



Speech by

SHANE KNUTH

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 22 April 2004

DUTIES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (3.30 p.m.): In rising to speak, I must say that it is with a feeling of great honour that I make my first speech as a member of the 51st parliament of Queensland. Madam Deputy Speaker Jarratt, I wish to convey to Mr Speaker my sincere congratulations and best wishes to him as Speaker of the House.

I am a proud Australian and a proud Queenslander. As Anzac Day draws near, I want to honour those who fought and fell to preserve our flag, our Constitution and the freedom we have inherited to this day. These brave men and women are the true heroes of our nation.

I wish to acknowledge those who are most important to me: first and foremost my wife and campaign secretary, Heather, who has helped share the burden that all candidates endure before, during and after an election campaign; also my children, Anna, Joel, Daniel and Naomi, who inspired me with the words of encouragement, 'Win, Dad'; to my mum, who I know is proud of me, I thank her for her prayers and may I give God the glory and seek his guidance; and my brother, Jeff, who is always there with a helping hand and was prepared to sacrifice his own electoral chances to see his younger brother get over the line. I also thank my parliamentary colleagues who supported me and visited my electorate. Thank you all.

I thank my electorate council chairman, Neil Dunbar, and his wife, Margaret, who put much effort into my campaign. To the branch members, booth workers and supporters throughout the electorate, I extend my sincere thanks. My heartfelt thanks goes to all of my work colleagues in Queensland Rail whom I will miss. Many of them put my name forward during the election and helped pave the way to win blue-collar support. I also must say that I am humbled in receiving the portfolio for disabilities and communities. This portfolio plays a significant part in my electorate. I believe that people with disabilities need to be allowed to gain a valued place in our society and that we should all work to enhance the quality of life of those with disabilities. There is a large and imminent need for training programs for people dealing with all types of disabilities, and the need for accommodation and respite are essential in these rural and remote areas. Many people in my electorate are forced to travel long distances to access services that are not available in their area. I will be working hard to help provide these services, and I look forward to working with the minister and service groups to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities and their families are being met.

As the elected member for Charters Towers, I am proud to represent a rural electorate. I am rural and regional Queensland through and through, and it gives me great pleasure to get out there and mix with the people such as the ringers, the roo shooters, the contract fencers and the average bush battlers. Year after year they are out there working amongst the flies, the crows, the heat and the dust. These are the people you will find at the Georgetown rodeo, the Jericho camp draft and the Prairie races. They are bushies. They are people who attend special events only once or twice a year, and these are special events—events that are under serious threat because of state government policy. This policy has affected 16 race clubs in my electorate. Charters Towers, Moranbah, Clermont and Georgetown have lost three meetings. Hughenden, Aramac and Richmond have lost one while Capella, Alpha, Jericho and Mingela have lost their only meetings.

Other clubs such as Einasleigh, Twin Hills, Oak Park, Kooroorinya and Towers Hill have lost significant funding. This government has ignored the plight of our small communities and their race clubs. Everyone in the bush has been made to suffer. Ordinary people, from the bushies to the miners

to townspeople and cockies, are united on this. They want their race dates back. This government needs to understand just how these cuts are destroying both the economic and social fabric of our small communities. I call on our new Racing Minister to not follow the same path as the previous Racing Minister. Venture out and he will see that the support for country racing is alive and well. He will see that people are fighting against a government that should be helping them.

The electorate of Charters Towers is one of the five largest electorates in the state. It covers an area of more than 260,000 square kilometres. It takes me more than 11 hours to travel from Georgetown in the northern part of the electorate to Alpha in the south. The electorate of Charters Towers is rich in minerals and supports other important industries such as grazing, farming, education and tourism. Moranbah and the towns of the surrounding district produce more than \$6 billion gross revenue a year from coal. The residents of Moranbah—people who pay their fair share of tax—see all that wealth siphoned out of their town and receive only a few crumbs in return. The people of Moranbah ask me why a town so rich in minerals has such a poor water supply. Why are the roads leading to the town and mine sites in such poor condition? They ask questions such as why coalfield residents have to travel to Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton and Brisbane for specialist treatment when all the necessary medical facilities should be provided locally.

Moranbah should not be treated as just a mining town. It is a place where parents are raising their children. It is a place that people call home, a place where people are choosing to retire. Moranbah is a town that is expanding, and the demand for housing far outweighs supply. In particular this town needs a dam, and I call on state and federal governments to support Moranbah in its quest for a permanent water supply not only for the town but also for farming and recreational purposes.

