



Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (4.27 pm): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is fantastic to be here on my birthday for my maiden speech. I would firstly like to congratulate the Speaker of the House on the elevation to his new position. I am sure that, under his leadership, the Speaker will assist in restoring the community's respect for this place, which sits at the heart of our democracy.

I would also like to recognise and congratulate the Premier on her appointment. Queenslanders spoke loudly at the last election in favour of a more inclusive and responsive government, which I know has core values to respect and restore integrity to all those who live, work and play in our vast state. I know that the Premier intends to govern for all Queenslanders.

It is certainly humbling to stand in this place as the representative of the people of Thuringowa. It is with respect and great honour that I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which Thuringowa sits: the Bindal and Wulgurukaba people and their elders past and present. I feel and recognise the great responsibility to be the voice of the 56,000 people who live in my electorate; to stand up, to make a difference and to advocate strongly on their behalf whilst in this place.

The many suburbs that make up Thuringowa—from Deeragun to Kelso, Alice River to Thuringowa Central and all surrounding suburbs—are home to local families, mine included. We work hard, we play hard and we proudly back the mighty North Queensland Cowboys. Not only do we celebrate the things that make us similar; we also enjoy our multicultural links in our festivals held at our Riverway precinct—everything from Greek Fest to the African Festival, India Fest and NAIDOC celebrations. Only recently the now-famous Weet-Bix challenge was once again held at our Riverway precinct, where we had nearly 1,000 children aged between seven and 15 take part in this excellent event promoting healthy lifestyle choices. Well done to all mums and dads who encouraged their children to be part of this growing event.

Sadly, our community of Thuringowa has done it tough in recent times. Unemployment has climbed, local businesses have gone to the wall and confidence has slipped out of the local community. The unacceptably high youth unemployment rate of over 18 per cent and the high cost of living over the past three years have placed pressure on local families—families like mine. Thuringowa has also experienced a significant downturn in business confidence over the past three years. More broadly, the entire Townsville area is suffering a high business bankruptcy rate. These are not easy things to fix, but it is our job to be part of the solution rather than the cause of the problem. I now have the opportunity to enable change in these important areas in my community as the elected member for Thuringowa.

I believe that the thing that defines us as Queenslanders is our willingness to help a neighbour in need. I would like to recognise the important work performed in Thuringowa by our many volunteers and community organisations. We know the importance of working together. We see it every day and particularly see it when we face natural disasters, but it does not need to involve a natural disaster. In Townsville over the weekend just gone, two young boys, aged five and six, went missing in Mount

Stuart scrub land. Over 170 volunteers, emergency services and army personnel came together to help find both Nicholas and Tim alive, safe and well after 24 hours lost. We should rightfully acknowledge the enormous effort in locating these boys. Well done to all involved, particularly the QPS for its coordination of this fantastic outcome.

Twenty-five years ago I joined the Queensland Ambulance Service. I am a proud ambo and have served in many roles across the northern region including acting officer in charge of various locations and stations including Hughenden, Charters Towers, Ayr, Ingham, Northern Beaches, South Townsville and Kirwan, and for the last 15 years I performed duties as a critical care flight paramedic. I feel now that I can still look after people; however, I can now assist many more in my electorate on a far broader range of issues.

I must confess that the transition from paramedic to parliamentarian was one that involved nerves and anticipation. During the campaign itself I was told to expect a number of things maybe not so pleasant whilst out doorknocking. This was going to be a tough road to travel. However, at my very first doorknock at Alice River a lady opened the door. As I introduced myself, she simply said my name and gave me a hug. She called on her husband to get up off the couch and come and meet the man who had saved his life some years ago—although he would not remember as he was unconscious at the time. He proudly showed me the scar on his chest from his bypass, and I believe that I walked from that house feeling like I could do this enormous task as I had been going to people's homes for 25 years as an ambo. I could still do this, now on an altogether different level.

