




Speech by

Jason Costigan

MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY

Hansard Wednesday, 30 May 2012

MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr COSTIGAN** (Whitsunday—LNP) (4.08 pm): It gives me tremendous pleasure to rise as the first LNP member for Whitsunday, fulfilling my dream of representing a region that is very dear to my heart. First, though, I take this opportunity to congratulate the Speaker of the House on her historic appointment; the Premier, the Hon. Campbell Newman MP, on his historic election; and all members on their success in being part of the 54th Parliament.

I look around the House and think back to 1865, when the foundation stone was laid—the same year that my great-great-grandfather came to Mackay as a pioneering police officer, having previously served as an officer of the Royal Irish Constabulary before arriving in Queensland. Pat Costigan served in Mackay and nearby Walkerston and by 1873 took up his posting as the first officer in charge at Nebo. Five generations later, there is still plenty of Nebo in my DNA. In fact, the Costigans have been in Queensland before there even was a Queensland, with William Costigan being part of that famous but ill-fated expedition to the north led by Edmund Kennedy way back in 1848, landing on the shores of Rockingham Bay north of present-day Cardwell.

I come from humble stock in what used to be called the Brigalow Belt, well before the term 'Bowen Basin' became part of Queensland's vernacular, with the emergence of the juggernaut that is now the coalmining industry in the Mackay-Whitsunday hinterland. Back in the days when just getting to Mackay was a huge trip in itself, my grandparents, parents and uncles all worked the land under the most difficult circumstances on stations such as Fort Cooper, Dabin, Wards Well, Weetalaba and Urannah, just to name a few. For many years my late grandfather Kelly Costigan also owned and operated Costigan's General Store at Nebo. He also had a mail run and served the Nebo community as an honorary ambulance officer, something I was reminded of when visiting a leagues club during my campaign.

However, unlike my forebears, I grew up on the coast, initially in working-class South Mackay, where I was firstly educated at St Mary's Catholic Primary School. Being the son of a single parent, money was extremely tight in those formative years and I will always be grateful to the Sisters of Mercy, who allowed me to commence schooling at St Mary's and put me on the right path in life. My late grandmother Annie Costigan was hardly a Catholic. In fact, being a Mackenzie, she was on the opposite side of the fence. But it was Nanna who played a pivotal role in sowing the seeds of my success in adulthood simply by introducing me to rugby league, the greatest game of all. As old-timers around Mackay may recall, I would be with her every Sunday at the showgrounds watching football, being ball boy at the football, and eventually for MVQ-6, the local TV station, calling the football—an opportunity that would eventually lead to a long and fruitful career in media and broadcasting, including a decade of calling the NRL to TV audiences on Fox Sports. On that note, go the Cowboys!

Scholastically, I was solid but far from brilliant. I would use my biology classes to write up rugby league reports for ABC Radio's 4QA in Mackay—no cutting of cane toads. During our lunchbreaks I would pretend with my mates under the big fig tree at Mackay State High School that we were part of the government of the day. Yes, an interest in politics and public affairs was stirred many moons ago. By the age of 16, while living in housing commission on Mackay's north side, I had made up my mind that I would

be a journalist. After all, there was no money back then calling footy, and after doing a day's fencing under the hot North Queensland sun out the back of Collinsville it was plainly obvious that this sugar stick from Mackay would not be following his uncles into being a ringer. So given my appreciation of English, work experience and sheer enthusiasm, I cracked it as a cadet reporter, starting work on the *Bowen Independent* newspaper at the top of the Whitsundays straight out of high school. From that point on I would mix with people from all walks of life: miners, railway workers, farmers, townies, bushies, battlers—you name it—and predominantly it happened in regional communities in North and Central Queensland. That ability to engage with people regardless of their socioeconomic status, colour or religion I believe has put me in good shape to stand in this place in the privileged role of representing the people of Whitsunday.

I could be a little biased, but I believe that the electorate of Whitsunday is the best geographical slice of Queensland. After all, the electorate I represent is home to the world-famous Whitsunday islands—places like Brampton, Hayman, Hamilton and Lindeman. The Whitsunday islands are also home to iconic locations such as Whitehaven Beach and Heart Reef—and how could I forget, of course, one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the Great Barrier Reef? If you do not call me the member for Whitsunday, then how about 'the member for paradise'?

The mainland part of my electorate is just as captivating, with Whitsunday also partly home to the Eungella National Park, Eungella being Aboriginal for 'land of the clouds'. On that note I acknowledge the Indigenous people of my electorate, the Yuibera and Juru people, who were here well before legendary explorer Captain James Cook sailed right past our very front door, giving us the name itself—Whitsunday—on Whit Sunday in 1770. In the northern part of the electorate you will find the famous tourist town of Airlie Beach and adjoining communities such as Cannonvale and Jubilee Pocket, the mighty sugar-milling town of Proserpine, where my eldest daughter attends school—well, normally—and scenic coastal communities such as Conway, Dingo Beach and Hydeaway Bay.

