



Speech by

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE**

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Hansard 15 September 1995

### FIRST SPEECH

**Mrs CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone) (3.49 p.m.): It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be here today as the elected representative for the seat of Gladstone. My responsibility now is to represent, to the best of my ability, the concerns of the electorate and to provide a conduit for information and perspective to and from the electorate.

Many people were part of the process which has afforded me this honour. I thank each one for their conviction that an Independent could succeed and their hard work to see that goal realised. To Wendy Goobanko for her organisation and to the team which assumed the financial side of the campaign—my thanks. On election day, the mammoth task of manning booths was made easy by those who volunteered to take on the responsibility. My thanks to each for their dedication and support.

I could not have pursued any political aspirations without the support, generosity and patience of my husband and family. My special thanks to John, Wendy, Rebecca and Emma, as they are as much a part of the hard work involved as I and yet the impact of my work on them is not generally recognised. No doubt there are many times when I am unaware of this impact. Thanks also to my mum and dad, whose support behind the scenes is greatly appreciated. I also recognise the many who have written since the election expressing their support and prayers for us during the forthcoming term in Parliament. The generosity and support of those people is appreciated and essential for the responsibilities ahead. I thank them.

My electorate is made up of two local authority areas: Gladstone City and Calliope Shire. Gladstone City has a predominantly urban base but includes within its boundary the recently privatised Gladstone Powerhouse, now NRG; one of the largest bauxite refineries, Queensland Alumina Ltd; Stickmakers who produce paddle-pop sticks and who in the near future plan to include chopstick manufacture for the Asian market; and significant world-standard port facilities. The port development over the past decade has seen the inclusion of a world-class marina and plans to incorporate a container port facility to complement the coal and product-loading facilities already in operation.

To a great extent, the city has been insulated from the recession because of its industry base. However, we have not escaped scot-free, with a high youth unemployment rate of around 30 per cent, a sustained general unemployment rate and small business feeling the pressure from burgeoning on-costs.

In spite of this, the Gladstone community remains positive and supportive of responsible development which recognises the constraints of the area's air shed, watershed and landmass with regard to human, industrial and primary production emissions. To provide for appropriately qualified staff for future development and diversification, the University of Central Queensland, Gladstone campus, will specialise in two areas: an engineering faculty as well as an environmental faculty. Other study streams will be available. However, great effort is being directed towards offering to students these specific streams as full degree courses.

Surrounding the City of Gladstone, Calliope Shire is home to a diverse economy. That diversity has added greatly to the shire's stability throughout the prolonged drought—a drought which is now entering its fifth year. The effects of drought are difficult to quantify, given the short-term obvious costs and the longer residual costs of recovery, which are masked. Continued State and Federal Government support will be essential in the longer term to ensure re-stabilisation.

Calliope's urban bases include the towns of Boyne Tannum and Calliope, with smaller populations at Benaraby, Mt Larcom, Raglan, Ambrose, Nagoorin, Ubobo, Builyan and Manypeaks—these last were the centre of a rich gold resource in the 1800s. Geographically, 90 per cent of the shire is used for grazing or dairying, with the addition of horticultural pursuits adding to the primary production economy of the area. Yarwun pawpaws and mangoes have achieved Australiawide and, in some instances, overseas acclaim.

The final tier in the shire's economic diversity and strength is its industrial base. This includes: Queensland Cement; Tigor and ICI, chlorine ammonium nitrate and sodium cyanide producers; Frost Enterprises, limestone extraction and crushing; and Boyne Smelters, a world standard aluminium smelter whose third potline expansion is even now in its start-up phase.

Recently, the State Government declared 6,000 hectares of land in the north of the shire a State development area to be purchased and maintained for the establishment of heavy and support industries. That the Calliope community is also attuned to responsible, controlled development is evidenced by the successful start-up of several greenfield industrial developments. The Calliope community, too, is supportive of responsible, controlled development. Awoonga Dam, also in Calliope Shire, is the primary source of both domestic and industrial water supply and serves as an impressive recreation site for water-based recreation. That calm water facility is within a half hour's drive of the ocean beaches at Boyne Island and Tannum Sands. Tourism is also an important component for the region. Although industrial, the coastal and hinterland beauty, especially in good years, offers attractive holiday destinations.

Two additional communities add to the rich culture of our area. The historical inhabitants of the region, the indigenous tribe of the Murri community, are re-establishing their cultural heritage for the benefit of Aboriginal people, young and old, and adding a vital dimension to the regional community as a whole. Also, we have a strong Russian community, based primarily in the Yarwun area, who also maintain strong cultural practices. Both add to the rich fabric of our past, present and future.

