



Address in Reply

GLEN ELMES
Member for Noosa

Extract from Hansard – Tuesday 5 May, 2015

Mr ELMES (Noosa—LNP) (9.45 pm): I rise to speak in response to the Governor's official opening address to this 55th Parliament of Queensland. It is an honour for me to be here for a fourth term representing the people of Noosa. There is no greater honour than to be elected and, I hope, trusted by one's community to represent them in this place. With this comes the work to maintain the trust, as one is then judged on the successes and judged on the failures. I thank the people of Noosa for placing their trust in me again and I pledge to serve them so that the interests of Noosa are given due regard in the proceedings of this parliament.

As far as opening speeches go, I have to say that the one delivered by His Excellency the Governor in this place on 25 March was pretty ordinary. Of course, I do not blame the Governor for that because he read from a preprepared speech not of his own doing. Members know that by convention the Governor does not write his own speech but merely delivers the words provided to him by the government. You cannot even blame the poor ministerial staffer charged with drafting the speech. They had so little material to work with because this new government has nothing of worth to say to the people of Queensland. They said nothing during the election campaign and they remain silent on how they plan to take this great state forward.

The speech we heard in this place on 25 March revealed the shallowness of this new government and how ill-prepared it is. In preparing my speech today I went through the Governor's speech looking for new ideas, policies and initiatives from the Labor Party. In opposition Labor automatically opposed everything the Newman government did. So I was hopeful of finding a raft of credible, fresh alternatives from a supposedly alternative government, but I was severely disappointed.

There was nothing new or ambitious in the speech to take this state forward. There was nothing to show how they would build on LNP initiatives which had freed up investment in the state, relieved cost-of-living pressures for ordinary Queenslanders and refocused public services on service rather than bureaucracy, which is the Labor preference. We have seen nothing in the past three months to indicate that anything has changed. The speech highlighted just how ill-prepared accidental Annastacia and her team were for government. Labor's union puppetmasters were obviously more optimistic than the candidates because they devoted significant financial and human resources to the re-election campaign.

As we have seen during recent weeks, they now want to claim their reward through the introduction of a swag of union-friendly policies and initiatives. The Palaszczuk government ministers 5 May 2015 Address-in-Reply 385 might occupy the government benches in this place, but we all know they are not running the government. The people of Queensland should be concerned that only a small group of union heavyweights—which represent probably around 20 per cent of workers—will have such a domineering influence over what this Labor government does whilst ever it remains in power.

This is a government which is shown to be pro union and anti ordinary Queenslanders. No matter how much the Premier and her ministers proclaim their independence, Queenslanders know where they take their direction from. I was interested, but not surprised, to note that the Governor's opening speech made no substantial mention of either Indigenous Queenslanders or those from culturally diverse backgrounds. That is disappointing because we tried so hard during the past three years to provide greater support and assistance for these two groups who have been sadly neglected in the past.

My focus has been on working with the leadership of both groups to provide more appropriate and better targeted assistance so that they have the necessary support to overcome challenges and solve issues from inside their own cultural and ethnic environments. I congratulate the new member for Algester on her election as the representative of the state's first nation people. I expect that she will bring a perspective to this place which only people of Indigenous descent can properly reflect. The next step is to elect members from culturally diverse backgrounds so that this House becomes truly representative of the modern Queensland community.

One in five Queenslanders is born overseas. There are 220 different cultures living here, 220 different languages, 100 different religions or belief systems represented in our community—that is the fact of modern Queensland. Queensland is rapidly changing and both major parties need to reflect this change in the candidates we select. This is a particular challenge for my own party, which is failing at embracing the newest Queenslanders. For the LNP to become a long-term party of government, we need to be building on the cultural coalitions and embracing our diversity.

I remember recently seeing a news clip showing the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, addressing the House of Commons and two seats down from him was a Sheikh gentleman in his traditional turban and beard. If it can be done in the UK, it can be done here in Queensland. I would have been pleased to see the LNP candidate for Yeerongpilly, Leila Abukar, elected as a first step in that direction, but it was not to be. Unfortunately, the endorsement of people from these culturally diverse backgrounds in my own party is pretty rare and that needs to change. Not to do so will limit the opportunities of a party to form government and certainly limit its opportunities to stay in power if it does not understand the constituency on whose behalf it seeks to govern.

