



Speech By
Barry O'Rourke

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr O'ROURKE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (4.29 pm): I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge today, being International Women's Day, the women of this parliament and the women of Queensland.

There are many people who have assisted me in this journey to this point in my life and to this place. I would like to thank the people of Rockhampton. I am humbled by the support that they have given me and I thank them for electing me to this parliament. I will strive to represent the interests of all Rockhampton residents.

I would also like to thank those who assisted me in my campaign: first and foremost, my beautiful wife, Sue-Ann; my sons James, and his partner Kelsey, and Harry; my brothers and sisters Brian, Tony and Lyndall, Cecily and Murray McLeod; and the other members of the O'Rourke clan. I thank the great Australian Labor Party in Rockhampton, among them the former minister and member for Rockhampton, Robert Schwarten and his wife, Judy; also Peter and Stephen Schwarten; Paul Hoolihan; and the member for Keppel, Brittany Lauga. I appreciate their support, wisdom and friendship. I would also like to thank my campaign team: Craig Marshall, Barry Thompson, Ann McDougall, Karen Horstman and, again, my brother Brian, who all provided great support. I am not sure that I would be here today without them.

I would also like to say a special thanks to Kez for being the amazing lady she is. I would also like to thank Deb, Vince, Tom and Marree, Alan, Amanda, Leisa and Mick, Paul, Wayne, Annette, Damien and Michelle, and all the other dedicated volunteers for their assistance. From handing out how-to-vote cards to putting corflutes on fences, or one of the many other jobs involved in campaigns, my support team was amazing.

The journey to this point in my life begins at the home of my parents, John and Enid. I am the second youngest of 13 children. My dad was raised on a dairy farm and was a young man during the 1930s depression years when he jumped trains and hitched lifts to travel around Queensland looking for work. He worked for Hornibrooks on the Mackay wharves and, after a stint in the Defence Force, was pleased to get a government job where he worked his way up to the position of adviser in horticulture in the department of primary industries. He met my mum, Enid Hardy, in Mackay at the local church dance. She gave up work when they married and, as dad would often joke, she never worked again—just staying at home raising my seven brothers and five sisters.

Members could imagine how much work was involved in feeding, clothing and caring for all the individuals in a household such as ours. We all learned to set the table, mash the potatoes, do the dishes and get the kitchen swept and mopped. Some of us would help with washing clothes or getting wood for the wood stove. As we grew up, we got age-appropriate jobs to help mum and dad around the house. We had plenty of spirited discussions about fairness and degrees of effort but also recognised that you can achieve a lot more if you work together. I thank my brothers and sisters for the love and support they have freely given me over the years.

My father was a working man who believed absolutely that family was the centre of and central to our lives. He instilled a sense of community in us and the need to work hard to achieve life's goals. He believed that education was the key to a better future. My mother was the most gentle person you could ever meet. I recall on many occasions coming into our kitchen after school to find a young mum in the neighbourhood who would be seeking her quiet guidance about the challenges facing her family. I never knew the details of these discussions as I was dispatched to the backyard immediately.

Unfortunately, both of my parents have now passed away, but I know that they would be extremely proud of me and I miss them dearly. Everyone's family upbringing teaches them life lessons, even though they do not know it at the time. We were taught to share, to listen, to stand up for what we believe in and to look after each another. My wife, Sue-Ann, and I have two children and raising them has been hard work. I would not be here today without that upbringing from my parents and the support of Sue-Ann and our sons James and Harry. They have helped mould me to be the best person I can be. They have kept my feet firmly on the ground and reminded me where I have come from and the reason I am here today. I thank Sue-Ann, James and Harry.

It has taken over 100 years for a family member to be elected to parliament. My great-grandfather, Florence O'Rourke, came from Ireland via New Zealand, arriving in Sydney in 1881. He travelled to the Traveston district in 1895 and started a sugarcane farm, before changing over to dairy farming a few years later. As well as being a successful farmer, he was involved in many facets of community life as a shareholder in the Murarrie bacon factory and the Caboolture butter factory. He was also on the local show committee, a member of the shire valuation board and chairman of the local schools committee. My father was very active in the community and was president of the local branch of the workers' political association, the political party that grew out of the emerging trade union movement and the precursor to the Australian Labor Party.