One must acknowledge the stability of that region and its contribution to the State's and the nation's economy. However, to ensure continuing development, it is imperative that diversification of both the economic base, complemented by a broadening of the skills base, is planned and achieved. To some extent this is mooted in statements such as: "The Gladstone Calliope region will become the light metals capital of Australia." One looks forward to such an advance into value-adding. The seat of Gladstone then is a blend of the urban, rural and industrial ethos with two distinct local authorities, varied in their make-up yet cooperative in their activity, resulting in a successful blending of demographics and economics.

Many issues were raised during the recent election campaign. Some of the tangible concerns—the need for a high school at Tannum Sands, the need for new police stations at Gladstone and Calliope, funding for school and hospital maintenance—were addressed during the election campaign. I wish to acknowledge those pledges and look forward to their implementation as confirmed by the Honourable the Premier.

Demographically, my area would reflect a cross-section of Queensland: non-skilled, qualified tradespeople, operators, technical officers and those tertiary trained; in fact, the full spectrum of our nation's skills, their expectations and aspirations. Historically, the seat of Gladstone, formerly Port Curtis, has elected a Labor member—recently Mr Neil Bennett; prior to Neil, it was Mr Bill Prest, and then Mr Marty Hansen. Indeed, for over 60 years the seat has been a safe Labor seat. It is therefore an indication of the area's courage and willingness to step outside the accepted norm that I received community support in the election. It is, however, also an indication of the level of disenchantment with the system that such a momentous change has occurred.

I mention the reflective nature of our community to reinforce a message which I believe is evident in the recent election. Besides the bread and butter issues across the State—health, police, education, environment and employment—one recurring theme characterised the election. I believe that that message is that our State's community is looking for, and even demanding, representation which reflects the community will even more so than the party will. By that, I mean that decision making must be community focused and not focused on that which will, or is perceived to, reinforce the party political agenda as opposed to the community good. How can this focus be translated into the specific disciplines of Government? I will relate this to my electorate of Gladstone.

In the area of health—besides the rhetoric of the billions of dollars spent on health, it needs to be an imperative that the greatest percentage of that budget actually provides for medical services: doctors and nurses in open wards providing health services to our communities. In Gladstone, with a population growth rate above the State average, it is a nonsense that hospital wards are being closed, medical services downgraded and specialist services not refilled when vacated. This approach lacks foresight and good planning. The Honourable Peter Beattie, Minister for Health, has indicated a willingness to consider solutions to those problems.

In relation to policing—the Budget should focus on the provision of police in the community. Police officers must be available to prevent crime by adequate education and enforcement, by ensuring that personnel are available at the time of a crime for investigation and apprehension of offenders, not—as has been reported to me—having people waiting up to three weeks for an officer to be available to make even an initial visit to investigate break and enter offences. Gladstone/Calliope is a growth area; yet due to the current and, I believe, inefficient staffing formula, police numbers in the district have been reduced.

As to aged care—acknowledging the great legacy our aged population has given to this generation and to succeeding generations, we must provide that for which our senior citizens have worked, financially and socially contributed, which they should, without fear, be confident is available to them in their retirement years. Sadly, for many pensioners, these years of relaxation are fraught with fears for their safety, financial security and even their value to the community.

In this, the fiftieth year of war's end, it is my privilege to express gratitude for the great contribution made by our parents and grandparents. Through their sacrifice, we enjoy peace and prosperity. To those whose fathers, brothers, sons, mothers, daughters or sisters paid the ultimate sacrifice, we say thank you. We thank those who are returned service men and women, for they left our shores as idealistic youth, filled with the desire to fight for freedom and democracy. They did this, but over many years they have paid with a torture of memory which we who have not been involved in war could never begin to imagine. To all involved in conflict to ensure our freedom and unfettered way of life: thank you, again. May we live worthy of the legacy they have given us.

Over the past decade or so, great advances have been made towards recognising the wonderful contribution made to our society by the physically or mentally handicapped. Many are involved in a full-time capacity providing leadership, products and services second to none. In the shadow of these people live those with a profound disability. The parents of these people live in fear that their severely handicapped sons or daughters will be released from their "safe" institutional care to be integrated into community clusters. It is significant that it is these parents who are approaching elected representatives to express fear at the loss of this safe and comfortable environment for their children. In many cases, parents are begging for reassurance that current accommodation be maintained.

Are we so far down the spiral of change, for the sake of change, that we cannot recognise, let alone accept, past successful decisions? Surely if parents are requesting a retention of the status quo as far as institutional care is concerned it is incumbent on Government to honour that request. After all, the parents have a love and concern for the wellbeing of these people which is far stronger than anything we could emulate.