As I said earlier, what an honour it is to be elected as a member of this parliament. So, too, is it a privilege to serve as a minister in Her Majesty's Queensland government. I believe that, during my time as the minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and multicultural affairs during the last government, we introduced new policies and initiatives to benefit key groups represented by the portfolio. These policies and initiatives set in place the building blocks to set a future course for greater community cohesion and prosperity. My concern is that this new government—for no reason other than the lack of alternative policies—will dismantle many of those initiatives.

Australia is a country built on migrants. Today's migrants are increasingly from different regions of the world to those a century or even a few decades ago, and it was my great honour to have worked with their business communities and refugee organisations which support them. The growing numbers from India, the Middle East, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, South-East Asia and the 50-odd nations that make up the African continent have seen the cultural mix of Queensland change yet again.

The cultural diversity policy and action plan introduced by the LNP government reflected our dedication to provide equality of opportunity for all Queenslanders to participate fully in our strong economy and enjoy our vibrant society. The action plan included real-life practical strategies to give life to the policy. It focused on improved outcomes in education participation and attainment, economic independence and community participation.

It is no wonder that Labor are not talking about policy in the multicultural community. They take this sector for granted and make an automatic assumption of support from this community base. This government has already begun reversing and downgrading achievements for the multicultural community. Probably the most significant action from the new government since coming into power three months ago has been the downgrading in importance of Queensland's multicultural awards. In recognition of the important role played in our communities by people from culturally diverse backgrounds, the LNP government expanded the awards to include more categories and specific regional recognition. The Palaszczuk government has announced that the 2015 award categories are 386 Address-in-Reply 5 May 2015 to be reduced by about half and appear to ignore regional achievements. Labor are going back to their roots in this portfolio, ignoring anything west of Logan or north of Caboolture.

The awards were a central event in the Queensland Multicultural Week, created by the Newman government out of the ashes of the failing Brisbane Festival. We expanded the Queensland Multicultural Festival into a statewide, week-long event, creating a coordinated series of events the multicultural community could be proud of. We also set the event on a course to be financially independent, with greater

community involvement and sponsorship to increase available funding. That was applauded and strongly supported by the state's multicultural community.

I hope we do not see the festival revert to the Brisbane-centric, one-day affair it was under the previous Labor government where attendance was declining and financial losses increasing. Likewise, we reformed CAMS and LAMP programs to be about outcomes and not about paying wages in community groups. That was to begin on 1 July, following an expression of interest process which was underway when the state election was called. I note the new government has already moved to scrap that process and continue the programs in the same unambitious way that it did under the former Labor government—no KPIs, no outcomes; just tokenism to keep an assortment of NGOs politically onside.

I trust those opposite will not scrap the economic participation grants program instituted by the previous government which provides funding for migrants and refugees to get training and jobs and to start businesses. The level of Labor's interest in people from culturally diverse backgrounds can be gauged from the fact that in the three years of the previous government I was never asked a single solitary question without notice from them in this parliament about multicultural affairs. Their level of interest for Indigenous affairs was not much better, with no questions without notice asked since a couple in the very, very early days of the LNP government.

The ALP policy pre-election document in 2014 was nothing but platitudes and had no Indigenous policy. I checked *Hansard* in case I missed any reference in the Governor's opening speech of Indigenous policy and found no mention of Aboriginals. I found no mention of Torres Strait Islanders. There were two mentions of Indigenous people—one regarding Indigenous students in a generalised manner and a brief mention of Indigenous elders—but certainly no published policy. But Labor now suddenly has one of their bright ridiculous ideas—to reopen the stolen wages issue with an additional \$21 million in funding. This came very late in the campaign through a media release from the member for Mulgrave. But is it his idea? I can tell you it is not. It is a policy push by the Queensland Council of Unions who own the members opposite—unions like the AWU, the ETU, the AMWU, the CFMEU and United Voice, all pulling the strings for their representatives in this House.

In terms of the stolen wages issue, the Beattie government, in 2002, correctly—correctly I say—set up an offer of reparations to address an injustice and set aside \$55.4 million. This was known as the Indigenous Wages and Savings Reparations Scheme. The Labor government then administered and disbursed these funds right up to June 2010 when the scheme was finalised, having paid out \$35.5 million to 5,779 eligible claimants.

