



Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Wednesday, 22 April 2009

MAIDEN SPEECH

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (2.52 pm): It is with great pleasure that I second the motion for the adoption of the address-in-reply moved by my friend and colleague the member for Townsville. Mandy deserves much praise for her election win and should be congratulated on her first speech which she has just made before us all here in the 53rd Parliament. I would also like to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your appointment to the high and honourable office you now hold.

Starting at Innisfail, the seat of Mulgrave stretches along the Bruce Highway and includes the townships of Miriwinni, Babinda, Bellenden Ker, Deeral, Gordonvale, Edmonton, Mount Sheridan and parts of White Rock on the southern edge of Cairns. The electorate has extensive sugarcane fields, banana plantations, tropical fruit orchards and cattle farms. It is home to Queensland's highest mountain, Mount Bartle Frere, and the iconic Walsh's Pyramid. The electorate of Mulgrave also includes the Yarrabah Aboriginal community, which has a special place in my heart.

On 21 March the people of Queensland made a choice. They chose stability over instability. They chose the party that will do everything it can to create job opportunities, not reduce them; the party that put the needs of families ahead of political expediency. They chose the leadership of Anna Bligh. The Premier is to be congratulated for the genuine process of renewal within the Labor caucus and, importantly, in cabinet. I am delighted to be part of this renewal and to have the opportunity to bring new ideas and enthusiasm to the team.

I want to acknowledge the architects of Labor's election win, Mike Kaiser and Anthony Chisholm. In the engine room, ALP organiser Chris Forrester provided amazing support and invaluable advice to me along with many other candidates across the state. I am absolutely humbled by the faith that voters in the Mulgrave electorate have shown in me and am deeply honoured to be elected as their representative in the Queensland parliament.

I was endorsed as the Labor candidate for Mulgrave late in the piece after the previous member dropped a retirement bombshell that left his family, colleagues and loyal supporters stunned. I spent the first week of the campaign defending myself against claims that I had somehow been gifted a place on the ballot and that I no longer had a connection with the local area. I made the decision to refute these assertions the best way I knew how: I campaigned strongly on local issues and offered fresh and enthusiastic representation. It is my belief that people in Mulgrave did not want to hear more negativity during times like this, and this is why a majority cast their vote for a positive future.

In Mulgrave we defied the trend and suffered a swing of less than two per cent. With the state-wide swing and the retirement of a long-serving local member, it is not possible to achieve such a result without a well-run local campaign. I would like to express my gratitude to my entire team of campaign workers and in particular my campaign director Jim Smith and Innisfail office coordinator Diana O'Brien, as well as their partners, Ros and John, for loaning them to me for the duration of the campaign.

What many people do not realise is that campaign workers are unpaid. They volunteer because they believe in the Labor Party and think their candidate is better than all comers. Campaign workers still hold down a day job and, at the end of a long day at work or on their weekends, they generously give of their time and unselfishly donate to the Labor cause. I would like to say a special thanks to Nathan Lambert

from the ALP national office who returned to the Far North to work on my campaign. Nathan is a formidable political strategist and I believe he has a very big future in the party. I will be forever grateful for his contribution.

During the election I campaigned the old-fashioned way—by talking with voters at shopping centres every chance I had and doorknocking street by street. During my conversations with workers and their families the global financial crisis and its impact on local jobs came up time and time again. I met people in genuinely distressed circumstances who had lost their jobs and others who were deeply worried about further cuts in their industries. The rollout of the Bligh government's \$17 billion infrastructure program and the federal government's economic stimulus package will be the driver of jobs in this state during this term and beyond.

I am committed to ensuring the direct flow-on effect to key local projects and to local contractors in Mulgrave. I will fight for local projects like the construction of a replacement for the Jubilee Bridge in Innisfail and will work with the Cassowary Coast Regional Council and the federal government to make this happen. This project is important for a number of reasons, but the anticipated 140 jobs that will be created during construction will be a real boost to the area. It is projects like this that will create turnover for local businesses and will also provide jobs for administrative and support staff.

Job losses affect everybody in our community—not just those who lose their jobs directly but also the businesses they frequent, the organisations they support and, most of all, the families they care for. Now, I know that I cannot protect the job of every person in Mulgrave, but for every job retained and every new job created I know that individual workers and their families will benefit.