Prior to farming, Florence tried his hand at goldmining in the Gympie area and at one time shared a two-man mining shift with Andrew Fisher who, as we know, went on to become Prime Minister of Australia for three terms between 1908 and 1915. Andrew and Florence became good mates and they regularly worked underground shifts together. After Andrew Fisher became Prime Minister, Florence, who was a bit of a storyteller, shared a few yarns with his neighbours, who were a little bit sceptical about his friendship. However, an incident occurred that gave Florence great joy and added credibility.

In those days, the Prime Minister had a special train in which he travelled around the country. This train was heading north from Brisbane and, as customary with steam trains, had to stop at Cooran to replenish its water. Florence was standing on the railway platform waiting for the next passenger train to go north to Tandur where he had a property. He had his lunch in a sugar bag slung across his shoulders and was in rough working clothes. When the Prime Minister's train came into view, those standing around Florence discussing the visit chucked him and queried if his old shift mate, Andrew, would know him now. When the train stopped not only did the Prime Minister acknowledge Florence but also he left the train and came over for a yarn. When the Prime Minister learned that Florence was waiting for the next train following his, much to the delight of Florence's mates on the platform, he asked Florence to join him in the carriage. Fisher then made arrangements for the train to stop at a spot where it was close enough for him to get to his farm. Roll on 100 years and here I am humbly making my first speech in this House.

My family's experience has seen the decline of small farming and the continual drift of rural populations to regional cities in the south-east of the state. New knowledge and skills are required as primary industry has given way to other job opportunities in our increasingly diverse economy. One thing that remains a priority throughout is education. Several of my aunts and uncles were teachers and a dozen or more of my siblings and cousins have worked or are working in that profession. Over the past 100 years or so, education has seen my family, like so many others, transition from having farming and rural occupations to being white-collar workers and having other professional careers.

My personal passion is helping people. I have spent all of my working life assisting in the provision of government services to the less fortunate in our society, moving from file boy to direct customer service delivery in Southport, Rockhampton, Mount Isa, Stones Corner and, finally, as regional director of housing and homelessness services in Rockhampton. Over many years I have seen some very sad situations that have impacted on my values and beliefs and led me to the various policy positions that I hold today.

I have dealt with many, many individuals and families who find themselves without housing for all sorts of reasons. I recall a young lady who would take drugs to stay alert through the night to reduce her risk of being attacked. Can you imagine her fear that while she slept in an unsafe location she would be bashed awake as she was robbed or assaulted.

I have dealt with the chronically homeless who are vastly overrepresented in mental health, crime and assault figures. To these people sometimes jail is a safer place than a footpath, a doorway or under a bridge. I have worked with people who have tried to commit suicide or who have sadly become a suicide statistic. I share the despair of their families and their friends, but there are good stories too, such as the man who had been homeless for many, many years before acquiring housing. One day I dropped in to see how he was going. He was so thankful for the housing assistance but was sleeping on the floor because he could not get used to a soft bed.

Sometimes homelessness can be the result of being involved in an accident, something as simple as tripping up a set of stairs, hitting your head causing a brain injury. Job loss, relationship breakdown, Centrelink issues, no money, no support and you could easily be facing homelessness. Without the support of the many community organisations our most vulnerable residents would be further disadvantaged.

I would also like to acknowledge the great work of our health workers, police and emergency services staff in Rockhampton for the support that they provide. This is what being a politician means to me. It is not only about jobs and the economy but also about people. Our nation is wealthy enough to ensure that we have a society where people are able to access services to improve their lives and the lives of their children. There is also a role for community organisations like Anglicare, Girls Time Out and Roseberry Community Services in Rockhampton that do a brilliant job helping some of our most vulnerable residents. It is where governments can and should play a role. Good governments work to help those most in need. Education, health and housing are a way out of poverty.

I have always voted Labor and supported the party while honouring the Public Service code of conduct to impartially serve the government of the day. I refrained from joining the Labor Party 20 years ago because of the obvious conflict of interest that may have arisen from having my local member as my minister. I believe that was the ethical thing to do. When I saw my mates in the Public Service thrown on the scrap heap by then premier Newman, when I saw the return of a vindictive government in the form of the LNP and I saw that Rockhampton was being punished for daring to return one of seven Labor MPs, I decided it was time to make a stand and exercise my citizen's right to actively pursue a political response to the excesses of that government.