To the west the electorate takes in the old goldmining village of Dittmer as well as the Peter Faust Dam, one of the great water storage facilities of the north. South of the O'Connell River, where the bulk of Whitsunday voters now reside, we have close-knit communities in the cane fields—towns and villages such as Bloomsbury, Calen, Mount Ossa, Kuttabul and The Leap. On the coast you come across places like Midge Point and the Hibiscus Coast, comprising Seaforth—where I have fond memories of holidaying as a child—Ball Bay, Haliday Bay and Cape Hillsborough, the cape being famous for its kangaroos wandering the beach as the sun rises over the warm waters of the Coral Sea.

Last but not least, we have the burgeoning city of Mackay—a city where I was born and bred—with Whitsunday taking in the northern suburbs of Glenella and Mount Pleasant, neighbouring localities north of the Pioneer River, plus the entire Northern Beaches, home to fast-growing suburbs such as Blacks Beach, Eimeo, Rural View and Shoal Point but lacking in basics such as a high school after two decades of Labor.

When I was a little boy Mackay was the undisputed sugar capital of Australia. After all, there were no fewer than eight mills within 90 minutes of the Ron Camm Bridge—a bridge named in honour of a former long-serving member for Whitsunday whose contribution to public life I acknowledge, noting that the late Ron Camm served in the Nicklin, Pizzey and Bjelke-Petersen governments. Mr Camm was Deputy Leader of the National Party, one of our predecessor parties, and served in various ministries, most notably that of mines and energy.

Although times have changed, the sugar industry is still a big and important part of the Whitsunday economy, with farms all the way from Foulden to Foxdale, Coningsby to Koolachu, supplying mills at Farleigh and Proserpine respectively. These farms have traditionally been passed on from one generation to another, and I particularly acknowledge the Maltese and Italian immigrants who came to our beautiful part of North Queensland seeking opportunity and a better life by farming the land with their bare hands. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the South Sea Islander people whose descendants form a significant part of the Mackay-Whitsunday community to this day.

For the past 20 years, government regulation, or overregulation, has seriously threatened the livelihoods of farmers, graziers and people engaged in small business, causing great distress to many hardworking families. This is a sad state of affairs, remembering that 2012 happens to be the Year of the Farmer. During my time as a candidate I said that I would take a cane knife to such regulation and set about restoring some balance between a strong and viable primary industries sector and the environment. No-one should misconstrue my remarks. I care for the environment—always have, always will—and I cherish the many national parks and state forests in Whitsunday, from the Whitsunday islands to places such as Eungella, Conway and Cape Hillsborough on the mainland. Sadly, our parks and forests have been locked up like Fort Knox providing a haven for feral animals and the like. That is something I want to see addressed, for good reason, during my time in parliament. I am sure that I am not alone in expressing such views.

I mentioned the sugar industry, which in my electorate goes back to the early days of European settlement: the 1860s in Mackay's case and the 1890s in Proserpine's case. But we cannot and will not overlook the vital importance of the tourism industry in Whitsunday. The Whitsundays is the most tourism-dependent region on Australia's eastern seaboard, but over the past two decades we have witnessed the contraction of this once vibrant industry, something I and many others in places like Airlie Beach want to see reversed as quickly as possible. I have a vision for this industry: to see more planes, more direct flights and more tourists coming to the Whitsundays, some from faraway lands—a vision, I know, that is shared by the Premier. We also need to grow the domestic tourism market and make it more attractive for Australian families and young couples to visit the Whitsundays like they used to instead of jetting off overseas.

Boosting capacity in relation to flights is not the only pressing need. We also need to be mindful of the fact that most visitors to the Whitsundays come via the Bruce Highway—a road that needs to be upgraded, especially in the north. Specifically, I am fed up with the section between Mackay and Proserpine that floods during our wet season. This section on the Goorganga Plains south of Proserpine must be addressed sooner rather than later because it cuts my electorate and the Mackay-Whitsunday region in half, remembering that this happens to be the biggest regional economy of the north. To quantify that, we are talking about a gross regional product for Mackay and the Whitsundays somewhere in the vicinity of \$17 billion. To say that we do our bit for both the state and the nation is like saying Bradman did his bit when he came out to bat in the baggy green.

