



Speech by

ROB MESSENGER

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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FIRST SPEECH

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (4.30 p.m.): It is an honour and a great privilege to be a member of the 51st Queensland Parliament and to have sworn and reaffirmed my allegiance to the people of Queensland, Australia and our sovereign, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It is an honour and a great privilege to be the new member for Burnett, and it is also an honour and a great privilege to be a member of the Queensland National Party and official opposition.

I have to confess my journey to this historic chamber was not planned. As a child and a teenager playing in the red dirt cane fields of South Kolan, I never harboured dreams of becoming a politician, and I will be the first to admit that I am only standing here before you because of God's grace. Of course, he was ably assisted by the good voters of the Burnett, whom I humbly thank and ask that they offer this prayer: that I have—that we all have—the courage to listen to and follow God's will and learn from the example given to us by his Holy Son and our Saviour, Lord Jesus Christ, to whom I offer all the glory.

I would like to dedicate my election victory to my mother, Irene Dorothy Messenger, who died on 10 September 2002 aged 59 from bowel cancer. Her love and support I have felt and continue to feel during every heartbeat of this wondrous journey. I would like to remind honourable members that the Queensland Cancer Fund has a dedicated hotline for anyone requiring information. The phone number is 131120. It is a number that could save you or your loved ones' lives.

Once or twice in a quiet moment since my election on 7 February I have felt the burden of my constituents' expectations. As all honourable members in this chamber know, there are so many good people who are hurting and who need our help, and I have been left wondering if there are enough hours in the day to get all the work done. When I experience those feelings and self-doubt, and fatigue weakens the mind and the body, I take heart from the example shown to me by a man who is in the public gallery today watching proceedings, my father, Des Messenger. In the early 1960s dad was a cane cutter—a Burnett cane cutter—who during the crushing had the job of cutting and loading 20 tonnes of cane a day. Each tonne of cane cut and loaded earned him and our family about \$1.60. He fed, clothed and put a roof over mum, me and my two brothers, Greg and Danny Messenger, with his sweat, grit, determination and love.

Des Messenger has never had any fear whatsoever of hard work. So when I think that I have run out of puff and I cannot make one more phone call from an airconditioned office to a constituent, write another letter of support or make one more speech petitioning a minister, the touchstone I will always turn to, my reality check, will be two cherished memories. One is of my father covered head to toe in black soot swinging a cane knife in the Burnett sugar fields. The other is that of my mother, Irene Messenger, laughing and joking with the other women of our district while they picked tomatoes in 35 degree tropical heat. I thank Irene and Des Messenger—mum and dad—for giving my brothers and me unconditional love and for showing us the meaning of hard work.

I eagerly look forward to the opportunity that the 51st Parliament of Queensland offers me for hard work. I would like to think that I am bred for it. In fact, the people of the Burnett right now are crying out for community leaders who are not afraid of hard work and who are not afraid to speak out if they think that something is wrong. The Burnett, the most beautiful and dynamic state electorate in Queensland, covers an area of around 7,506 square kilometres and takes in approximately three local government areas—Isis, Burnett and Miriam Vale. You will find the Burnett on the coast after about a

five-hour drive north of Brisbane. The electorate has a population of more than 35,000 souls and has to face some enormous challenges, some of which I will list now.

The health crisis: nowhere in Queensland will you find a hospital which needs additional resources and a comprehensive independent review more than the Bundaberg Base Hospital. I believe that staff morale is at rock bottom. Since my election I have had a steady stream of Bundaberg Hospital health professionals in my office or on the phone telling me stories of bullying, unsafe working conditions, understaffing and overworking. I would encourage and urge the honourable member for Sandgate and Minister for Health, Mr Nuttall, to waste no time in establishing this comprehensive review of the Bundaberg and district health services, which of course serves the people of the Burnett.

I would respectfully suggest that this review must be structured so that health professionals who have spoken to me are encouraged to come forward and give their testimony without fear of a health management reprisal or backlash. These dedicated professionals must be allowed to tell the truth while avoiding any possibility of placing their careers with Queensland Health in jeopardy. These workers' stories must be heard and acted on if the people of the Burnett are ever to enjoy the level of health care that they richly deserve.

