



Speech by
Ray Stevens

MEMBER FOR ROBINA

Hansard Wednesday, 11 October 2006

MAIDEN SPEECH

Mr STEVENS (Robina—Lib) (7.30 pm): Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to address the House. May I also congratulate the Speaker, as a fellow member of parliament born in Townsville General Hospital, on his elevation to the Speaker's chair.

I rise to deliver my inaugural speech in parliament with a tremendous sense of pride, achievement and humility. A little over seven weeks ago, a seat in the 52nd Queensland Parliament for Ray Stevens was not on Ray Stevens's agenda. Due to the sudden and unexpected resignation of the former member for Robina, Mr Bob Quinn, after 17 years of diligent and faithful service to the people of the south coast, renamed Merrimac and renamed Robina, I am honoured to be representing the people of Robina in the ultimate decision-making forum in Queensland.

The fact that I am here today is in no small way due to the efforts of many, many people, all of whom I thank and generously appreciate. However, there are some people who command special mention during this, for me, most momentous occasion, and I beg the indulgence of the House to give these people their due recognition, which they have so richly earned.

Mr and Mrs Dave and Kay Elson have been unquestionably the driving force behind my rise to this seat of honour and responsibility, showing faith, dedication and commitment in my capacity to represent the ideals and philosophies of the Liberal Party in the Queensland parliament. Since my local government Albert shire mayoralty days of 1994, they have believed in and supported my representative expertise, and my arrival here today is the culmination of that belief.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my campaign managers, Mr Wayne Moran and Mr John McKeon, who have battled away unstintingly under difficult circumstances to allow me to take my place in this parliament after two campaigns.

The most important people in my life and my greatest supporters through the highs and lows of my public, business and private life are my family. My wife of 30 years, Ruth, has far exceeded my wildest dreams of a perfect life partner and has endured my very public profile with a sense of dignity, respect and understanding, for which to her I am forever indebted. My children, Jessica, who is overseas, and Louis, who is coming tonight, are my very best pals and I consider them outstanding young Australians who make their mother and father enormously proud. Lastly, I would like to put on record my everlasting thanks to my deceased mother and father, Babs and Louis Stevens, from Richmond, north-west Queensland, who would have been so ecstatically chuffed at having their boy sit in the Queensland parliament. The ideals, morals, work ethic and values that they instilled in me as a child have eventually led to me being recognised as worthy enough to grace these hallowed chambers with what I know is their full blessing.

It has been a long ride from Richmond to where I am today. In 1979, when we arrived on the Gold Coast, I could not have dreamed what a wonderful city the Gold Coast would grow to in 2006. Fabulous beaches, beautiful mountain ranges and a plethora of rural lifestyles including a great little racetrack—of which I am particularly fond—that attracted a young country couple to the Gold Coast all those years ago are still available today. In addition, there are many other attractions that are sustained by a resident population of 500,000 people and nearly four million tourists who make their pilgrimage to this holiday

mecca on an annual basis, and I count myself and my children extremely lucky to have enjoyed the best long paddock in the world.

As I look back on Mr Quinn's maiden speech in 1990, I note with interest that some of his visions for the electorate have come to fruition and some of his identified problems and issues of Robina are still relevant today. As a councillor of the Albert shire at the very time Mr Quinn was delivering his maiden speech, I am pleased to say that the council was busy planning and approving the development of a massive commercial area which is today known as the Robina town centre. This successful and innovative regional business district is now blossoming into a retail and transport orientated heart of Gold Coast commerce. At the same time it is providing modern community facilities, comprehensive dining and entertainment options and of course is the home of the soon-to-be-premiership-winning Gold Coast Titans Rugby League team. As a former board member of our previous team, the Gold Coast Chargers, who were unceremoniously deleted from the national competition for expediency reasons rather than performance, I am greatly pleased to see a National Rugby League team returning to the Gold Coast.

Mr Quinn spoke of the region he represented as having one of the fastest growing electorates in Queensland. He said—

Should this expansion rate continue, the population will double within 10 years, giving the Gold Coast region a population of over 500,000 by the turn of the century.

Well, he was a little out, but by 2006 we have reached this magical number of half a million people on the Gold Coast and are now the country's fifth largest city. The Gold Coast City Council has predicted that by 2014 we will overtake Adelaide as the fourth largest city in Australia. That means that the Gold Coast is a serious city that has to be acknowledged as economically significant, that has to be properly financed and that has to be recognised as more than just the beachside suburb of Brisbane.

