



Speech by
Bill Byrne

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Thursday, 17 May 2012

MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr BYRNE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (11.09 am): I rise to speak in the address-in-reply debate. This is a unique experience not only because I have the honour of representing the people of Rockhampton and making this speech on their behalf but also because the opposition has been reduced to so few newly elected members. This is not something we as a party intend to see repeated. Many friends have suggested that a maiden speech might be something of a daunting task in such circumstances. I have replied that often such things are informed by your life experiences. Does it compare to being present at the significantly premature induced birth of your first child, who is present in the gallery today, or to the experience of being a shiny new 21-year-old platoon commander standing in front of experienced Vietnam veteran infantrymen, seeking to convince them of your worth as their new leader? I suggest not really. I have approached this speech with one purpose—that is, to ensure that I represent myself in a rational and honest fashion.

I take this opportunity to thank the people of Rockhampton who supported the ALP and me in keeping the seat Labor. As the editor of the *Morning Bulletin* editorialised, the LNP had a small swing of 4.3 per cent, the lowest in the state, which shows that while Labor voters swung away from us, with good reason, they did not embrace the LNP.

I acknowledge the presence in the gallery of my father, Bill, my wife, Kim, my daughters Sarah and Bonnie, and my sister Diana. A statement of appreciation is hardly adequate for Kim and my three daughters, especially Sarah who stepped up to the role of campaign director in the most trying of circumstances. Kim has stuck with me through thick and thin for reasons that often escape me. She walked away from successful business and sporting careers to marry me and become a military camp follower, and she has been there with me ever since. My brother Robert also made every effort for me during the most tense periods of the campaign. The saying is that blood is thicker than water and no man could wish for any better family support or loyalty.

It is indeed sad that my late mother, Desma, is not here too. She once told me that one of her proudest moments was to witness my graduation parade as a newly commissioned army officer from the Officer Cadet School at Portsea. I suspect today might have engendered similar emotions, as I am sure my father understands at this moment. I need to say that my values and principles have been shaped by the example of two parents, both state schoolteachers, who with somewhat dogged determination persisted in laying the foundation of my character. Perhaps I was not the most receptive of students and, admittedly, there have been times when my choices would not have been encouraged by my parents. However, at least at those times I understood the implications of such decisions and that appreciation of consequence and acceptance of responsibility are largely due to the example set by and expected from my parents. They gave me the latitude to make mistakes, to follow my own star and to choose the path that ultimately led me here. My father always encouraged me to have a go and not to be overly consumed by personal doubts.

I can trace my family roots as Queenslanders back more than 140 years. My great great grandfather, Edward Byrne, sailed his barge from Brisbane to the Burnett River and in the early 1870s

operated the first barge across the Burnett River. To this day the Byrne family remains well known in the Bundaberg and Wide Bay region. I am the product of many generations of regional Queenslanders and I am proud of it.

I want to thank the members of the ALP in Rockhampton who assisted and advised me from the moment I decided to contest the preselection. I thank people such as Robert Schwarten and his family who were collectively instrumental in my decision to seek to represent the people of Rockhampton in this chamber. I thank Davey Thomas, who was my Rock of Gibraltar through the entire campaign. He never once failed me in thought or deed. I thank Kirsten Livermore, Craig Brown, Chris McJannett, Charlie Broughton, Ann McDougall, Roseanne Mathewson, Marilyn Tynan, Noel Keegan, Dan McIntyre, Justin Kann, Melissa Newton, Karen Horstman, Debra Wickerson, Rees Banks, Greg Belz, Barry Large and, last but not least, Barry Thompson from the Queensland Teachers Union. They all provided me with assistance at critical stages.

It is not just Labor people and family whom I have to thank. Old Army and Defence comrades such as John Phelan, Steve Grant, who was my last regular Army sergeant major and who has had the misfortune to work with me for almost two decades, Cameron Hurtz, Scott Mackie and Scott and Leesa McGinnis—Scott is an ex-US Navy submariner—all provided me with support when I needed it. Everyone in this chamber knows that politics is a team sport and the most important team is your local one. Without my family, those friends and party supporters I would not be here making this address.

As I said, my journey here began with parents dedicated to quality public education. They ensured their children got not just the benefit of the best formal education experiences but also the understanding that a good society is based on compassion, generosity and one's best endeavours to help create equity of opportunity, thereby ensuring we get the best economic and social outcomes by maximizing human capital. The strength of this state is its people and empowering our constituents through quality education must be our overwhelming priority. If we want a highly flexible and intellectually robust society, then the first step is a quality education. That journey took me from school in Bundaberg, to a Queensland Rail electrical apprenticeship in the Ipswich Railway Workshops and three decades of regular and Army Reserve service. The latter stages of that service overlapped a further career in the Department of Defence managing highly complex and at times controversial activities in one of the most environmentally significant tropical military training establishments in the world. I served overseas on active duty and commenced my military career as an airborne officer with the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, where I was introduced to my bride. Yes, that means that she supports the Blues on State of Origin nights.