The Bruce Highway, put simply, was just a line on the map under the previous Labor governments. If it was not, then why do we have a 250-kilometre section heading north from Mount Ossa without a single overtaking lane? This is something I will work hard to rectify, thus improving road safety and productivity—something that should be applauded by both sides of the House. When one thinks about it, great tourism pioneers in the Whitsundays, people like the late Captain Tom McLean and the late Keith Williams, must be wondering what on earth has happened to our tourism industry. For me it seems like only yesterday when Captain Tom's Roylen Cruises sailed out of Mackay Harbour bound for the Whitsunday islands and the Barrier Reef. They were the great days—indeed the glory days—of tourism in Mackay and the Whitsundays, when people from all corners of the globe would come to my home town for what was the trip of a lifetime. If it was not Mackay then it was Shute Harbour which, in its heyday, lay claim to being the second biggest passenger port in Australia behind Circular Quay.

Of course, the electorate of Whitsunday is more than just sugar and tourism. You only have to drive throughout the northern suburbs of Mackay—suburbs that form part of my electorate—to see the huge influence of the coalmining industry, with many of my constituents working either directly or indirectly in this industry. It is an industry that has not looked back since the opening of the Goonyella to Hay Point rail line in November 1971. Back then substantial investment in infrastructure, in particular regional infrastructure, happened in Queensland, and it is my vision to see another coming of this infrastructure making it even more desirable for people to settle, work and raise a family in electorates such as Whitsunday. The boom in the resources sector has brought prosperity to many, especially around Mackay and the Whitsundays, but I am acutely aware that not everyone in our community has shared in that prosperity and that many people working outside the sector struggle with everyday living underlined by issues such as housing affordability. I believe that the Newman LNP government can and will address these issues and in general lower the cost of living—a pledge that resonated with voters everywhere on 24 March 2012.

There are so many people I wish to thank for playing a role in my election as the member for Whitsunday. Firstly, can I acknowledge the guidance and support of three political mentors who have served our great nation in the federal parliament and continue to do so—namely, Alby Schultz MP, the retiring member for Hume, Senator the Hon. Ian Macdonald, shadow parliamentary secretary for northern and remote Australia, and Senator the Hon. George Brandis SC, Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and the shadow Attorney-General. It is great to see both senators in the House today. Collectively in all parliaments, state and federal, these three gentlemen have 58 years of experience between them—no shortage of wisdom they have passed onto the member for Whitsunday.

I also acknowledge the support of my parliamentary colleagues—in particular, my neighbouring MPs immediately to the north and south respectively: Rosemary Menkens, the member for Burdekin, and Ted Malone, the member for Mirani, as well as George Christensen MP, the federal member for Dawson. In becoming Whitsunday's new MP, I would also like to pay tribute to my army of supporters, not just members of the LNP, but anyone and everyone who helped me in my 57-week campaign—a campaign that put us at breaking point, I am not ashamed to say, given the challenge before us, combined with the circumstances, which, for the record, included being a single father. As I said at my preselection on 19 February 2011, we would fight Labor in the canefields, on the beaches and in all the towns and villages in Whitsunday and we would fight to win. Well, we have won that fight, but it would not have been possible without so many special people. Starting with my campaign team, chaired by Charlie Camilleri with Leanne Fordyce as secretary and including Shelley Argent, Dee Bilborough, Bill and Julie Boyd, Colin Croyden,

Paul Fordyce, Michael Jones, Ken Kelly, Sean Kelly, Tony Large, Bill and Margaret McLean and Stan Wright. I also wish to acknowledge the Mackay-Whitsunday Young LNP branch, people such as Cian Middleton, Ari and Tahlia Oliver, Daniel Sullivan, and everyone associated with our five senior branches across the electorate, Glenella, Sunset Bay, Calen-Bloomsbury, Proserpine and Airlie Beach. Special and sincere thanks also to Les and Nardine Durnsford, Jim and Rosa Wort, Bill and Eileen Deicke, Maxine and Trevor Bassett, Sam and Lois Deguara, Jacqui Kersten, Brian Nicole and my old mate David Russo. Working together we ended a run of seven consecutive losses in Whitsunday, allowing us to win for the first time in more than a quarter of a century. For the true believers, some of whom I have just mentioned, it was a magic result.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the support, love and understanding of my family, particularly my two darling daughters, Brianna and Bridie, who are in the gallery today and joined by my dear mother, Nola, who has probably told everybody in Mackay by now that she is my mother—not for the first time either.

If there is one thing I will be doing in this job, it is fighting for our fair share as I stand up for the people of Whitsunday, including those people who did not vote for me. I particularly hope to reach out to the bushies and the battlers, people in small business, tradies and pensioners—the ‘forgotten people’ in the words of Sir Robert Menzies. I have a burning passion for my electorate—indeed, the Mackay-Whitsunday region, the North and regional Queensland in general. That is the principal reason I stand here in the House today: in the hope of making a difference, to make the system better. It is a passion I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will be obvious to all and sundry for as long as I have the opportunity to represent the good people of Whitsunday.