With this spectacular growth that I believe will continue for at least the next two decades, it is incumbent upon us as elected representatives to plan for this growth and to adequately fund the installation of necessary infrastructure on a pre-emptive basis rather than the current practice of playing catch-up. We know that the very attractive climate and geography of the Gold Coast will continue to make it the place of choice for interstate and international migration. The windfall income that comes to the state government from this burgeoning growth must be ploughed back into its source of generation to address the issues that this growing population brings with it as a corollary of booming growth. In his first speech in 1990 Bob Quinn also said—

With dynamic growth comes the inevitable problems of developing the necessary infrastructure to accommodate such a massive and increasing population base.

His 1990 call for a 'separated dual carriageway from Nerang to Bilinga' has now been surpassed by the community's and my call for an urgent upgrading of the Nerang to Tugun bypass part of the M1 to six lanes to alleviate the current gridlock and congestion that far exceeds anything that Bob Quinn could have envisaged back in 1990. Bundall Road is also a state government responsibility that needs immediate attention through funding to address peak hour snarls and unnecessary fuel burning. A simple commitment to an overpass at Ashmore Road would allow smooth traffic flow to occur and has been recognised as a requirement since my early days as Albert shire works committee chairman back in 1991. Continuing in the transport mode, Mr Quinn stated—

The proposed Beenleigh to Robina railway will provide a necessary rapid transit system between Brisbane and the Gold Coast...

How right he was, and the Brian Howe inspired Better Cities program which led to the installation of the Brisbane to Robina railway needs to be taken to its logical conclusion at Coolangatta immediately, rather than procrastinating with more studies and environmental impact studies that inevitably result in catch-up football being the game of the day.

I now turn to other infrastructure that is urgently required for the Gold Coast and, in particular, the residents of Robina. I remember clearly the unfortunate decision by the Goss government to walk away from the Wolffdene Dam as the future supply for the northern Gold Coast and southern Brisbane regions purely on the basis of a political promise in the lead-up to an election. The ramifications of that decision are obviously being felt by the residents of Brisbane today and by the residents of the Gold Coast a few years ago when the Hinze Dam level dropped to 27 per cent.

In November 2004, two years ago, the Gold Coast City Council resolved to implement and increase the Hinze Dam capacity to double its current size in what is known as the Hinze Dam stage 3 extension. This extension had been planned since the early eighties and required no resumption of lands, no forcing of people from their homes and no political heartache. When I left the Gold Coast mayoralty in 1997, it was firmly on the agenda as part of the important works that had to be installed to cater for the increasing number of new citizens expected to be residing on the Gold Coast in the years to come.

Council officers in their wisdom and in their quest for an alternative water supply have stalled the installation of Hinze Dam 3 at every opportunity, preferring in their eyes to go to a better alternative source in Wivenhoe Dam, which, as history shows, is under increasing stress because of drought conditions and its own growth pressures. The moral of the story is do not let the bureaucrats make all of the decisions. I

congratulate the state government on fast-tracking this much needed piece of water infrastructure and will look forward to its completion by 2009.

Further on implementing necessary infrastructure, I also note that the government has moved to upgrade the Robina Hospital with an accident and emergency facility that recognises the important role the Robina Hospital has to play for the residents of the southern end of the Gold Coast. This is in accord with the government's recognition of the strained state of the health system in Queensland. However, the government has announced plans for a multimillion-dollar new hospital facility near Parklands to cater for the Gold Coast's increasing needs commencing somewhere in the vicinity of 2011.

As most large cities have their major hospitals spread across the city, can I respectfully suggest to the government that, rather than planning another hospital in the immediate precinct of the current Gold Coast Hospital, it should look to Robina Hospital for further upgrades to appropriately accommodate health for the southern dwellers of the Gold Coast. To that end, there is a large parcel of land to the north of Robina Hospital that is currently controlled by the Gold Coast City Council and is earmarked for sporting fields. For the future expansion of the Robina Hospital, it would be timely for the government to reserve that land for health purposes now rather than limit the expansion of the Robina Hospital because of land constraints in the future.

Members would be acutely aware that my speech has the recurrent theme of recognising the spectacular growth of the Gold Coast and committing to spending on the required infrastructure today, rather than waiting for the problems to occur tomorrow. It is no coincidence that my long history and experience in local government on the Gold Coast has given me a close and insightful vision into the problems and solutions of a rapidly expanding city.

When I joined the Albert Shire Council in 1988, I came from a background of small business built around retail outlets in Pacific Fair, Surfers Paradise and Nerang. After becoming the mayor of Albert shire in March 1994, it was only 12 months later that the Albert shire was abolished by the state government and I was forced back to another election as an Independent candidate for the mayoralty of the Gold Coast. After winning this new election in March 1995 and becoming mayor of the Gold Coast for a term that was supposed to be for five years until the year 2000, we had a change in state government in 1996. This new state government ordered a new election to be held on the Gold Coast in March 1997. I lost the mayoralty election in 1997 and had therefore faced three elections in four years at the behest of the state government.

