



Speech by

JASON O'BRIEN

MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard 18 March 2004

FIRST SPEECH

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (3.26 p.m.): I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and by thanking the people of Cook for putting their trust in me to represent them in this parliament. The Cook electorate is like no other in this parliament. It starts at the Papua New Guinea border to the north and includes the 17 inhabited islands of the Torres Strait, the five northern peninsula area communities at the tip of mainland Australia, the eight Aboriginal communities on the balance at Cape York cornered by Kowanyama in the south-west, also including the mining township of Weipa and the Cook shire centred in Cooktown. It stretches south from there to the Douglas shire, the main centres of which are Mossman and Port Douglas. It then extends further south to include the three most northern beach suburbs of Cairns. Just to make life especially interesting, it now takes in parts of the Mareeba shire around Kuranda, north of the Barron River.

While the electorate of Cook has changed over the years, for the last 30 years the seat has been more than adequately represented by two men whose intelligence, work ethic and determination to better the lives of the people they represent shall always be my guiding principle. I refer to Steve Bredhauer, who is in the gallery today, and Bob Scott. Thank you, gentlemen. The reason Cook remains in Labor hands today and the reason I stand here is because of the work they have put in over many years.

When you have an electorate as diverse as Cook, with a distinct and unique culture in Torres Strait Islanders, a large Aboriginal population and a host of other issues facing regional and remote Australia, the difficulty is knowing where to start. Previous members have done a bit of a cook's tour, so to speak. Today, however, I will try to keep it issue focused and work my way around the electorate starting with environment protection. The reason I start with this topic is not just because of the pristine areas the electorate encompasses but also for much more personal reasons. I was born in 1969—a landmark year in terms of the evolution of human endeavour with the lunar landing. While the technological advances space exploration has brought about are remarkable, I am more interested in the changes in human consciousness created by the ability for the first time to look back at ourselves from outer space.

I think that the moon landing gave us a chance to see our planet for what it really is: a small vulnerable rock in a sea of inexplicable infinity. It is from this perspective that my generation must face its future. For some, while the hairs on our head are numbered, from now on it is the very trees and rivers and other natural resources that we must attentively manage. Our role as the 89 custodians of this large portion of the planet gives us the responsibility for some very important areas of national significance. The question of this age and of this society is how we maintain sustainable economic growth without impacting negatively and permanently on the natural environment. I think a large part of the answer for breaking the nexus between economic growth and environmental protection is careful planning.

The future of a large part of my electorate has been planned for under the Cape York Peninsula Land Use Study. It acts as a blueprint for the future land management of this important region. That is why it is of concern that there are still large areas of extremely high conservation value that remain unprotected on Cape York Peninsula. The cape remains as one of the world's great unexplored wildernesses. The necessity to ensure that it remains that way for the enjoyment and prosperity of future generations is imperative.

It was, therefore, very pleasing during the recent election campaign to receive a commitment that a re-elected Beattie government will spend \$7.5 million for voluntary acquisitions of land of high conservation value on the cape. The commitment comes on top of the groundbreaking wild rivers policy, which gives added protection to 17 of Queensland's large pristine river systems. Fourteen of these rivers are within the Cook electorate.

Another commitment given during the campaign was to begin compiling the case towards World Heritage listing for appropriate areas on Cape York Peninsula. This is a critical step towards the future economic prosperity of the region. It is high time the Commonwealth government stopped ignoring the importance of the area and joined the Queensland government in protecting it and presenting it to the world.

This government has also committed an additional \$5 million for acquisition of land of high conservation value in the Daintree area. The history of the subdivision of this precious and rare low-lying rainforest is one of the most sordid tales in Queensland's political history. It would certainly rival the late-night demolition of the historic Bellevue Hotel, to give it some perspective for southern based members. Certainly there will be no prizes for guessing which party was in power when the rainforest was carved up and sold off. So it falls upon us on the Labor side of politics to do the patently obvious right thing and protect this unique environment, not just for the environment's sake but because it guarantees the jobs and businesses of thousands of people in the tourism industry. This area is one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet which, through careful research, may unlock the doors to all sorts of medical understanding.

I would like to acknowledge the previous Minister for the Environment, Dean Wells; his policy officer, Ross McLeod; and Damian McGreevy from the Premier's office for their work in developing these important policies for the future of this planet. I look forward to working with the new Environment Minister on their implementation.

