



Speech by

ROSEMARY MENKENS

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard 18 March 2004

FIRST SPEECH

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (5.05 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, would you please convey my congratulations to the Speaker on his election to this very significant position with the 51st Parliament of Queensland. I feel totally honoured to be able to address the parliament as the member for Burdekin. I deem it a great privilege to have been elected to this position. I am imbued with a sense of deep loyalty to the constituents of the Burdekin electorate for having placed me here.

I experience genuine pride in being the first women to be elected to the seat of Burdekin, in having lived the majority of my life in the Burdekin electorate and in having it as my birthplace. In fact, I can even lay claim to being called a local, which is a major compliment in many areas of rural Queensland.

The Burdekin electorate is most diverse. It encompasses the coalmining area of Collinsville with its adjacent pastoral lands and the horticultural farming district of Bowen to the south. Half of the constituents of this electorate are actually in the Lower Burdekin sugar growing region of Giru, Home Hill and Ayr. To the north, in Townsville city, a third of Burdekin's electors live on the southern side of the Ross River. They share urban and industrial interests. To the west are the farms of Woodstock.

I was born in Collinsville and actually grew up in the bush. Our sons now carry on my family's pastoral tradition of 70 years in the Collinsville district. I am proud to say that I never attended primary school. In fact, all my primary schooling was done by correspondence. I subsequently trained and worked as a school teacher. Recently I have spent my time in Home Hill where we are a family of fourth generation sugar cane farmers. Our family's core business is cane and cattle.

The rich coalfields of Collinsville and Newlands in the Bowen River Basin are an integral part of the Burdekin electorate economy. This huge industry is currently at risk through lack of water. Eungella Dam, which feeds the Bowen River, is at 25 per cent capacity. There has been little irrigation from the Bowen River since June last year and, without further rain, mining operations as far south as Moranbah might also be severely disadvantaged. Plans for mining, for farming and for pastoral expansion are forestalled for lack of water storage. There is a major need for increased water infrastructure in this area, not only to progress future development but also to basically sustain the existing industries.

This electorate has a very large horticultural industry. Produce includes the well-known Bowen mangoes and Bowen tomatoes, Gumlum capsicums and a huge assortment of various other fruit and vegetables grown from Alligator Creek south through the electorate to Bowen. This area provides produce throughout Australia and exports world wide. Its farmers are some of the most technologically advanced world wide. They provide Australia with not only the cheapest but the best-quality produce to be grown anywhere. No country has fresher, better fruit and vegetables than Australia, and in winter months these mainly emanate from the Burdekin electorate. The horticultural industry has not only battled the tyranny of distance but also major business costs, the scourge of drought and the availability and enormous cost of water. In representing the horticulturalists in this electorate, I am keenly aware of the enormous problems that they are currently facing.

The electorate has a large cattle industry. Much of its contribution is processed through the largest meatworks in north Queensland and this meatworks is also situated in the electorate. The sale of a significant live export quota adds another boost to the national economy. The once large fishing industry in the Burdekin waters is now under major threat of extinction. The Burdekin is one of the few areas from which fresh reef fish is sold right across Australia. Under new reef and fish management laws to be introduced, consumers across Australia are becoming aware that they could be losing the

opportunity to ever again buy fresh reef fish. Not only are professional fishing enterprises affected but, of course, so are the recreational fishermen. These two groups are speaking with the one voice in the Save Our Seafood Association recently formed in my area and their concerns are very real.

The electorate contains several large agriculture projects as well as many small businesses and light industries. The innovative attempts of so many businesspeople in this area must be truly commended as those businesspeople search for alternative areas in which to diversify in their attempts to survive. Within my electorate, there are two major base metal refineries in Townsville as well as a coal-fired powerhouse in Collinsville. Of the four sugar mills in the Burdekin, one is the largest in Australia. The gas pipeline, which is currently under construction and running through the electorate from Moranbah to Townsville, should provide opportunity for future expansion. Abbot Point is already a major coal exporting port connected by rail to the Collinsville and Newlands mining fields. However, the construction of a rail link connecting the southern Bowen Basin mines to Newlands would provide the capacity to double the capabilities of Abbot Point immediately. This coal currently goes to Hay Point. With a rail extension, more loading could come to Abbot Point and relieve the pressure that is on the Abbot Point outlet, which is already stressed. The Abbot Point port and surrounding area has huge potential for further development. The whole area is rich in future industry potential, which must be advanced. But a delicate balance exists between environmental concerns and existing legislation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the concerns expressed by large numbers of residents in the southern Townsville suburbs about proposed high-impact industry development in their environs.

Urban racing features strongly with the Townsville Turf Club at Cluden Racecourse. Sadly, though, other country racing clubs in my area, the Burdekin Turf Club, the Bowen and Bowen River turf clubs, are not so fortunate as they battle the loss of so many race days. A huge economic as well as social deficit is a consequence of that loss in those districts. As well, horse breeding and training as significant industries have all but disappeared in those areas.

