



Speech by

**Rachel Nolan**

**MEMBER FOR IPSWICH**

Hansard Wednesday, 19 May 2004

---

### **ADDRESS-IN-REPLY**

**Ms NOLAN** (Ipswich—ALP) (5.07 p.m.): I rise today to respond to the Governor's speech outlining the Beattie government's priorities for this, our third term. I wish to respond to those priorities from a personal, philosophical framework and to comment on how Ipswich fits into them. I want to talk specifically about some issues relating to the health of our democracy and the community's engagement with it. I want to talk about education, I want to talk about south-east Queensland planning and how Ipswich fits into that.

At the commencement of my second term, I am three years—and I feel very many years—older and I would like to think that I am a little wiser, too. I am often asked if I have yet become cynical about politics. The answer very clearly is no. While people put politicians and the political process down, my experience has heartened me as often as it has caused me disillusionment. Among my colleagues in parliament and in the Ipswich community are many wise, smart and passionate souls who it is my privilege to know and, as a result of my work, to be able to call friends. Politics is the most direct reflection of the community. Voting is a direct expression of community values. Just as our political process is flawed so, too, are we. Just as it is not good enough for politicians to ignore communities so, too, it is not good enough for individuals to opt out of democracy and then blame someone else for their problems. The corollary here, or perhaps the harsh reality, is that people get the politicians they deserve. There should not be a gaping void between the community and their representatives. We are in this together.

Politics should be about hope, about appealing—as Abraham Lincoln said—to the better angels of our nature. It is a great tragedy that through the Hanson and Howard eras Australian politics has been about appealing to our fears and our petty jealousies. How else do we explain running a whole election campaign around the lie that Australia is endangered by foreigners who throw their children overboard? Mark Latham's leadership is different, because it returns the agenda to hope—to the idea that government should participate in protecting and educating children and that it should be focused on providing opportunities for all. That hope and that active notion of government should be irresistible.

To provide that hope, however, we must restore a degree of humanity to the debate. We must value civil society and the political process, and the public debate must always be relevant. Too often we spend our time caught up in what American academic Benjamin DeMott calls junk politics, where the focus is so personal and so symbolic that the real issues are lost. Our media gave more attention to the Lockhart River wine matter last month than it has to years of Aboriginal poverty. They obsess about Amanda Vanstone's shirts but do not ask why she is one of only two women in the federal cabinet. And the *Courier-Mail* counts the number of MPs' speeches as some kind of performance measure, but rarely does it take note of the quality of what was or was not said.

Hugh Mackay argues that this focus on the immediate and the personal is a response to the fact that the big social and political issues are too daunting for us to contemplate. But frankly, we cannot just cop out like that. We should indeed expect more from a media that is more than willing to take the easy road. Politics matters. Nothing will influence our society's future as much as politics, and it behoves both those of us in it and those reporting on it not to treat politics like an insider's game in which the community are not playing but to focus on its capacity to change people's lives.

The community's decreasing connection to the public debate is reflected in the fact that 48 per cent of 18-year-olds and 13 per cent of people between the ages of 21 and 25 are not even enrolled to vote. What worries me is that for every smart 19-year-old with a vision for Australia's future who chooses not to vote there is a grumpy reactionary who wants to return us to the 1950s who does.

In 1905 Queensland women for the first time got the right to vote, in 1966 Aborigines were granted the right and in 1973 we lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Each extension of the franchise has been met with a rush of participation from the newly empowered group. It is now time to extend the franchise again, this time by lowering the voting age to 17. The member for Nudgee has made a similar call, and I acknowledge his work on this issue. My proposal, though, is that lowering the voting age should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, it should be one aspect of a renewed, genuine national focus on democratic participation, and it should come in conjunction with the introduction of a genuine, comprehensive system of civic education in schools.

Young people care about the future, and no single thing will impact on that future more than politics. But at the moment what we teach them about our political system is decidedly hit and miss. Most Australians could not tell you of the differing responsibilities of the three levels of government. A recent study showed that most Australians, in huge contrast to Americans, did not even know that we had a Constitution. And the separation of powers is a foreign concept to the National Party, let alone to the majority of punters. How would people know? We do not really teach them at school. Right now there is some civics in the SOSE program from primary school to year 10. While the federal government has talked a lot about its Discovering Democracy project, the truth is that the take-up has been abysmal and its funding is now being stripped.

How is it that we can teach kids senior physics without teaching them the foundations of their own society? Ignorance of how our own society runs can have a huge impact on people's lives. As MPs we see it every day as we see people who feel victimised and disempowered by a system they do not understand. It is a small step from finding a system you cannot navigate to thinking it is a system that is out to get you. So we should lower the voting age and we should compulsorily teach kids the life skills of civics, just like we do English and maths.

