



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 7 September 1995

FIRST SPEECH

Ms BLIGH (South Brisbane) (12.46 p.m.), who was received with Government "Hear, hears!", said: It is an honour and a pleasure that I be given the opportunity to move—

"That the following address be presented to the Governor in reply to the Speech delivered by Her Excellency in opening this, the Forty-eight 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 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.'

In the seven short weeks since the 1995 State election, our Government has moved quickly to implement our new agenda of reform spelt out so comprehensively by Her Excellency and in our election campaign. The challenge for any incumbent Government is to demonstrate to the electorate a capacity to respond to the responsibilities of Government with innovative and effective measures. It is the strong tradition of progressive reform of the Australian Labor Party which has informed the new agenda of this Government. It is also this tradition which separates us from our opponents and which I believe has seen us returned to Government in 1995.

I take this opportunity to say how proud and honoured I feel to be chosen by the people of South Brisbane to represent their interests in this Parliament. The South Brisbane area has a long history of very strong Labor advocates. I want to assure the electors of South Brisbane that their faith in me is well placed and that I will continue the legacy of strong and effective advocacy on their behalf.

It is important to recognise that I would not have the honour to be standing here without the hard work and support of a great many people. My special thanks go to my campaign director, Jackie Trad, who has worked tirelessly with me throughout this year. I also thank Christine Cosgrove, Cath Rafferty, Tim Quinn, Stephan Greder, Leonides Naoumis, Di Fingleton and Kathy Munro, all of whom contributed to the success of my campaign.

In common with many other members of this House, the real backbone of my electoral success and my political life, not only this year but over the past decade, has been my family. I pay tribute to them today for their work and support and, most importantly, the sacrifices they have made so willingly on my behalf. I say a special "thank you" to my partner, Greg Withers, whose faith in me is a constant source of strength and whose enthusiasm for my entry to parliamentary politics is an inspiration. To my children, Joseph and Oliver—Joseph is in the gallery today—I say: thank you for your love and patience, and I hope that my contribution to this Parliament will make for a better and fairer world for your future.

I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to my mother, Frances Tancred. It is through her self-sacrifice throughout my childhood that I have achieved anything in my life. This was especially true during my adolescence, when she brought up four teenagers on the then supporting mothers pension—an initiative of the Whitlam Government which provided a real safety net for families such as

ours. She is a woman of great strength and integrity, and I thank her for both the opportunities she has given me and the example she has set for me.

As the member for South Brisbane, I draw to the attention of this House many interesting features of the electorate. In doing so, I acknowledge the first citizens of the area, the Jagera people. I pay tribute to the Jagera and their ancestors who, from the beginning, have been the custodians of this land. Throughout much of my electorate—perhaps more so than in other parts of metropolitan Brisbane—it is impossible not to recognise that we walk on Aboriginal land. Many indigenous people, their families and the organisations that provide services and advocacy on their behalf, have made their home in South Brisbane, and that has enriched the lives of all of us who live there.

A significant feature of the South Brisbane electorate is that it reflects the pressures and opportunities of inner-city life. The suburbs to the south of the river have evolved to contain a remarkable mix of land uses and a fabric of development that provides a rich setting within which to live. Within its borders, the South Brisbane electorate contains a number of attractions that have an appeal far beyond the local area, the City of Brisbane, the State and even nationally. I speak, of course, of the wonderful community recreation facilities offered by the South Bank parklands, the international standard Brisbane Convention Centre and, of course, the famous Gabba. Those facilities have been developed alongside the existing Performing Arts Complex, the State Library, the art gallery and the museum. Together they exhibit an extraordinary range of recreational and cultural resources for all Queenslanders.

Those public facilities have been constructed with an innovative and balanced strategy designed for accessibility with visual and practical appeal. They complement each other. It is this example of public urban planning, brought forward by this Government, that can provide the incentive, the demonstration of and standard for a new vision for our cities. Everywhere cannot have the scale and diversity of such important public places. However, the planning of these inner-city suburbs as communities in the centre of a rapidly expanding and demanding metropolis can be equally carefully crafted. It is my aim to ensure that the people of the electorate of South Brisbane benefit from the careful and, where possible, inclusive approach to planning our communities, which this Government has brought to it in the past.

