



Speech by

**VAUGHAN JOHNSON**

**MEMBER FOR GREGORY**

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Hansard 7 March 1990

#### FIRST SPEECH

**Mr JOHNSON** (Gregory) (4.14 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker—

**Mr Cooper:** This will be better than the last speaker.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Campbell): Order! The Leader of the Opposition has made disparaging remarks about Mr Speaker, who has just left the chair. I ask that they be withdrawn.

**Mr COOPER:** Those remarks were directed to the previous speaker, the Treasurer.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Is the Leader of the Opposition sure?

**Mr COOPER:** Absolutely.

**Mr JOHNSON:** In rising to speak to the amendment to the motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply, I must say that it is with a feeling of great honour that I make my first speech as a member of the Forty-sixth Parliament of Queensland.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you to convey to Mr Speaker my sincere congratulations and best wishes on his election as Speaker of this House. To gain courtesy from members, the occupant of the position requires integrity and must adopt a responsible attitude. I have no doubt that Mr Speaker has both qualities. He can rest assured that he will have my respect at all times.

I express my total loyalty and that of my constituents to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. I congratulate His Excellency the Governor, Sir Walter Campbell, on his address when opening the Forty-sixth Parliament. I wish him and Lady Campbell well.

I offer my sincere thanks to my National Party supporters in Gregory for selecting me to be their candidate and for supporting me at the 2 December election. The constituents of Gregory can rest assured that they will receive total and sincere representation. I pledge myself to represent and assist people, no matter what their political persuasions, to achieve the quality of life that they desire.

As a result of the tremendous efforts of my predecessor in the National Party Government, I am happy to announce that the Gregory electorate is a better place to live in. He was a valuable member of previous Governments for 15 years. Bill Glasson needs no introduction to honourable members. He has set a pace and an example that is hard for me to match. As all honourable members would agree, he is a man of great integrity. He is respected throughout the length and breadth of the Gregory electorate by people of all colours, creeds and political persuasions. His achievements, whether they be material or for individuals, are monuments in the Gregory electorate. On behalf of the people of the electorate, which he loves, I offer Bill, and his wife, Shirl, many thanks, good luck, good health, and God bless.

**Opposition members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr JOHNSON:** At this point, I mention Sidonie Stormonth, who was Bill's very able secretary during his 15 years in Parliament. No doubt many members of this House know Sidonie, who is a lady of great integrity. She upheld the qualities of the office of the secretary to the member for the Gregory for all those years. Her local knowledge and depth of work was a great help to the people of that area. On Bill's behalf, I thank Sidonie.

Now I will extend my sincere thanks to many people who have helped and supported me. I thank firstly my wife of 19 years, Robin, who has put up with much. She supported me, gave me advice and, most importantly, was there when the chips were down. I thank my daughters, Monique and Tanya, and my son, Michael. I also thank my campaign organisers and directors, Barb and Keith Morton and Tony and Sandy Richards, with special thanks to Kaye Richards and Barb Morton for keeping the clothes clean and the meals provided, as well as for their friendly smiles. I thank Colin Secombe for his kindness and hospitality. Those people are true blue.

I received moral support from my brothers, Brendan, Ashley and Adrian, as well as from my sister, Thea, and their families. I also thank my wife's family for their kindness and support. My good mates Reg Cross and the legend of the west, Mike Gibson, are the best, and I thank them.

I offer special thanks to the electorate councils that supported me and gave me untiring help in many different ways. I make special mention of our leader, Russell Cooper, who came to my electorate twice during the campaign. I thank him for his support.

I thank the press, particularly the *Longreach Leader*, for its fair and unbiased reporting during the campaign. I believe that all parties were reported fairly. I thank the management of the *Longreach Leader*. I take the opportunity to thank radio station 4QL and radio station 4LG Longreach.