If the voting age were 17, most young people would vote for the first time while at school. It would make their civic education relevant and it would allow enrolment drives to be targeted at the captive audience of young people while they are still at school. Such a change is entirely consistent with the state government's Education and Training Reforms for the Future agenda, and it is only appropriate that it is Labor, the party which has always led Australian social change, which should empower young people now.

The Governor's speech rightly focused on education, because that is at the heart of everything that we as a government do. For the sake of our economic and environmental future, Queenslanders have to live more off our minds and less off our natural resources. We cannot continue to be a quarry and a farm. The most recent figures for gross state product show that agriculture and mining still account for around 12 per cent of gross state product, compared with less than five per cent for education and six per cent for health. While the proportion for agriculture has declined markedly in recent years, we still rely heavily for export income on primary products. While that continues we will remain export price takers, never price makers. The only way to change that is to realise the aim of the Smart State. The Beattie government is already on the way.

In the last three years year 12 retention rates have increased from 68 per cent to 81 per cent, and that is before Education and Training Reforms for the Future really kicks in. In addition, the statewide introduction of a prep year will improve children's educational foundations, especially for those children who are not read to at home.

When these changes are bedded down, however, there will still be more that needs to be done. Australia is increasingly divided between the upwardly mobile middle class who value education and are giving their children a chance through education and a growing underclass of people who do not. These are the people you hear swearing at their kids in the street. Education should be the focus for all parents. If we as a society are not focused on giving young people opportunities in their lives then what on earth are we doing? We should start by taking a tough, symbolic stand on the value of education.

I have recently written to Mark Latham arguing that parents, including those in some Aboriginal as well as white communities who do not send their kids to school, should not get family allowance. School uniforms are another sign of valuing education, and uniforms contribute to respectful school environments. I contend that school uniforms, properly worn, should be compulsory in all state schools.

The second thing about education is that we should value teaching. The Howard government has finally woken up to the impending teacher shortage and, appropriately, focused on teaching and nurses through the Nelson review. As a state government we need to do better at encouraging and rewarding teachers who take curriculum leadership in the school and who genuinely engage in lifelong learning. The latest Australian Education Union figures show that nearly 45 per cent of teachers engaged in professional development outside of school hours, and 16 per cent of women teachers surveyed are enrolled in further

study. The state's leading teacher program does not sufficiently reward those people and does little to reward good, young, professional teachers. We need to look at more ways, like the recently announced professional year, to fast-track and reward good teachers.

Thirdly, we need to stay focused on the physical infrastructure of state schools. While we have stemmed the tide from state to private schools in recent years, we need to do more to improve the physical infrastructure, particularly of older state schools. My electorate is like many established areas of Queensland in that the schools are old and in some cases well worn. While the Triple R and Building Better Schools programs of recent years mean that schools such as Bremer High in my electorate are now in much better shape than they were three, four or five years ago, school improvement should continue to be a major funding focus. I contend that Queensland needs a comprehensive school rebuilding program. This is more important, to my mind, than some of the more fashionable causes such as school airconditioning.

Education creates opportunity. It is the best thing a Labor government can do. As we look for new ways to link government to people, we should start planning for schools to be genuine community hubs where local people come together to meet and through which other social services like child protection, public health, adult education and sport are delivered. To some extent this already happens. In some schools where the principal is local and long term, the school will run things like the local Anzac Day service and community groups might use a classroom at night. But this is not always the case. Schools have vastly underutilised physical infrastructure, so the idea that schools would be places where parents meet at night classes, where principals are involved with child protection conferences and where retired people come during the day to read to kids seems a sensible antidote to the social disengagement in communities and to the insatiable call for physical infrastructure. This idea was well developed by the Victorian principals association some years ago. I propose it as a useful planning goal for our government.

I wish to turn now to Ipswich. The people of Ipswich delivered one of the biggest pro-government swings in the state at the last election. The seat, which was previously about the 20th safest for Labor, is now, on Associate Professor Paul Reynolds' calculation, fourth. To the people of Ipswich I am deeply grateful. Ipswich has a tremendous sense of identity and community, like nothing I have encountered anywhere else—and I have lived in many parts of the world and in many other parts of Australia. It is socioeconomically and culturally diverse, with the gritty honesty that comes from people from different backgrounds making a go of living through a long, sometimes hard, history together. A few weeks ago at Anzac Day at Woodend I looked around at the people who support me and who have known my family for generations, and I was struck by what good people they are and what an extraordinary privilege it is to represent them. I put my soul into representing Ipswich people and towards me they are warm and supportive. Ipswich is now more prosperous and optimistic than it has been at any other time in my lifetime. Our unemployment and crime rates are falling. The property market is booming. The economy is diversifying into tourism and a better integrated education sector and a new manufacturing sector exemplified by the Capral development at Bundamba is emerging.

South-east Queensland planning was a key election issue. There now needs to be an understanding that one of the keys to creating a sustainable future for south-east Queensland is embracing Ipswich. In recent years the Gold and Sunshine coasts have experienced population growth of around four per cent per year, creating areas of urban sprawl with stretched social and physical infrastructure and limited capacity for jobs growth. To top it off for the people who have moved to the coast to live the dream, many of the new urban areas are not even very close to the beach. If this trend continues, we will have urban sprawl stretching from Noosa to Coolangatta.

