



Speech by

# JAN JARRATT

## MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY

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### FIRST SPEECH

**Ms JARRATT** (Whitsunday—ALP) (3.46 p.m.): It is with great pride and a sense of overwhelming responsibility that I rise for the first time in this House to represent the people of Whitsunday. In doing so, I wish to give recognition to the traditional owners of the lands and islands of the Whitsunday region. Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate Mr Speaker on his re-election to the high office of Speaker and wish him and you well on behalf of the people of Whitsunday. I am not the first Labor member for Whitsunday, nor am I the first woman to take this role in the electorate. However, I cannot help but reflect upon the personal significance held for me of joining this parliament at this time.

It is sobering to reflect that women did not gain the right to sit in this House until 1918 and that the first female member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland did not take her seat in parliament until 1929. The last 100 years of our state's history have seen women emerge from the mantle of domestic expertise to a position in which we now share an almost equal responsibility with men for the governance of this state. My paternal grandmother was born in 1901, exactly 100 years ago this month. Had she lived to see this day, she would have been very happy and very proud. Her pride would have been for me as both her grand-daughter and as a woman. Were she here today, she would celebrate the achievements of all the women in this House, because what we have achieved she could only dream of.

Likewise, my mother, who was raised on an isolated dairy farm and educated by correspondence which ended at the age of 11, would, if she had lived to see this day, shed a tear for her daughter who overcame the obstacles of isolation and gender to aspire to be the voice for a regional community that seeks to provide a better way of life for its children. My grandmother and my mother were women of uncommon courage. I think of them often and pray that I may face my own life challenges with the same sense of purpose and courage that they demonstrated in their lives. I have no doubt that the greatest life challenge for me still lies ahead. On 17 February this year the people of Whitsunday cast their vote and passed to me a fragile chalice containing their hopes for the future, their aspirations and, most importantly, their trust. This is a daunting responsibility but one that I cherish. I place on record my commitment to the people of Whitsunday. I will strive to represent them with fairness, honesty and energy. I will do everything in my power to advance the region's interests and needs.

The seat of Whitsunday is notable not just for its reef-fringed islands and fun-in-the-sun resorts; it is a diverse and complex electorate that is nestled within a narrow coastal strip that runs from Bowen in the north to the northern beaches suburbs of Mackay in the south.

The southern section of the electorate, where I myself live, is unique in that, while it is part of the city of Mackay, it is a purely residential area. We have no industrial development and only a smattering of low-key commercial facilities. Part of the challenge that lies ahead for this part of the world is to plan for future development in an area that is growing at one of the fastest rates in the state.

In the five years from 1991 to 1996, the population of the northern beaches suburbs more than doubled. There are presently around 8,000 people living in this residential haven and, with this area holding the major stock of land around Mackay targeted for future residential development, I do not see this trend of rapid growth dissipating for some time to come.

The challenge for both state and local government is to provide the necessary public infrastructure within this community without destroying the relaxed lifestyle. I am pleased to say that the Beattie government has been cognisant of the situation and has acted decisively to provide for the needs of the northern beaches. Funds have been set aside to purchase land for a 24-hour police station and, likewise, we can look forward to the establishment of both ambulance and fire services that will significantly reduce existing response times in emergency situations.

In addition, the Labor government has responded to the need for new and expanded education facilities in the northern beaches by providing funds for an upgrade of facilities at Eimeo State School, as well as undertaking a community consultation process aimed at establishing a new high school for the northern beaches that will reflect the specific needs of the local community. I regret that it is too late for my own two sons to attend this local school but I know that, upon opening in 2003, this new high school will become a great community hub for the area and will evolve with a unique northern beaches personality.

The one great advantage that I have in representing this part of the electorate is that I will be working closely with my friend and mentor the member for Mackay, Tim Mulherin. Tim has always been readily accessible to the people of the northern beaches. He has been responsible for many of the advances already achieved in the area and he continues to take on the role of quiet achiever who never refuses to take up an issue on behalf of his own constituents or those in neighbouring electorates. I consider myself most fortunate to have a person such as Tim to guide me through the labyrinth of representative responsibility.

As we travel north through the electorate of Whitsunday, the landscape is dominated by a sea of green in the form of field upon field of sugarcane. The growing and processing of sugarcane comprises, by both direct and indirect means, a major source of employment in the electorate. For canegrowers, the annual cycle of planting, nurturing and harvesting sugarcane is a way of life that, for many, dates back to the earliest days of settlement in the area. Growing up as I did on a wheat and cattle property, I understand only too well the deep attachment that farmers have to their land and to the lifestyle that can be both life engendering and soul destroying.