I joined the Labor Party and became active in my own free time and of my own free will because I knew only Labor has delivered for the city where I choose to live and raise our family. Time does not permit me to list all the projects delivered, but suffice to say from the hospital hill to the top of Mount Archer more than a billion dollars has been spent by successive Labor governments on capital works projects and I intend to keep that tradition going.

In the first term of this Palaszczuk government in excess of a dozen projects have already been delivered via the Rockhampton Regional Council. On occasions this government has not received due credit for these projects as most people would think they were financed by the council, but the truth is that without this Labor government projects like the Rockhampton riverbank, Kershaw Gardens, Cedric Archer Park water play area and the flood mitigation projects that have benefited hundreds of residents would not have been delivered.

I want to assure the House that I will not be a politician who takes credit for projects funded by other levels of government and I expect the assurance to be reciprocated so that the electors who have put me here know exactly what I have tried to do and what I have delivered. On that point I want to reinforce my commitments and those of the government to the people of Rockhampton. The \$10 million commitment to the development of a new manufacturing hub is something I am eager to get my teeth into. Then there is \$4 million to ensure that JBS meatworks can access rail transport for its cattle. This is a win for the workers whether on the rail or at the abattoir. It also means there is less road traffic so I will win there too. While I acknowledge that as a new member I had little to do with these welcome announcements, I nevertheless guarantee I will work 24/7 on their delivery.

There are three projects that I do claim as my own initiatives. These are as a result of local discussions in the short time I had—a matter of only weeks given the shock retirement of my predecessor Bill Byrne—to listen, learn and persuade those in the top levels of this government to get these projects off the ground. The first of these is the much needed revamp of the home of Rugby League in Rockhampton, Browne Park. If ever there was an asset whose turn has come it is Browne Park. Now that the NRL has declared that there will be no NRL club in Central Queensland the path is clear for making Rockhampton Rugby League grounds come of age. Given my late entry into this job, this is my first tilt at getting such a worthwhile project off the ground. The \$75,000 commitment I will obtain from this government will get the ball rolling.

There is a lot to do beyond initial planning, including an enormous public consultation process. I have made it very clear that I will work with all stakeholders. What I expect is transparency, respect and meaningful consultation from all proponents on every project that attracts my support. I see huge benefits in the walk-to stadium entertainment venue that is being proposed and I am eager to get this money spent and deliver a proposal that can be properly assessed by government.

The second project relates to junior sports. One of my great loves is sport. I am fortunate to have two sons who have been not only interested but also reasonably talented in this area. At the outset let me say that thanks to Labor we have some of the best sporting facilities in the state. Local facilities for tennis and swimming spring to mind, but hockey, where we boast three Olympic stars, Knowles, Dwyer and Gohdes, is no slouch. Consider also other well-known sports stars who have links to Rockhampton: the Meares cycling sisters and golf legend Jason Day. Primary school cricket and Rugby League are standouts in the state. I have always thought Rockhampton had a natural geographic advantage when it came to hosting junior sports, and I am grateful to the Premier for her support to put \$100,000 into making a case for Rockhampton to be the junior sports capital of the state.

In relation to the third project, I confess I know nothing about motor sports, but Craig Jervis is an expert. They say he was born with a spanner in his hand and drinks diesel for breakfast. He certainly made a case for me to fight for another \$100,000 for the business case so that Central Queensland Motor Sporting Club can rev up the Rockhampton Regional Council Supercar bid.

I am humbled yet happy to be here. My background, as I said, is in helping people. I see that as very much a solid foundation for this job. I am here with a mission, and that is to well and truly serve the people of the Rockhampton electorate who have put their faith and trust me. Again I thank them for this most unique opportunity.

Above all, I want to restore the faith of those traditional Labor voters who have become disillusioned. I want to not only regain their trust but also prove that Labor has always been as loyal to Rockhampton as Rocky has been to us. Having said that, I will be a member for all people regardless of how they voted. I have spent what seems like a lifetime implementing government policy, making suggestions for improvements, which at times have been well accepted and acted upon, and consequently I have an abiding respect for the parliament and its members. Thank you.