



Speech by

Mr R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON NORTH

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FIRST SPEECH

Mr SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton North) (8.19 p.m.): I rise for the first time in this House and, in so doing, I pay tribute to those loyal Labor voters of the electorate of Rockhampton North.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I offer the congratulations of those electors to you on your appointment as Chairman of Committees and I ask that you convey their congratulations to Mr Speaker himself.

In addressing this House I place on record my appreciation to certain individuals who have contributed significantly to my election as a member of this the Forty-sixth Parliament. I refer foremostly to my parents, Evan and Bonnie Schwarten, who are both life members of the Australia Labor Party. Without their guidance, support and, in some cases, sacrifice, some other Labor member would be standing here today. In advocating the cause of the working class in this State, my parents have endured discrimination. Thankfully, they have lived long enough to reap the reward of having a Labor Government on this side of the House.

I likewise acknowledge the support given to me by other members of my family, especially my wife, Judy and my brother, Stephen, who is in the gallery.

I also record my gratitude to the members of the Park Avenue branch of the Australian Labor Party and the Queensland Teachers Union. I also acknowledge tonight the presence of the acting general secretary, Mr Steve Knudsen, and the organiser for Brisbane North, Mr John Battams. I also acknowledge the support given to me by my electorate secretary, Mrs Thelma Pye, and my campaign direction, Mr Les Yewdale, who assisted me greatly.

Rockhampton North has an interesting history that goes back to federation, but I do not intend to drone on about that. Suffice it to say that the seat has been represented by predominantly Labor members, one of whom was my predecessor, Mr Les Yewdale, who represented the electorate for 17 years. At this juncture I pay tribute to Les. Full marks go to him for weathering the continued shunning of the National Party State Government. Regardless of his strong representations, he and the electors of Rockhampton North were treated with contempt. Unlike his Government opponents, whose electorates manage to get more than their fair share of tax dollars, Yewdale and Rockhampton North were continually ignored by previous State Governments. To add insult to injury, when State Government projects were announced for the electorate, invariably it was at election-time and almost every time Les got to know about those projects from the National Party candidate who was opposing him. As I said earlier, it is to Les Yewdale's credit that he was able to continue in the face of such adversity and it is little wonder that he is held in such high regard both inside and outside the electorate by all those who know him.

Let there be no mistake about what I will say today. Only successive National/Liberal and National Party Governments can be blamed for the deterioration of Government services and buildings in the electorate of Rockhampton North and in Rockhampton generally. The previous Government had a deliberate policy of allocating tax dollars away from Labor strongholds into its own electorates.

Because of its geographical location, Rockhampton is host to many State Government departments. These departments are housed in buildings all over the city, and this has caused great inconvenience to Rockhampton's citizens. Some years ago there were plans to centralise Government services in one building, and land was purchased on the corner of Bolsover Street and Cambridge

Street for that purpose. Formerly, the old Three Crowns Hotel stood on that land. However, at the eleventh hour, there was intervention from real estate agents and other office block owners in the city who, I am told, used their now-defunct green-and-gold charm and possibly some brown-paper-bag diplomacy to have the State Government change its mind. This, of course, has been to the disadvantage of my constituents, who are still forced to almost traverse the city to go from one State Government department to another.

Whilst I am on the subject of Government buildings, I remind the House that the previous Government was not backward in coming forward in using taxpayers' money to rent buildings from the National Party. A classic example of this is National Party House in Quay Street, Rockhampton. Naturally, the building is owned by the National Party but it has been rented—surprise, surprise!—to the Queensland Department of Education for more than six years. In other words, hundreds of thousands of tax dollars—money that could have been spent paying off a Government building in Rockhampton—has been paid to the National Party when, quite frankly, better options were available. Fortunately for the constituents of Rockhampton North, this situation will not continue under the Labor Government.

I next want to address the neglect of Government buildings. All members of this House know that one of the basic rights afforded to a citizen in a democracy is the right to a fair trial. While Rockhampton North and Rockhampton citizens generally do have that right, they do not have the right to a trial in reasonable surroundings, privacy or comfort. The court facilities in Rockhampton are an absolute disgrace. There is only one Magistrates Court, which means that there are great delays in obtaining hearing dates. There are no interviewing rooms, so defendants must speak with their counsel in the sight and hearing of others, including the general public of Rockhampton driving down Fitzroy Street. In the Supreme Court, conditions are so archaic that the good judge has to almost shout to be heard.

