



Speech by

Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 29 May 2012

MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.39 pm): I am proud to stand here today with my colleagues of the 54th Parliament of Queensland. I congratulate you all on your election success and I look forward to working with you for the advancement of Queensland. I acknowledge the people of the Burnett for the significant responsibility that you have bestowed upon me. I accept this great honour and privilege. I want to acknowledge my family's support in our journey. My family supported my every career decision—from our relocations around Queensland from Mount Isa, Rockhampton and Thursday Island to our involvement and investment in the construction sector in Bundaberg. Without their support and patience I could not have continued my academic studies later in life, obtaining two degrees and my masters in 2010. I started my working career cutting railway sleepers in Central Queensland, completing an apprenticeship in the building industry and maintaining and advancing my qualifications as a registered builder. James, my oldest son, has forged a career as an electrician in the mining sector. Joshua has followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a carpenter and now working in facilities management and planning. My daughter Richelle and her partner Luke are now proud parents of baby Alyce, but probably not as proud as my wife and I to be blessed with our first grandchild.

I want to take this special opportunity to acknowledge some terrific people who contributed to our election result. Firstly, I thank the LNP executive for its excellent and professional approach. I thank LNP President Bruce McIver, who was supportive and provided assistance when required. I also want to thank the LNP head office team—James McGrath, Gerard Benedet, James Martin, Rachael Parry, Harriet Nunan, Kate Wilson, Diane Balke, Diane Power, Matt McEachen, Mitchell Redford and most particularly the Wide Bay Chair, Llew O'Brien. The campaign was well supported by the LNP and I want to thank the many ministers who enthusiastically supported the joint campaign for Bundaberg and Burnett—Premier Campbell Newman, Deputy Premier Jeff Seeney, Deputy Speaker Dr Mark Robinson, Dr Bruce Flegg, Scott Emerson, Jarrod Bleijie, Andrew Powell, Andrew Cripps, Mark McArdle, Tracy Davis, Steve Dickson and Jann Stuckey. I thank them very much.

Locally, I was introduced to the Burnett LNP branch preselection by the Hon. Jack Dempsey, the member for Bundaberg. I want to thank Jack and his staff, Marcia and Chris. It was a privilege to work with these dedicated people, who often put my needs ahead of their own. Jack would often step aside at functions to help promote my election campaign. One of the truly remarkable examples of party commitment and to me personally was Jack's insistence on running a joint campaign, sharing resources, sharing campaign office and holding functions together. Jack, I will be eternally grateful for your help. I also want to acknowledge the support I received from our federal colleagues during the election campaign—Senator Fiona Nash; Senator Ron Boswell; Senator Barnaby Joyce, who visited the electorate several times; the member for Flynn, Ken O'Dowd; Dr Andrew Laming; and the Leader of the Nationals, Warren Truss, who was always available. Thank you for your advice and guidance.

Locally, I could not have been better placed having the support of the member for Hinkler, Paul Neville. Early on in the campaign it was evident that I was being nurtured and mentored by a truly great man and a great politician. Paul Neville was always available during the campaign, and this has continued.

Paul has always provided endorsement of my candidacy publicly, although he was not obligated to. But unselfishly he promoted me and the state LNP during the entire campaign. The jewel in the experience with the federal team was the member's staff. I was privileged to get to know and become friends with Paul Neville's staff—Darlene, Janelle, Heather and Kate. These staff were patient, tireless workers and most supportive. Kate Barwick was truly inspirational. Her work ethic, her experience and the huge responsibility that Kate bore was much appreciated.

It is clear that you cannot win elections without a good team of supporters and volunteers. It is also clear that you cannot win elections without a good plan for campaign success. I want to thank Mary Walsh and Jim Elmes who ran the campaign office; Angela Nightingale; the branch members from Childers; Stephen and Trish Hoffman; Bill Trevor and team; the Bargara supporters; Peter Hoffman and Barry Masters and the Agnes Water supporters; Robert Edgar, Barry Davies, Flora Barwick, Joe Gatt; and the army of volunteers; thank you to you all. My campaign manager Geoff Campbell was terrific. Geoff and his family were a source of inspiration and stability during the campaign. I want to acknowledge the commitment of Jain Henriksen. Jain, who I have worked with for many years, has graciously joined the Burnett electorate office.

Special relationships and friendships are forged during campaigns, and Ken and Christine Tyson were supportive from day one. During the campaign their enthusiasm, knowledge and untiring commitment was tremendous and the future of the LNP and the local branches will be well served by their continued involvement. I want to mention long-term supporters and members from our Gooburrum branch, Ernie and Elaine Jobson. Ernie and Elaine are life members of the party and, sadly, Ernie passed away the week before the election. Our thoughts are with the family, but we know Ernie was with us in spirit on election night and I know that he would have had a contented grin on his face with the election result.

