




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Record of Proceedings, 10 March 2021

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (6.35 pm): I rise to provide my address-in-reply to the speech delivered by His Excellency in opening the 57th Parliament of Queensland. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be elected to represent the electorate of Burdekin in this place. I am sure that all members would agree that, along with a sense of responsibility, serving in this parliament comes with a great sense of pride. I am also humbled to take on the role of shadow minister for police and corrective services, shadow minister for fire and emergency services and shadow minister for rural and regional affairs.

Regardless of the electorate we represent or the side of the chamber on which we sit, the challenges we face in this coming term are many. We live in a period that none of us has experienced before. In the last few months, regions around the world and here in Australia have faced one of the greatest health challenges in history. It is a history that will judge whether our response was correct, but it goes without question that we have faced uncertainty on so many fronts. As we move forward, we face the challenge of returning to what we call 'normal'—if there is such a thing. We as a state and as a nation face economic challenges and possibly further health challenges. As we look back over the last term of parliament and look forward to the next, there is an undeniable sense of irony that comes with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it is the tyranny of distance that meant some areas of our great state remained relatively or absolutely COVID free.

It is almost symbolic that the same issue that makes it difficult to attract health professionals to some areas of my electorate played a major part in halting the spread of coronavirus. It is the same vast distances that make roads such an important issue in the Burdekin electorate that most likely saw most of my electorate largely spared from the health challenges that this virus posed. Many of those challenges that we have faced and will face come about due to uncertainty, but one thing I am certain of is that Queenslanders together will overcome these challenges, just as we have overcome the COVID pandemic.

As the member for Burdekin, my pride for the electorate is as strong as ever and my dedication to working for my electorate is unchanged. I want to acknowledge my team of LNP members and volunteers who supported me during the election campaign—volunteers who drove hundreds of kilometres to stand outside pre-polls in 38-degree heat and sat in the dark until nine o'clock at night on lonely streets, volunteers who believed in me and to whom I am eternally grateful. In no particular order I want to acknowledge my campaign team: Jim and Jewel Gist, Terry Williams, Rosemary and Ray Menkens, Peter and Amanda Hall, and of course my tireless offside David Cooper, to whom I owe so much. I also want to acknowledge Dave Blundell, Terry Heyer, Jan Brown, Pauline Shield, Wade Smith, Carl and Andrea Moller, Marlene Benn, the Denis family from Clermont, Hughie and Denise Smith, Richard and Dyan Hughes, Margo Fordyce, Lynnne Busk, Trevor Anderson and Eileen Meyer. I could not have done it without you. I want to also make special mention of my family: my wife, Kim, and children, Jack and Molly. Their unwavering support, love and encouragement is the reason I am standing here today and is the reason I have been able to devote so much time to my electorate.

As we move into the first fixed four-year term, I want to make clear my commitment to the Burdekin electorate and my pledge to continue the fight to ensure my constituents have access to the same support, services and opportunities as are available in metropolitan areas of the state. His Excellency spoke of the need to represent all Queenslanders, and I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the opportunity to work for all Queenslanders in my role as a shadow minister and in particular to represent those rural and regional areas of Queensland which contribute so much to this great state.

As the opposition leader, the member for Broadwater, has said, the LNP opposition offers the government its full support to ensure, as His Excellency said, stable and trustworthy government. Where the government gets it right, we will be the first to acknowledge that. However, I will be the first to provide alternatives where necessary. We will move amendments and we will oppose legislation in this House if necessary because we are elected to represent our electorates and we are entrusted by Queenslanders to not only hold this government to account but also ensure that Queensland has the best governance possible.

This government made 1,000 commitments during the recent election campaign. My constituents and all Queenslanders have my commitment to ensure that those commitments are delivered in an efficient and timely fashion where they provide benefits to this state. They have my commitment that I will work cooperatively with the government wherever possible, but they also have my word that my loyalty remains to them. They have my word that where there are wrongs to be exposed I will expose them and where there are people left behind I will do my best to restore equality.

Members of the last parliament will undoubtedly be aware of my campaign to show that at times what works in the metropolitan areas does not necessarily work in rural and regional Queensland. I have and will continue to highlight the disparity in infrastructure and services in regional Queensland as opposed to those metropolitan areas. Whilst much was achieved during the last term of parliament, there is much more left to do. Regional Queensland still struggles to endure significantly higher electricity prices than those available to our counterparts in South-East Queensland. Whilst \$50 credits from time to time are welcomed, the fact remains that consumers in the south-east can save more than \$400 per year with a few phone calls to providers. The regions of this state can never achieve their full potential while they are denied the opportunities available to their city cousins, and this applies especially to electricity prices.