Gregory is a vast electorate of approximately 430 000 square kilometres enveloping 12 local authorities that reflect the vast size of the electorate itself. Firstly, I mention my home town of Quilpie, which is almost 1 000 kilometres west of Brisbane and at the end of the great western railway line. It is the gateway to the channel country and home of the famous Quilpie boulder opal, which was made famous largely by the efforts of the late Des Burton, who was a legend in the opal-mining industry in western Queensland. Quilpie has a population of approximately 740 who are typical of true western people, as is the case with all the people in the Gregory electorate. Quilpie has some famous families. The descendants of pioneers live in the district today, namely the Tully, Watts, Pegler, Hall, Wade, Costello, Richardson, Hansen and D'Hennin families, as well as my good friends the Gibsons.

I must mention three late identities of Quilpie: Jimmy and Harry Coronas, who built the hotels there in about 1916 and, last but not least, the late Len McManus, who was the local store-keeper and whose business is carried on today by his daughter and son-in-law. They were true examples of western characters and are a very important part of the town's history.

With due respect to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will now relate a story. The Coronas family is a legend in the west. No doubt honourable members have heard of them. The late Jimmy Coronas is no exception. One day, somebody said to Jimmy, "How many £10 notes are in a 44-gallon drum, Jimmy?" He said, "Ah, I don't know, boy; he's not full yet." That story is a reflection of some of the people who live in the west. The Gregory electorate is full of colourful characters, including many bush larrikins, and much bush folklore. Those characters are all fair dinkum and true blue.

Quilpie boasts many sporting bodies and a bowls club of which the town is proud. I must mention the Catholic convent run by the Sisters of St Joseph, who are to be commended for the courage they have shown and the love they have extended to many children since 1950. I am proud to say that I was a member of that school from 1955 to 1957. In recent times, my children have attended the school. I also mention the Marist Brothers, with whom I finished my education at St Joseph's College at Hunters Hill in Sydney. I am proud to be a past student of that great college. I offer them my thanks.

To the south of Quilpie is the Toompine Hotel, which is a must to visit when one goes west. To the west of Quilpie, one passes the famous Thylungra homestead of the famous Durack pioneering family, which was made even more famous by Mary Durack's book, *Kings in Grass Castles*.

That takes me to Windorah and Cooper Creek in the middle of the channel country, then westward again to Betoota and Birdsville in the far south-western corner of my electorate. Birdsville needs no introduction to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and fellow members. Birdsville, at the top of the track, is some 500 miles north of Maree in South Australia. The annual race meeting held at Birdsville on the first Friday and Saturday of September is a well-known tourist attraction. Further north west of Quilpie are Bedourie and Boulia and, not to be forgotten, Urandangie in the far north of the electorate. I might add that I have not got to the end of my electorate yet, so honourable members can appreciate its size. The other major centre is Winton. Kynuna, with its famous Blue Heeler Hotel, is not far away from Winton. McKinlay and Corfield are situated on the edge of the electorate of the honourable member for Flinders.

To the south of Winton is Longreach on the Thomson River, home of the wonderful Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre. I will return to that later. To the east of Longreach is Barcaldine. On this historic occasion of the first session of the Forty-sixth Parliament under a Labor Government, it would be unfair of me, on the eve of the first 100 years of the Australian Labor Party, not to mention its birthplace. At Barcaldine stands the famous tree of knowledge, where the Labor Party was supposedly formed during the great shearers' strike of the 1890s. To commemorate

that occasion, Barcaldine is to be the site of the proposed workers' heritage centre. Further east of Longreach is the Jericho Shire, of which Alpha is the main town. It is principally a railway and cattle town, which is currently being threatened with the proposed closure of its diesel locomotive shed. If that closure goes ahead, it will create hardship for many people. Honourable members can rest assured that I will do everything in my power to keep that diesel locomotive shed operating.

The main industry in my electorate is primary production—beef, wool and mutton. It would be totally unfair of me not to mention the problems facing these industries today. Firstly, the wool market has reached the floor of the reserve price again, with stockpiles around the two-million bale level. It is going to be some time before the situation improves. Hopefully, a drop in the value of the dollar is not far away. However, at the same time, costs do not stay down. For example, in Brisbane the estimated cost of a bale by the time it reaches Brisbane from Quilpie is approximately \$450. Honourable members might think that that is an enormous sum. However, by the time one takes into account running expenses, shearing expenses, rents, rates, fuel bills and so on, there is not much profit to be had from a sale price of \$800 or \$850 a bale. The costs are even higher for bales transported from places further out than Boulia.