The city of Charter Towers is the largest township in the electorate. I am proud to say that my family is one of the largest and most local families in Charters Towers. My great-great-grandfather arrived in the Towers a few years after gold was discovered in 1872. The town has a high level of juvenile crime, with reports of children as young as 10 roaming the streets late at night. In part this problem could be solved with the introduction of curfews for children under 15 to keep them away from hot spots within the town. I am supportive of such a curfew. Residents are sick and tired of their cars being trashed, their homes being entered and shop windows spat on. Put simply, having these children roaming the streets at night is a recipe for disaster. However, a place of alternative care such as a youth shelter also needs to be provided for those children whose home environment has been assessed and at that time is an unsafe place for the child to be returned. We owe it to our children and our community to do something positive about this problem.

I want to draw to the House's attention and also the attention of the media what has occurred during the last three years in Charters Towers with respect to plagues of flying fox inhabiting the residential area. I believe that this issue is important and it makes me feel sad that, knowing that residents are crying out for help, there is no-one to turn to. Every Queenslanders has a basic right to a safe and healthy living environment. Normally when this quality of life is disturbed, health departments, environmentalists and compassionate governments would be moving to help. But the residents of Charters Towers are being denied this right.

The residents of Charters Towers have had to put up with flying foxes ranging in numbers from 100 to 5,000 in their backyards. These people cannot sleep because of the noise. They cannot peg their clean clothes on the line without them being covered with bat excrement. They turn on their airconditioners in 40 degree heat and the stench enters their homes and, in some cases, this has made people physically ill. This problem has affected the majority of the community at one time or another. Adults, children of all ages from babies to high school students and the elderly and the infirm have suffered from lack of sleep, high levels of stress and a substantial decrease in the quality of life.

I call on the Beattie government to come out publicly and tell the residents of Charter Towers who it values the most—the residents or plagues of virus-carrying flying foxes. A health warning has already been issued telling the general public not to attempt to touch these animals or pick up the dead or injured flying foxes off the ground for fear that they may contact lyssavirus. Will we have to wait until someone actually contracts lyssavirus before action is taken? This matter is a state government issue as black and red flying foxes are a non-threatened species under the federal government's Biodiversity Act. Previous mitigation permits received by the city council to remove flying foxes have included too many restrictions. For example, flying foxes cannot be moved between the hours of 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. and flying foxes carrying young or in the later stages of pregnancy cannot be moved under any circumstances. Restrictions such as these make it almost impossible to move them, especially during the months when high numbers of flying foxes are present.

Suburbia is not the natural habitat of the flying fox and controlled culling has been suggested. However, if the current restrictions on mitigation permits could be relaxed, it may be possible for flying foxes to be moved out of the city and relocated to an area where they could live undisturbed and in their natural habitat. This issue has unsettled the Charters Towers community and I would like to work with the government to achieve an outcome for the people of Charters Towers.

It is ridiculous that Richmond has been left without a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff at Richmond have to drive and operate the town's ambulance because the government is too miserable to provide the people of the town and the district with a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff are doing a wonderful job of ensuring that residents have access to ambulance services. Unfortunately, hospital staff are virtually on call 24 hours a day, which puts a lot of pressure on staff and patients. Georgetown is another town in the same situation as Richmond. Hospital staff travel hundreds of kilometres to assist accident victims. We all know how valuable ambulance services are to our rural communities and it is ridiculous that these towns do not have an ambulance officer.

I was employed by Queensland Rail for more than 19 years. I first joined in 1983 and worked 10 months with a temporary special flying gang until the gang closed down. I was later reinstated in March 1985 and worked in a concrete gang. I then transferred to Brisbane to play Rugby League and worked on the bridges and also as a plant operator. After spending five years in Brisbane I then transferred to a local track gang in Charters Towers and spent a number of years welding out west as far as Mount Isa. I was a proud member of the Charters Towers Silver Spike team that won the state championships in 1997, 1998 and 1999. We received an Australia Day medal for our achievements.

During the 1990s, under Labor Premier Wayne Goss, I unfortunately witnessed the redundancies of thousands of my fellow work colleagues. More than 500 were laid off on the great northern rail line between Charters Towers and Mount Isa. Towns like Alpha and Jericho lost 200. Rural Queensland has been gutted with the closure of railway stations, diesel sheds, trucking yards and rail sidings. This has impacted heavily and caused almost the complete annihilation of small country towns. Q-Rail was once a service provider to rural Queensland but has now become a service provider to the big private companies.

National competition policy has now given the all clear for big corporations to have access and become third-party operators, running their own trains on QR tracks. This, I believe, will put more money in the pockets of the big corporations, less money into State Treasury and pave the way for privatisation. There is now a push to reduce staff levels by introducing driver-only relief and driver self-drive for relief. What I have just mentioned is an unsafe work practice that will also result in a further reduction in the number of drivers and station staff. Many of these employees are in my electorate and are long-term residents in towns like Charters Towers and Hughenden. The loss of these jobs would be a major blow to them and their families as well as the economy of their towns. Every rail job, railway station, trucking yard and rail siding that is closed is another nail in the coffin for the small country towns. As a National Party member of parliament, I will be standing up for these blue-collar workers. I challenge the Labor Minister for Transport to do the same.