Why did Labor close the fund? Because there were no further legitimate claims. Subsequently, the remaining amount of almost \$26 million was put into a fund, the independent Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation, or QATSIF. QATSIF fills a crucial role in providing scholarships for Indigenous students to complete years 11 and 12 at high school. This year more than 1,200 Indigenous students will be assisted through QATSIF. That is 1,200 students who now have a chance of breaking the welfare cycle by getting an education as a precursor to higher education or an apprenticeship.

In my three years as minister, there were only a couple of occasions when someone even generally raised the issue of stolen wages with me and only one occasion when I dealt with a suggested claimant. In the five intervening years since Labor finalised the scheme, any additional actual claims could have been dealt with through the court process. Now Labor will open old wounds, but will achieve little or nothing in terms of the advancement of Indigenous people in Queensland. In fact, I believe the reverse will be the case.

I wish the Treasurer were in the House tonight. I call for a guarantee from the Treasurer that whatever money is left over—and it should be the overwhelming amount of \$21 million—be placed in the QATSIF trust. We can continue to look to the future and work hard to achieve what really are basic human rights for Indigenous people here in Queensland, that is, the right to a quality education and the right to improved health outcomes so that the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and 5 May 2015 Adjournment 387 non-Indigenous people continues towards equality. The first step towards this is to make sure that government funding goes towards direct service delivery and not funding an expanding bureaucracy.

After a lot of very hard work, the LNP government was able to identify a conservative spend in excess of \$400 million in Queensland government Indigenous-specific funding across the state. The Newman government also set up a separate portfolio and department. It did not have a large budget. It was a junior

portfolio, and I can tell honourable members that it could have done so much more. What we did, however, was better than what had previously occurred under Labor, which changed its Indigenous Affairs minister about every 12 months.

Had we retained government, my suggestion would have been to bring the entire ATSI and MAQ portfolio across to Premier's, which would have given it the ability to punch at a much greater weight. It is not possible to be the Treasurer, the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations and the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and still give the time and effort required to be an effective advocate for the Indigenous community.

I say with the greatest respect that it is also not possible for the Minister for Communities, Women and Youth, the Minister for Child Safety and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs to be able to put in the time, effort and relationship building in the multicultural sector. In fact, it is a shame that the small number of officers in the previous multicultural affairs department has already disappeared back into the monolith that is the department of communities.

I was very proud to have served as a minister in the previous government. On one hand, there was the honour, excitement and privilege of being able to work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities whose history on this continent goes back 60,000-odd years and, on the same day, provide help and assistance to refugees who had only been in the country for a few weeks or even days. I will be forever committed to the advancement of these two groups of Australians. However, one cannot do these things without first being elected by one's local community and being on hand to be able to assist in many and different ways those men, women and children of the community in which one lives.

My electorate of Noosa is a special place. My colleagues will have heard me make that comment on more than one occasion. However, there are many communities found across the state that comprise people who have made a conscious effort to relocate and live in their special place. This is true for the residents of Noosa, the majority of whom have made an educated choice to live there. It is not an accident of birth. Communities such as this have a passion about where they live, a real and strong sense of what is important in the make-up of their town. In the case of my community, it is the environment which drives this passion and I do not just mean the parks, gardens and beaches, but a strong desire to live sustainably and within one's means and to have something worthwhile and better to pass on to future generations.

Of course, I am proud and committed to the areas of the Noosa electorate which sit inside the Sunshine Coast council area—Eumundi, Doonan, Verrierdale, parts of Peregian and Peregian Springs. They all share the same values as the rest of the electorate. I would venture to say that these values are held close by communities south to the Maroochy River, which is why there is such enormous opposition to the development of Sekisui House in Yaroomba. I do not believe, either now or in the future, that there will be a time when anyone will be able to see the worth of high density, high-rise developments north of the Maroochy River.

During the course of this 55th Parliament there were a number of local issues on which I will be working very hard such as the long-term future of the Noosa Hospital. Its importance and relevance grows as the opening of the Sunshine Coast University Hospital draws closer. I will also be working with the Noosa council to repurpose the old TAFE facility in Noosa regarding its future role as an education and training centre for local residents. Our community's greatest effort is the Noosa River. It is probably the busiest waterway in South-East Queensland and its health is a prime concern. I will be seeking to work with the new government to maintain and enhance our waterway. I will also be reminding the Premier to uphold her undertaking, given in July 2014 to the Noosa Labor candidate, that residents of Eumundi, Doonan and Verrierdale, the area known as EDV, deserve to have their say in determining their future.

Debate, on motion of Mr Hinchliffe, adjourned