



Speech by

Rachel Nolan

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

Hansard Thursday, 25 May 2006

VOLUNTEERS

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (9.47 pm): Since the parliament last sat I have been involved in three significant Ipswich events: the Ipswich Chamber of Commerce has celebrated its centenary; Ipswich Meals on Wheels, which was Queensland's first, celebrated 50 years; and Mark and Gail Edwards, who are friends of mine and wonderful people, celebrated 15 years service to the Ipswich Region Community Church. The three events were different in that they represent milestones in business, community and church but they share a common thread in that they mark a continuing spirit of public service. I speak about them tonight because it concerns me that, as people become busier and more individualistic, that spirit of community and public service is under threat.

At all three events I spoke to the people involved and asked them what made them do the things they do. Mark Edwards told me that the sense of community service was something that he, through his family, had learnt. He told me that he felt compelled to help what he called 'the least'. Chamber President Craig Thomas said to me that he was drawn to ways in which he could help people and make a difference. A number of the Meals on Wheels volunteers told me that they had an extraordinary sense of fulfilment from going to people's homes and making sure that they were OK. They said that in many cases the Meals on Wheels volunteer was the only person those old people saw all day.

The thread that runs through all these people is the joy, the warmth and the spirit of helping other people. I raise this matter because it concerns me that that spirit is under threat. Even in Ipswich, which has a far higher rate of participation in volunteer organisations than do many other places, some organisations tell me that they struggle to find volunteers. Therefore, my call tonight is for people to volunteer; to embrace the spirit of helping others.

The influential academic Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* laments the loss of the public. His American research identified that the rate at which people joined organisations, be they churches, business groups or bowling leagues, peaked in the 1950s and has been declining ever since. Research in Australia shows the same trend, which is exacerbated by a city-country divide in that about 42 per cent of people in regional areas volunteer compared to 10 per cent fewer people in the cities.

We live in a materialistic society but we know in our hearts that no fulfilment can be found there. For instance, research shows that if our neighbour gets richer we will become less happy. But if our neighbour becomes happier—say by getting married—we become happier, too. On top of that, if we help our neighbours to become happier, the fulfilment delivered to us will be magnified.

The best thing that any of us can do for our own happiness is to help someone else—to give them security or joy. That cannot be bought, but it is within our power to attain. I urge the people of Ipswich—indeed, the people of Queensland—including the people who move to these areas, to get involved in community, to maintain the spirit of public service and to help others.