




Speech By
Scott Stewart

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (12.31 pm): Today I rise to second the motion moved on the address-in-reply and I do so proudly and with the greatest honour. I present my address in reply to the speech of His Excellency at the opening of the 55th Parliament of Queensland. I pledge my loyalty to this parliament, the people of Queensland and, more particularly, to the electors of Townsville. I am humbled by the confidence that the people of Townsville have placed in me to represent them in this House. Firstly, I pass on my sincere congratulations to the member for Nicklin on becoming the first Independent member for 100 years to take on the role of the Speaker of the House. Mr Speaker, I look forward to working with you over the coming years.

I am a proud North Queensland man who was born in the electorate of the member for Burdekin at Home Hill. Although I grew up in Brisbane, I started my teaching career in the electorate of the member for Gregory at Springsure. Three years later I transferred to Mackay and nine years after that, in 1999, I transferred to Townsville with my wife, two children and a son on the way. Back then my wife said to me, 'Scott, we'll do two years in Townsville and then move back to Mackay,' and like a good husband I said, 'Yes, dear.' Sixteen years later we still call Townsville home.

Not only do I call Townsville home, but so too do the North Queensland Cowboys, the Townsville Crocodiles and the Townsville Fire, the current national champions of the WNBL and the only Queensland women's professional basketball team. Later in the year, the V8 Supercars will call Townsville home for the Townsville 400 race.

Two months ago I was a high school principal at a large, high-performing school that was among an elite group of schools known as independent public schools. I had risen to the pinnacle of my career and achieved my dream job in what could be called a plum school. However, I put my job on the line and pursued a political career. Some say that my time as a high school principal has aptly prepared me for a life in politics. I assure members here today that I will not be issuing detentions for unruly behaviour or for not completing homework on time. I will leave that role to you, Mr Speaker. I hope that I will not be on the receiving end of any lunchtime detentions, even though that may delight several of my past students.

I was a student in state schools for my primary and secondary education and am part of a very special alumni with two ministers, the Hon. Kate Jones and the Hon. Coralee O'Rourke, as we call Kelvin Grove State College—Kelvin Grove State High as it was back then—our high school. I quickly point out that during my glory days at high school the Hon. Coralee O'Rourke was in the early years of primary school, while the Hon. Kate Jones was in mere nappies. My high school education taught me the most important and valuable lessons in life, those of tolerance, resilience, compassion, understanding, honesty and integrity.

My parents, Dawn and David Stewart, who next month will celebrate 57 years of marriage, were and still are very supportive of their three children. Through their continued love, parenting and self-sacrifice, they taught me how to be a good person and, later, a good parent. They were never my

friends. They never wanted to be my friends as they had a more important role in my life, that is, to be my parents. That is the most important role bestowed on anyone.

On 26 December 1912 in Mount Isa, Phyllis Davidson was born into a pioneering family and almost 96 years later, on 31 August 2008, she passed away. She lived a life that saw the war to end all wars and, not 30 years later, she saw another one. She listened to the wireless and later in life watched TV, which became colour in 1977. She saw a man walk on the moon and the Berlin Wall rise and eventually fall. She saw two aeroplanes fly into buildings, which would lead to a change in the world such as this generation has never seen before. She saw a Beatle get shot, a president get murdered and a Prime Minister go for a swim and never return. She wept the day a princess was married and she wept again the day that that princess was killed in a motor vehicle accident. She watched Australia win the America's Cup and the Davis Cup, and host two Olympic Games, and she cheered until she could not talk anymore. She marvelled at five grandchildren being born and as three great grandchildren entered the world. In 1942, during the Second World War, in Townsville Phyllis Davidson worked for the American Red Cross where her role was to assist American service men and women located in Australia. Her role was very similar to what we would now refer to as a liaison officer.

I take the House back further in time to 1864 when John Melton Black from Woodstock Station, who was in partnership with pastoralist and businessman Robert Towns, dispatched a small party to search for a coastal site that would be suitable for a port to be established. Woodstock Station was located to the south-west of where Townsville is now located. Prior to 1864, all livestock was shipped through the most northern port located at Port Denison, now known as Bowen. A suitable site was found at the mouth of Ross Creek and it was determined that a settlement could be established to support the port. Within three years, Townsville had become the major port and service centre for the Cape River, Gilbert, Ravenswood, Etheridge and Charters Towers goldfields. It encouraged the pastoral industry to expand further west and the sugar industry, now worth billions of dollars annually, to be developed in coastal towns to both the north and south of Townsville.

