

## **Acknowledgements**

- I respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which this event is taking place, and the Custodians of the sacred lands of our State.

## **“FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW”**

As patron of the Queensland Chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group I am very pleased to have this opportunity to update the group on the work I am undertaking here at the Queensland Parliament towards a significant and meaningful community engagement strategy.

I may be occupying the ancient and honourable office as Speaker of an institution that traces its roots through over 800 years of history – but I am bringing in important changes that I am convinced will bring the institution of Parliament into the current century.

Major social institutions such as governments, courts, parliaments and universities can sometimes appear impenetrable to people outside of the institution.

Despite the enormous significance of each of these institutions in our society, people do not always have an automatic understanding of what the institutions exist for or the roles they fill.

As you are aware, our society is based on three main pillars – the Parliament which makes the law, the Government which administers the law and delivers services, and the courts which uphold the law.

These pillars often appear mystifying, baffling, sometimes secretive and at times just downright strange to a lot of people.

Compare for one moment the difference in doing business with the local corner store or petrol station – usually a simple transaction – with doing business with the Tax Office or the Primary Industries Department or even your local Member’s office.

People readily understand the terms of engagement with a local retail outlet but government departments and governmental institutions often appear much more complex, remote and difficult to navigate.

Why is this the case? Why does this perception – and of course people's perceptions become their realities – continue to exist?

I submit that a reason for this perception existing for many people is because governmental institutions do not always adapt to changing circumstances as quickly as business does – and do not always make an effort to communicate and explain changes.

To be fair, the nature of the business conducted between people and government can often be complex and legalistic.

Naturally this contributes significantly to the perception that governments are difficult to deal with, remote or “behind the times”.

So if institutions can appear impenetrable to some people on the outside, then what are the perceptions of those on the inside?

As someone who has spent his entire career on the inside of governmental institutions I can assure you that often the perceptions are the exact opposite.

Sometimes change within government seems so constant that public servants become fatigued.

For example, there has recently been a change of premier in Queensland.

With a change of this significance came an overhaul of the government departments in Queensland.

In September government departments were changed, abolished and created through no less than 26 major machinery of government changes.

These changes have ranged from renaming some departments, reallocating responsibilities across existing departments, introducing new portfolios such as climate change and abolishing an entire department whose responsibilities were absorbed elsewhere.

Of course many people would not be aware of any of these changes at all.

But a few years ago when Kentucky Fried Chicken decided to re-badge itself KFC, most people caught on pretty quickly.

My point is that change occurs all of the time despite perceptions to the contrary.

Of all the governmental institutions that exist I would be prepared to nominate parliament as the one that suffers with the greatest image of stagnation, rigidity and inflexibility.

The image of parliament remains for most people one of men in suits sitting in a chamber either hurling abuse at each other or being overpaid for doing little work.

Indeed parliaments have long been mystifying to many people.

Living in a country that inherited the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy from Britain does mean that many of our processes and procedures are based on ancient British practices.

But many, many more of our procedures have been and continue to be adapted to reflect Australian circumstances.

In a country such as Australia which has 9 parliaments I can assure you that no two chambers anywhere in the country operate in the same way and they never will.

This is the case because every parliament has been changed by the people that have served in it.

As the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland and as your patron I am here to share with you the changes that are underway in your parliament.

I have titled my address this evening "*From little things, big things grow*".

These are the popular lyrics of singer / songwriters Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly.

These lyrics rang true when the Queensland Parliament recently embarked on a journey towards increased engagement with the

community, in particular young people, regional and Indigenous Queenslanders.

I want to share with you my guiding philosophy and the changes I have implemented to increase the engagement between the parliament and the people.

When I was elected as the 33<sup>rd</sup> Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland on 10 October last year, I paid tribute to each of the Speakers who had filled the office before me.

Each Speaker contributed to the style and nature of parliamentary democracy in the state of Queensland through their stewardship of the House.

All Speakers, of course, bring to the job a unique style and approach.

A strong sense of social justice has guided me throughout my professional life.

I told the Parliament that I would bring that philosophy to the Speaker's job and that my vision would be for the parliament to engage with the people of Queensland whatever their age, background, colour, religion or gender.