Clearly, the excellent facilities that I have just highlighted are only one outcome of living near the centre of the city. The South Brisbane electorate has more than its share of congestion, industry, freeways, noise and other pressures of redevelopment. As always, with the privilege of central location comes the responsibility of major essential and public facilities such as hospitals. This is an enormous challenge for a city such as Brisbane in the 1990s. However, Labor in Government has shown that innovative and progressive solutions and projects can be undertaken to deal with the pressures and demands of the urban environment.

As outlined by Her Excellency yesterday, the Government's commitment to doubling the number of public transport consumers over the next 25 years is a visionary and practical demonstration of an urban planning policy that will affect significantly the lives of people living in my electorate. Likewise, the creation of bus and multiple occupancy transit lanes will reduce pollution and increase safety.

Of course, alongside and in between the major public facilities in my electorate live the people: the long-term and often short-term residents of the southern inner suburbs. My electorate is subject to continual redevelopment, sometimes on a massive and disruptive scale. The ability to live in secure, affordable and good-quality housing is always threatened by this tide of change. I am proud to say that this Government has made an important commitment to the provision of quality public housing right across this State. However, in my electorate this commitment has special significance to a dominantly low-income population with a high reliance on private rental accommodation.

Public housing has been invigorated through new and better designs, fairer tenancy arrangements that treat lessees as equal partners and by locating dwellings across the inner suburbs and not just in outlying areas where people become stigmatised. Inner-city communities such as those in my electorate benefit from the security and stability that these reforms provide. This helps to keep them together and gives them a stake in their neighbourhood. Public housing is one example, albeit a very important example, of the importance of a Labor Government to the people of an electorate such as South Brisbane. Of course, other examples are transport, health, education and social services. The communities of the South Brisbane electorate are vulnerable to the pressures of urban change. I have a responsibility to ensure that the State Government works cooperatively with other levels of government to manage this change for the benefit of the people who live there.

Who are the people who live in South Brisbane? There is no easy or short answer to this question. The electorate, although geographically compact, is incredibly diverse in character. It has a long and spectacular border with the Brisbane River from Dutton Park to Norman Park. There are long-established residential suburbs and older ones still that are the subject of significant gentrification. The area is especially vibrant with large Greek, Italian, Vietnamese and Chinese communities. It is a very

active community with hundreds of organisations representing a great variety of causes, issues and endeavours. It is also an extremely tolerant community that appreciates its diversity, character and vitality.

It has been only Labor Governments that have recognised and supported the aspirations of people in communities such as in my electorate through important reforms and initiatives such as anti-discrimination legislation, inclusive and innovative school curriculums and financial support for a range of community festivals and related activities that celebrate the varied cultures of the community. New policies and programs such as the community recreation centres will further assist the aspirations of the people of the South Brisbane area. As a local member, I am aware of the expectations of that community for me to take up the issues of the day and often beyond the borders of the electorate. There is a keen sense of social justice among the people of my electorate and an ability to speak up and take forward issues of interest and concern. The community articulates its feelings well and, as many people in this House would know, while accepting and assimilating many of the changes that are thrust upon it, when necessary it can come together decisively.

I am fortunate to be making my inaugural speech in this House on a Thursday, as it gives me a unique opportunity to highlight the Thursdays in Black campaign—and today I wear its badge with pleasure—and draw attention to the issue of violence against women. Every Thursday, people around the world are invited by the World Council of Churches to wear black as a protest against rape and violence. The choice of Thursday was inspired by the mothers who gather in silence every Thursday in the Plaza De Mayo in Argentina, holding placards of missing loved ones and demanding that justice be done. In Queensland, it is being promoted by an ecumenical network called With Women.

Although the campaign condemns all forms of rape and violence, especially those that arise from war and other conflicts, many Australians have used the campaign to bring attention to the violence that continues to be experienced by women in the private spheres of their lives, often at the hands of those to whom they are closest. I have long held a commitment to working towards a society where domestic and sexual violence are a thing of the past. My first full-time paid employment was with the Women's House Refuge and Rape Crisis Centre. That organisation was one of the first in Queensland to provide services to women and children escaping domestic violence. More importantly, it played a leading role in breaking the silence that had long surrounded this issue by speaking out, conducting research and actively lobbying Governments to accept some responsibility by providing adequate services and seeking solutions.

