



Speech By
Robert Skelton

MEMBER FOR NICKLIN

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INAUGURAL SPEECH

 **Mr SKELTON** (Nicklin—ALP) (11.18 am): I would like to begin by acknowledging the First Nation people on whose land we meet: the Turrbal people. I also acknowledge the Kabi Kabi people, whose land I am honoured to speak of in this place, and I pay my respects to their leaders past, present and emerging.

I was born an Army brat and spent my early life travelling around the country with my family and sister Cassandra as my father, Robert, served. My mother, Yvonne, also imbued in me a sense of duty and honour, so in 1995 after finishing school in Townsville I joined the Navy so that I, too, could serve my country. My naval career saw me serve as a boatswain's mate on HMAS *Swan*, HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Ipswich*. I later had an educational posting at the gunnery range at HMAS *Cerberus*. In 2002 I transferred to RAAF Base Amberley to train as an aviation firefighter. I then served at RAAF Base Tindal. My time in the services taught me the importance of comradeship, teamwork, improvisation and a love of, and duty to, country. During this time my wife, Rachel, and I had a young family. I have three beautiful children: Brandt, Delaney and Jamison. All three were born thousands of kilometres apart in Cairns, Frankston and Katherine respectively. I also had the good fortune of adopting Ray and Sandra Hubbard and John and Julie Aldous as parents somewhere along the way.

In 2004 I joined Aviation Rescue Firefighting and served at Townsville Airport. From 2010 until last Friday I was employed at Brisbane Airport as leading firefighter and trainer/assessor. This role saw me elected as president of the UFU Aviation Branch from 2017 to 2020. While in that role I appeared before a Senate inquiry into the provision of firefighting services at Australian airports. I also negotiated the 2018-2021 enterprise agreement for my peers. This period of time taught me tact, negotiation and the essential nature of strong unions in the workplace.

For me, unionism is a cornerstone of the Australian ethos. Mates looking out for mates and the egalitarian maxim of striving for the greater good of all is who we are as a people. Union strength is community strength. A political hero and key influencer of mine has been 'Red Ted' Theodore, the 20th premier of Queensland, who helped bring union solidarity to government in 1915. He served as treasurer from 1915 to 1919 and then as premier through two elections in 1920 and 1923, going on to become deputy leader of the federal Labor Party under James Scullin as federal treasurer. 'Red Ted' was tough as nails and suffered no nonsense from anyone in his political life. He had a vision for Queensland and he worked every day to achieve it. It is he whom we can thank for the eventual self-abolition of the archaic chamber next door, thus freeing Queensland from the yolk of pastoralist domination. In the current climate of crumbling global neoliberalism we can learn much by looking back to Theodore's competition and labour market reforms as well as his establishment of state-run enterprises.

It is my honour to represent the electors of Nicklin, which is situated in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. It stretches from Chevallum in the south through to the old railway towns of Palmwoods, Woombye, Nambour, Yandina and Cooroy in the north, and west to the rural gem of Kenilworth. Nicklin is beautiful and green—a treasure for Queensland. Only once since separation from New South Wales

in 1859 has the entire region that is now known as Nicklin had Labor representation. Andrew Thompson won the seat of Wide Bay in 1918 for the TJ Ryan government and held it until 1920. Now, 100 years later, it has happened again.

Nicklin was named after former premier Sir Frank Nicklin, who lived in Palmwoods. Dare I say that his ghost still walks the byways and laneways of the southern end of my electorate. Sir Frank was known as an honourable, hardworking and likeable man. He served his country with distinction in World War I. After 16 years in opposition he served as premier from 1957 to 1968, winning four elections. Sir Frank was the epitome of the hardworking, constituent focused MP. Even today his name is sacred in the railway towns and pineapple fields of my electorate. If I can serve my constituents as he did, then I will be sure that the towns and villages, farms and industries of Nicklin will thrive and be proud of the history of their home. Nicklin—Nambour in particular—has stagnated as the coastal strip of Maroochydore and Mooloolaba thrived. It was not so long ago that anyone who lived on the coastal plain had to visit Nambour at least once a month for any government agency; for example, the local council, dentist, doctor and hospital.

Nicklin was an agricultural food bowl with a large sugar mill that serviced thousands of acres of lush cane fields. Nicklin grew pineapples, oranges and avocados in the foothills and ranges and bred the finest dairy and beef cattle in the Obi Obi valley and Kenilworth areas. Now the sugar mill has closed and the cane farms are disappearing under the tarmac of new mushrooming suburbs. The Golden Circle cannery closed and the pineapple harvest has shrunk. State and federal government agencies have followed the population and are mostly based on the coast, while the Sunshine Coast is building new chambers in Maroochydore which will see half of the local council jobs disappear in the next year or so. The new multi-billion dollar Sunshine Coast hospital at Kawana has seen the Nambour General Hospital lose a few jobs and COVID-19 has slammed shut the doors of business; however, there are glimmers of light.

COVID-19 has taught us that we do not need to be chained to an office to be productive as tree changers are moving in ever greater numbers into the electorate, attracted by the leafy streets, good climate and relaxed lifestyle. With these new arrivals have come fresh ideas and a younger demographic which is transforming the railway towns. Now Yandina even has a Belgian beer cafe—an unthinkable proposition even five years ago. Nambour has the only other entertainment precinct zoning—although I have just heard about Wellcamp, so I cannot say that now—in Queensland apart from Fortitude Valley, and a nascent music and entertainment industry is starting to emerge from the COVID-19 strictures of social distancing and group restrictions.