I am told that the judiciary and the Queensland Law Society complained to the previous State Government for years about these intolerable conditions, but nothing was ever done about the problem. And nothing would have been done if it were not for the election of a Labor Government. Fortunately, the Minister for Administrative Services, the Honourable Ron McLean, has seen fit to inspect the facilities first hand and has told the Rockhampton people that he will actively pursue this matter. The fact is that it took a Labor Government to define the problem and it will take a Labor Government to solve it.

I now wish to refer to the general condition of the school buildings in the electorate of Rockhampton North. Before I was elected to this House, I was an official of the Queensland Teachers Union and, before that, I was a teacher for about 12 years. One aspect that never ceased to disgust me during that period was the persecution by the previous Government of many Queensland schoolchildren; and they were persecuted simply because their parents voted Labor.

I challenge anybody to deny my claim that nowhere could this be more evident than in my electorate of Rockhampton North. There are 11 State schools in my electorate. The newest are Mount Archer State School and Glenmore State High School, both of which are already burdened by the presence of demountable buildings or "tinnies" as they are called. However, these schools are palaces compared to others such as North Rockhampton State High School, Frenchville State School and Park Avenue State School, all of which are among the most dilapidated that I have ever seen. And believe me, because I covered the entire central Queensland area from Yeppoon to Birdsville when I was employed as a union organiser, I saw many school buildings.

It is interesting to note that the electorate of Broadsound, which adjoins my electorate, was very handsomely treated. The former member for that electorate, Mr Hinton, was able to tell principals in his electorate that it did not matter what they wanted, all they need do was ask him for it. He said, "I don't care whether it is only a lid for a box that you want, you just get onto me and I will make sure that you get it." It would not have mattered if Les Yewdale stood on his head and screamed, or stood on the roof of the Frenchville State School, he would have been ignored.

We, as a responsible Government, are addressing these issues. Only two weeks ago, my colleague the Honourable the Minister for Administrative Services announced a \$164,000 maintenance package for schools in Rockhampton North. It must be stressed, however, that we in Government will not be in the business of pork-barrelling electorates the way that members opposite did. We are determined that all children, no matter in which electorate they attend school, will get their fair share of State Government funding. Notwithstanding this, it will take time and millions of dollars to bring the schools in my electorate up to the standard that already exists in electorates such as Broadsound. I, for one, will not rest until that is the case.

I now wish to turn to the railways. Many honourable members will know that a significant proportion of my electors derive their income working for the Queensland Railway Department. During recent years, the Queensland Government appeared to do everything in its power to scale down the rail

infrastructure in Rockhampton. The consequence of this action was the loss of job opportunities, especially for the young, and, naturally, a general loss of income to the city of Rockhampton.

Our Government, however, will do everything possible to reverse that trend by ensuring that a modern, competitive rail system is developed throughout Queensland. The direct result of this will be that rail centres such as Rockhampton will be enhanced and, in time, the number of job opportunities will increase.

Law enforcement in my electorate is yet another area of National Party neglect that this Labor Government plans to clean up. Notwithstanding the fact that—thanks to our predecessors—the Queensland Police Department is understaffed, Rockhampton is still a poor relation. Rockhampton North has a police-to-population ratio which is significantly worse than, for example, the town of Longreach in the National Party seat of Gregory. In any case, according to the Eric St Johnston ratio, which was published in the Fitzgerald report, the Rockhampton district should have approximately 353 police officers rather than the 189 which is currently the case. Rockhampton North boasts two police stations, the North Rockhampton Police Station and the one-man station at Lakes Creek, both of which are ably run by Senior Sergeant Colin Salloway and Constable Chris O'Neil. Both stations play an important role in the community, but, apart from the understaffing problem which I have already mentioned, other conditions prevail which result in neither police station being open for 24 hours a day. In other words, the good citizens in my electorate do not have access to police services 24 hours a day. The facilities at both these stations are basic, if not primitive. The North Rockhampton station is sited in the old police house, which was renovated at goodness knows what cost. The building has no air-conditioning, nor does it have interviewing rooms for suspects. There is limited security for evidence exhibits. During my last visit to the North Rockhampton station a few weeks ago, I was shown a large marijuana plant exhibit which should have been kept in a locked steel cupboard, but no-one could find the keys. This is the kind of mess that the National Party has left in Rockhampton North for this Government to clean up. I say to this House that it will be cleaned up.