The circle is a vicious one, especially now that we have lost the market in the Middle East for our older wethers. The nations in that region with which we trade will not take sheep older than 6 tooth, thus leaving us with no option but to take very little money for older sheep. This problem has been even further aggravated by the current low wool prices. The cattle market has its ups and downs, with most producers facing constant drought conditions over the last decade. My electorate produces mainly fat cattle from the channel country, but the seasonal conditions over the last 10 or 12 years have had an adverse effect. The stock that have not been able to be fattened in this area have had to be road or rail-transported to the east. The cattle have to be sold as stores to the east or taken to feedlots in the east or south of the border to be grain-fed, thus reducing the profit margin of the producer. Hopefully, the Honourable the Premier and Minister for Economic and Trade Development can do a deal with our south-east Asian neighbours in regard to beef and mutton.

No doubt honourable members are well aware of the potential for tourism in my electorate. When my predecessor came to this place 15 years ago, tourism was virtually unheard of. However, with the opening by Her Majesty in April 1988 of the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre which was built at a cost of some \$12m, tourism in the west has taken off. It should be noted that no Government funding is provided for the running of that centre, nor for maintenance or improvements to the museum. All the funds needed to keep this national monument open 364 days a year must be obtained from admittance charges, sales of merchandise and provision of refreshments, as well as membership donations and special sponsorship donations.

I will tell honourable members a bit about the Stockman's Hall of Fame. Before its first two years have concluded, an attendance figure of 200 000 will have been reached. This remarkable attendance in a location as remote as Longreach is the result of a number of factors. One is the excellence of the museum and its exhibits, many of which are on loan from other institutions such as the Museum of Victoria and the Australian National Museum. At some stage they will have to be returned to their owners. A vigorous marketing program is another major factor in attracting visitors. Attendances are much stronger during the winter months and during the school holidays, stretching the facilities to their limit. In the hot weather it is not uncommon on weekdays for fewer than 100 visitors to patronise the centre.

During peak periods the shortage of accommodation in Longreach is a factor that reduces attendances. Modern commercial jets cannot use the inadequate aerodrome, which is another factor that limits the number of visitors from overseas. Analyses of attendances, which are carried out on a continuing basis, show that in the winter period, 57 per cent of visitors are from Queensland, 25 per cent from New South Wales, 10 per cent from Victoria, 1 per cent from the Northern Territory, 2 per cent from overseas, 1 per cent from Tasmania, 3 per cent from South Australia and 1 per cent from Western Australia.

The Stockman's Hall of Fame usually has a staff of 25 full-time and part-time employees at Longreach and nine in the main administration branch in Brisbane. The turn-over of the Hall of Fame is in the seven-figure range. The normal day-to-day operation of the Hall of Fame makes a substantial contribution to the economy of Longreach and the surrounding region by way of direct operating cash and expenditure. In addition, although there are real, indirect cash benefits, they are somewhat difficult to quantify.

Figures provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate the impact of the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame on the tourist industry in western Queensland. Since the opening of the Stockman's Hall of Fame in 1988, the number of tourist nights spent in the western Queensland statistical division has increased by 44 per cent.

The Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame was the catalyst for growth in other tourism-related activities in western Queensland. The workers' heritage centre in Barcaldine and the campaign to

restore the wool scour at Blackall, which is in the electorate of the honourable member for Warrego, were inspired by the success of the Hall of Fame. Several entrepreneurs have established small tourist operations, such as cruises on the Thomson River, Cobb and Co. coach rides and holiday stations. Some enterprising tour-operators have taken positive steps to provide additional tourist accommodation. Many similar projects are in the planning or approval phase.

Many western towns are slowly losing their economic importance, populations and services. In contrast, Longreach is enjoying increased employment and investment opportunities and population growth, which can be attributed directly to the Stockman's Hall of Fame.