In 2004 I returned to the Gold Coast City Council as executive assistant to Mayor Ron Clarke, and I think all members would be aware of the troublesome period of instability and public dissatisfaction with the council caused by a public crime and misconduct inquiry and the threat of state intervention to remove the council. The inquiry has found no corruption, and the media vilification of the council can only impede good governance of this important city, of which I have for many years been proudly extolling the virtues. It also brings a lack of confidence in this arm of governance which is totally undeserved.

The point of this short history of my association with the Gold Coast City Council is that I believe democratically elected councils should be left alone by state governments—even though they are a child of the state government—to run their full term to complete their charter given to them by their constituents. Of course the exceptions of financial mismanagement, corruption and an unworkable council must be addressed by the state government.

However, losing candidates, vocal minority interest groups and media interests with their own agendas must not usurp the democratic process of providing the people's choice of representatives every four years regardless of how politically popular it is for the state government to intervene. I have always believed there should be constitutional recognition of local government in Australia, particularly given the size and increased responsibilities being passed to them by state governments. In accordance with the Premier's wish to revisit the constitutional arrangements espoused in this House this morning, perhaps the federal government should look at the referendum question of recognising local government again when it could be asked without tying the question to other more controversial issues.

I again refer back to history so that we can more wisely plan for the future, and I note that in Bob Quinn's maiden speech he said—

Existing national parks such as Lamington and Natural Bridge must be maintained, protected and, if possible, expanded, and green belt areas and wildlife corridors should be established as breathing spaces between densely populated areas.

Since 1990, between the local governments and the state government, we have done exactly as Mr Quinn requested with large tracts of land being bought by both levels of governments and added to the national park at Springbrook. A large breathing space for urban development has been placed over the Beenleigh cane fields, and many areas of South Stradbroke Island and the hinterland mountains have been purchased by the local authorities.

I am again proud to say that I was part of the Albert Shire Council that was the first local authority in the region to introduce the 'green levy' on its residents in 1992. This has facilitated the purchase of

thousands of hectares of land in the years since. Of some 1,500 square kilometres of Gold Coast City Council, 60 per cent has been kept as open space and under rural designation protection and 145,000 hectares are for passive and active recreation.

The environmental future of the Gold Coast will be dramatically enhanced when the ambitious plan to create the 'green heart' of the Gold Coast in a 430-hectare area bounded by the Robina electorate and the Mudgeeraba electorate has been completed. Already, the Gold Coast City Council has purchased 220 hectares in this prime location in the middle of the Gold Coast and I envisage a huge 'Central Park' style recreational icon by the time this project is finished.

I disagree with the former member for Robina when he said in his maiden speech that the Gold Coast 'has now become a degraded and permanently damaged environment'. In fact, it is my considered view that the Gold Coast has become a far more enjoyable, visually attractive and exciting destination than when the first timber getters arrived there after Captain Logan blazed the opening trail. Magnificent waterways, Australia's best collection of family theme parks, some of the world's leading entertainment events, spectacular high-rise affording unequalled views and convenient new-age living, vibrant night-life and a World Heritage listed green backdrop boasting a smorgasbord of inspiring flora and fauna leave me in no doubt that I represent a region that has been blessed with great planning and innovative creativity for the past 50 years. I thank my forefathers, decision makers and planners for this bountiful legacy.

As I enter what is for me a new forum of public representation, I do so with excitement, anticipation and an enormous sense of responsibility. I look forward to a steep and rapid learning curve, punctuated with highs and lows, but at all times endured with a strong degree of propriety, decorum and a recognition that the betterment of Queenslanders is the ultimate charter of this parliament. I have many long-term friends established in this House from all sides of politics whom I respect and whose company I enjoy immensely. My debate will always be based on the improvement of the lifestyle for my Robina constituents and the pursuit of a better Queensland through clear and practical thinking.

I believe in strong, unfettered and robust debate carried out with passion, conviction and common sense. However, the principles of fairness, equity and polite consideration should always be the overriding constraints under which such enlivening debate should take place. I pledge to you, Mr Speaker, my commitment to uphold the dignity, tradition and respect of parliamentary debate in this House during my whole term of residence.

As I bring to a close the moving experience of my first speech in the Queensland parliament, I am reminded of the media heading from my good friends at my local newspaper, the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, when they announced my candidacy for the upcoming election on 9 September. At my tender age of 53 years young, they generously proclaimed the occasion with the equine imputation that it was 'into the breach again for an old warhorse'. I am pleased to advise the House that, in the words of the great Banjo Patterson, 'and the stockhorse snuffs the battle with delight'.