However, I point out to honourable members that I was not parachuted into preselection, as I won a local plebiscite in order to be here. Again I thank those party members who put their faith in me back in May last year and the singularly critical support rendered by Robert Schwarten. Many in this chamber know Robert and I will not go into a resume of Robert's background. I must also acknowledge my opponent in that pre-selection, Mr Matthew Flanagan. Matthew demonstrated extraordinary integrity at a difficult moment, simply on the basis of a matter of personal honour. I mention it now because I want that fact to be known and recognised.

I am well aware that in the history of this parliament no Labor opposition has been represented by such a limited membership in the chamber. Honourable members must remember that the Australian Labor Party is the oldest social democrat political party in the world. Many times our opponents have crowed about the final demise of the ALP. This will not happen. One may well ask why I say that. Further, one may well ask why an ex-Army officer, from a profession renowned for its conservative tendencies, is a passionate member of the Labor Party. As a once career soldier who rose to a modest senior rank, became an ALP branch president, a candidate and, ultimately, a Labor MP, I reply that the majority of citizens who have served and continue to serve this country are working-class people. There are working-class soldiers, sailors and airmen buried in war cemeteries all over the world and no-one should be surprised that people such as me, who hail from that very stock, are supportive of Labor philosophies. As an officer the first rule is always to put the wellbeing of your people ahead of your own interests and I believe this to be one of the essential differences between genuine high performance groups and the also-rans. It is never about you!

The motto of my first unit was 'Duty First'. I have always believed strongly in this motto and have adopted it as a motto for life. I am not a free market fundamentalist. I do not accept that greed is good and I remain a committed opponent of the selfish 'affluenza' infecting our society. I support balance in all things. We have become a society where the sensible questioning of the circumstances of the uber-rich immediately draws howls of class warfare and class envy. That is nonsense and is really a case of Australians being force fed foreign mantras. Australians believe in human equality, especially with respect to social, political and economic affairs. That is what it means to be truly an egalitarian society and the notion is embraced by the vast majority of our people and the Australian Labor Party.

The political tipping point for me was the election of the first Howard government. This first term really got me energised about politics. I participated in a brutal and ill-considered reform program within the

ADF. I give a word of warning: not all reforms are for the better. This particular program was nothing short of an abomination and saw the lives of normal, hardworking, loyal people turned upside down for no other reason than the implementation of a conservative ideological position. It was this experience and an intimate appreciation of the facts and implications that encouraged me to join the Australian Labor Party once I had separated from the Army. It seems that my generation of Portsea graduate Army officers possesses a certain amount of political fire in the belly. Mal Brough, who is well known to many on the other side of this chamber, served with me well before he was known to them. He was a Portsea boy in the class behind me. I also note that another classmate, Andrew Nikolic, is preselected federally for the Liberal Party in Tasmania.

There seems to be a bit of a trend there, so I am happy to balance out the political spectrum, so to speak. However, we all share a common notion of duty and service and, on that basis, seek to lead our communities. Genuine leadership in all circumstances is demonstrated most importantly by self-sacrifice in the face of difficulty for the good of the majority. When it comes to leadership I have always measured myself against the quote attributed to Erwin Rommel from 1938 when he was the director of a military school addressing assembled cadets. He said, 'Be an example to your people, both on duty and in private life. Never spare yourself, and let your people see that you don't, in your endurance of fatigue and privation. Always be tactful and well mannered, and teach your people to be the same. Avoid excessive sharpness or harshness of voice, as this usually indicates the man who has shortcomings of his own to hide.'

Manners cost nothing. I have always measured people against this basic behavioural benchmark and at times harshly judged myself in the same fashion. Vicious, nasty, loud and overly aggressive behaviour is always the signature of the intellectually or morally corrupt coward. Unfortunately, these undesirable qualities have been seen by some as useful in public life and have undoubtedly degraded the political discourse in this state. I suggest that this is one of the factors shaping the broader community's generally low regard for politicians.

Every member of this chamber should commit to raising people's opinions about the political process and politicians more generally. Despite some of the fantastic leadership models that the Army provided me, I have been guided in most things, as I said, by my parents. They valued the fundamental rights that we have, particularly the right to equal opportunity regardless of circumstance. This is the compass that was preset for me as a young apprentice, a soldier, a father, a husband, a son and now as an elected Labor MP. Perhaps I have not always stayed the course, though I have tried to strengthen and improve myself as a result of my various failings. This is a function of self-awareness and force of habit.