The electorate of Burnett is one of the most beautiful and unique in Queensland. It covers 7,500 square kilometres. The Burnett covers most of the coastal region south of Gladstone to Woodgate as well as coastal and inland regions around Bundaberg. The Burnett River flows through the region, hence its name. The region is serviced by two regional councils, Bundaberg and Gladstone. I congratulate the mayors and councillors on their success in the recent council elections. A new spirit of cooperation and desire for progression in the region is evident, and I thank the elected officials and the staff for the professional manner and goodwill they have displayed.

I want to acknowledge the volunteers in our region, the tireless workers who contribute so much. Whether it is group leader Charles Elson and his team at Woodgate SES, Marylyn King in Winfield from Rural Fires, Josie Meng and the Round Hill Volunteer Marine Rescue or Branka and the Country Women's Associations, we need to help these groups with appropriate funding and support to ensure that these services are available in our times of need. As we all know, volunteer groups in all their forms are the backbone of our communities. I want to acknowledge and thank the organisers of just a few of the events that are run in our region: Cane2Coral Fun, Run and Walk which raises much needed funds; the Agnes Water and 1770 festival; and the Childers Festival of cultures which is held in the last weekend in July.

I am a very proud member of the Rotary club of Bundaberg Sunrise whose members have been working for our community for many years. Rotary orchestrates many programs, both in Australia and internationally, and I am particularly proud of our club's facilitation and promotion of multiculturalism in our region. The annual multicultural festival is an event that I am proud to have been associated with for many years. Young people in our communities are extremely important and Rotary has exceptional programs to help foster and develop students in their formative years. Youth exchange and group study exchange programs are a particular passion of mine, and I am proud to have chaired these programs for many years in our district.

I want to remind the House of the need for continued support for international humanitarian projects. The fact that in this day and age children are still sold into slavery and prostitution is something we should all be aware of and something we need to wipe out. Our family's international charity of choice is Destiny Rescue, a Christian charity doing tremendous work in Asia. We are very proud to support, sponsor and work with at-risk and rescued children in Thailand and Cambodia.

Whether it is the townships of Childers, Miriam Vale or Bororen, which have the Bruce Highway running through them, or the many provincial towns which are connected to federal and state roads via local corridors, there is desperate need for action when it comes to road infrastructure. Many areas in the Burnett electorate are cut off every time it rains and many communities lose significant revenue when tourists cannot get through or produce and commodities cannot be shifted. Local residents are inconvenienced when they cannot get to work or their children cannot get to school. We must provide flood mitigation solutions to my electorate, especially the communities of Agnes Water and town of 1770. Flood proofing Fingerboard Road, which links these towns to the Bruce Highway, is an absolute economic imperative for the entire region. The Discovery Coast Tourism committee has worked hard on advocacy and research on the financial impacts of the road closures, and it is quite obvious that urgent attention is required.

From the time of first settlement until approximately 30 years ago, most agricultural production in the Burnett was centred around growing sugar cane. Since that time, agricultural production has diversified and the Burnett electorate is now home to many of Australia's largest and most innovative rural producers. We have the largest chilli grower in Australia, one of the largest tomato growers, the largest avocado grower, the largest grower of cucumbers and the largest sugar producer in the country.

The Burnett is also home to the largest macadamia grower—not only in Australia but in the world. More than 80 per cent of sweet potatoes grown in Australia are grown in the Burnett. Horticulture contributes more than \$500 million to the local economy each year. Around 20 per cent of Queensland's beef producers are located in the wider Burnett region.

I am most fortunate to represent a diverse, productive and innovative agricultural region with the soils, climate and water to produce some of the best food in the world. My electorate and its primary industries are pivotal to Queensland's economy and the key to our nation's food security. That reliability makes the Burnett region of immense importance to agricultural production in this great state. However, many challenges confront the agricultural industry and threaten the industry's productivity and profitability. Those challenges include the rising cost of production, biosecurity risks, loss of crop protection, loss of labour to the resource sector, impractical and unfair federal legislation, arrangements with large retailers and proposed changes to electricity and irrigation water pricing. All of those challenges are serious threats to the industry's capacity to survive and thrive.

My electorate also produces high-quality seafood that is enjoyed throughout Australia and the world. On that point, I would like to raise the issues facing commercial and recreational fishing in the Burnett. The fisheries harvest in the Burnett is very low and declining—not from reduced fish stocks, but from poor management intent on reducing the livelihood of many local families. We have the largest per capita fishing zone and the lowest fisheries harvest rate in the world—at about one-thirtieth of the global average. We also have more restrictive and costly marine resource management. Two-thirds of our seafood consumption is imported. The fishermen in the Burnett operate in the most environmentally sustainable manner and should be encouraged to provide the maximum sustainable means of production. They are champions of their industry and I am proud to represent them in this place.

For too long Queenslanders have paid a high price for the gross mismanagement of our natural resources—something that is reflected in our cost of living, our health, our freedom and in the broader wellbeing of region—with no benefit to the environment at all. Another major problem affecting much of the grazing and agricultural land in the electorate is the infestation of weeds such as giant rat-tail grass, groundsel, lantana and cat's claw and feral animals such as wild dogs, pigs and foxes. Local landholders and councils seem to be fighting a losing battle. Weeds are among the most serious threats to Australia's natural environment and primary production. They displace native species, contribute significantly to land degradation and reduce farm and forest productivity. After habitat loss, invasive species, including weeds, animal pests and diseases, represent the biggest threat to our biodiversity. Weed invasions change the natural diversity and balance of our environment and they threaten the survival of many plants and animals. I welcome the initiatives proposed in the Investing in our Environment for the Future policy and again highlight the significant work that needs to be done.

