



Speech by

Mandy Johnstone

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Wednesday, 22 April 2009

MAIDEN SPEECH

Ms JOHNSTONE (Townsville—ALP) (2.36 pm), by leave, without notice: I move—

That the following address be presented to the Governor in reply to the speech delivered by Her Excellency in opening this, the 53rd Parliament of Queensland—

"We the members of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland wish to assure Your Excellency of our continued respect for the Crown and loyalty to the system of government in this state and to tender our thanks for the speech with which you opened the first session.

The various measures to which Your Excellency referred and to all other matters that may be brought before us will receive our careful consideration and we shall strive to deal with them so that our endeavours may contribute to the advancement and the prosperity of the people of this state."

I am honoured and privileged to be here in the chamber delivering my address-in-reply to the 53rd sitting of the Queensland parliament as the first woman elected as the member for Townsville. To be doing so as part of this parliament led by Premier Anna Bligh, the first Australian woman to be elected to her position in her own right, is a truly historic time. I could not be more proud to be a Queenslanders than I am today.

I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which parliament meets. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land which makes up the Townsville electorate, the Wulgurukaba and the Bindal peoples of Townsville and Magnetic Island, and the Manbarra people of Palm Island. I also acknowledge the historical owners of Palm Island, the Bwgcolman people.

As the member for Townsville, my first responsibility is to you, the people of Townsville. This responsibility is to represent you here in the parliament and to be held accountable by you for decisions and actions that I take on your behalf. Indeed, it was at the historical 2002 Townsville sitting of parliament that the then Premier, Peter Beattie, reminded parliamentarians of this critical point. I believe one of the most important functions of government is to provide the infrastructure, services and amenities that create safe, inclusive and progressive communities. If provided, this then allows individuals and families to safely go about their everyday lives within the context of a rich and dynamic democracy that they can take ownership of and be a part of.

Family is, of course, at the core of who we are. Indeed, having a strong supportive family is what has allowed me to undertake the journey that has led me to this most respected chamber today. To my husband, Carl, I say: you are my rock. As my staunchest supporter you have never doubted for one minute my decision to take my work in the community to the next level by pursuing a career in politics. Sharing, as I do, your passion for a socially just society and fair employment conditions for working Australians, I hope that I will do you proud.

To Ethan and Paige, our children: your smiles and cuddles always arrive at just the right time. I know that you will grow up in a household where there are no limitations on what great things you can achieve in your lives. Dad and I are so proud to have you as our children. I will remember sharing this day with you forever.

Hard work will be at the core of me achieving my priorities in this term of government. The people of Townsville can be assured that I have a huge capacity for hard work. This comes from my parents, Terry

and Val Thompson, who are here in the gallery today. Dad is a carpenter by trade and a self-employed builder by profession. Mum has dedicated her life to working in the home, raising four children and working in partnership with dad in their business. I know how hard some of those early years were for you both, but you managed to shield us from these hardships and ensured that we always had what all children need—a safe and loving home to come home to each night, a point that I will reflect on a little later in my speech. Together Dad and Mum have managed to provide the leadership, trust and love that children need to grow into confident and capable adults. My siblings, Matthew, Shannon and Danielle, are also strong, independent thinkers in their own areas of interest.

Thank you to my parents-in-law, Philip and June Johnstone, for your love and support to Carl and me, Ethan and Paige. June is another example of the strong women role models that have been a key feature of both my personal and professional life. My mother-in-law had a deeply rewarding and successful career which saw her teaching children in England, Kenya, Papua New Guinea and Australia. Much of this work and travel was undertaken as a single woman during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when this was definitely the exception rather than the rule.

This election victory is so sweet because of the exceptional campaign team I had working around the clock to ensure that the seat of Townsville remained a Labor stronghold in the wake of the retirement of Mike Reynolds. The contribution Mike has made to the people of Townsville is significant. I acknowledge both his time as councillor and mayor of the Townsville City Council and his work for the city in the state parliament.

My campaign team, from the executive to the broader committee, was simply sensational. The team worked to our plan and stayed on track even when I did not think we had a track to be on. Campaign director, Nikki Burrell, put her already busy life on hold with little notice and zero fuss. In true Labor style she simply got on with the job at hand. It truly became a family affair. I thank Zac Burrell for all his work behind the scenes.

To Scott McFarlane, you are a very special person—thank you. We were extremely privileged to have someone with your campaigning skills and abilities working with us. You and Nikki provided me with calm and reason several times a day during that hectic 26 days. I also acknowledge again my husband, Carl, Brian Pridmore and Ray Goodmanson who worked tirelessly in the campaign office—answering the phones, managing the postal vote campaign and coordinating volunteers, rosters and anything else that came their way.

Another critical factor in our ultimate success was volunteer contributions. The campaign office was a hive of activity because of the number of supporters who simply turned up unannounced and got on with the jobs of the day. To each of you I say thank you for every text message of support, every envelope stuffed and every letter hand delivered. The success of the campaign was in us getting the little things right. You made it possible for me to be out in the neighbourhoods meeting with and listening to as many people as possible.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Queensland Labor Party and the trade union movement. Special thanks to Terry Wood and Chris Forrester from the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party, particularly through those early days and not so early days. To Andrew Dettmer and Rick Finch from the AMWU, we could not have done this without your support. Similarly, to Bill Marklew and the team at the CPSU, the great team at the LHMU and Dick Williams and the guys at the ETU, thank you all. I also include in this acknowledgement the many local union members who volunteered their time around their own busy work and family commitments to help on this campaign. Each union and individual member's contribution was highly valued and I thank you.