The time I spent working with Women's House gave me a real insight into the complexities of violence against women. Later, I drew on this experience when I became a founding member of the Women's Policy Unit, established by this Government to coordinate the development and implementation of strategies to improve the status of Queensland women. In 1992, I worked alongside others to draft the Queensland Government policy on violence against women. The launch of this policy and its subsequent implementation over the past three years is an achievement for which this Government deserves full credit and from which many Queensland women and their families have benefited.

Queensland is the only State in Australia that has a comprehensive, whole-of-Government policy on violence against women. The fundamental thrusts of this policy are a commitment to providing high-quality, effective services to women experiencing violence and a commitment to eradicating such violence by attacking its root causes. That is a complex and difficult problem, and it requires both sensitive and strategic policy responses. To give a sense of how effectively this Government has taken up this challenge, I would like to outline some examples of services and programs developed and funded in the implementation of this policy, including—

- significant increases to basic services such as emergency accommodation, refuges and counselling services. This increased funding has been targeted to ensure the provision of services, often for the first time, in regional areas outside the south-east corner;

- innovative improvements through the Office of the Deputy Public Prosecutor to services and support for women and girls in criminal proceedings;

- funding for counselling programs for children who witness domestic violence as part of their daily lives. This program, in particular, is aimed at breaking the cycle of violence;

- provision for the expansion of the Neighbourhood Safety Program and the introduction of a safe and confident living program for older women, which addresses both fears and risks;

- funding for staff training and development programs for a range of professionals, such as police and TAFE teachers, who have varying responsibilities and experience in this field; and

- the expansion of the Community Rent Scheme to target the immediate housing needs of women and children escaping violence in their homes.

I believe that those examples are the hallmarks of a Government that is making a sincere and sustained effort to grapple with this issue, the continued existence of which restricts the rights and freedom of all women in our community.

However, when we are struggling with something of this size, in the end it is not always large funding programs that make the difference. When we are reaching out for a world which is free of the attitudes and power imbalances that underpin these appalling crimes, it can be the relatively inexpensive policy changes that help to turn the tide. As an illustration of this point, I cite the decision of this Government to ban the use of the cane in Queensland State schools. This policy was adopted for a range of reasons, among them the recognition of the message that we were sending to our young men. It must be recognised that it was male children who were caned in Queensland schools and the caning was predominantly done by male teachers. This situation did little or nothing to teach our sons about the appropriate ways for men in our community to deal with conflict. In fact, it sent the unequivocal message to those boys that men hit out. This relatively small change in Government policy challenges our school system to find alternative methods of disciplining our children and this, over time, has the potential to bring about real change in the way we all think about the place of violence in our lives.

I have been appalled to hear members of this Parliament calling for a return of the cane, the use of which has never been anything other than ritualised brutality. I applaud the Government's firm stand on this issue, as did the Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens Association in its August 1994 newsletter, which stated in part—

"Schools and parents have a role to play in stopping the cycle of violence, not in perpetuating it. Let's accept the challenge of moving into new territory and not cling to the old idea of saying, 'Well, it didn't do me any harm.' "

As I and my campaign workers moved around the electorate over the past six months, we met many aged and frail members of our community. A notable characteristic of these people is that, although they proudly continue to live independent lives in the face of the problems that age, sickness and disability will no doubt bring to us all, many of them live in fear. In their own homes, they live in fear of crime and violence. A striking majority of these people are elderly women. There is no doubt that living with these fears absolutely diminishes the quality of their lives.

Although crimes of violence are a sad reality, and we as a Government are committed to addressing the issue constructively, we must all be careful not to inflate this reality. Successive victims of crimes surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics demonstrate that the fear of violent crime in our community far exceeds the incidence of these crimes. There is no doubt that the media must bear some responsibility for the fuelling of these fears through the often sensationalist coverage it provides of criminal activity. However, politicians must also bear the responsibility that we, as community leaders, have to conduct debates about law and order in a manner which is not calculated to maximise political point scoring. This approach is irresponsible and serves only to maximise community fears. During my time in this House, I will not be indulging in sensational and histrionic debates on law and order which ultimately serve only one purpose—to limit unnecessarily the freedom and opportunities of many vulnerable people in our community.

In addition to my work in women's organisations, I have worked in a number of white collar trade unions. I am proud to bring to this Parliament a respect for the legitimate and valuable place of trade unions in our community and an acknowledgment of the value of collective action which these organisations foster. Immediately prior to my election, I worked in the Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations where I was involved in the negotiations leading to the enterprise bargaining agreement between this Government and the public sector unions.