While the economy is the single biggest issue facing people right around the country, there are other issues in Mulgrave that need to be addressed. The first one is the traffic congestion on the southern access into Cairns which is increasing every day. We must take action now on an integrated transport network to meet this challenge. I welcome the planning study being undertaken by the Department of Main Roads and Queensland Transport in partnership with the federal government. This \$5 million study has sought community input, and it is clear that the current southern access corridor, if properly developed, can provide the necessary transport solutions.

The second issue is the importance of strategic planning for the estimated 50,000 new residents who will move to the southern suburbs of Cairns over the next 15 years or so. Unrestricted developer driven growth is not in the best interests of Far North Queenslanders. This is why I fully support the FNQ 2031 statutory plan. It will ensure urban growth is responsible and will protect the precious natural environment that makes Far North Queensland so unique.

Thirdly, I will be strongly championing the importance of living a healthy and active lifestyle. Preventative health is by far the best way to take pressure off our health system in the long term, and this benefits our whole community. I want to work with local sporting clubs to look at ways to keep the costs of junior sport down to support families, particularly given the increased financial stresses and demands upon household budgets.

Our local athletes and stars of tomorrow also need facilities for training and competition, with current facilities struggling to cope with the growing population in the region. I will push for new sports facilities because they are a great investment in our kids' health and because they are an investment in the future. I will also strongly support efforts to improve Indigenous health, education and economic participation at every opportunity not only because it is important and has reached a critical juncture but also because I have personally invested in closing the gap. My wife, Kerry, is Kuku Yalangi. I am extraordinarily proud of her Aboriginal heritage and we both share close ties with the Yarrabah community. The CDEP program has served the Yarrabah community well over many years. However, the federal government's decision to scale back CDEP from 30 June has the potential to leave much of the current workforce without employment. Unemployment and underemployment has serious social and economic consequences. The changes to CDEP have the potential to add another 400 or 500 people to the approximately 1,000 people who are already receiving welfare payments in the community.

Yarrabah is the only discrete Aboriginal community in Queensland that is losing its CDEP as it will not be designated a remote area for the purposes of the program. On the surface, Yarrabah's proximity to Gordonvale and Cairns makes this a fair assessment. However, other communities such as Cherbourg in the state's south-east are considered remote despite being six kilometres' drive to Murgon and just over an hour's drive from Gympie. The common element here, though, is not the distance to be travelled but that these two communities, like many other discrete Indigenous communities, do not have access to reliable transportation—public or private—to commute to larger centres for work. I am committed to working with the Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council to form commercial partnerships that can create real jobs in the community and employment pathways for young people finishing school.

The need to resolve outstanding land tenure issues is also a high priority, as this is one of the biggest hurdles that must be overcome in order to make progress on economic participation in the

community. Another ongoing challenge is the requirement for sufficient and suitable housing in Yarrabah, which has important linkages to employment in the community. More often than not, outside contractors secure the tenders and employ only a limited number of locals. There must be an increased focus on using local skilled workers to construct these homes.

My first official engagement after I was elected took me back to Gordonvale State Primary School. To say that I was pleased would be an understatement. I handed out badges to school captains, sports captains and members of the student cabinet. These are the leaders of tomorrow. Twenty years ago I was one of those students at the very same school. I attended Gordonvale State High School, did my senior years at St Mary's Catholic College and attained my bachelor's degree at James Cook University in Cairns.

Young men and women move away from the place where they grew up for many reasons. For some, it is the spirit of adventure, for study, or perhaps to be with the one they love. For others, it is to further their careers and earn a big salary. In my case, it was to learn the inner workings of government firsthand. I spent nearly six years in Brisbane working in the Queensland Public Service managing policy and program areas within the economic and regional development portfolio. As manager of the government's skilled and business migration program, I helped to shape a workable response to the controversial 457 visa program with colleagues from state multicultural affairs and industrial relations agencies, the Australian government, employers, industry groups and migration agents. Later I worked for the Department of Communities on alcohol management, diversionary activities and economic participation in Aboriginal and mainland Torres Strait Islander communities. During this time I worked with some of the most intelligent people I have ever met and I have a great deal of respect and admiration for the professionalism and dedication of those who work in the Queensland Public Service. In those six years, I would like to think that I went away a boy and I came back a man.

But this time was more than just an opportunity to gain experience and learn more about the world. During this time I also went on an important personal journey. Each year in Australia approximately 58,000 couples experience reproductive loss. About 55,000 experience early pregnancy losses, about 900 babies die in the first 28 days after birth and 1,750 babies are stillborn. Last year, my daughter, Isabel, was one of those babies. She was stillborn at 41 weeks. My wife, Kerry, and I were only hours from holding her in our arms and words cannot describe how difficult it was to look at Isabel and know that she would never open her eyes. To leave the hospital without our baby was the hardest day of my life.