The unemployment crisis: I also feel that it is my duty to inform this 51st Parliament that my electorate is suffering from unacceptably high unemployment. Our state's unemployment rate according to the Queensland Treasury economic policy branch is 6.2 per cent. The Burnett's unemployment rate is at least double that. Youth unemployment is more than 35 per cent. These figures give the Burnett the dubious distinction of maintaining one of the highest unemployment rates in Australia. That is an outrageous injustice. We need more state government help. We need a plan like the enterprise zones program, which was launched by the National Party's honourable leader, Lawrence Springborg, on 15 January this year in Bundaberg. It is a plan which launches an investment assault on regional and rural Queensland. At the heart of this plan is the enterprise zone policy, which offers tax concessions and discounted charges to new industries which choose to establish themselves in rural and regional Queensland. We in the Burnett need more investment and industry to destroy the outrageous injustice of unemployment.

The sugar crisis: I cannot mention unemployment without also mentioning the sugar crisis. This is not an exaggeration. The sugar industry is on the canvas; it is on its knees. It has been king hit, sucker punched by corrupt world prices, drought, the rising Australian dollar and unfair state government charges and taxes. Some 35,000 jobs are in the industry and they are at risk, and the only reason that those 35,000 jobs have remained in the industry, the only reason that we have not had massive unemployment, social upheaval and industrial turmoil is that cane farmers have shouldered more than their fair share of the load and worked for nothing for at least the last three years, possibly more.

Cane farmers have grown their crops for nothing and in many cases have incurred huge losses. They have run up massive personal debts so that an industry which employs 35,000 people can still survive. The most common charge made by the ill-informed commentators is, 'Why don't the sugar farmers become more efficient and lower their cost of production?' The facts are quite plain: Burnett growers and Queensland sugar growers, given the social and industrial conditions they operate in, are some of the most efficient and best growers in the world. So why are many facing financial ruin? I would say loyalty—loyalty to their industry, loyalty to 35,000 workers, loyalty to Queensland.

Now it is time for Queensland to return that loyalty. It is time now for the government to prove to the growers that their loyalty was not misplaced. How will Queensland return that loyalty? By lowering the cost of sugar production. The cost of producing sugar is far greater than the returns on growing it. The cost of production in Queensland is between \$250 and \$270 per tonne of sugar. The return on sugar is now about \$200 per tonne. Because of the distorted and corrupted world markets, the growers know that a state government cannot influence the price they receive for their commodity. Sugar growers know that they, like all other Australian primary producers, are price takers. The sugar growers also know that, because of heavy regulation, a state government can lower the cost of sugar production. The state government can immediately lower the cost of sugar production through reductions in state water charges, state electricity charges, state stamp duties and state taxes. It will not be the definitive answer or solution to the sugar crisis. The federal government must play its role, but that would be a damn good start. It is the start that sugar growers want. It is the start that 35,000 workers want. It is the start that Queensland wants. Like many sugar producers, I believe that canegrowing does have a bright future in the Burnett. All we need for that to happen is for the Queensland government to show some loyalty to the sugar industry, some loyalty to the bush.

I do not have time in this, my maiden speech, to examine in detail all the other crises and important problems which face the people of the Burnett and which have already been presented to me and my staff. I will, however, be bringing them before the chamber during the course of this 51st Parliament and I will take the time now to name just a few: the child protection crisis, the seafood industry crisis, the education crisis, the public housing crisis, the crisis in the delivery of basic infrastructure—power and water—the law and order crisis, the racing industry crisis, the crisis in public

liability insurance and the land clearing crisis. These crises and challenges can be overcome—must be overcome—if the people of the Burnett are to ever realise their full potential. These challenges and crises will be overcome only by hard work, clear thinking, commonsense and a commitment by every member in this parliament to do the right thing by the bush, to do the right thing by Queensland.

In the Burnett the word on the street, in the hospitals and classrooms and on the factory floors is that if you do not live in Brisbane or the south-east corner then you do not count and you will not be given a fair go by politicians who are in charge of the purse strings in Brisbane. I was elected by my Burnett constituents to send a message to the politicians and people who live in Brisbane: there is a world north of Noosa and it is worth visiting and it is worth helping.

The Burnett is a perfect patch of Queensland coastline and hinterland which stretches from Woodgate and the Burrum River in the south to Turkey Beach in the north and makes the claim of being the birthplace of Queensland. This claim is supported by the fact that Captain Cook came ashore in 1770, hence the naming of the spectacular township of 1770.

I invite all members to visit the beautiful Burnett and sample our legendary produce, scenery and hospitality. The main industries you will find are, as I have mentioned, sugar; horticulture, which brings almost \$400 million per year to our region; tourism—we are the gateway to the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef—beef production; seafood; sawmilling; and tree cropping. They are just a few of the industries that I choose to name.