Tourism is flourishing in the villages of the Blackall Range and the hinterland towns of Palmwoods, Woombye, Yandina and Cooroy, with many operators reporting a solid profitable season so far on the back of local Queenslanders supporting Queenslanders. It is all good business, I am told, as it is local families visiting and this will be repeated as time goes by.

In the railway towns, the heritage values have come under pressure as industry and unimagined development have tried to fill the streets with ugly tilt-slab anonymous monstrosities. The communities are fighting back, and heritage preservation has become a defining motif of these towns. There is a deep, rich history to Nicklin.

The 60,000 years of Aboriginal stewardship have gifted us a lush forest of the iconic bunya pines and fine water meadows of pasture. The early explorers Simpson and Eipner marvelled at the park like vistas. The early settlers came up the Mary River and across the Conondale Range, following the timeworn Aboriginal pathways. When the railways came, the towns soon grew. We must cherish our history and heritage and allow both to shape and guide our stewardship of the land.

Now, in the modern era, the demands of development and population shift are placing great pressures on the fabric of community. Jobs must be created for the new arrivals and the existing population. The community infrastructure of schools, roads, hospitals and all the good works that the people trust this Labor government to provide must match and support the growth we are seeing. This government's unite and recover blueprint will be integral to my electorate. The schools in Nicklin need urgent attention, from asbestos removal to new classrooms and teachers. It is my goal to provide the best schooling this government can provide. The constant issue of road construction and maintenance will also be a key focus.

The essential roles of community groups, historical societies, progress associations, chambers of commerce and the ilk will have my full support and be encouraged to support and foster the pride and dignity of place so essential to community cohesion. I will work with all levels of government, regardless of the politics, to promote and support robust, proud communities.

Given my background in the fire service, I will have an early focus on supporting and developing the Rural Fire Service, the State Emergency Service and their associated entities so they are fully capable, ready and trained to protect our land and people. The essential services supplied by the groups

who care and advocate for the most vulnerable in our community will also have my early attention. Homelessness, mental health, and drug and alcohol services are all areas that are staffed by passionate and kind people dedicated to easing the problems we all could face at some point in our lives. They will have my support and it is my intention to devote as many resources as can be provided to diminish the wicked societal problems now so prevalent in modern Australia. We are a nation of communities, not of individuals. We must pull together, look out for the poor and needy, give a hand up where we can and bind the streets, villages and towns as cohesive, proud communities.

I have a vision for our region and its people. Nambour is zoned as a special entertainment precinct, providing us with the opportunity to make Nambour an arts and culture powerhouse. We also have gourmet produce that with marketing could be leaving the region fresh, by air, to the burgeoning markets of the world. The towns, villages, forests, mountains and watercourses make for a unique environment rich in heritage and natural beauty.

Tourism is also a part of this government's plan. The economic recovery is happening. I will always stand up for the people of Nicklin. I will always stand with my state and country. I will always stand with my party. I will fight the good fight—or, as they say in Latin and as was my campaign motto, *bonum certamen certare*.

It is with humility that I accept the honour of my life and serve in this place. The journey to here has been one of trials and tribulation, wins and losses, highs and lows. I would not be standing here if it were not for the rock-solid belief and energy of the Burnside and Nambour Labor branches, whose fervent vision of victory was not only humbling but also infectious and all consuming. Our ragtag bunch of rebels, ratbags and rascalions gave the Australian Labor Party a fighting victory for the ages. It gives me a great deal of pride to name these people who are family to me so they can be recorded in *Hansard* for posterity.

I give my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to John Campbell and Peter Shooter, whose wise counsel guided me. Their relentless corflute management saw them out every day of the campaign replacing and restoring the vandalised and stolen signs that were such an issue in my quest for office. Col Heath, Malcolm and Rad Rudd, Greg Pitman, Jim Egerton, Nadia Guterres, Alex Jutte, Marjorie Farren and many others relentlessly letterboxed day after day getting our message out and uncomplainingly staffed the pre-poll and election day booths. Our branch presidents, Maree Sullivan and Charmaine Foley, focused on pre-polling rosters, booth management and team unity, and their unquestioning loyalty to our cause was integral to our win.

The pre-poll volunteers—Naomi Szalek, who is the undisputed princess positive, Paul Dawkins, Donna Cooper and Justin Raethel—all gave till they fell. Laurence McLean, Terry Wood and the Young Labor team, the other Sunshine Coast branches, along with our branch heroes scrutineered the count to the last vote. The Transport Workers Union and the aviation branch of the United Firefighters Union both gave support, guidance and encouragement, and for that I am most grateful. All these true believers' loyalty and passion will be my guiding motivation for the next four years. I honour my mentor, campaign director and now electorate officer, Tony Millroy. His belief in me made me think him a father. He has stated though that he would not adopt me. My sincere apologies to anyone I have missed.

Finally, I must honour our Premier for the leadership, courage and stubborn determination that saved our state from the worst ravages of COVID-19. Her leadership gave the electors of Nicklin reason to hope and to put their faith in this government. We knew we had a good chance to win when, on the first count of the pre-poll votes, my campaign director, Tony, saw a ballot with a notation on the bottom in old-fashioned beautiful copperplate script that read, 'Thank you, Annastacia, for saving our lives.' From the grateful people of Nicklin, I thank you all again.