



Speech By
Patrick Weir

MEMBER FOR CONDAMINE

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr WEIR** (Condamine—LNP) (3.35 pm): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is with much pleasure that I stand before you in the legislative chamber of the parliament of Queensland to deliver my maiden speech to this House. I would firstly like to congratulate the Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, and the Labor government on their recent electoral success. I congratulate the member for Nicklin upon his appointment by the elected members of the House to the honourable office of Speaker. I acknowledge all returning members on successfully retaining their seats and congratulate the new members who, like me, are taking their place in this chamber for the first time.

When I attended my first local branch meeting I never envisaged that I would one day be standing here as an elected member of parliament. I became a member of the National Party in 2003 and soon after was elected chairman of the Cecil Plains branch. In a short time I became vice-chairman of the Maranoa federal divisional council and the chairman of the Cunningham state electoral council until the seat of Cunningham was abolished at the last state redistribution. In 2008, upon the formation of the Liberal National Party, I was elected the south-west regional chair and took my place on the state executive of the party, a position I held until I stood down after being preselected as the candidate for the seat of Condamine.

There are many members and supporters who helped throughout the campaign to ensure that the LNP reclaimed the seat of Condamine and I take this opportunity to express my gratitude. I owe a special thankyou to Peter Wilson, Jennifer Tunley, Kylie Fuelling and Pam and Roy Grundy. I will always be appreciative of their dedication and support. To all who assisted with fundraising and manning information stalls, baking, attending functions with me and handing out cards on polling day, thank you.

I grew up on the family farm at Cecil Plains, producing dryland crops including cotton, sorghum, wheat, barley and fattening cattle. I was educated at the local Cecil Plains state primary school and high school, completing my schooling at the end of year 10. That coincided with the beginning of my father's battle with a debilitating heart condition, so I began working on the farm with my father, Byron, and my uncle, Des. In my late teens and early 20s I spent some time working as a builder's labourer in the Cairns area and had the pleasure of celebrating my 21st birthday whilst working on Lizard Island. Shortly after that I worked on an exploration drilling rig in the Tanami Desert.

Both my father and then my uncle passed away, leaving me with the opportunity to purchase the property from my mother and I became the owner of a piece of the most productive land in Australia. By that time I had married and my two children had been born. As members know, timing is everything in business, especially in primary production. Immediately after signing the contract, a drought set in and I did not grow one solitary grain for two years and was forced to handfeed my cattle.

All droughts end in time, as did my first one as a landholder. Several good seasons followed, enabling me to grow some impressive crops. The devastating floods of 2011 and 2013 came and were crippling to my own crops and those of many of my neighbours. Unfortunately, I have witnessed and faced the challenges that come with a life on the land. Like many others in the agricultural sector, I have had to go cap in hand to the banks to secure funds after these exceptional events to continue and try to recover, a situation many in the rural sector find themselves in at the present time.

Despite these setbacks, primary producers are by and large an optimistic and determined group of people. We have all enjoyed the good seasons when they come and endured the not-so-good when they rear their ugly head. The problem over recent times has been an ever-shrinking profit margin. In an attempt to counter this, we have seen many changes in agricultural practices and technology, particularly in the cropping sector, to lower costs and increase production. The combination of zero tillage, tram tracking, GPS navigation, less reliance on chemicals, yield mapping and more strategic use of fertiliser in the last 20 years has enabled farmers to become more efficient and more productive. Irrigation practices have improved, adapting to a more efficient use of less water to produce greater yields while maintaining a product of high quality. Most of these changes have been industry driven to increase profitability and feed an ever-increasing world population.

The seat of Condamine is experiencing some exciting developments, both now and in the near future, that the agricultural sector will be well positioned to take advantage of. These include the building of a jet-capable airport at Wellcamp on the western edge of Toowoomba. This facility has been built by a locally owned company, the Wagner family, and is the first private airport of its size and capability in Australia. It means that the markets of Asia, such as China, are now only nine hours from the agriculture producers of the Darling Downs and the nearby Lockyer Valley. Condamine is home to two large meatworks, Beef City and Oakey Beef Exports. Recently one of our region's largest construction companies announced it is planning to build another. These processing plants are well positioned to embrace the marketing opportunities that are now on our doorstep. Oakey Abattoirs is aiming to expand its production in the very near future, which would create another 400 jobs for the township of Oakey. This is a project Queensland needs to support and help make a reality.

The building of the second range crossing will present great cost savings to transport which will flow on to our local industry, manufacturers and primary producers, as well as creating many jobs during the construction stage. Another potential major project in the area is the inland rail. If this eventuates and can link into the Wellcamp Airport where the intermodal transport hub is to be built we will have access by road and rail to every port from Darwin to Melbourne as well as to Asia by air. There are many businesses and industry groups that could benefit from these developments, including the University of Southern Queensland which is located in the seat of Condamine. Making Toowoomba more accessible to students, businesspeople and tourists will generate a large increase in the region's economy.