It is not the years of service that is important but, as I am sure my fellow QAS colleague and now fellow MP Craig Crawford for Barron River would attest, it is what you do with those years of service that makes the difference. Those years of service were not only a job but also a privilege. To quote the words of a colleague my mine, Kyla Golds—

You might be lucky enough to watch a life come into this world, and you most probably will see a life leave us too. You will get to hold grandmas hand and tell her that its ok while you yourself have tears in your eyes as she has just lost her lifelong partner, or plead with the mentally ill not to end their life. You will reassure the first time mum panicking because her little one may have a fever, but you could also be faced with the distraught mum who has woken to find her baby no longer breathing ... what you will also see and never tire of, is the look of relief on a patients or family members face when they open the door and realise help has arrived.

Kyla said those words in a Facebook post she made to Campbell Newman after she decided she could not stand the cuts and attacks on ambos and the Ambulance Service anymore. She was desperate to be heard, but the former premier's staff just deleted her post. Fortunately, Facebook does not make it quite that easy for these things to go away, and more than 90,000 people have so far read Kyla's plea for simple recognition. I make a promise to Kyla, her colleagues and my QAS colleagues: I will not for a moment forget how important you are to our community; nor will I let anyone else forget.

These are the things that Queensland and Queenslanders are all about: being ready, willing and able to respond when a neighbour is in need. Of course, those moments are all too often coloured with tragedy and crisis. It is not just the ambos on the front line; it is also police, fire, coastguard, RFDS, SES, rural fire, aeromedical retrieval services and our mighty ADF. Of course, Townsville is home to thousands of troops. As a flight paramedic I have seen firsthand these front-line services work together, hand in hand, to assist the people of North Queensland when the chips are down.

It would be remiss of me not to include the often unsung heroes in any natural disaster: the Ergon and Energex workers who, the minute it is safe, are out restoring power and helping our communities get going again. Having been part of the immediate response to Innisfail in 2006 after the severe destruction of Cyclone Larry, I can say that the image of the seemingly endless convoy of Energex trucks arriving in town is burned into my memory. I am proud that as part of this government I will play a role in keeping those workers and companies in public hands.

Sometimes the help that is required is more local and more individual. I would like to share the story of Jamie Jackway—a mate, a former colleague and now a neighbour of mine. Jamie's story should remind all in this place of courage, resilience and mateship that demonstrates our true community spirit—a story that not only Thuringowa and Townsville should be proud of but all of Queensland should be proud of. As a former partner of Jamie's on the road I can say that we shared plenty of ups and downs, as paramedics do each day. When I went over to the then EMQ helicopter rescue base in Townsville, Jamie soon followed suit and moved to Thursday Island to continue his work in QAS which involved helicopter retrievals.

In November 2009 Jamie's life changed when a winching accident resulted in a fall of over 50 feet onto a ship's deck, rendering Jamie a quadriplegic. What occurred over the following days, months and years was a testament to the power of our community. Remarkably surviving the initial

trauma, Jamie spent nearly eight months in the spinal and rehab centre of the Princess Alexandra Hospital. On his release from hospital Jamie, being a tall bloke, had to have specially built and designed equipment and a vehicle to enable him to do the things he used to take for granted.

After initial visits to Jamie from many staff, it was decided that we needed to act. We all knew that the items required would be a significant cost, so an appeal was started and the 'ambo army' went to work. With the support of QAS and the United Voice union, anything that could be done to raise funds was organised including golf days, Brisbane-Townsville and Cairns-Townsville bike rides and a Kokoda Challenge.

All of this would lead to building and completing Jamie's dream home in Kelso, Thuringowa. Our community came together. Major works were completed and the Queensland community raised over \$400,000 to ensure Jamie has a house he can raise his family in, be proud of and enjoy for many, many years into the future. If we could learn anything from Jamie's story it is simply that you can make a difference in someone's life just by showing up and being there. Be there for the long haul and help where you can. Never leave behind a mate who is doing it tough. These are not just my values; they are also the values of ordinary working people across our great state. These are the values of this government.

