

**Kerry Rea, Federal Member for Bonner
– First Speech to House of Representatives
Tuesday 19th February 2008**

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call Ms Rea, I remind honourable members that this is her first speech. I therefore ask that the usual courtesies be extended to her.

Ms REA (Bonner) (5.33 pm)—I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathered here today and the traditional owners of the land which is covered by the electorate of Bonner, the Quandamooka and Jagera peoples. I wish to acknowledge elders past and present and, in so doing, make special mention of the late Neville Bonner, the first Indigenous member of parliament, a true gentleman and a great Queenslander. Mr Speaker, may I also congratulate you on your election to this very significant office.

Only 1,059 people have sat in the federal parliament since Federation and, of that 1,059, only 78 have been women. When you consider the millions of Australians who have contributed over the last 107 years to making this country what it is today, I am humbled by the incredible honour and opportunity I have been granted by the people of Bonner and Australia.

Democracy is a wonderful thing. It is highly likely that the next United States President will be either an African-American man or a white woman. In Australia, our Prime Minister and Treasurer are two blokes from Nambour called Kevin and Wayne.

The last election was clearly a call by the Australian people to restore our democratic system of government as a positive force for change. For its health and vitality, its equitable progress and advancement, our system of government depends on an open, transparent and accountable political process, a robust opposition and a concerned and informed public. These are the foundations not only to make democracy work but to make democracy matter to citizens of our nation.

Our democracy must be robust to survive and succeed. It can only be so if all its citizens are able to participate freely, fairly and to their full potential. That is why the next step for our ever-evolving democracy must be reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of Australia. When prejudice and economic or social disadvantage prevent even one person from participating in society then we are all weakened. As the great Martin Luther King Jr said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister moved a formal apology to the stolen generations. It was an important

step in achieving reconciliation, an important step to begin the process of healing the rift that has existed for too long between Australians. It was a day that made me so proud to be a member of the first Labor government in almost 12 years. For me, personally, there was no more poignant moment. My mother is now 88, the same age as many of the members of the stolen generations who sat in this parliament last Wednesday. Ten years ago my siblings and I discovered that her grandmother, Nellie Richards, was an Aboriginal woman from Central Queensland. It has made us all keenly aware of how different her life and my mother's life could have been.

The focus of the day was deliberately and quite rightly the apology to Indigenous Australians. Further to this, we must also recognise the importance of this day for our whole nation and its democratic traditions. Reconciliation is vital, not just to acknowledge the wrongs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered in the past; it is also important for non-Indigenous Australians. Until we recognise that we are not two separate peoples simply inhabiting the same continent, we are denying a fundamental part of our social development. Our language, our placenames and our music have all been influenced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. We share a history and we must embrace that with pride.

For nearly 12 years, all of us as a nation have been subjected to the most cynical use of our democratic sensibilities. They have been used to divide and drive wedges between us, but last Wednesday the people of Australia—all over Australia—came out of their homes in their thousands to acknowledge the government's apology. It was proof that for so long we have been waiting for a chance to unite in a common cause, to feel whole rather than a mixture of different parts. We demonstrated the Australian generosity of spirit and the fundamental belief that working collectively, whether it is in the workplace or on the lawn of Parliament House, is a far better way for us all to individually succeed. The corrosive politics of division that played on suspicion and fear are gone. The setting against each other of workers, practitioners of different faiths and citizens from differing ethnic backgrounds is gone and, ultimately, the refusal to acknowledge our responsibility and to show true respect for the Indigenous people of this country is also gone. It felt like a breath of fresh air, and the nation collectively breathed it and sighed with relief.

Up to this point, most of my working life has been devoted to serving the people of Brisbane as a city councillor. Building a city is similar to building a nation. It is the best way to learn how government and

our democratic system work best to provide the community with the basic services and infrastructure they need to go about their daily lives. It taught me a lot. I have learned that building a community is about investing in the people that live there. It is about providing the infrastructure, both physical and social, that enables everyone to develop the lifestyle that best suits them.

If there is one lesson you learn from local government, it is a sense of reality. You are transported from the theatre of parliamentary politics and planted right in the middle of someone's backyard or even their street. You quickly learn that no problem is too big or too small, and playing the blame game matters nought to someone who cannot sleep because of their neighbour's barking dog.

Of course, being a member of the Brisbane City Council is a unique experience in local government. It is the largest council in the country, covering the whole metropolitan area of the city, with a budget of over \$2 billion. Serving with Brisbane City Council was an experience that taught me the value of being involved at the grassroots of a local community. I would like here to acknowledge my friend Jim Soorley, a person who led by action, a true visionary and, I believe, one of the best lord mayors Brisbane has ever had. He set out to transform Brisbane. In the 13 years that I was part of the Labor council led by Jim, I grew up—and so did Brisbane. The city emerged from having a sleepy, country town image to become the bustling, cosmopolitan, modern city it is today. Much of the urban renewal that occurred in Brisbane was, of course, driven by the visionary Building Better Cities program initiated by then Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe. This program invested federal government money into local government areas, enabling valuable inner-city land—traditionally, industrial areas now redundant—to be redeveloped into new suburbs. They were strategically planned to include affordable housing and community infrastructure, creating a village-like atmosphere in the middle of a major city.