His Excellency spoke of the government's plan to diversify the economy and to grow the agricultural and resource sectors—something very dear to my heart. He spoke of growing tourism, helping small business and growing manufacturing by supporting the introduction of new products. We heard of infrastructure investment in the regions and the need to grow the population and ensure a wide range of talented people live in regional Queensland. I fully support those lofty ambitions, but the fact is that while regional Queensland and electorates like the Burdekin electorate are held back by high electricity prices, by inadequate roads, by insufficient health services and by, in some parts, a crime epidemic regional Queensland will never achieve its full potential.

I am proud to say that the Burdekin electorate is the most diverse electorate in Queensland. From the semirural areas in the north, it works its way down the coast to Australia's largest sugarcane-growing area. Moving even further south, it has one of the largest horticultural industries and then heading inland we have the majority of coalmines in Queensland. Even further west we see the cattle industry, more agriculture and more mines, all within the one electorate. The Burdekin electorate is almost 90,000 square kilometres of untapped potential, and it is that potential that Queensland needs to realise as we recover economically from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Burdekin electorate is a place to live and a place to work for people who embrace opportunity and work hard for themselves, their families, their communities and their state. They are people who want the opportunity to achieve, and even more, but in order to do so they require the essentials that many Queenslanders take for granted. Let us take health services, for example. In Home Hill we have an award-winning doctor who is currently expanding his practice for the third time in a few years. Meanwhile in Clermont, the efforts of a mining company, a passionate group of locals and support from the federal government has done little to address the doctor shortage in that community. In Collinsville we recently saw the appointment of a second doctor, but when emergency care is needed we find that the Royal Flying Doctor Service is unable to land at the Collinsville airstrip due to restrictions with that airport.

Earlier I mentioned the vast distances travelled by people in regional Queensland and particularly within the Burdekin electorate. Despite the riches that come out of my electorate, there are still unsealed state roads within my electorate and other roads that are nothing more than goat tracks. In the past three months alone, three people have lost their lives on roads in the Burdekin electorate. Both incidents

occurred on stretches of road that my constituents quite rightly want addressed. While the investigations into these incidents continue and we wait for the causes, it is without doubt that these roads have previously contributed to serious injuries and fatalities.

In the February edition of the RACQ's *Road Ahead* two of the top 10 worst roads in Queensland were in my electorate. The condition of Kilcummin Diamond Downs Road was so bad late last year that the school bus run was cancelled. This impacts on the ability of Queensland children to even attend school, let alone achieve their dreams. It is a situation that simply would not be tolerated in the south-east, yet, while \$7 billion is committed to a tunnel in Brisbane, roads in my electorate are holding back our children from attending school and, furthermore, they are claiming lives. May Downs Road was the other road identified in that report. Given the increasing volumes of produce and the heavy vehicles using this road, not to mention local traffic, it is only a matter of time before we see more injuries and fatalities on that section of road as well.

Roads are without question the single biggest issue in my electorate. I have spoken at length about the Peak Downs Highway and the recent fatality on the Bruce Highway south of Townsville has again highlighted how dangerous this section of highway has become. We need action and a real commitment to upgrading this section of the highway before more lives are lost. I also want to talk about roads like the Bowen Developmental Road and the Clermont Alpha Road that still have vast stretches that are unsealed. The produce that feeds Queenslanders, the coal and the other resources that inject billions into our economy and the people who work day after day to support this state share these roads. They are the vital connection to basic medical services, let alone specialists, which can be situated hundreds of kilometres away. They are the vital link to allowing our children to learn, to grow and to achieve their very best, but they are in many cases overlooked. The smashed windscreens caused by these roads, the shredded tyres that sit on the side of those roads alongside the crosses erected to honour those who have died are not just symbols of broken lives and broken vehicles; they are proof positive that we are not realising the value, let alone the potential, of those areas.

Moving on to education, we face further challenges. It is no secret that attracting teachers to some areas of regional Queensland is a challenge, but in the Burdekin electorate there are currently several schools with acting principals appointed on a temporary basis who have been in that role for over 15 months. How are we going to attract teachers to a school where at any time the leadership of that school could change due to the temporary nature of those appointments? There are schools that have had teacher vacancies for in excess of 12 months right throughout the electorate and I will fight to bring the resources to my rural schools that they deserve, because, after all, those students are our future.