I believe in the rights of workers to be represented by their union. I am a proud member of my union, United Voice. It is unions that have worked hard over so many years to not just ensure that working people have a decent living but also have dignity at work. Unions have fought for so many of the protections that ensure workers can do their job safely and come home from work. United Voice is not just an ambulance union. It represents workers from our community, from the cradle to the grave—in our schools, our hospitals, childcare centres, stadiums, bars and clubs. I want to acknowledge the many members of United Voice who showed up to help my campaign—to make calls, to lift my spirits and to push me harder. I say this: with a united voice we won. The rights of workers to organise collectively to achieve better outcomes is a fundamental right and one I look forward to seeing this government restore in our state. Of course it was not just the members of my union who showed up to help; this last campaign was a key moment in the history of our state. It showed the power of ordinary people to make change. It was a referendum not only on the sale of our ports and power companies but also about the style of government they wanted.

Good government makes a difference to the lives of every Queenslanders. Good government builds communities, it invests in our young people through training and education, it ensures our front-line services are staffed and equipped to do the jobs that need doing and it looks after the most vulnerable when they need help. Good government listens to the community, but it is also prepared to lead. I look forward to being part of a more inclusive, more caring government—more caring than the one just departed—and also look forward to being part of a government that takes the lead to build a better Queensland. I know that not every day will be easy, but I am committed to ensuring the people of Thuringowa have a voice in this place—a voice that is heard—and that the people of North Queensland get their fair share such as ensuring the upgrading of roads such as Riverway Drive to meet the everyday needs of our residents. This single infrastructure project in the Upper Ross corridor where 26,000 constituents live would allow the opportunity for local jobs, considerable residential and retail development and investment but has been held back by local politics. For far too long on this and other projects, the people of Thuringowa have had lip-service when what they clearly needed was action.

Thuringowa is home to our state's second largest state high school, Kirwan State High School. Its 2,000 students have no current covered hall for them to assemble in and the school pays an extraordinary amount of money to bus children some kilometres away to a private school for some assemblies and events. In the subtropics with the intense heat and humidity, rain and storms, this untenable situation is entirely deserving of our attention. Only a few weeks ago I attended a fantastic school event marking the school's respects for our Anzacs by holding its own ceremony. For the first time I witnessed the 2,000 students seated on the grass in the heat, and no amount of sunscreen, hats and goodwill of the teachers will reduce the many complaints from parents. This school has produced some amazing individuals, both sporting and academic, and our students deserve better. As a mark of respect, it should be noted that the bulk of these students, many of whom have gone on to have various roles in our communities, were at the school under the watchful eye and leadership of the recently and sadly deceased Kirwan State High School principal, Mr John Livingston. May he rest peacefully in the knowledge his school is in very capable hands with the acting executive team.

Of course the path to this career is not one that you travel on your own. The support of local people has been nothing short of amazing, but there are always those people who have made a mark and should be acknowledged. These are the people in my life who have supported, mentored, encouraged, picked me up and shown me a better way of serving our community. United Voice was

not the only union to support me as word got out that a worker was standing at the last election. I am deeply grateful to the assistance of the ETU, the CFMEU and local organiser Mick Robinson, who is best described as a true-blue Aussie champion who is always there to lend a hand. Thanks must also go to the MUA, AMIEU, QNU, RTBU, NACU, Together, the ASU and, more broadly, the Queensland Council of Unions. These unions represent the workers in our community—a community that was sick of the arrogant and out-of-touch government approach to running Queensland. Special thanks to the UFU, Mr John Oliver, Jamie Ryder and Bill Hitchcock and to local UFU delegates for organising 15 firefighters who provided much needed boots on the ground on polling day.