Winton, which is 115 miles to the north west of Longreach, is the home of Qantas. The town is famous also for the Combo Waterhole where Banjo Patterson wrote *Waltzing Matilda*. The people of Winton are very proud of that. The Winton Outback Festival, which is held every two years, will be held again in September 1991. In many ways Winton is similar to Quilpie. Both towns boast opal-mining and provide facilities for fat cattle from the channel country. Between 90 000 and 100 000 head of cattle travel from the channel country through the Winton/Quilpie district.

Unfortunately, the honourable member for Townsville is not in the Chamber at the moment. Yesterday he spoke about one vote, one value. If it were not for the numbers of cattle that come from the western districts of this State, the meatworks in Townsville probably would have to close because they would not process sufficient numbers of cattle.

Because tourism has injected a great deal of capital into the western towns, including Alpha, Barcaldine, Longreach and Winton, it should be encouraged as a growth industry.

I turn now to health, which is a very important issue with which I have been involved in the past. I am pleased that the Minister for Health is in the Chamber. I congratulate the previous Government on the way in which it upgraded hospitals and health facilities in the west. Members of that Government can be proud of those achievements.

One aspect of health care that needs to be highlighted is the care of aged people. Yesterday, it gave me great pleasure to hear the honourable member for Yeronga express concern about the senior citizens of his electorate. Honourable members would be aware that aged people are well catered for in Longreach at the Pioneer Home. Although that home initially catered for only 40 people, it now caters for about 80 aged persons. I congratulate and commend the people who care for those elderly people. They are truly saints in their own world.

A nursing home in Charleville, which is in the electorate of the honourable member for Warrego, also services part of my electorate. I commend also the people who work at that nursing home, which is especially dear to me because my mother lived out her final days there.

I am concerned about the aged people of western towns. The problem is that many of those towns have large aged populations. For example, approximately 20 elderly people in the small town of Aramac live alone. In the future those people will need home and community health care. Something must be done to help them. If possible, they should be kept in their own homes for as long as possible. No doubt the Minister would agree that keeping those people in their own homes is less costly than caring for them in nursing homes. During their twilight years they should be able to remain in their own environment. Because those aged people have devoted their lives to their districts, they deserve respect.

I turn now to ambulance services, which play a very important role in my electorate. Ambulances in Longreach, Quilpie and other areas of western Queensland are under the control of hospital boards. The number of ambulances in Longreach should be increased, especially when one considers the increased population in that town during the tourist season. In the west, schools need to place more emphasis on teaching people about the benefits of first aid. Some western ambulance centres are manned by unskilled people and at times it is difficult to acquire staff for them. Consideration needs to be given to that problem.

The people of Longreach are very lucky that, if the need arises, the flying surgeon covers the vast Gregory electorate and beyond. I thank Dr Spence for the service that he provides. Recently the services of the flying gynaecologist were introduced to the electorate. That very important service is performed by Dr Jim Baker. The honourable member for Warrego may remember that, many years ago, Dr Baker was the local GP in Blackall. He has now set up a practice in Roma and his service is provided to our area on a monthly or two-monthly basis, whenever it is required. I congratulate Dr Baker on providing what is undoubtedly a very important service to the women of the west.

While the Minister for Health is in the House, I am pleased to mention the patient transfer scheme. Although the scheme needs reorganising, there is no doubt that it is a great one. I thank the former Government for establishing it. For the benefit of honourable members who may not be aware of the scheme, I point out that it provides transfers to Brisbane of sick people who need urgent help. At present, the aerial ambulance service does not cover the Longreach area; it goes only as far as Barcaldine. If a patient has to be transferred to Brisbane, a plane has to come from Brisbane to pick

that patient up. Consideration should be given to basing a plane in Longreach to service the vast inland area so that people needing urgent medical help can be flown straight to Brisbane. I will not refer to that matter further.

I turn now to hospital boards. It is of paramount importance that hospital boards be retained because they have the local input and the local knowledge to deal with the problems in local hospitals. I plead with the Minister for Health to give serious consideration to the retention of those boards.

The next important matter relating to my electorate is education. The electorate of Gregory boasts some 25 schools, 21 of which are State schools and four of which are private schools operated by Catholic nuns. Education is a very important part of our life. Children in western Queensland deserve equality of education. Many people are not aware of the high school facilities in the west. In the towns of Winton, Longreach and Barcaldine, children are educated to Year 12, but the high schools in Quilpie and Alpha cater for children only to Year 10.