I think that it is appropriate that I name some of the key people who contributed to the Nationals' Burnett victory. My leader and political inspiration, the honourable member for Southern Downs, Lawrence Springborg, maintained a cracking pace and visited my electorate three times during the campaign. The honourable member for Callide and Deputy Opposition Leader, Jeff Seeney, also visited and shared his considerable experience, as did the honourable member for Cunningham and shadow minister for health, Stuart Copeland. The honourable member for Toowoomba South, Mike Horan, brought the thunder and rain with him when he visited and we attended the Miriam Vale cattle sale. Senator Nigel Scullion from the Country-Liberal coalition in the Northern Territory furnished me with valuable and expert seafood industry knowledge during his visit to the Burnett. Deputy Prime Minister and federal National Party Leader, John Anderson's visit and launch of the Nationals campaign office, which I shared with the outstanding National Party candidate for Bundaberg, Sergeant Jack Dempsey, was the electoral icing on the cake and ensured my victory.

I must pay a special tribute to the National Party's federal member for Hinkler, the Hon. Paul Neville. Paul and his delightful wife, Margaret, importantly made sure that I was fed as well as offered fine fellowship and practised political advice. Roger Harcourt, the National Party State Director, and his team kept my political ship on course with his astute management, discipline, application and dedication.

I have named democracy's generals. This is also an appropriate time to thank the workers, the selfless volunteers, the foot soldiers of democracy who gave their valuable time and energy to the National Party cause so that I was given the best possible chance of winning February's poll. My campaign director, Ernie, and his good wife, Elaine Jobson; Mr and Mrs Pickup; Mr and Mrs Neilsen; John Evans; Mr and Mrs Joe Gatt; Tom Berry; Laura Whittingham and her partner, Brendan; Lorraine Tyson; Keith Roberts; proud dad-to-be Tim Langmead and his wife, Fleur; Katie, Flora and Tim Barwick; Gavin and Fay Peterson—all these people have helped me more than they could ever know and it was a privilege to share the victory with them. Another gentleman whom I have mentioned previously and whose company I felt privileged to share for the duration of my Burnett campaign is Sergeant Jack Dempsey, the former Nationals candidate for Bundaberg who, in my opinion, is destined to become an honourable member of this parliament because of his good nature, honesty, humour and outstanding work ethic.

Before I close I think it is appropriate that in the light of recent and tragic world events I express my deepest sympathies for the people of Spain during this, their time of grief, suffering and sorrow. On behalf of the people of the Burnett I offer them our sincerest condolences after the despicable and heartless terrorist bombing in Madrid. I pray that those people who were wounded recover quickly and that the families and friends of the innocent victims find comfort and strength in the loving arms of God. I also honour and salute the Spanish heroes who rushed to the aid of their fallen comrades. This senseless and cowardly butchery reminds us that one government cannot stop a determined and well-resourced modern terrorist who is hell-bent on bloody murder.

After studying these terrorists' manifestos and observing their actions I believe that there is only one condition that will make these fundamentalists voluntarily stop their cowardly attacks and butchery: we surrender our culture and adopt their fundamentalist beliefs. It is my opinion—and I hope that someone more learned than me can prove I am wrong—that the people responsible for this bloody treachery will only stop their killing when all the people of the worlds think as they do and live as they do. This war on terrorism is not being fought over oil, water or land; it is being fought over culture. At stake is the freedom to choose our beliefs and our culture. Throughout the years our freedom was

handed to us by selfless generations who truly understood and still continue to understand the meaning of the word 'sacrifice'. In battlefields all over the world wherever freedom and basic human rights were threatened, Australians willingly spilt their blood, willingly sacrificed themselves because they knew that at stake was our children's and grandchildren's freedom to choose their beliefs and culture.

Today we are being asked to sacrifice. With every Bali and Madrid bombing, every September 11, Australians, Spaniards, Americans—all countries who waged war against this brand of terrorism—are being asked the question: how much do we Australians, we Queenslanders, value our freedom? How much are we prepared to sacrifice so that we have the power to choose our own beliefs, determine our culture and chart our own course in history?

More than ever I am reminded of the saying that all it takes for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. If we choose to ignore this evil of terrorism, if we good people choose to do nothing, we will be cursed and condemned by the generations to come. I do not believe that will happen. I believe that Burnett residents, Queenslanders, Australians, are all in the majority decent and good people who are prepared to confront evil with courageous decisions and actions. In the same manner we will confront the economic and moral challenges and crises I have detailed today, and that is with courageous decisions and actions and then, God willing, we will be rewarded with triumph and victory.