National competition policy was first signed off by Paul Keating and Wayne Goss. It has been a tremendous failure for rural Queensland and it has not achieved the desired outcome that the theologians expected. It has had a detrimental impact on small businesses, farms and employees to the point that the federal coalition's continued support of this policy has lost the Nationals many former friends. I welcome the review of this policy and I hope that the right decisions will prevail.

Although I may support the sale of a public asset when it is no longer profitable to remain in government hands, I am totally against the sale of Telstra. Telstra remains a high profit making public asset and an important public utility. More importantly, the lack of mobile phone coverage in my electorate demonstrates that there is much to be done to bring rural and regional telecommunications up to an acceptable standard. If Telstra is fully privatised there will be no incentives for improved services, especially in rural Queensland. I challenge my federal colleagues not to travel the same path as Labor, which sold out great Australian icons like Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank.

Greater incentive packages need to be provided to encourage more nurses, doctors and dentists to work in regional, rural and remote areas. Often health workers sent out by agencies are not prepared for remote area conditions and stay only six weeks to eight weeks. There is a continual high turnover of staff, which puts pressure on other nursing and health care staff and patients. If we lose a doctor or a dentist, it can take up to three to four months for a replacement, and some people have no other choice then to travel an 800-kilometre round trip just to get a tooth fixed.

With respect to the community of Clermont and the surrounding district, I would like to bring to the attention of both state and federal governments the need to address the issue of aged care facilities. At present there are approximately 20 people on the waiting list to enter the aged care facility, Monash Lodge. The citizens of Clermont do not want to see their elderly forced out of the town because of the lack of facilities in their home town. Many elderly residents are remaining in their homes despite health problems, because they are worried that they will be sent to hospitals or other facilities outside of Clermont. The current facility is wonderful. However, it needs to be extended to accommodate the many elderly residents who require greater attention than what is available to them in their own homes. I will be pushing this issue in the hope that it will be addressed.

There has been lobbying for more than 20 years for the Clermont-Alpha-Tambo road to be sealed. It is too dangerous for the average traveller to access. It is often used to carry livestock and

general supplies and is used by locals and tourists. It is also a major trucking route for companies from as far south as Adelaide. Every day, students from the Mistake Creek State School travel in excess of 100 kilometres per day along this road—a road that even seasoned travellers decline to use. In the last 10 years there have been numerous accidents on this road. At least 12 accidents have involved government employees trying to do their jobs. Sealing the road makes plain commonsense. It would relieve transport pressure on the coastal highways, increase tourism, save lives and provide a much-needed boost to the local communities. Other roads in my electorate that I believe are of national importance to be sealed are the Hughenden-Lynd and the Aramac-Torrens Creek roads, and the Gregory Development Road needs upgrading urgently.

Many shires in my electorate rely heavily on the beef industry. The tick line extends right through the southern and north-western parts of my electorate. It is of great concern that stock inspectors are being replaced with third-party providers to carry out tick inspections. Third-party providers do not have the power to deter truck loads of cattle that are bypassing the dip and they are not qualified to monitor and report animal diseases and stock movements. The prevention of the spread of cattle tick into the clean areas of western Queensland is an extremely high priority. I am disappointed to hear that the township of Alpha, which dips an average of 25,000 head per year, plus sprays approximately 900 horses, will not have a stock inspector because of a funding shortfall. This is an insult when we consider that a multimillion dollar industry is placed in jeopardy because the government is too lousy to provide a stock inspector. I call on the Primary Industries Minister to address this matter as this is a serious issue.

Vegetation management plays a big part in my electorate, which has a large percentage of small, medium and large blocks. It is no exaggeration to say that many people who live in rural electorates are frustrated and angry at being gutted by a government whose policies are not compatible with the needs of country Queensland. The myth that landowners are environmental vandals—destroying the Great Barrier Reef, pumping rivers dry and depleting the ozone layer—is hypothetical nonsense that is dreamed up by academic greenies and those who have never got their hands dirty with real work. This same nonsense is also ashamedly believed by members of the Labor Party, who know that 83 per cent of this state is remnant vegetation.

Land management is about improving the land, sowing the good seed, producing the best beef and, in the end, putting the best food on the family table. The vegetation management bill is antirural, antijobs and removes people's livelihoods. It is a deep shame that the fate of a rural electorate is decided by the majority of members who represent metropolitan areas.

As the member for Charters Towers and a representative of the people of that large and diverse electorate, I feel that it is my duty to bring these issues before this parliament. Often the needs of those in the bush are overlooked. There are many other issues that need to be raised, but time prohibits me mentioning them. I will be standing up for my electorate and it is my intention to continue to make those views known, both to this parliament and to this government.