I want to refer to the non-availability of high-school education in some of the outlying areas. Many of the townspeople of Jundah, Isisford, Aramac, Muttaborra, Jericho and Quilpie cannot afford to send their children to boarding school. Further consideration should be given to that in the hope that those children may receive the same education as that received by children whose parents are financially better off. I pay tribute to the tremendous job done for outback children by the School of Distance Education.

I refer now to the arid zone research station in Longreach and to the pastoral college. I pay tribute to the people who work at the arid zone research station under the deputy directorship of Mr Warren Hoey. They are doing a grand job, in an advisory capacity and in a listening capacity, for the people of western Queensland. The input of the arid zone research station in western Queensland into the rural fraternity of the area has been of great magnitude. I congratulate the people who work at that centre.

During the past 22 years, the pastoral college, which is now under the directorship of Mr Alan McGregor, has taught some 1 000 young men and women. The college offers a two-year course that covers a very broad area of the rural spectrum.

I deal now with local government. Probably the largest employers of people in the electorate of Gregory are local authorities. As honourable members would be well aware, in recent years, because of funding cuts for main roads works, local authorities have faced hardship. Much of the money raised by local authorities comes from rates, grants and loans. I pay tribute to the people who serve on local authorities. They do not receive a lot of thanks. In recent years, their struggle has been made even more difficult by the Federal Government's cuts in road-funding and by high interest rates that have resulted from the Federal Government's policies.

After local government, the shearing industry is of major importance to the electorate of Gregory. Shearers have a great input into the economy of the electorate, which is a major wool-growing area. Shearers are big money earners and they spend much of their money in the area. They are a very important part of our way of life. After all, they are legends in this country.

Police officers in western areas are not receiving a fair go. For too long they have been taken for granted, especially since the Fitzgerald inquiry. The majority of police officers with whom I come in contact in the west are fair dinkum blokes. It is time to put on record the direction in which the police force is heading. Police officers are concerned about their future. They are career people. It is of paramount importance that they know what their future is. After all, many police officers have families. Married police officers in Longreach are facing a housing problem. It is important that I raise that matter now in order that the problem can be addressed.

The main part of my speech—and it is paramount—addresses quality of life. No matter what a person's walk of life may be, he deserves the comforts of his achievements. He may be in the shearing industry, the railways, small business or government. Many employees in the Gregory electorate work for the Government, particularly in the Main Roads Department.

I have already approached the Minister for Resource Industries, Mr Vaughan, on the subject of the Barcoo and Boulia power schemes. I will be doing everything I can to achieve an electricity service for the people of those areas. Many people take such a service for granted. It is important to provide electricity to the people of Barcoo and Boulia.

The last subject to which I refer is one vote, one value. Yesterday, the honourable member for Townsville informed the House that I represented some 8 300 voters. I record that the population of the Gregory electorate is approximately 13 000, which is spread over 430 000 square kilometres.

The constituents of Gregory are workers and they have a right to be properly represented in their State Parliament. It is a nonsense for the honourable member for Townsville to imply that the people of Gregory are privileged by the current zonal system. The people who are unfairly favoured are those who have never contributed anything to the society on which they have sponged all their lives.

Those people have been told by certain people that they have a special right to control the will and destiny of people in areas such as Gregory primarily because people living in the densely populated coastal belt had the numbers to do so. I totally reject that proposition.

Numerically, the electorate of Gregory is very small, but it is that small group of people who have provided the wealth of this nation. They are the ones providing the money that has been soaked up by a social security system that has been abused constantly. The cost of providing the Australian social security system rises year after year.

I reject the proposition that the people in Gregory should be denied the right of proper representation because of the number of electors in that electorate. Any proposition that the vote of any one of my hard-working constituents is considered to be inferior to a person living in a densely populated coastal belt is also rejected. The citizens of Queensland require fair representation. The only way that will be achieved is through a zonal system.

I conclude my speech by thanking honourable members for their forbearance. On behalf of the people of the Gregory electorate, in the country where men are men and women are angels in isolation, I thank you one and all.

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