Unfortunately, however, there remain some significant impediments to the implementation of these policies. One significant factor stands between the protection of these globally significant areas and the potential for these areas to create sustainable employment for local people. That factor is conservative politicians at all levels. It is not my intention to be overly negative in this inaugural address, but certainly there is a view held by people who represent a very narrow interest that World Heritage protection is paramount to locking up Cape York Peninsula. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. I ask those people who hold that view to consider the economy of the Daintree area before parts of it were World Heritage listed and compare it to the economic base which exists there today. It is like chalk and cheese. Today the Daintree area with its World Heritage listing is providing more jobs and more services for more people than at any time in the area's history. There is no reason to suggest that the same dramatic change cannot happen in parts of the cape to assist people living there who are desperately in need of employment opportunities. Labor is doing more to open up the cape, especially through road construction, due largely to the work of my predecessor.

In the near future the government will hopefully sign off some policies and protocols to allow for the management of national parks by Aboriginal people. This will not only provide valuable employment for Aboriginal people but will also create a much more interesting perspective for visitors to those national parks. It is hoped that the pace of property management agreements, which seek to ensure the future of the cattle industry on Cape York, is accelerated throughout this term. While I set out talking specifically about environment protection in the Cook electorate, you can see how closely the issue is linked to tourism and economic development.

A few years ago I attended a lecture by the historian Henry Reynolds, who indicated that there are about 7,000 different human cultures but for a variety of reasons they were being overshadowed by seven large cultural blocks. He said that unless the seven large cultural blocks took positive steps to accommodate the smaller ones, we are in danger of losing those groups.

In the electorate of Cook there is a separate and distinct cultural group whose traditions go back many centuries. They are Australia's other indigenous people, Torres Strait Islanders. Torres Strait Islanders are very enthusiastic to maintain their cultural traditions as they engage in the business of the wider world. Anyone who is lucky enough to travel to the Torres Strait sees—on the surface at least—paradise. The clear blue water and sandy beaches of many islands are the stuff that holiday postcards are made of. Certainly there is a growing movement amongst many islands to improve their tourism infrastructure and start attracting more visitors to their ideal location. The Queensland government, through the Department of State Development, can assist this industry, which clearly has an enormous potential for growth in the long term, with coordinated marketing and grants for individual businesses and projects. Efforts will also need to be made to ensure that indigenous people are included in the development of the industry at all levels.

There are a number of things that hold the Torres Strait back from reaching its full potential and have enormous impact on the quality of life and health of people living there. The first of these is the cost of living. By virtue of its distance from Cairns and Brisbane, not only is the cost of all goods in all

parts of the Torres Strait expensive but so is the simple act of moving from one island to another to visit family and for other functions. Because the islands have little space to farm vegetables and meat in any large-scale method at this time, prices of these staple foods are high. There are health implications as a consequence of the high cost of living, both at a physical and spiritual level, especially when people are isolated from their family.

Many of these issues also pertain to people living in Aboriginal communities on Cape York Peninsula. The Torres Shire mayor, Pedro Stephen, has called for a committee of inquiry into the high cost of living in the Torres Strait. I want to publicly support that request and ask that it extend to Cape York as well.

Another important issue facing the six islands of the Torres Strait is erosion. On a couple of these islands, such as Yorke and Poruma, the erosion is quite simple. I would like to invite the new Environment Minister to visit these islands with his departmental officers in the near future and to offer what assistance he can to the very concerned people living there.

There is debate occurring throughout the Torres Strait at the moment concerning the future government structure for that region. The debate is occurring at two levels with some people calling for a new board structure for the Torres Strait Regional Authority. While generally speaking the authority is a Commonwealth institution, it works closely with state government agencies, especially in the field of infrastructure improvement. At the state level many people have been watching the proposed changes to the governing structure in Aboriginal communities with interest and are waiting patiently for us to engage with them if similar changes are to be implemented in the Torres Strait.

I want to talk now about alcohol management plans. I raise them when I am talking about economic development in the Cook electorate because I believe they are the cornerstone for change. Honourable members may have noticed that there has been a bit of information in the news recently about the plans and, as best I can, I have become somewhat knowledgeable about their implementation. I want to put my support for alcohol management plans on the record straight away. For too long the ravages of alcohol abuse have destroyed Aboriginal families and communities. I also want to place on record my regard for the former Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and the Premier for having the courage to finally do something when so many people before did nothing. I also acknowledge the comments made by the member for Gregory in the previous speech.