I take this opportunity to comment on recent coverage regarding corporal punishment. In the context of a question time, I was asked my views on corporal punishment. In reply, I stated, and continue to hold the view, that discipline in our schools has deteriorated to the point where the ability of teachers to provide a learning environment for students as a group has been eroded almost totally. Students' rights have been recognised, and rightly so, but to the point where the rights of fellow class members to be educated and the rights of teachers to teach have been totally overshadowed by these "individual rights".

I continue to hold the view that corporal punishment should be reintroduced in a responsible manner and be added, as a last resort option, to enhance a range of measures available to teachers. These include time out; detention; and deprivation of privileges, for example, sport, hobbies or outings, in a genuine effort to re-establish teacher authority.

However, the corporal punishment process must be accompanied by a number of constraints. Firstly, that the student clearly understands the misdemeanour—and who here would not acknowledge that young people are generally quite aware when they have overstepped defined boundaries. Secondly, that the parents of the student are advised of the administration of the corporal punishment and the reasons why—most parents are still disappointed if their children will not work within clearly defined parameters. Thirdly, that one person within the school structure be responsible—generally this would be the principal or a delegate. Fourthly, that there be a same-sex witness to the administering of the punishment, but that the matter be dealt with in all other aspects in a private environment.

Contrary to the emotive statements already made in this Chamber regarding the "barbaric" nature of corporal punishment, I would contend that since the removal of discipline in schools there has not been a decline in violent crime, in bullying or the like. Quite the contrary! Indeed, if the argument were true that physical discipline in schools provoked violence, it follows that the removal of corporal punishment should have realised a decline in bullying and so on. The obverse is true.

We, as the decision makers, are at risk of leaving a moral void with the current preoccupation with freedoms, removal of inhibitions, and accepting all behaviour as "normal", "acceptable" or "appropriate".

Love him or hate him, John Laws said—

"The poverty that should bother this country most is the poverty of values. Humanity and everything that makes up humanity hasn't changed all that much in the last thirty years. People are just as envious, just as violent, just as lascivious. Young people are just as rebellious, just as genetically driven. So human nature didn't change, but humanity did and humanity did because society did. Society changed all its Stop Signs to Give Way Signs. Once upon a time it was a culture of restraint. Now it's a culture of indulgence; personal responsibility watered down; the blame-others factor introduced. The re-introduction of shame is what's needed. It's what too many people these days lack. How can you feel shameful about your despicable behaviour if you're told it's not your fault."

I have no doubt that some members could not support the Christian principles I value and aspire to live by. However, our youth need some clear absolutes. It should be added that we have a responsibility here in this Chamber to provide a model to young people. That example should be one of statesmanship, of decision making based on effective, informed debate and not the sledging one might anticipate at the local footy club. If students are presented with poor decision-making models, it is surely inevitable that the lack of respect they feel for decision makers will translate into a lack of respect for the decisions and laws then established.

To return to the election, it appears from a community perspective that Governments have assumed over time that the community will accept the philosophy that life is easier than you think. All you have to do is accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, bear the intolerable and be able to smile at anything. This myth has been smashed when one looks at the power of the people in this election: in the south-east corner, the freeway lobby; in the south west of the State, the Eastlink lobby; and so on. People will not do without the indispensable nor bear the intolerable for ever. This election demonstrates the power of reaction.

We as legislators need to go beyond consulting. We must listen and respond. The concept of bipartisan representation is not new. Twenty years ago, Gladstone's representative was a man named Marty Hanson. While I did not know the man, the folklore surrounding him and his time in Government is characterised by impartiality, his ability to represent the broadest community concerns as opposed to definable party perspectives.

After this amount of time, perhaps romance has replaced some recollections of the man. However, the dominant reflection of Marty's representation was impartiality. Many great statesmen have been similarly immortalised. The representative imperative can still be achieved. The question is: will we as legislators pick up the challenge so clearly offered by the voters of the State and work collectively to lift Queensland from its problems—problems which include the health system, problems in education and rising crime?

I am convinced of the value of the role of Independents in Parliament. However, decision making is a team job, a job of representing our electorates—our people—and providing them with personal values, behavioural parameters and legislative guidelines which are clear, definable and achievable.

I trust that this, the Forty-eighth Parliament in our great State, will be characterised by its representative decision making by consideration of issues based on community benefit and not introspective benefit—idealistic, perhaps; achievable, definitely. I trust we are big enough to accept the challenge this community has so clearly given us. Thank you.

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