Rockhampton North has a significant percentage of Queensland Housing Commission rental stock. This stock ranges in type from units—which are grouped together in what I regard as totally unsatisfactory social situations—to houses which in the main are fairly reasonable. These houses have either three or four bedrooms. I am sure that all honourable members are aware of the standard to which I refer. Last year, prior to my election, I was made aware of a matter which, to my mind, exemplifies the attitude of our predecessors towards the family unit. I record my thanks to Mr and Mrs Ken Lidster of Sisley Street, North Rockhampton for bringing this matter to my attention. Honourable members would be aware that the Federal Government has put in place a tax-free grant to families called the Family Allowance Supplement. It is designed to give needy families additional tax-free income and put shoes on their kids' feet and extra food on the table. Because of the way the previous State Government structured its rents, it deemed this family supplement to be income and immediately took one-quarter of it away as rent. The Labor Government will change that practice so that families will not be obliged to hand over one-quarter of that supplement to the Government. The package that this Government is offering to the residents of Queensland Housing Commission accommodation is not only far superior to that offered by our predecessors, but also is much more equitable. It would be entirely inappropriate for me to leave this subject without making reference to the good work that is being carried out by the administration officer of the Queensland Housing Commission in Rockhampton, Mr Kelvin Sait. Mr Sait is well respected for the difficult role he discharges for this Government and he deserves our recognition.

In 1972 in his maiden speech my predecessor, Mr Yewdale, made mention of a large tract of industrial land which was developed by the State Government prior to his election. Mr Yewdale commented at that time that not one building had been constructed on the industrial estate. It gives me no pleasure to report to this House that in the intervening years only a handful of buildings have been constructed at the site, and it is generally regarded as something of a joke and a white elephant by the business community of Rockhampton. The time has arrived for this Government to rethink its position in regard to this estate and, unlike its predecessors, amend the apparently restrictive regulations which govern the usage of such land.

Now it is my intention to turn to the broader issues of Government. Perhaps the most vital issue is that of the environment. Since taking over the Environment portfolio, my colleague the Honourable Pat Comben has carried out a preliminary, but nonetheless comprehensive audit of the state of the environment in Queensland. Having identified some of the key problems, the Goss Labor Government will implement decisions that will safeguard the environment for generations to come. It gives me much pride to point out that the Labor Party in Queensland has long taken a pro-active stance in relation to the environment. For the information of honourable members, I point out that for almost five years I have been a member of the Labor administration of the Rockhampton City Council, which is ably led by our Mayor, Jim Webber. This council has always recognised the need for vast tree-planting schemes to be implemented. Accordingly, the council has planted many thousands of trees to enhance the quality of the Rockhampton environment. By involving schoolchildren in many of its programs, the council has

also paved the way for hands-on land-care education to become a normal feature of life for young Rockhamptonites. Queensland has many serious environmental problems, and previous speakers have alluded to them. The worst problem is that of land degradation. I appeal to honourable members opposite to give their full cooperation to this Labor Government as it moves to repair the damage done to Queensland's environment by successive decades of improper land-use practice.

As I have already mentioned, my background is in education. Education is the vehicle by which the illiterate becomes literate, the unthinking becomes questioning, the oppressed becomes free and the politically non-motivated becomes the political activist. Therefore, it is little wonder that for the past 32 years the previous Government almost always spent less on education than any other State Government in Australia. Seventeen years ago, my predecessor also used his maiden speech to comment on the education system. After reading his speech, I find myself drawing parallels between what he said in 1972 and what the issues are in Queensland's education system today. The parallels are extraordinarily frightening.

The issues are the teaching of the languages of the Pacific rim, class sizes, textbook allowances and class room accommodation. They are the issues that Les Yewdale referred to in the House in 1972. Today they prevail as important issues in much the same way as they did at that time. What a shocking indictment of members who sit opposite the Government in this Chamber that, for the last 17 years, those issues have remained largely unaddressed. Thankfully, Queensland now has a Government that has addressed those issues in its policies.

At this juncture I wish to place on record the efforts of the Queensland Teachers Union, of which I was an active member for 15 years. I note from previous volumes of *Hansard* that various members of the National Party—some of whom departed from Parliament last December—used this forum to deride the efforts of the union and the people who were part of it, including me. It is my view that the Queensland Teachers Union is among the finest of Australia's industrial organisations. For decades it has been unselfish in its use of membership dues for improvement of the education system in this State. It can justly claim to be one of the groups that put education high on the political agenda in Queensland.

Obviously, the National Party State Government was fearful of the union's success in marshalling support for educational issues because it certainly never afforded the union any positive recognition. In contrast to that, the Labor Government has already built a bridge between its members and the Queensland Teachers Union. That statement should not be construed to mean that, as a Government, we will always agree with the Queensland Teachers Union; rather, it means that the Government will sit down and talk with teachers' representatives about educational matters. The fact of life is that this Government will not assume that it knows all about education or that it has a God-given right to assume total control of education. This Government endorses the view that its members should sit down with people who are involved in the education profession to ascertain their views.