Taking the decision to enter public life may seem a difficult one for some, but I was very fortunate to have around me some wonderful mentors and friends who have guided, coached and encouraged me to believe that such things are possible. To Lindy Nelson-Carr and Russell Carr, I am deeply honoured to call you my friends. Your guidance and commitment in showing me that you can and must fight the good fight has been invaluable. To Dale Parker, I simply say thank you my friend. Your service to the people of Townsville as councillor for division 5 at the Townsville City Council was second to none. Entering politics as you did following your battle with bone cancer and after a career in the wharfs, you have shown why we must continue to create inclusive and diverse communities. We will miss out on contributions like yours if we do not.

Townsville is the capital of North Queensland. It is my home. I was born there and raised there, I worked there and now I am raising my children there. One of the strengths of this electorate is its diversity—diversity of community, industry and cultures. Founded in 1866 by John Melton Black and first established as a state seat in 1878, the original village was established around the development of the port which today remains a critical feature of the local and state economy.

Today Townsville is a major regional city with a population in excess of 160,000 people. The electorate itself includes the beautiful Palm and Magnetic islands, the CBD, the port and the older suburbs of Garbutt, West End, South Townsville and Railway Estate. Our diverse economy is made up of a number of industries and sectors. The Defence Force has a special presence in the city with Lavarack Barracks

based there. We have a large public sector and a range of different construction and trade based private sectors.

We are proud to have great thinkers and researchers at our James Cook University. North Queensland also provides world-class leadership and innovation in the important areas of tropical health and medicine, tropical marine science and research into renewable and alternative energy industries to name but a few. You can see that we have an abundance of assets in the people with specialist skills on which we are building our community.

We are a proud and parochial lot who provide leadership across a range of cultural, community and sporting areas. When I speak of leadership I am speaking of those community minded citizens who go about the business of building community without seeking accolades and often without recognition. These leaders include our volunteer management committee members, our junior sporting coaches and our professional workforce. To give just one example of this, I acknowledge the quality work that is being done by workers and volunteers in the multicultural, homeless and domestic violence sectors. Your work is best practice when measured against both national and international standards.

Martin Luther King once said, 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.' So it is for me. My work has always been driven by values and a commitment to social justice and the imperative of fair treatment. I became more politically active during the 1990s when it became clear what the Howard industrial relations reforms meant for ordinary working people, particularly for women and minority groups. The impacts on working families of this time, particularly in the area of the casualisation of workplaces, was devastating.

We must remember that as an elected representative in this parliament what we really are about is people. Our humanity is what joins and bonds us and is what must never be forgotten in the process of government. The impacts on ordinary people must be at the forefront of our minds when policy is formulated and legislation debated.

Decisions of government must be socially just and have consideration for the most marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable in our society. My first experience in working for better outcomes from such vulnerable people came 19 years ago when I was first employed by the department of housing, the then Queensland Housing Commission. My commitment to striving for better outcomes in the areas of housing and homelessness has not waned since this time.

Whilst not impossible, anyone who has worked in a SAAP or homeless service knows how difficult and labour intensive it is to break the cycle of homelessness. In 'A road home' the Rudd Labor government has acknowledged the complex nature of homelessness and has committed to developing a holistic public and community sector response.

I am proud to be part of the Bligh Labor government that will be working with our federal colleagues towards better outcomes in this area—most importantly, with the construction of 4,000 new affordable housing dwellings for vulnerable Queenslanders. All Australians, and in particular our children, have a right to safe, secure and affordable housing. Without this stable foundation all else becomes near impossible. Jobs cannot be sustained, homework cannot be completed, families break down and neighbourhoods cannot be nourished. We simply must do better. These people deserve it.

Many of the people seeking refuge in our shelters each night are made homeless through no fault of their own. A significant proportion of women and children have been made homeless because of domestic and family violence. I have worked with many women in this situation and I have heard their stories. The strength and resilience of the many women who have touched me during my working life has been amazing. I feel so privileged and indebted to the women who allowed me to share a small part of their lives when they were at their most vulnerable and desperate, either seeking refuge in a women's shelter or turning up at my office looking for housing or other assistance. It never ceases to amaze me how these women ingeniously and at great personal cost are able to protect and nurture their children in some of the most intolerable situations that you can imagine. The use of violence against women and children must never be tolerated and we must continue to work hard in this area.

As an ordinary woman coming from a working-class family, I also bring to this parliament an appreciation of the types of struggles facing working families. I understand the dilemmas families have in achieving the work/family balance. Education, child care, securing stable employment and often simply hoping there is enough left for groceries at the end of each week are issues that thousands of families are dealing with on a daily basis. All of us want to work hard to provide security and opportunity for our children. The importance of protecting jobs for working families in the current economic climate cannot be underestimated.

As a society, we have let down our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers with tragic consequences. I cannot change what has gone before, though I wish I could. However, I look forward to working alongside and with you in the electorate to work towards achieving your collective goals. I feel strongly that all Australian citizens should have services and opportunity which will support people and communities to achieve their dreams. This includes working with individuals, Elders and other

Indigenous leaders to create these opportunities in a way that respects and values the unique cultures that our first citizens have handed down for generations.

Whilst we have much to be proud of, there is still much to be done, and it is within this context that I place on the record here today how I plan to do this. I intend to get the little things right in my job as your local MP. I will build relationships with you that are based on mutual respect and understanding. I will listen to you and value your position on issues that are important to the community. I will be your advocate and will fight hard for you. Finally, I will never take for granted the privilege and honour that has been given to me by the people of Townsville, and I look forward to the next three years with excitement, optimism and hope.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!