Very soon after becoming Speaker and familiarising myself with the structure and management of the Queensland Parliamentary Service I asked myself "how are we as a Parliament engaging with our community?"

In short the answer was that we were not engaging very well at all.

Of course Members of Parliament, as elected representatives, have primary responsibility for engaging with the community.

However, I believe there is also a role for the Parliament as an institution in supporting Members to engage with the community, by increasing public understanding of the role and work of the Parliament, and facilitating greater engagement with the House itself.

As a result, a new goal has been set for the Parliamentary Service: “to support the Parliament to engage with all Queenslanders”.

The new Community Engagement unit was established in July this year to undertake a range of important roles including:

- parliamentary education
- media, multimedia and publications
- indigenous liaison
- protocol, and
- parliamentary history.

A new manager of the Community Engagement Unit, Glenda Emmerson, has been appointed.

A new Protocol Officer and a new Indigenous Liaison Officer are in the process of being appointed to assist me with the very important diplomatic work I undertake on behalf of the Parliament of Queensland and to assist in my determination to give Indigenous Queenslanders a greater sense of connection to their Parliament.

All visiting Ambassadors and High Commissioners who come to Brisbane call on three people – the Governor, the Premier and the Speaker.

The new Protocol Officer will assist me greatly in this expanding work and also work with the new Indigenous Liaison Officer on matters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols.

Parliamentary history will be focused on maintaining and developing resources relating to the history of the Parliament, its committees and Members, buildings and events.

In February I hosted a dinner at Parliament House for senior representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum.

This was the first time some elders had stepped foot inside Parliament House.

The dinner was quite historic and many of the participants later said we should have filmed it.

At the dinner were 13 Indigenous people and 13 non-Indigenous people.

From this dinner came a working group which assisted myself and Parliamentary staff to plan a number of special events to acknowledge the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 referendum and Reconciliation Week 2007.

The 1967 referendum saw more than 90% of eligible Australians support the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national population census and gave the Commonwealth Government powers to make laws in respect of Indigenous peoples.

The referendum is often referred to as the first stage of the reconciliation movement in Australia and its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides a significant opportunity to further encourage the Queensland community's interest in reconciliation.

The historic events held at Parliament House earlier this year, which have heralded a new era for the Parliament include:

- The flying of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags alongside the Australian and Queensland flags outside Parliament House and in the Legislative Assembly Chamber;
- The introduction of an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land at the beginning of each parliamentary sitting;
- The launching of the inaugural Indigenous artist-in-residence program;
- The staging of an Indigenous art display in the former Upper House Chamber;

- A Speaker's Reconciliation Reception, including a traditional smoking ceremony; and
- The innovative Cape York to Parliament program for young Indigenous students.

On 22 May I was joined by representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the front gates of Parliament House where together we hoisted the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

I have ordered that the flags be flown in front of Parliament House on a permanent basis with the Australian and Queensland flags.

I have also introduced onto the floor of the Legislative Assembly itself the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag, along with the Australian and Queensland flags.

The flags will be a reminder to those inside the Parliament that they are charged with making decisions for all Queenslanders, including Indigenous Queenslanders, as well as being a symbol to all Queenslanders that the Parliament exists for the benefit of the entire community.

The proceedings of Parliament on 22 May also began, for the first time in all of our 147 year history, with an acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the land upon which the Parliament is assembled and the Custodians of the sacred lands of our State.

This will be my practice each sitting day while I am Speaker and I hope that it will become the practice of Speakers for ever more.

The importance of this change to the proceedings of the House should not be underestimated.

This year also saw the introduction of the first parliamentary artist in residence program.

Mr John Pene-Fonmosa of Indij-n-Arts gallery at South Brisbane was appointed as the Parliament's inaugural artist in residence. John is part of the tribal area of Bunjalung and his art is based on his connection to the land, ocean, and rivers.

John was commissioned to create a special didgeridoo for the Parliament which will symbolise the custodianship by traditional owners of the lands that today make up the state of Queensland.

The didgeridoo was presented to me on 5 July in time for NAIDOC week and is now a significant parliamentary symbol to be used on special occasions and will be displayed in a special cabinet alongside the Mace.