The year 2000 was a devastating year for many, if not all, canegrowers in the electorate, as a combination of orange rust and low sugar prices left many reeling and struggling to face the future. The Beattie government responded decisively to assist those worst hit by the crisis through its \$10 million rescue package. This package provided low-interest loans of up to \$10,000 for each eligible farmer to assist with the replanting of rust-affected crops. With a drier summer this year and a somewhat improved sugar price outlook for the coming crop, the situation is looking brighter for cane farmers in 2001. However, I do not underestimate the long-term social and financial impact of the previous year and I believe that the consequences of the crisis will reverberate throughout the electorate for some time to come.

While the growers were certainly the most visible victims of the industry crisis, we cannot forget that farm and mill workers also bore the brunt of reduced production. In a town such as Proserpine, where the sugarmill is a major employer and almost every business in town was affected by the sudden and dramatic industry downturn, the sense of despair was almost palpable. But the locals of Proserpine are not the type of people who dwell on the negatives of life. If you were to partake of a cold ale in one of the local hotels in Proserpine, you would be more likely to hear about the progress of the local football team or the size of the barramundi caught in one of the area's many secret fishing spots than hear self-indulgent discussion.

Proserpine is a town that is proud of its past and enthusiastic about its future. It is a great country town with a warm sense of community. The local historical society exemplifies this can-do attitude. On Australia Day this year the Proserpine Historical Society opened the doors of its brand new museum. I applaud the efforts of the small group of volunteers who worked tirelessly to ensure that significant aspects of the district's history have been preserved within the museum's collection. Their work, however, has only just begun. This government has made a commitment to provide an extra \$100,000 towards the completion of stage 2 of the Proserpine Historical Museum as part of the Millennium Arts Regional Program.

Proserpine also boasts a new community centre that, with government help, has recently opened its doors. Already this facility has become a community hub, with a variety of service and leisure groups operating from within the centre. I will support the Proserpine Community Centre and others like it in any way I can because I recognise and value the role that community groups play in the health and identity of a community through the provision of a range of services that simply could not and should not be provided by government alone.

This is not to say that government does not have a significant responsibility for the provision and support of services at a community level, and I am proud to be part of a government that leads by example in the support of community-based projects. One of my priorities over the next three years will

be to ensure that the work of volunteer and service groups in the electorate is given due recognition and is adequately funded.

I have always had a deep and sincere conviction that the true measure of a society can be assessed by the way in which it embraces the less fortunate amongst its number. I joined the Labor Party because I recognised that its philosophies are based on a powerful sense of social justice and the notion of a fair go. The dawning of that recognition came when, as a university student in the seventies, I received a free tertiary education—something my parents simply could not have afforded me on their own. I am very fearful that our education system is quickly sliding back to the bad old days, when money and privilege determined educational opportunity and the financially disadvantaged were left out in the cold. The Howard government should be ashamed of its blatant attempt at social engineering via the imposition of exorbitant tertiary fees and the outrageously biased funding arrangements that it has imposed on our state school system.

But back to the electorate and on to the beautiful Whitsunday area, which boasts 74 tropical islands that offer everything from deserted beaches to world-class resorts, all surrounded by the calm waters and spectacular coral reefs that make up the Whitsunday Passage. This is an internationally renowned tourist destination that offers an extensive array of diving, boating, fishing and mainland activities that I believe are unparalleled in the world. The township of Whitsunday, comprising Airlie Beach and Cannonvale, provides a village-like atmosphere where backpackers, families and jet-setting tourists mingle with the locals in a relaxed yet vibrant village atmosphere.

While Airlie Beach has always had a certain mystique that has attracted people from all parts of the world, one irony is inescapable. There is no beach at Airlie Beach—well, at least not at low tide, and even when the tide is in one has to weigh up the possibility of having an up-close and personal encounter with the deadly box jellyfish. Visitors have tended to stay for one night and then head offshore in search of safer pursuits. I am delighted to say that this situation has recently changed for all time. The Beattie Labor government promised and delivered \$8 million for the construction of the Vision Airlie Lagoon, a safe swimming development that rivals South Bank for size and, I believe, beauty. Set on the foreshore in the heart of Airlie Beach, the lagoon has become a focal point for visitors and locals alike, who gather in and around the water and soak up the incredible beauty of the surroundings.

Tourism is certainly the fastest-growing industry in the electorate and, as such, provides a major source of employment. We are fortunate to have within the community people of vision to whom we entrust the future direction of the tourism industry in our area. I am convinced that future development must complement the natural environment and provide nature based experiences for our visitors. If we rush to expand for the sake of the mighty dollar, we risk destroying the very thing that attracts people to the area.