An important facility for north Australia in the electorate is the Lavarack Defence Barracks, which houses the 3rd Brigade. Currently, there are 7,800 regular, reserve and civilian Navy, Army and Air Force personnel based there. The total expenditure from that base within the Townsville community is \$500 million annually, which is a significant part of the Townsville economy. The internationally recognised Australian Institute of Marine Science adds a further dimension. Also situated in the electorate is the Townsville Correctional Centre. Education is catered for with 43 schools. Vocational training is provided at the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE—Burdekin College and also at the Australian College of Tropical Agriculture—Burdekin Campus. Also in the electorate are three hospitals.

The Burdekin area also contains some of Australia's finest wetlands which harbour a wide variety of bird life and other fauna. There is potential for significant tourist opportunities in this wetlands region. However, the industry that I believe has the most economic impact across the region from the perspective of the farm gate to the consumer is the sugar industry. The Burdekin electorate encompasses an area that produced 9.3 million tonnes of cane, 1.3 million tonnes of sugar to the value of \$300 million and supplied approximately 30 per cent of the state's output of sugar in 2003. These operations are some of the most efficient in the world. Cane farming activity could also be regarded as some of the most environmentally friendly farming operations in the world. The sugar industry in the Burdekin prides itself as being on the cutting edge of technology, both mechanically and environmentally. The sugar industry offers Australia an excellent opportunity for greenhouse gas reduction in energy use in the long term, both in vehicle fuel and in cogeneration. It is of interest to note that the sugar industry has also one of the most closely monitored irrigation schemes in the world as well as probably one of the most productive and innovative irrigation schemes in the world.

The sugar industry is in crisis and needs real assistance: short-term assistance and a long-term business economic plan. State legislation controls the sugar industry and this is the state government's responsibility. The state government's previous offer of assistance to the sugar industry does not address the real issues. I urge the state government to really look with compassion towards the sugar industry—an industry that grossed \$1 billion towards the Queensland economy in 2002.

The Burdekin has the largest subartesian basin in Australia. This as well as water from the largest dam in Queensland, the mighty Burdekin Dam, is the lifeblood of the sugar industry and many other industries. Yet one of the biggest issues facing the electorate is the taking of profits from the management of water out of the area and into Brisbane. Water is a precious commodity, absolutely vital to rural Queensland, and must be managed wisely, efficiently and with regard to the people of the local communities who depend on it. A key aspect of the Council of Australian Governments—COAG—water reforms is the local management of river systems. Currently, this is not being applied in most areas of Australia and therein lies one of the biggest crises facing the Burdekin electorate.

However, my real passion is seeing young people and adults achieving their potential in life. Being involved in vocational training now for many years has made me really aware of how desperately insecure the world of work is today, especially in country areas. Could I say that the greatest export from my area is our youth, who take with them the principles and attitudes of a country upbringing, which invariably places them in positions of significant management responsibility.

Recently, I received a letter that deeply touched me. I am part of a group of local citizens who are working towards the formation of a local community bank to help rebuild community and business confidence in my home town of Home Hill. A young woman wrote to me because she had seen my name involved with this group. After growing up in Home Hill, she is now working away from the area, because there are insufficient job opportunities there. She asked me how and when she could apply for a job in this new local project, which is still only a vision. Her message was one of so many from young people in country regions today: when a town is their home, they want to go back to live and work there and give their children the benefits of the country lifestyle that they received. I believe that we have a responsibility to manage the state's resources so that opportunity is possible. Where is the act of support for small business and the value adding needed for so many of our primary products?

I look forward to the challenge of being the shadow minister for child safety and working towards the implementation of the recommendations of the Crime and Misconduct Commission report from a bipartisan approach. Our children are our heritage. Our children are our future and they are our responsibility, and I see this as a critically important department and portfolio. There is too much negativity in our community today and too much negativity being generated. So many people feel that there is nothing for future generations to look forward to. It is our responsibility to bring back confidence in this magnificent nation and in this state of Queensland and to provide them with real hope for the future.

I have a vision for the Burdekin electorate. My vision for the Burdekin is one of industry development and further infrastructure within the region. I have a vision of security—security of employment and personal safety for all—a vision of compassion and care for all our residents, and a vision of equity in services and facilities in northern Queensland. My aim is to bring the voice of the Burdekin to Brisbane. We do not come empty handed. We have much to offer. The Nationals stand for commitment and sustainable development. I know the value of hard work, and my commitment to the fine people of the Burdekin is that I will work very hard for our community.

In the words of Kahil Gibran, 'You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.' My success in the recent state election was due totally to the hard work and commitment of a wonderful team of people whose faith demonstrated the strength and principles of democratic party politics. Among the many volunteers, I wish in particular to acknowledge Don Pickard, Jan Callow, Terry Williams and Jim Gist as well as a dedicated team of Young Nationals whose energy and enthusiasm infused us all. As well, I am deeply indebted to the unconditional love and support of my wonderful family. To my wonderful husband Ray, to my two sons and daughters-in-law and to my very special daughter, I thank them all sincerely as they bravely encompass this family lifestyle challenge. I care very deeply about the future. We have earned our heritage, and I intend to fight for it.