John was nominated by others in the Indigenous community to become the first Indigenous artist in residence at the Queensland Parliament and curator of a two week art display, held in the former Upper House Chamber.

John is not only the inaugural parliamentary artist in residence. He is the first Indigenous artist in residence at the Queensland Parliament.

A step closer to meaningful and sincere reconciliation between all of our peoples occurred on the evening of 22 May.

An historic Reconciliation Reception was held on the Speaker's Green at Parliament House.

The reception brought together hundreds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders from all walks of life.

A major moment of the reception was when Members of Parliament and other guests were led through a traditional smoking ceremony by myself and the President of Brisbane Council of Elders, Aunty Valda Coolwell.

The ceremony was performed by MAREEBAH KUNJEIL ("Mareeba Kun Jeel"), made up of representatives of local Brisbane tribes of the Noonucal and Yuggera people.

The cultural teacher of the performers was Mr Raymond Walker, a descendant of the Noonucal people who continues to teach the traditional song and dance of his people to others.

One of the most exciting changes implemented at the Parliament this year was the innovative Cape York to Parliament Program.

As part of this historic program, eighteen year 6 and 7 indigenous school students from Coen and Hope Vale in Far North Queensland visited the Parliament as part of a series of educational, cultural and recreational activities.

The Cape York to Parliament Program included parliamentary studies, mentoring from Elders, a visit to the Murri School, reconciliation activities with non-Indigenous students and art projects, as well as trips to the State of Origin and the reconciliation match between the North Queensland Cowboys and the Canterbury Bulldogs at Suncorp Stadium.

The NRL's Reconciliation Cup was unveiled at the Parliament ahead of the inaugural Reconciliation Match held at Suncorp Stadium on 24 May.

The trophy was presented to the victorious team on the night by students participating in the Cape York to Parliament program.

The Cape York to Parliament program was organised in partnership with members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community, the private sector and government departments.

These reconciliation events, and other community engagement events to be held throughout the year, sow the seeds for the Parliament's major new community engagement strategy aimed at young people, regional and Indigenous Queenslanders which will be launched later this year.

Future changes already in the planning stage include:

- Convening a Murri Parliament, along the model of a Youth Parliament;
- Developing an outreach program for delivery of education and community engagement programs, to include two regional education and community engagement programs based on the regional parliament model.
- Evaluating current educational programs to ensure that educational and information resources continue to be

appropriate for the target audience, based on relevant school curricula, and consistent with best practice in teaching.

- Reviewing and enhancing the parliamentary internship program, in particular the level of participation of regional universities.
- Developing a media engagement strategy for the Queensland Parliament with particular emphasis on engagement with regional outlets and publicising the new video broadcast of Parliament which you will hear more about shortly.
- Reviewing the design, usability and interactivity of the Parliament's internet site and the current range of parliamentary publications and develop a suite of fact sheets to complement the information available on the internet site.

A few years ago a major change to parliament occurred with the introduction of Regional Parliaments.

In 2002 the State Parliament met for a week outside of Brisbane for the first time.

I remember the sitting very well because it occurred in my home town of Townsville.

In 2005 parliament met in Rockhampton, and will again travel outside of Brisbane for a special regional sitting some time next year.

A regional sitting of Parliament in 2008, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Parliament in 2010, following on from the State's anniversary in 2009, will be a major focus of our community engagement activities. In the next three years.

I consider it an immense privilege to be the current custodian of the ancient and honourable office of Speaker.

It is a position that carries with it the dignity and tradition of the Westminster parliamentary system.

However, as I hope my address this evening has demonstrated, the Office of Speaker is also a role that can facilitate change.

It can also bring about positive community engagement, empowerment and pride in the people that a Parliament stands to represent and, importantly, an opportunity to lead by example and demonstrate a respect for all people in the community.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I selected the examples of change that I have just informed you of to strongly demonstrate that change is constant in even one of our most traditional and time-honoured institutions such as the Parliament of Queensland.

Within a building that is over 140 years old and within a parliamentary environment much, much older than that, change cannot be stopped and should not be stopped.

The innovations you have heard of tonight are important changes that have been made to keep parliament relevant to people and better position it to adapt and keep up with the people it represents.

Thank you for your time this evening.