During the last state election, the former LNP government hatched a plan that would see the sale of assets across the state and the Port of Townsville was one of the assets on the table to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. What the then Premier and Treasurer failed to see was that the Port of Townsville was what established our city. It is the very heart of the city that pumps life into our industries such as mining and agriculture. It pumps life into our beef and livestock export industries and it pumps life into our very city. To the people of Townsville, the port is more than just an asset where ships come to load and unload commodities. It is part of our DNA. It is part of the very social fabric that makes up our community. It is where Phyllis Davidson and thousands of other Townsville residents went to welcome home the ships that brought back our troops from various conflicts during the Second World War. The government's lack of understanding of the pivotal role the port has had in shaping our city and its people was met with contempt by those very people.

On 22 November 1933 Phyllis Davidson gave birth to a son named David John. In the 1950s and 1960s David was employed by the Townsville Regional Electrical Board, or TREB as everyone in the area knew it back then. In those days each region across Queensland was responsible for supplying and maintaining electricity in the area. In the event of the electricity supply being disrupted, maintenance crews were sent out to perform the necessary repairs to return the power supply to those affected. David was one of those crew members who restored lost power.

In the years to come TREB became NORQEB. Then another restructure of the state's electricity suppliers saw the abolition of the multiple boards, with Energex replacing SEQEB and Ergon set up for the rest of the state to provide services to over 700,000 consumers. This represented a major departure from the previous decentralised nature of the industry, with Ergon's headquarters transferring to Brisbane.

In 2004 the Townsville City Council, along with the then state member for Townsville, Mike Reynolds, rallied for the head office of Ergon Energy, the regional Queensland electricity supplier, to be based in Townsville. After a 10-year battle with the south-east corner of the state, Ergon's headquarters is now located on the corner of Flinders and Stanley streets, Townsville, and employs over 400 people to help provide electricity to regional Queensland. However, the former government again failed to see the significance of the government owned Ergon Energy and its connection with regional people and specifically the people of Townsville when they put this asset on the table for sale.

The city is also home to the largest hospitals in Northern Australia. They provide genuine care to more than 600,000 residents across North Queensland—as far north as Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islands, and west to Mount Isa and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and south to Sarina. It is

also the major teaching hospital for James Cook University's schools of medicine, nursing and allied health and for the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE.

Townsville has, over the past 150 years, produced some memorable leaders who have shaped our city and state as we know it. In January this year George Vivian Roberts, a former Townsville city councillor, passed away aged 99, and just one week short of his 100th birthday. Mr Roberts had played an important role in locating James Cook University and Lavarack Army Barracks at the foot of Mount Stuart.

Both of these institutions have become essential to educating and protecting not only North Queensland but also Northern Australia. James Cook University is arguably one of the nation's leading universities, and in certain faculties a world leader. Lavarack Barracks is now the largest Army barracks in Australia and is occupied by 1, 2 and 3 Royal Australian Regiment or some 6,500 service men and women.

It would be remiss of me not to highlight the work of Eddie Koiki Mabo as a leader. Koiki Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander man born on Mer Island—we call it Murri Island. He started work in 1967 at James Cook University as a gardener when he was 31 years old. Eddie Mabo's story of proving land ownership for Indigenous people in the High Court of Australia is quite famous across our country. In 1992 Eddie Mabo passed away aged 55, and five months prior to the announcement by the High Court of Australia overturning the doctrine of terra nullius opening the way for our nation's first people to claim ownership of the land.

In 2008 JCU renamed their library the Eddie Koiki Mabo Library in honour of the research he conducted during his lunch breaks in the library that led to his actions. It is just as important for me to highlight to all members here today that one of Eddie Koiki Mabo's grandsons Cade Mabo-Edwards is one of the Premier's Anzac prize winners for the centenary of the Anzacs landing at Gallipoli and will be at the dawn service in Anzac Cove on 25 April this year. It is quite a remarkable achievement by a bright young man from Pimlico State High School, where I was principal.

I would like to acknowledge the work of Professor Gracelyn Smallwood, or Aunty Gracelyn as most in Townsville know her. She grew up in a tin house with a dirt floor, one of 18 siblings of whom she is the third eldest. Her father was one of the stolen generation; stolen from his family from the North Queensland town of Ayr and banished to the notorious Palm Island dormitories.

She was awarded the Queensland Aboriginal of the Year in 1986 and an Order of Australia in 1992 for service to public health, particularly HIV-AIDS education. In 1993 she was the first Indigenous Australian to receive a Masters of Science in Public Health at the JCU for her work on HIV education in North Queensland's Indigenous communities. In 2007 she had one of her greatest achievements; the Deadly Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in Indigenous Health. In 2011 Aunty Gracelyn completed her PhD thesis 'Human rights and first Australians wellbeing'.