A project that requires further serious investigation is bringing Brisbane's treated wastewater over the Toowoomba Range and onto the Darling Downs to be used for agriculture and other purposes. This would bring a significant increase in agriculture production, employment opportunities and confidence to the region. This project was investigated some years ago by a committee that was formed called Vision 2000. The committee was made up of farmers and businesses that would benefit from the increased production that could be produced by the additional water. This conversation came to a halt when it appeared Brisbane was going to run out of water during a severe period of drought. Peter Beattie, the then premier, spent \$1 billion on treatment plants and pipelines to droughtproof Brisbane. It then rained and this entire infrastructure was not used. Currently, 150,000 megalitres of wastewater is being treated to a potable standard and then dumped into Moreton Bay. If that water could be transported by a pipeline to the Darling Downs it would provide certainty of production which would mean increased employment, not only on-farm but in all the regional towns in the district. There would be flow-on benefits for the environment—for example, the Murray-Darling system—as there would be less reliance on water harvesting from overland flow allowing more water to flow downstream. This water would be relatively expensive. However, it would provide certainty to irrigators who have established irrigation infrastructure and who have invested capital into the future of agriculture. Before any progress can be made, a cost analysis would need to be completed to establish what the cost per megalitre would be at the delivery point. I believe that we as a country need to investigate schemes such as this if we truly want to bring development to our inland regions. We have surely reached the point, after so many droughts, where we cannot afford to use our water only once and then allow it to be wasted.

The arrival of the CSG industry has brought both benefits and challenges to the seat of Condamine. This industry was unleashed on landholders at 100 miles an hour and caused a lot of unrest and concern regarding the impact on underground water and the ability to continue the day-to-day operations necessary on farms across the region. This was particularly evident when one company proposed to install gas wells on the intensively farmed land on the Central Downs. The LNP government recognised the level of conflict that would arise, particularly in areas where intensive agriculture existed, and after wide consultation introduced statutory regional plans for the Darling Downs and Central Queensland, putting a priority on food and fibre production. This allowed for the first time the opportunity for landholders in these areas to have a say in what and where any future footprint from any gas development on their land would be. There is currently no CSG being produced in the seat of Condamine and given some of the conflicts that have arisen in other areas of the state it is an issue that I will be watching closely.

Whilst there is much change and economic progress happening in Condamine, it is imperative that we do not forget our local historical heritage. The Jondaryan woolshed is an example of this, where visitors can come and learn how many agricultural practices were accomplished in a bygone era. The Royal Bull's Head Inn is one of the oldest inns in Queensland and located at Drayton. The Condamine electorate is also home to one of our best known authors who went via the pen-name of Steele Rudd of *Dad and Dave* fame. The Bunya Mountains is the second-oldest national park in Queensland. It rises abruptly from the surrounding plains and reaches more than 1,100 metres above sea level. The world's largest stand of ancient bunya pines is within the confines of the national park. When you couple these icons with some of our larger events, such as the Felton Food Festival, the Dalby Picnic Races and the Jackie Howe Festival, tourism is an industry that I believe can only continue to grow.

While there are many opportunities in Condamine and much reason to be optimistic, it is not without its challenges. While the resource sector produced many jobs and considerable activity in the construction stage, this all commenced very rapidly and wound down just as quickly. Many construction workers have been made redundant and businesses in Dalby directly related to the gas industry are finding conditions very difficult at the moment. This is one of the many reasons we need to support and encourage growth in the agriculture and tourism industries to ensure a stable economy in regional communities now and into the future.

Regrettably there is a growing social problem that we are facing, not just in Condamine but across the state, that does concern me and should concern all of us—this is the growing problem of the use of methamphetamine or ice. Having experienced this through someone close to me, watching them fall into this world for a time has been an experience I would not like to repeat. I have seen the effects that this insidious drug has not only on the user but on their loved ones as well. This drug is almost seen as accepted behaviour in our young people. It is cheap and readily available. It is being made in houses, backyard sheds and even in the boots of cars. Recipes are available on the internet. Recently a psychiatrist told me that it is the most dangerous and addictive drug that we have seen. Users of this drug will, over time, suffer permanent brain damage and severe damage to their vital organs. Whilst on the drug users become very volatile and can be extremely violent. Drug induced psychosis, if not treated in time, in many cases is recurring. My greatest fear is that we are going to see many of these users of ice undergoing mental health treatment for the rest of their short lives. We need to be more proactive in educating the public that this is not a low-risk drug and in trying to stop them before they start. Recently I received a briefing from one of the police stations within the Condamine electorate. I was told that the latest random breath test results were finding a ratio of three drug affected drivers to every drunk driver. The detective to whom I spoke said we are facing an epidemic.

In closing, I thank my family, some of whom are in the gallery today, and friends for their ongoing support and love on the journey that has brought me to this point. I am indeed lucky to have come from such a large, supportive and close family, which came in very handy on polling day. I thank the constituents of Condamine for the honour that they have bestowed on me. I look forward to being their voice in this House.