Like many sectors of our economy, the public sector is confronting the challenges posed by the globalisation of our economy. Significant workplace reforms are required if the public sector is to be able to meet the expectations of Government and the increasing expectations of the community. Although all change is difficult, these reforms can either be managed constructively and negotiated in a spirit of mutual respect or they can be dragged through in a climate of industrial disharmony and chaos. It is fair comment to observe that the public sector enterprise bargaining negotiations in the past 18 months were not without some disappointments and frustration for all parties. This is not an unexpected outcome when trying out a new process. However, I have no doubt that the shift from centralised wage fixing would have been used by our opponents as an excuse to strip away working conditions and create an industrial nightmare, as their colleagues have done in Victoria and Western Australia. This process highlights the ability of this Government to optimise the relationship it has with the labour movement so that both parties use the relationship as a tool to manage and bring about constructive change and meet the increasing imperatives of micro-economic reform.

Today also presents an opportunity for me to place on record the significant influence that my predecessor in this House, Ms Anne Warner, had on my political development and to pay a tribute to the contribution she made to this House and the Labor caucus, both in Opposition and in Government.

Anne came to this country as a British immigrant with a young family in the early seventies. She settled in Queensland and very quickly threw herself into politics. As many members of the House know, Anne is a person with a passionate sense of social justice and highly developed political skills. She ably used this passion and these skills to play a leadership role among the many people in this State, both inside and outside the Labor Party, who stood up against the tyranny of the Bjelke-Petersen regime. She made her mark on Queensland politics long before entering this Parliament by fighting for civil liberties, Aboriginal land rights, abortion law reform and industrial justice.

Upon her election to State Parliament in 1983, Anne faced a difficult challenge as the only female member of the Labor caucus. She concluded her inaugural speech in this House by saying, on behalf of all those Queenslanders determined to resist the abuse of democracy perpetrated by the National Party Government, "We will not be silent. We will not go away." They were fighting words and she lived up to them in her resistance to the excesses of that Government. Her ability and tenacity were rewarded in 1989 when she had the honour of being the first woman to hold a Cabinet post in a Labor Government in this State. As Minister for Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, she established herself as a strong advocate for some of the most disadvantaged groups in our community.

Her time as Minister saw the overhauling and modernisation of almost every piece of legislation administered by her portfolio. In addition to the exemplary contribution she made to this Parliament and this Government, Anne has played a pivotal role in the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party. During the late 1970s and early eighties she, along with others such as Denis Murphy, Joy Ardill, Norma and Lindsay Jones and Peter Beattie, worked hard to bring about the necessary changes in the party which have made us an effective political force in this State.

In the face of all these achievements, it is difficult to nominate the most outstanding. However, the legacy for which I most admire Anne is her willingness to promote and encourage other women to play a role in political life. Within the ALP, Anne has always been willing to impart her extensive political knowledge and skills to another generation of women. She has been that rare thing in the often self-interested world of party politics—an able and inspiring mentor. It is in large part due to her support and encouragement that I stand here today and I thank her for that, as no doubt do the many able women in the ALP whom I believe will join me in this House over my time here.

Since my earliest involvement in politics, I have held the view that to be a part of the passion and action of one's times is the mark of a life well spent. I look forward to applying this attitude to the activities and responsibilities of a parliamentary representative. In this spirit, I would like to conclude by saying that, similar to other members of this House, I am both saddened and outraged by the fact that on the day this Parliament opened the French Government resumed nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll. I was born on 14 July and therefore share a birthday with the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille—the dawn of a new era in French politics based on the high ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The contempt with which the French colonial Government has treated the concerns of the people of this region makes a travesty of these ideals. The action fundamentally attacks the liberty of the people of the Pacific region, and indeed all the peoples of the world, to live free from the threat of nuclear warfare.

The choice of Mururoa as the site for these tests clearly indicates that, when the French speak of equality, they believe that the people of France are more equal than the people of Mururoa. As the member for Lytton noted, this is the fundamental premise of colonialism and it has no place in the modern world. As for fraternity, there is nothing in the actions of the French Government which indicates the principles of friendship and cooperative effort embodied in either the word "fraternity" or indeed the word "sorority". I conclude by saying that I look forward to making a contribution in this House on behalf my electors of South Brisbane.