Yesterday I spoke to the Minister for Education about Valkyrie State School down Beef Road. That school does not have water. That school does not have a water supply and has not had a water supply for nearly 10 years, so it trucks water into that school each week. To think that in 2021 in the state of Queensland there is a school without a water supply is unforgivable to me. It is all well and good to talk about attracting people to regional centres, but if you take the example of a family, schools, doctors, nurses and allied health services they are all vitally important considerations. Even before the pandemic many centres in my electorate were calling out for services like psychology, occupational therapy and speech therapy, so I welcome the government's commitment to ensure all Queensland students have access to mental health services. In many areas that will be a difficult goal to achieve and I ask the Premier on behalf of my constituents to consider commencing the rollout of that service in areas that have little or no access to these services at all.

I am sure that we would all agree that schools contribute to the fabric of any community. While we face challenges at some schools in my electorate, there are other factors that are also eroding the fabric of those communities. Sports, committee organisations and businesses are being torn apart due to the impacts of mine rostering practices as well as FIFO and DIDO workers, but there are further possible impacts.

Services such as health are based on the number of residents in a particular area, but FIFO and DIDO workers are not included in those calculations. That leaves the potential for grossly inadequate services that, frankly, have the potential to lead to the loss of life. I have given my commitment that I will continue to work with both the state and federal governments during the coming term of parliament to address this issue because, and I know Isaac Regional Council have undertaken this exercise, on any given day there are tens of thousands of additional employees and personnel working across that council area.

Another issue that must be addressed if we are truly to tap into the full potential of the Burdekin electorate and the wider area of regional Queensland is water infrastructure. Despite commitment after commitment we are still no closer to seeing the raising of the Burdekin Falls Dam, and projects like the

Urannah Dam and the Elliot Main Channel remain plans instead of reality. I quite often say that where there is water there is opportunity and if we are truly going to realise the opportunities that are on offer in the Burdekin electorate these water projects must become reality rather than the subject of yet another study.

I also want to talk about one of the most exciting projects this state has seen in a generation and that is the establishment of a space station at Bowen. We have an expression of interest from Gilmour Space Technologies to construct a launch site at the Abbot Point industrial area north of Bowen. What an opportunity for Queensland it would be if we were to see satellites launched on a regular basis from this area.

During the course of the campaign I made a number of commitments around infrastructure, services and support for community groups. These commitments were made following consultation with councils, sporting groups, not-for-profit organisations and industry groups. They included, inter alia, widening, overtaking lanes, replacement of bridges on the Peak Downs Highway, the full replacement of the Phillips Creek Bridge, the construction of the space launch facility at Abbot Point, a commitment to increase storage and processing at the Brandon Rice Mill, the renewal of the Moranbah Community Centre, the upgrade of the Clermont Saleyards, the installation of turning lanes on the Bruce Highway at a number of intersections, upgrades to a number of sporting facilities throughout the electorate, a commitment to upgrade the Collinsville Airstrip to allow the Royal Flying Doctor Service to land at night, pre-approval and planning for multipurpose halls at the Clermont State High School, the Collinsville State High School and the Dysart State High School.

All I have ever asked for is our fair slice of the pie, a return on the billions of dollars in royalties that are pumped into state government coffers each year by our resource sector. I met with the Kilcummin Diamond Downs Group last week that have been fighting tirelessly for upgrades to services in this area. They are fighting for upgrades to something as simple as a telephone service, which we here in the south-east corner of the state and along the coastline take for granted. Many of those residents who live and work in the rural and regional areas of Queensland still have no access to simple mobile phone coverage. Many of them are stranded during the wet season because of road conditions and intermittent power supply.

What we consider so fundamental in our capital cities in the south-east of this state is still a massive problem in many areas throughout my electorate. Is it too much to ask for a sealed road, a doctor, teachers or staff at the local hospital dialysis unit? I am a passionate North Queenslander and my quest for equality in terms of infrastructure and services will never be satisfied until we achieve the same standards and access to services as those enjoyed by our city cousins.

I am truly humbled to be re-elected as the member for Burdekin. We kicked some goals during the last term, but there is more to be done. I look forward to once again taking up the fight on the issues that matter and making the Burdekin electorate a better place to live, work and play.