In a rural electorate such as Burnett the impact on landholders of the Vegetation Management Act cannot be understated. The act, which set out to address broadscale clearing in Western Queensland, has resulted in severe and unintended consequences for producers and landholders who were unlucky enough to have properties containing remnant vegetation. By virtue of this legislation and the complete absence of genuine compensation provisions, these landowners now bear the cost of the perceived public interest in maintaining remnant vegetation on their properties. The former government, not satisfied with placing this burden on landholders, also placed the onus on landowners to meet the cost of fixing incorrect mapping, usually requiring a costly consultant's report as well as the indignity of a DERM application fee. The process for map amendments is tortuous and places unfair burden on landholders who simply want to understand vegetation management of their property and manage that vegetation accordingly.

Other simple farm management actions such as realigning boundaries is attracting DERM—and now NRM—application fees of up to \$5,000, which usually means that they do not happen. Other simple actions cannot go ahead because the necessary clearing exemptions for new boundary firebreaks, or protecting fences, might mean that we have to clear a couple of trees. Land zoned for rural residential purposes under local authority planning schemes had development rights disappear overnight when they were mapped as remnant vegetation. Surely, it is a fundamental premise in a civilised society that the cost of preserving a resource for the public interest should not be borne by individuals.

As if rural landholders have not suffered enough under the former government, the recent strategic cropping legislation has now taken a similar path of unintended consequences. Legislation, which was supposed to preserve good-quality agricultural land from mining activities, now prevents farmers from

adjusting property boundaries despite this matter being addressed by the original state planning policy and being enshrined in local authority planning schemes. Surely, that is an unintended consequence of the policy.

As I outlined earlier, the sugar industry has played an important role in the history of the Wide Bay region. South Sea Islander labourers were integral to the development of the sugar industry. The cane fields in the Burnett electorate are dotted with stone walls built by the South Sea Islander labourers who worked on the district's sugar plantations. It is important to maintain the physical reminders of the past, such as stone walls and burial grounds. They are part of our history. It gives us a sense of understanding and respect for the contribution made to our state's development. Between 1863 and 1904 South Sea Islanders aged as young as 12 were brought out to work on Queensland farms and the Burnett electorate has many burial sites, most of them for workers aged between 16 and 30 years. At least 644 people are buried at a site near the Bundaberg cemetery, but many South Sea Islander workers were buried along the fence lines of the plantations where they worked. One such farm is Sunnyside, which is located between Bundaberg and Bargara. It is the site of 50 South Sea Islander graves. The property was sold to cane farmer Brian Courtice's family in the 1920s. I will be working with the local South Sea Islander community and Mr Courtice, who has proven to be a wonderful guardian of the South Sea Islander legacy, to protect and recognise those sites of significance.

The tourism industry is also very important to the economy of the Burnett. We are blessed to have some of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in Australia—reaching from the long open beaches of Woodgate in the south almost all the way to Boyne Island and Tannum Sands in the north. Our hinterland areas are also unique, with the historic and cultural centre of Childers nestled in the hills of the Isis district and the heartland communities of Rosedale, Lowmead, Miriam Vale and Bororen lying in the north of the electorate. The Burnett electorate is also the gateway to the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, with Lady Elliot Island, Lady Musgrave Island lagoon and Fitzroy Reef important tourist sites. In the north is the Discovery Coast, made up of Agnes Water and the town of 1770, which is the site of the second landing of Captain James Cook on Australian soil. Coastal townships such as Bargara, Elliott Heads, Burnett Heads and Moore Park beach complement the many tourist attractions in the city of Bundaberg and are a huge asset to the region.

Also situated in the Burnett electorate is the Mon Repos Conservation Park, which is where world famous aviator Bert Hinkler first flew his gliders. It was the launching pad for his aviation career, whereby he became the first to fly solo from England to Australia. Mon Repos and its surrounding beaches are also famous as the nesting sites for the largest number of marine turtles on mainland Australia. The majority of these turtles are the endangered loggerhead turtles, but other species, including the flat back and green turtles, also nest there. In the late 1960s turtle researcher Dr Col Limpus started studying the breeding of the turtles at Mon Repos and his research has continued right up to today. In fact, this nesting and the hatching of the baby turtles has developed into one of the most important tourist attractions of the region, with some 28,000 tourists visiting this season. I pledge today to help support the work being done to protect nesting sea turtles and hatchlings by promoting and resourcing the Cut the Glow to help Turtles Go community awareness campaign. This campaign aims to reduce the glow from domestic and street lights, which disorient nesting turtles.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the people of the Burnett electorate. We are here in the parliament to work for and serve the people of Queensland. I feel that my experience in business, management, community service and my humility will underpin my role as the member for Burnett.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!