During the pregnancy we were prepared for anything, except this. As parents, we were both devastated, but for mothers the loss is even harder. I saw the extreme sadness my wife experienced. I have always been the person who has had all the answers, but on this occasion I was found wanting. For the first time in my life I felt completely helpless.

It is impossible to go through heartbreak like this without learning something about who you are, without testing your relationships and without your priorities in life being forever changed. But our circumstances were far from unique. Tragedies like ours affect families across Queensland every day. We do not expect it to happen in this day and age, but it is more common than you would think. I am sharing our story with you not to garner sympathy, but to increase awareness in our community.

Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support—or SANDS—Queensland provides a range of services to parents and their families who experience the death of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth, neonatal death and other reproductive losses. SANDS Queensland is a parent-managed, not-for-profit organisation which carries out its important work through the assistance of donations, corporate sponsorship and limited government funding. I am committed to using my position and profile to support the work of SANDS Queensland in any way that I can.

Like many in this House, my family is the reason I am able to stand here today and deliver my first speech in parliament. I would like to pay tribute to my sister, Dionne Berry, to my grandmother Doreen Dodd, and to both of my parents who have been tireless in their efforts over their past 20 years in public life. The person who I am and the path that I have chosen in life I owe to these wonderful people. In particular, my parents have instilled in me solid Labor values: the importance of social justice, the value of education and the belief in a fair go for all.

It is with immense pride that I am able to succeed my father, Warren Pitt, as the member for Mulgrave. I know that I have big shoes to fill. He was known as one of the true gentlemen of politics—respected by members on both sides of the chamber because he is a decent and compassionate man. His achievements in Mulgrave are too numerous to mention, but he was particularly proud of the completion of the Ma:Mu Canopy Walk, the St John's Community Care Facility in Gordonvale for young people with a disability, and the establishment of Bentley Park College.

My father had an enviable record as a minister, serving in cabinet under Premiers Goss, Beattie and Bligh. The impact my father made on the disability sector in Queensland was enormous and he made significant contributions to the Blueprint for the Bush and major projects such as the Tugun bypass and the

Gateway upgrade. My father was an unrelenting advocate for regional Queensland and his work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was unsurpassed. No task was too big for him to tackle but no task was too small, either. My father worked hard each and every day to ensure that voices within our community were heard by government and all options were explored on their behalf. Throughout all of this work my father battled non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and showed me the true meaning of courage.

I also want to pay tribute to another extraordinarily courageous person and the most important person in my life—my wife, Kerry. Kerry has made many sacrifices in her personal and professional life for me and I draw on her love and unwavering support each and every day. It is often the partners of politicians who are the unsung heroes. My father, along with my mother, Linda, set a high bar for the standard of local representation and community involvement in Mulgrave. My wife, Kerry, and I are a great team and we will closely follow their example as we strive to build on their good work. Public life can take its toll on families and it can be tough. We enter this next phase of our lives together with our eyes wide open, prepared to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

The significance of making my first speech and the enormity of this occasion is by no means lost on me, but the most important thing that will happen to me this year is still to come. My wife is due to give birth to our second child in late June. I know that my new role will mean time spent away from my family and that I may miss some important moments in my new son or daughter's life. But I will do everything that I can to ensure that I do not miss too many.

I have been around politics pretty much my whole life. I have been fortunate to receive good advice from many great Labor politicians—like former Cairns mayor Tom Pyne, the late great Tom Burns, Wayne Goss, Kim Beazley and Gough Whitlam. But during my lifetime I have observed the public's opinion of politicians sink lower and lower. By and large, this view is not justified. Many great men and women have sat in this parliament and have served with honour and integrity and have effectively served the communities they represent. But whether it is justified or not, it does not change the fact that people's faith in their political representatives must be restored. Each member in this parliament has a role to play in rebuilding that trust both inside and outside of this chamber. I plan on playing my part.

We are all human. We all make mistakes. But much of what we do is within our power to control. We can do better. We will do better. The people of Queensland expect nothing less. The election has come and gone. The time for talk is over and it is time for me to get to work. My promise to the families of Mulgrave is that I will fight for them and deliver results through hard work and determination for as long as they will have me as their representative. I second the motion moved by the honourable member for Townsville.