One thing, however, that must be understood about the plans is that they are the first step of a long journey. The theory is that only when Aboriginal people working through their community justice groups and in partnership with their government take control of alcohol abuse can we move forward with improving health, education and employment standards. Having said that, though, and acknowledging that the Premier is steadfast in his determination to push forward with the plans, what I will not support is alcohol management plans that are imposed upon communities. Each AMP, as they are known, is different. They are different because they were formed in consultation with the community justice groups. However, I cannot support plans where the wishes of the justice groups have been set aside. There is widespread support for the plans by nearly every person I have spoken to about them in my electorate. The concern of people is that they are not having a say in the detail of the plans. In places like Mapoon and the northern peninsula area this is particularly so.

The first alcohol management plan which was agreed to was in Aurukun and has been in place for over 12 months now. It is now timely for a warts and all review of its effects. I think the Premier indicated today that the initial results are largely positive. Through you, Mr Speaker, I would urge the Premier to visit Mapoon and the Northern Peninsula area, sit down with the people there in the community justice groups and listen to their concerns and take them into account. There is a genuine commitment to making these plans work, but without the support of the communities themselves it is going to be made more difficult. Once alcohol management plans have had the desired effect—and there is no doubt that in a place like Aurukun the plans have had a marked effect in a short period of time—it is then up to other government agencies to increase their engagement with Aboriginal communities. In the long run, both Aboriginal and Islander people must provide as much of their own government services, whether it is in the critical area of housing, police, road construction or education, for example, as possible.

There are other economic opportunities opening up for people on Cape York Peninsula, particularly in the cattle, fishing and mining industries. While I wholeheartedly support the tree clearing legislation the Minister for Natural Resources introduced into the House today, I think the legislation must include provisions for projects of regional significance that allow Aboriginal people the opportunity to expand and develop their economic base. I will speak more on this matter during the second reading debate of that bill.

I think a major impediment to economic development in Aboriginal communities is the quality and quantity of training that is delivered there. Many Aboriginal people are sick and tired of training. Many are walking around their communities with all sorts of qualifications with little opportunities to employ them. Other training which may be of use and interest to people is delivered in a culturally inappropriate

manner. Often an agency will get a good idea for a project and immediately send some trainer in the community to round up a few interested bodies, and nicks off two days later with his cheque in tow. The community is often left with no ongoing support and the project with no chance of success.

It is important to emphasise that in addition to alcohol management plans there are a number of positive changes happening in Cape York communities. In two weeks time, on 27 March, Aboriginal councils will begin the transition that will see them become the same as nearly every other council in Queensland. It would surprise many members to know the wide variety of services community councils are expected to deliver. Amongst other things, community councils provide normal council services and are also expected to run the post office, the police force, Centrelink services, employment services, funerals and a host of other services. In addition to improving the financial accountability requirements of these councils, the change is also intended to try to relieve the large burden placed upon these councils. The fact of the matter is that Aboriginal and Island councils simply do not have the resources to do all that is asked of them. For example, the Wujal Wujal council is not in a position at this time to fund a vehicle for its community police, making it very hard for them to undertake their duties, especially in relation to enforcing alcohol management plans.

Generally speaking, the proposed changes to local government have been welcomed in the Cook electorate, though there remains a large amount of work to be done to ensure the transition is achieved as soon as possible. When you have an electorate that has over 30 primary schools, a similar number of health clinics, five hospitals, five high schools, numerous police stations and hundreds of kilometres of state roads, a critical issue is asset management. It is fair to say that since the Goss government was elected in 1989 there has been considerable improvement to state government infrastructure in the electorate after many years of neglect. It is important that adequate resources are allocated to ensure that those assets remain in good condition so that they can continue to serve the communities where they are situated.

None of this is to say that the programs and services that are delivered through this infrastructure are less important. In fact, there are a number of programs being delivered through the region that are making or have the potential to make enormous improvements to the lives of people in Cook. One such program which is being delivered through Queensland Health is the chronic disease program. This program is providing case management to all individuals fronting remote health clinics and helping reduce the incidence of diabetes.

In the same vein, the delivery of the education curriculum is very different in my electorate to any other. In particular, in some remote communities for the majority of students English is sometimes a second or third language. Teachers who go into these communities are a special breed and face a range of issues that simply are not experienced in other centres. Despite the challenges, there are a number of schools doing some exceptional work. For instance, the Thursday Island State High School was named the *Australian* newspaper school of the year in 2003. The school, under the guidance of principal Tony Considine, has turned around its attendance and literacy rates, and similar improvements are being made in primary schools across the region, such as the Badu Island State School, under the guidance of principal Steve Foster. A critical issue, though, for students in the Cape and Torres Strait is at a secondary level, where there is not easy access to a high school. An important issue for those people may be that the state government will need at some stage to provide boarding facilities in a centre like Cairns for high schools for those people to be able to access a decent standard of education more readily.