I have heard her speak with passion on many occasions in many different forums. But perhaps the saddest address I have heard from Aunty Gracelyn was the one she gave at the recent opening of the Mental Illness Fellowship of North Queensland where she cited the following statistics regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates. The rates of suicide are substantially higher in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, accounting for 4.2 per cent of all Indigenous deaths compared to 1.6 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians in 2010. In males the suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is highest in the 25- to 29-year-old age group and is more than four times the rate in the corresponding age group for non-Indigenous males. In females the suicide rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is highest in the 20- to 24-year-old age group and is more than five times higher than their corresponding non-Indigenous counterparts.

Aunty is calling on governments, both national and state, to work in partnership with the Indigenous mental health leaders, experts and stakeholders to close the gap with regard to the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. That is something that I am sure that every one of us sitting in this chamber today can recognise is needed if we are truly going to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health concerns.

I have spent a deal of time talking about the history of Townsville and its people. The city will celebrate its 150th birthday next year. As a city we have seen the boom times and we have seen the bust times. We have endured the ravages of cyclones that have flattened our buildings, the dismay of floods as they have swept our life's work away and the anguish of fires as they have destroyed our structures leaving behind only the broken shells of what once was.

But Townsville was forged by tough men and women who did not lay blame or want compensation. They wiped away their tears, rolled up their sleeves and with mate standing beside mate started to rebuild the city of Townsville. Right now the city of Townsville is on its knees. While

we have not weathered a cyclone or endured a flood or sheltered from a fire, we have been at the mercy of a former government that saw the only way to forge ahead was to slash jobs and close vital government services and programs. Couple this with the fall in mineral prices globally resulting in the downturn in the mining industry, the fallout from those decisions has been almost economically catastrophic with unemployment rates at 8.9 per cent and youth unemployment at 17.4 per cent. Insolvencies are amongst the highest in the country and commercial rental vacancies are at 23 per cent, which is an all-time high.

Trade at a global level will see increased consumer demands for local commodities including coal, sugar and beef to countries such as Japan, China and particularly Indonesia. However, we have an aggressive competitor who is quickly positioning themselves as the conduit for trade through Northern Australia. Darwin is forging ahead in developing itself as the lead city for trade and transport with Southern Asia. We need to act quickly and decisively if we are to rebuild the Townsville economy through attracting industry and creating opportunities for investors to grow business by our ability to deliver on projects that are not hamstrung by bureaucratic red tape, that facilitate expediency in delivering outcomes and are supported by modern infrastructure and sustainable but affordable resources. This vision for Townsville should not and will not rely solely on state government spending, but result through partnerships with local and foreign private investors supported by various levels of government.

The opportunities for Townsville as a serious player on the national and international stage are endless, but it will take bravery to make tough decisions that are shaped by a very clear vision for the city. This has already started with the announcement by the Premier that \$100 million has been committed over the next four years to build a new stadium.

Mr Speaker, earlier in my speech I spoke of a woman by the name of Phyllis Davidson, who saw the growth of the Port of Townsville, who saw the new Townsville Hospital built, who saw the ring-road built and who saw the Townsville Strand get redeveloped. All these projects that helped build a city were the vision of the Labor Party—projects that reflected faith in the Townsville economy through the many thousands of jobs that have been created. Phyllis Davidson was my grandmother and her son David John Stewart, who worked at TREB, is my father. Now it is my turn to help create a Townsville that will be vibrant—a city that will be the north Australian hub of business, industry, agriculture, education, health and defence; a city that thrives in business on a national and international level; and a city that is supported by its community.

I would like to acknowledge the work of my young campaign manager, Ben Gertz, who hopefully is present here today in the gallery. Ben is an Aboriginal man from Mount Isa and, despite his young age of 24, he ran an outstanding campaign like a person twice his age. I also acknowledge Patricia Schluter, the Townsville team's organiser, who is a single mum and who dedicated 24 hours a day to the campaign ensuring that the three Labor candidates in Townsville were elected. I would like to congratulate my fellow regional Townsville members—the member for Mundingburra, the Hon. Coralee O'Rourke, and the member for Thuringowa, Aaron Harper. During the election campaign, the three of us ran a united campaign. Without their support and encouragement I doubt whether I could have made it through.

Finally, I thank my family who loved me, supported me and endured me during those rough campaign days. To my eldest daughter, Tyler Jane: you have turned into a fine young woman whom I admire for your determination and courage. To my middle daughter, Jordan Mackenzie: I cherish your compassion and sense of humour. And to my young man, Lachlan James: I never cease to be amazed by your knowledge and zest for learning. But most of all to my wife, Jackie, who is my rock and who stood beside me when I needed her the most: my love for you can never be measured.

Mr Speaker, you do not need to be Einstein to work out that family is the most important thing in my world. I draw strength from them and my values are shaped by them. I thank the people of Townsville for the faith that they have given me in this role. I will not disappoint them.