The biggest environmental issues facing south-east Queensland are protecting green space, including bush that is not in national parks for recreation, maintaining water supply and quality, and protecting air quality by ensuring that people live near where they work. To avoid the nightmare south-east Queensland could easily become, we need to draw the population west. Ipswich provides the south-east Queensland solution for two reasons. Firstly, it has the land capacity to accommodate jobs beyond the projections for its urban growth and, secondly, it is a community with existing social infrastructure, not a greenfield site.

The Beattie government, I am pleased to say, gets it when it comes to the strategic importance of Ipswich. The evidence of that understanding is that our one major road funding commitment in the recent election campaign was \$120 million to build a second Ipswich-Brisbane road by extending the Centenary Highway from Springfield to Ripley. This road will be built 20 years ahead of its projected time.

My job, though, is not just to get people to Ipswich; it is to ensure that we get the planning and infrastructure for liveable, not dumb growth. In coming years Ipswich will see both industrial and urban growth. They must be done well. At its heart, Ipswich is an industrial town. If we fail to attract new, clean green industry now, or if those industries are deterred by self-interested NIMBYs, then Ipswich will not see jobs growth; it will become nothing more than a satellite city of Brisbane and our identity will be lost.

Industrial growth in Ipswich has been and will continue to be my first priority. For the record, I want Ipswich people to know that I am not pro development at any cost. The council, too, must assert that we

are planning—not developer—driven and we must play to our strengths—maintaining our heritage, cleaning up our river, loving our sense of community and building new industry to make Ipswich again a workers' town. If we do these things, good urban growth will follow. If we are developer driven, then we will be no better than the suburban sprawl that other parts of south-east Queensland have already become.

Already Ipswich has some clear examples of good and bad urban planning. Springfield and Winston Glades are connected, well-serviced communities because they have been built with forethought by developers who have stuck around. In contrast, we have patchwork developments where suburban streets meet horse paddocks in areas around Redbank Plains and Raceview. They are the signs of councils who have simply responded to developers' demands, and we live with the social consequences of that for many years to come.

The next part of Ipswich to be developed will be Ripley. The large number of land-holdings there and the distance from the CBD mean that without tough planning guidelines we could easily fall into those same traps again. Today I call on council to insist that the gaps in our existing suburbs are filled before we start moving further out. We want quality development, and with demand for land in south-east Queensland so strong there is no reason why we should not get it. To make our claim, we need an attractive CBD and we need to improve our river. The Bremer River has always been one of my priorities and that work will soon start to come to fruition with the \$6 million River Heart project which will develop parkland and walkways along the CBD stretch of the river.

Still the Ipswich City Square shopping precinct is moribund—an embarrassment to the city. Hundreds of millions of dollars of retail spending flow from Ipswich each year while T.P. Tay, the owner of the prime CBD site, fails to properly maintain let alone renovate his centre. The empty shops are a blight on the city, and again today I call on the city square owner for the sake of the people of Ipswich to invest in his centre or to sell it to someone who will.

This insistence on quality planning should extend throughout the city. In recent years I have been very concerned by the poor quality, cheap prefab concrete developments we are getting along the main city entrance on Brisbane Road between Bundamba and the CBD. This is not good enough for the main entrance to a heritage city, and I call on council to look at ways of ensuring better quality building in that area.

The other side in addition to planning is building the infrastructure. My views on the Ipswich Motorway are well known and I will not go into a lot of detail today except to say this: the member for Blair, Cameron Thompson, has run one of the most deceitful campaigns I have ever seen in politics. His argument that the planning for the Ipswich Motorway upgrade is sufficient is outrageous given that his government, the federal government, set the parameters for that planning. The motorway is 100 per cent a federal road. The Howard government's ongoing refusal to provide the funds for its upgrade means that the gridlock that occurred there yesterday is 100 per cent the federal government's fault. Ipswich people almost universally want a six-lane upgrade and, if Cameron Thompson's government will not deliver it, then he should start looking for another job. At a local level, there are a number of big issues on the horizon. There is too much traffic flowing through the CBD and the council needs to reinvigorate its ring-road plan. As a state government, we need to improve rail.

I have talked about a lot of ideas in this speech from schools to roads and protecting the environment in south-east Queensland. Not all of them will be taken up, but I will make the point that I see putting forward those ideas as my job. I do not think it is good enough to come in here and talk about things that you have not thought about. I do not think it is good enough to always be a populist and to squib the real issues. In electing me to the parliament again, an enormous number of people including my branch members, my family and my friends have supported me, and I intend to represent them genuinely to the best of my abilities. I put my mind and my soul into this job, and for the next three years I intend to continue to do this job with the greatest of my integrity.