my address-in-reply speech tonight, I was out the front with the QTU rally tonight and tipped my hat to Mum for her many years of teaching and representing all of her colleagues through the QTU. I know she was there in spirit.

I cannot believe that my kids were tiny when I started here. I now have two teenagers and a six-year-old, who was not here with us when I was first elected. I am so incredibly proud of all them. They are growing up to be outstanding young people, and I will be so proud to see all they achieve in their lives. Juniper will turn six in a couple of days and, boy, don’t we know about it!

I sincerely thank all of the electorate office staff. I will not try to name them all because we have had quite a lot of turnover. There is so much talent in the office and they get poached to work on campaigns or in other offices. Particular thanks go to Emerald, who was my chief of staff throughout the last term, and to the entire team. Everyone has done incredible work. To keep the office ticking over and to keep me out, engaged and visible to the community while so much was being done to juggle family life in the background was an extraordinary feat, and I am so grateful for them and their work.

The same is true for all the campaign staff and volunteers. Again, I will not challenge myself to do a roll call of the staff or the volunteers because there were so many of them. I will name Sean Womersley, who headed up the campaign in Maiwar. The team is an absolute powerhouse. Thank you, Sean. Thank you for being there to pick up the pieces while I, as a solo parent and with my parents living with me, slowly lost the plot throughout the month of September. Everyone else, do not take it personally—you are in my heart and I love you. Thank you for your support. I promise not to hold it against you that I am back here for another four years in the most welcoming, collegiate and supportive workplace that any of us could possibly hope to be part of.

There are countless people behind the scenes as well—the party executive and office bearers at the state level and in the branches—who do amazing work. It is largely unseen, but all of us here and certainly everyone in the party appreciate what you do and how much time and emotional investment it takes.

I will take a moment to pay tribute to the former member for South Brisbane, Amy MacMahon. This is no reflection whatsoever on the current sitting member for South Brisbane, but Amy is a genuine loss to this parliament. It is difficult to imagine a person who was more hardworking, more committed to her community and her causes and more genuine. I dearly miss her presence in here, but I feel very lucky that I have been able to continue to work with Amy in recent months. It is hard to encapsulate what a full-on year last year was, especially given the car crash before we even arrived back at parliament. To come off the back of that accident and head straight into a campaign was no mean feat. It is kind of fitting that recently we heard judicial commentary of the car crash identifying what great compassion Amy had in that circumstance. That is the same compassion she brought to her work, to her engagement with the community and to the parliament. She still has it too.

Obviously the outcome at the last state election was not one that we wanted to see. I would argue that we did see a glimmer of hope for Queensland politics last year and I will specify why. It is because we saw Labor finally adopting a bunch of Greens' policies. Fair, it was in an attempt to stem the bleeding in Brisbane after they had clearly done the maths and decided that they could not stop the LNP across the state, but let's reflect on a couple.

I started my time here being roundly ridiculed—literally laughed at—for talking about free public transport, yet now it is practically free. Everyone is clambering over each other to claim a policy that was rolled out by the Greens in 2017. It is interesting that the policy was \$1 fares in 2017 and free in 2020. They had to split the difference and make it 50 cents because they could not be seen to directly take that particular Greens policy. We were mocked as unrealistic dreamers. Imagine how foolhardy you would be to suggest that schools could actually provide free lunches for their students across the state. What an absurd idea that you would feed children! Not only was it part of Labor's election platform; it has now effectively become a part of the personal brand of the Leader of the Opposition.

I am not the only one to reflect that this is a broken institution, but every now and then we are reminded that it is just the institution. Queenslanders themselves certainly are not the broken ones. Queenslanders simply want a better life for their neighbours every bit as much as they want it for themselves. They want a fair state, they want a protected environment and they want hope for the future. When we recognise that, quite incredible things can happen for us—for example, in the last term legislating the right to die with dignity or changes to consent laws that, again, were initially pushed forcefully by the Greens, turned away by Labor but ultimately won by the people who were standing up and fighting for those changes until the powers that be finally listened.

I still have hope that the major parties will be forced to listen to renters too. The last government ultimately failed to do anything to meaningfully support renters. Despite our ongoing pressure, despite calls from the housing sector and despite calls from the millions of renters in Queensland, rents have skyrocketed and governments continue to do nothing to about it—Labor in the last term or the LNP now. We have to wonder how many people could have been protected from homelessness if we had banned unlimited rent increases. How many people could have been able to keep living in their own communities? How many kids would have continued at their schools and continued to learn with their friends? Instead, renters continue to live their lives in constant fear of being outright evicted or just priced out of the communities they have grown up in because of this stubborn and enormous power imbalance between renters and landlords.

I keep my hope as well by remembering that this state has suffered through political ignorance and brutality and made it out the other side previously. That is how I approach this new government too because we know just how ignorant and brutal the LNP can be. We saw it in their last iteration. Despite all of the claims that they have left behind the old ways of Campbell Newman, we know that deep down what the LNP stands for has not changed. Indeed, the mask started slipping as soon as they had themselves cosily settled on the government benches.

The LNP fundamentally does not believe in a well-funded Public Service. They would sell off our entire public health system and leave it to the private health insurers if they could. They claim to be supporting state schools by waving around an agreement to meet minimum funding requirements. They are going to meet them in 10 years time!

The LNP fundamentally believes that it is just the natural order of things that banking bosses can take home multimillion dollar bonuses while families continue to sleep in tents and cars. The only issue they see in this is an aesthetic one, and their LNP council colleagues have had those values on full display as they continue to kick people out of public parks who have nowhere else to sleep, and I have heard their members in here cheering that on when I have addressed it previously.

This is a party that fundamentally believes inequality is an individual's fault—that if a kid born into intergenerational disadvantage, poverty or disability, whatever that might look like, just worked hard and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps they too could be a billionaire. It is the ultimate neoliberal lie and it is a stubborn and insidious one indeed. It is a lie that is firmly held in place by the real puppeteer of Queensland politics: the big business interests, the billionaires and the lobby groups—be they the real estate lobby or for the resources sector—that work hand in hand with the major parties to deeply embed their power so that they hold that power over ordinary people and continue to rip them off for their own profits.

Were it not for the fact that I know they are just going after the political donations and the cushy job prospects after politics, I would think it embarrassing how wholly these politicians continue to swallow and parrot the industry lines—the gas lobby in particular. Following Labor's example, we have now seen them open up 16,000 square kilometres more of Queensland to gas exploration, as if these gas companies are just desperate to charitably help out our electricity needs like there is really anything in it for Queenslanders from an industry that pays bugger all tax and where we get essentially no royalties—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Order! Member for Maiwar, withdraw that unparliamentary language.

Mr BERKMAN: I withdraw. My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. We know that the LNP loves a culture war because obsessing over individual difference, fear and hysteria creates a convenient distraction from the growing power of a wealthy few individuals who are corrupting the system and making life worse for us all. Labor was disappointing in its time too because, frankly, you cannot speak truth to power when you are living in its pocket. I have said it before and I will say it again: until corporate donations stop, until the revolving door and cash for access stops, Queensland politics is in trouble. I do not intend to be distracted by the major parties and their culture wars. I will continue to be a thorn in their side wherever I can by refusing to ignore the climate science. Someone has to do it.

(Time expired)