The Goss Labor Government has placed education high on the agenda, not because it was told to do so by the Queensland Teachers Union, the QCPCA or an opinion poll, but because it regards education as part of the solution to some of this State's economic woes. Whereas the previous Government perceived education as a bottomless pit into which it threw money and retrieved nothing, the Labor Government sees education not only as a right but also as a very necessary investment in Queensland's future. Already Australia is showing signs of an inability to compete with other nations on an educational basis. It is therefore absolutely urgent that Queensland's education system be reappraised. It is pleasing to note that Queensland's new Education Minister, Paul Braddy, has set out to do exactly that.

The linchpin of any education system is, of course, its teachers. Without teachers, there would be no education; it is as simple as that. Earlier today I noted comments made by the former Minister for Education, Mr Littleproud, who praised Queensland's education system. I will certainly not use Parliament as a forum in which to deride education in Queensland, because I believe that this State has the makings of an education system that could well become the flagship of education in Australia.

It is my perception that, in no small way, the dedicated efforts of teachers in this State have prevented Queensland's education system from sinking. It is my contention that, in contrast to that diligence, the previous Government treated teachers very badly. Teachers in Queensland have been the lowest-paid educators in Australia and have endured some of the most restrictive regulations governing their conduct. They have suffered an unfair transfer system and have worked in some of the most intolerable conditions ever experienced by any public servant.

Perhaps one of the cruellest blows dealt to teachers in recent years occurred last year at Budget-time. The previous Government promised a new deal in salaries and transfer conditions in what was an industrially and morally wrong offer. Honourable members might recall that no expense was spared—I emphasise "no expense was spared"—in advising each teacher that he or she was to receive a pay rise of significant proportions. However, the fact was that, in common with many other promises made by the Nationals in Government, the proposal was not worth the paper on which it was written. It

may be 12 months before the Industrial Commission can make rulings on some of the matters contained in the Budget.

Mr Speaker, I take the opportunity of your entering the Chamber to convey to you my congratulations and the best wishes of the people of my electorate. I inform the House that it is the intention of the Labor Government not to repeat the mistakes made by its predecessors. I reiterate that this Government will work cooperatively with the Queensland Teachers Union to ensure that enough incentives exist in the teaching profession to attract and retain quality teachers.

As members of the Government, we value the future of this State. We also understand that those who control the present are responsible for the future and that, unless a commitment is made to education and retraining today, the future is at best questionable. The cornerstone of the Labor Party's plan to develop this State is its education policy which we, as members of the Government, are carefully and coherently putting into place.

I turn now to the issue of criminal justice in this State. It is apparent to me that reform in this area is long overdue. The Labor Government is absolutely committed to the view that Queensland's entire criminal justice system needs to be put under the microscope. To that end, the Government is adamant that the processes outlined by Tony Fitzgerald, QC, will be followed. As one who has studied the Fitzgerald report from cover to cover, I must commend Tony Fitzgerald, QC, for his efforts in questioning aspects of criminal justice in this State that hitherto had never really been considered by Queenslanders.

I must also warn the House that the temptation still exists for those who do not want criminal justice reform in this State to deflect the Criminal Justice Commission's attention away from some of the real issues, such as reform of the police force, and onto the more juicy issues, such as prostitution and homosexuality. If we allowed the moral issues to dominate debate on criminal justice, it is entirely likely that we would lose our way in addressing the whole question of criminal justice reform. Therefore, I implore honourable members on the other side of the Chamber to cooperate with the Government, especially at the parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee level, to ensure that we provide Queenslanders with the type of reforms that are so desperately needed in that area.

In conclusion, allow me to say that I am proud to represent not only those loyal Labor voters of Rockhampton North who voted for me on 2 December last, but all citizens from my electorate regardless of their political persuasion. The message that I am getting loudly and clearly from my constituents is that they want change. They do not want a revolution, but they demand incremental reform, and they are going to get it. It should be clear to those who are now on the other side of the Chamber, having occupied this side of the House for a long period, that the carnival is over.

We have promised the people of this State honest, open Government. Already they can see that we meant every word that we said. I remind the House that it was also our pledge, for example, that no longer would the honourable member for Peak Downs be elected to this House on about a third of the votes needed to elect me; and, again, we mean that. The next election will be on fair boundaries.

If I were on the other side of this House and happened to be returned at the next election, I would steel myself for a long wait. Our party has the leadership, the unity, the loyalty, the competence and, above all, the policies which will guarantee our electoral success for many years to come.