In addition to the challenges of determining the future shape of the local tourism industry is the ever-present challenge of maintaining and growing our market share in a domestic and international climate of increasingly aggressive competition. For many years the Whitsunday area has been able to rely on its reef and rainforest experiences to lure backpackers to its shores, but with increasing competition in the marketplace this is no longer a viable, long-term option.

Most other states and territories in Australia have in place an aggressive advertising and marketing policy that is increasingly drawing clients from what has been our traditional market. We must ensure that we match this effort in order to survive and expand. I have given a commitment to our local peak tourism body, Tourism Whitsunday, that I will work closely with them and the Minister for Tourism to ensure that we do everything in our power to meet the challenges that lie ahead. Ultimately, this may mean finding more money in the budget so that we can compete more effectively with our interstate rivals in the battle for the hearts and minds of local and international tourists. At the very least we need to ensure that available funding is spent wisely in creating effective and efficient marketing strategies that hit the target and deliver jobs in places like Whitsunday and Bowen.

Bowen, which lies at the northern extremity of the electorate, is regarded as part of the greater Whitsunday region. And indeed, it has much to offer tourists who come in search of a tranquil escape. With its beautiful beaches, warm climate and peaceful country town atmosphere, Bowen is a favourite destination of the southern caravanning holiday-maker. Just as geese flying south marks the change of season in some countries, we in our part of the world identify the coming of winter by the procession of caravans that wind their way from Victoria along the Bruce Highway towards Bowen.

While Bowen is a great place in which to holiday and live, the last 10 years have seen the district suffer the consequences of serious economic decline, with over 2,000 jobs lost to the area over this short period. The social consequences of such a sudden and dramatic downturn in the local economy have been serious indeed. For me, the saddest consequence of the situation is that the town's young people now have little prospect of finding employment in their home town and are left with the choice of receiving unemployment benefits or leaving town in search of work. This situation is simply unacceptable. What the people of Bowen need is to see a revival of local industry so that they can stay in their own area and contribute to the local economy, thus ensuring not only their own futures but also

that of the area as a whole. The previous Labor government, in recognising these needs, contributed over \$10 million to the local government authority for the purpose of retiring debt and creating job opportunities for local people. This tangible demonstration of support for the Bowen community has gone a long way towards lifting community spirits and arresting the pace of economic decline, but there is much more to be done.

Being a very proactive community, the Bowen Shire Council together with local enterprise and development groups are working hard to charter a way forward. And as their representative in state government, I am committed to seeing that Bowen overcomes the hurdles it faces and can once again provide its children with a future. What they need from state government, in the words of the local mayor, Mike Brunker, is not a handout but a hand up.

There is much more to be said about the electorate of Whitsunday that must for now await another opportunity. The one thing that I share with all members in this chamber today is that my being here was not the result of a solo effort. I could not have survived the rigours of an 18-month campaign without the help and support of my family, friends and campaign team. My partner, Ray, has been my rock throughout our years together. I especially thank him for allowing me the space and freedom to pursue my dream while always being there to pick up the pieces when my resolve weakened. Without his loyalty, love and support I could not have endured the physical, emotional and financial strain of a protracted campaign.

I am so proud of my sons, Ben and Jeremy, who never complained about a mother who, in recent years, has been missing in action. They have never seen themselves as victims, and I love them dearly for accepting my many absences when they needed me, too. My father, Keith, my brother, Allan, and his wife, Julie, were in this House to witness my swearing-in as a member of this parliament. They put aside their own concerns of trying to survive on a drought-declared property to share that moment with me, and it meant everything to me that they were here. They, along with my two sisters, Merise and Regina, mean the world to me, and I thank them for their enduring love and support.

My campaign manager, Mick Colwell, and his wife, Maria, are very special people. I thank them for their personal sacrifice, hard work and generous hospitality during a long campaign. It was such a privilege to have the support of so many branch members and friends during the period leading up to the election. Our team of workers and supporters have formed a special bond that I know will not quickly fade. To all those many, many people who raised funds for the campaign, doorknocked with me, erected signs, worked on polling booths and performed the myriad tasks that are required for a successful campaign, please accept this as my sincere and heartfelt thanks for a job well done and for extending to me your friendship and support over that extended period. I thank them for the opportunity to see the seat of Whitsunday returned to the Labor fold. I also thank the voters of Whitsunday, many of whom voted for Labor for the first time in their lives. I respect the courage it took to do this, and I again pledge my commitment to the electorate of Whitsunday and its people.

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