Of course, I am well aware of the Tarago jokes at our expense, and that is fair enough. I prefer to think of Labor in this chamber as the 'significant 7'. Maybe that is something for cartoonists to contemplate in the future. As our leader has said, we owe an apology to those Labor voters whom the previous government pushed into the laps of our opponents. Those opponents now boast unprecedented numbers in this place. All I can promise is that I have committed myself over the next three years to giving our traditional supporters a reason to vote Labor again.

We have been resoundingly defeated at the polls. 'Belted' is a more accurate term. However, it would be a factual misrepresentation to condemn every facet of Labor's record. Labor made some very substantial investments and progress in areas such as education, disabilities, child protection and environmental protection. These achievements were before my time so I will not be dwelling further on the past. As we have already seen this morning, I am sure that the government will be reminding us enough over the next 12 to 18 months about their recollections and, I dare say, interpretations of the legacy of this period. Ultimately and in time, a measure of objectivity may prevail and the examples of uplifting teachers' salaries to parity with those of other states and creating a prep year so that our kids have the same number of years at school as those in other states may be given due recognition. I am not prosecuting an argument that somehow the electors got it wrong—the votes are in and have been tallied; Labor has been measured and found wanting—but I must propose that Labor was not a failure on all fronts.

Likewise, I do not believe that every idea or initiative that emanates from the conservative side of politics represents evil incarnate. My role in this chamber is to promote good public policy. Too often the blunt instrument of political necessity has overwhelmed or substantially compromised the development of good public policy in this great state. There will probably be some friction around the edges of the definition of good public policy. This should be expected as a product of the diversity of opinion present in this chamber. However, my point is that Queenslanders are sick and tired of the argument for argument's sake, of the spin generated simply to distract and divert from the essential facts of the matter. They deserve better than that. If this chamber is ever to be redeemed in their eyes, then an outbreak of honesty might be worth a go. The people of Queensland expect every MP in this chamber to act in the best interests of Queensland. I believe that good public policy should be supported and acknowledged, regardless of its source. I hope to be able to work with the government, where those opportunities present, for the betterment of this marvellous state.

I guess it is normal for those opposite to be buoyed by their success and to be full of confidence. After all, nothing is sweeter than victory. But there is an old saying that it is not the size of the dog in the fight; it is the size of the fight in the dog. I can assure all present that the opposition is up for it. As a history enthusiast, I have to advise those who think they are unassailable because of the numbers that there are plenty of examples where, against heavy odds, small teams, pure of purpose, have defeated whole companies. The *Magnificent Seven* remains one of the classic movies for this very reason.

Some in this chamber admire Napoleon, and there are many things to admire. However, he once said, 'God is on the side of the big battalions,' and look what happened to him ultimately. I am more inclined to agree with Voltaire, another Frenchman, when he said, 'God is not on the side of the big battalions but on the side of those who shoot best.' As I often pointed out to my soldiers over the years, there is a reason the Army puts sights on their rifles. It is so that when they pull the trigger they hit the target. This parliament certainly provides us, the Labor opposition, with a target-rich environment and we will be from time to time, metaphorically speaking, pulling the trigger as an agile opponent.

I now turn to what is a most important priority for me—that is, the electorate of Rockhampton and one of the promises our side made during the recent campaign. Foremost was a pledge to provide funding for the Rockhampton Meals on Wheels to construct new premises on land gifted by the Rockhampton Regional Council. This is not a luxury; this is not something that can be ignored by government. I can say without reservation that it is an issue beyond politics. This is not just about providing a few meals to pensioners; it is about keeping people out of aged-care homes. It is not only essential to their health and wellbeing outcomes; it is also saving the taxpayer the huge cost of subsidising nursing-care beds. It is socioeconomic soundness by any measure. Also, I must point out to all that this project has as many implications for the seat of Keppel as it has for Rockhampton. I offer to work with the member for Keppel to bring this project on. It is appropriate and important for this government to dispel growing concerns about a partisan agenda and provide modest support to projects like the Meals on Wheels in Rockhampton where the merits are so patently non-partisan and obvious.

I suggest that the community has had their fill of promises that can never be delivered, of 'five-second sound bite' public policy debate and the never-ending distortion of political discourse. I know that I am contesting Cicero's basic rules of politics, but I submit that the time is up for such approaches. The party I respect, that I joined and that I believe in has strayed from its path and not only has been cut down by its political enemy but also has endured an epidemic of fratricide. Today we are but a few holding the bridge. However, the fact is that we represent over 600,000 Queenslanders who voted for us. We as an opposition owe it to them to stand up and fight for the principles we believe in, and we will.