To Mr Ken McElligott, I stand by this fact: one must remember where one comes from in order to know where one is going, or what to do when you get there. Ken is a man well remembered for his successive terms in this place and I am thankful for his guidance and advice over recent times. Thank you, Ken. To Mr Eddie and Heather Blain: Eddie was my mentor after joining the QATB in 1990. Eddie's guidance, mentorship and friendship certainly contributed to making me the person I am today. Thank you, Eddie and Heather. To Mr Jamie Jackway: Jamie's own situations and battles were never a discussion point for him. Jamie inspired me and supported me to go further to help others in need, and for that support I am very grateful. To my many peers in the ambulance, health, EMQ, Fire and Emergency Services: your constant belief and encouragement to succeed was second to none. Thank you to those who stood beside me, walked with me and provided me with well wishes of support and to those who were able to assist me directly during my campaign. Those long, hot days were worth it.

To Mr Gary Bullock and Matthew Lawrence from United Voice: both believed I could make change to represent others from the worker and community perspective and both were instrumental in assisting me to make this decision to run a reality. Thanks also to the United Voice executive, ambulance union organisers Geoff Sharp and Kroy Day and past organisers John Webb and Jeanette Temperley. Thanks to the state council for ambulance in United Voice and Mr David O'Byrne for your calm words of wisdom when needed most. To my fellow state councillor Mark Denham who ran for Noosa: we shall keep a seat warm for you, mate. Thanks must also go to my campaign team. With a volunteer list of over 50, there are simply too many to name. However, special thanks must go to my core campaign team: Alec McConnell, Billy Colless, Eva Foster, Vera Dirou, Kurt Rebeihn, Ewan Hughs, Les Moffit and Peter Hindle. Thanks also to Mark Sterrit, Paul Jacob and to Lee Sallaway who pushed me to ensure that I could have a seat in this place. Thank you to Thelma Richards and Roslyn Mellon, both of whom are now working in my electorate office and are no doubt listening to me now. I put on the record that you are both doing an outstanding job. I also want to acknowledge Victoria Close, an 84-year-old lady who, as part of my team, assisted with the energy of someone half her age.

Special thanks to my fellow MPs Scott Stewart and Minister Coralee O'Rourke who joined me under the guidance of our campaign organiser, Patricia Schulter. We make a great and strong team in Townsville and I feel safe in the knowledge that I have made lifelong friends on this journey. Thanks to my friends who turned up to be there—some unexpectedly: David Beil and his entire family, Matt Brooks, Jeff Barton, Terry O'Sullivan, Ryan Hadland, Trevor Southern, Terry Caswell, Tony Scarsi, Angus and Ann Marie McDonnell, Michael Paulsen, Brad Garvey, Jon Mawdsley, Adam Harders, Sam and Vincena Sorbello and Richard Hayes. On election eve two good lifelong friends flew up to Townsville without my knowledge—Jason Dutton and Mark Hancock. They are here today. Thank you to each of you for your support. I simply could not have done this without you.

To my father, Allan, and his wife, Di, brother, Dale, and his wife, Mandy, for their support and love from afar: all was needed and appreciated. Finally to my immediate family: tough times were felt over the last year during a long, hard grassroots campaign. To my wife, Amanda, who would like to be here with me today but is in Perth with her extended family due to the death of her grandmother: I know you are listening and I love you very much. You have always supported me in my desires to go off and help people for any cause, mostly at some expense to us and our family. A simple thank you does not seem great enough a word to acknowledge what you have done for me by sticking by me at the most difficult times. Thanks to our children, Michael, Mitchell and daughter, Ashleigh. To Michael, you have grown up to be a fine young man and we are proud of you, particularly for stepping up in our absence this past week. To Mitchell: at one point my son Mitchell wanted to come doorknocking and make calls with me. He is 12—a future politician perhaps! Thank you, Mitch. To Michael, Mitch and our darling daughter Ashleigh, who thinks I am a great MoP—member of parliament: all three of you were forever patient, supportive and loving every step of the way. I am proud to have achieved the position of representing you and our community and will forever be grateful for the love and support shown to me throughout this election campaign. Let's get to work!