Indeed, it was the achievements of the Brisbane City Council and my passion for local government that had a strong influence on my decision to enter the federal parliament. It is at this level of governance in our country that the lack of Commonwealth government investment in our cities and regions over the last 11 years has been keenly felt. I look forward to seeing a revitalised relationship between the federal government and local councils to deliver the infrastructure required to build even better communities—invest federally; think locally. I know that this government appreciates the local knowledge and expertise that local councils can

bring to ensuring that Infrastructure Australia invests most effectively. So I say to my former council colleagues: I look forward to continuing to work with you to deliver for Bonner. I will never forget the lessons I learnt at the coalface.

These experiences have brought me here as the representative for Bonner, one of the most interesting electorates in the country. It covers the south-eastern suburbs of Brisbane, from the city's southern border to the river, so, like the Prime Minister, I am a proud southsider. I often describe Bonner as 'the lungs of Brisbane'. On three sides it is bordered by significant waterways: Brisbane River, Tingalpa Creek and Moreton Bay. From Mount Gravatt, in the south-west, to Moreton Bay run several major creek catchments, protected by large tracts of bushland. Then there is Moreton Island, which boasts the largest sand dunes in the world. This is all within an electorate fully contained within the fastest growing capital city in the country.

What a privilege and a challenge it will be to represent. It is why signing the Kyoto protocol was so important to the Bonner community, and I thank the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts for taking such a strong stance on commercial whaling. The islands of Moreton Bay are home to some of the best whale-watching sites in the country.

Of course, Bonner's charm is not just its landscape; it is also the people. Around the bay side are some of the oldest suburbs in Brisbane, where a largely elderly population are facing the challenges that being elderly brings. The middle suburbs of the electorate are growing as fast as the rest of south-east Queensland. The suburb of Wakerley alone has become home to an extra 3,500 people just over the last three years. That is a lot of working families needing the physical and social infrastructure that more established suburbs take for granted, while trying to cope with rising mortgage payments. Homelessness is increasing. Many residents live in public housing and many are struggling to survive in an increasingly competitive rental market.

The most encouraging elements of the strengths of a thriving democracy are the ideals of justice, equity and a fair go and seeing those ideals practically implemented to extend and encourage the voice of those we represent in this House. The new priorities committed to by the Rudd government are reflected as welcome developments for Bonner. That is why the Prime Minister's focus on housing affordability and infrastructure was welcomed by the whole community.

I look forward to working with the Prime Minister and the Minister for Housing to deliver a range of solutions that will assist the residents of Bonner to move more freely through all levels of the housing sector.

These include policies that will address the causes of homelessness, rental assistance for those who wish to move into the private rental market but cannot, and the very innovative First Home Saver Account scheme that will enable so many more people to purchase their first home. This will mean that the prosperity that comes from the significant pace of population growth in south-east Queensland can be shared by all. The residents of Bonner are a socially diverse group.

From a significant Indigenous population through to all the communities who came here post war and the most newly-arrived refugees from Africa, this electorate is a snapshot of migration in Australia. I am pleased to be part of a new government that will build opportunities for all Australians. The government's focus on education will ensure this. And I look forward to the education revolution beginning with the completion of the school hall at Gumdale State School.

As only the second federal member for Bonner, I wish to acknowledge the first, Ross Vasta, and thank him for the positive and cordial manner in which he conducted the campaign. I also wish to acknowledge the Hon. Con Sciacca, the former member for Bowman, whose seat was redistributed. He contributed so much to this parliament and his local community. I also wish to make mention of my good friend Garrie Gibbon, the former member for Moreton, who is in the gallery today.

I simply do not have the time to name individually all those wonderful people who helped win the seat of Bonner for the Labor Party or all the family and friends who have been the means of encouragement and inspiration throughout my life. However, there are a few to whom I would like to express my thanks here today. I will begin by thanking the Whitlam government. It enabled me to attend university; it improved the status of women that gave my generation opportunities never experienced before; and it had the foresight to provide affordable and accessible childcare, which allowed me to have a career and children. Without these reforms I do not believe I would be here today.

I would like to thank the nuns of Mount Carmel College Wynnum, who tolerated my rebelliousness whilst instilling in me and my fellow students the notion that women can do anything as long as they have a good education and keep their hemline below their knees. I would like to thank my first boss and mentor, Ann Warner, who has never let me forget my principles and values and whose integrity as a person and as a politician will always be my benchmark. I would like to thank the many committed workers in the Your Rights at Work campaign, particularly the co-ordinator in the Bonner area, Barry Welch—a true community champion.

I thank him and his many volunteers for demonstrating that the trade union movement has a long and proud history in community activity and community advocacy and for giving those workers in Bonner most disadvantaged by Work Choices a voice and a sense of hope.

To Mike Nicholls, my campaign director, I owe a special debt of thanks. Managing a candidate as well as a large group of volunteers is not the easiest thing to do. But, Mike, you did it with grace and authority and earned much respect as a result. To Greg Laumann and the Bonner campaign committee, I say thank you. I am indebted to your tireless commitment and support—in particular, Lynne Maree Lewis and her husband, Martin, whose presence at a campaign meeting with a full pot of freshly made pasta sauce for my family sustained us for about three days. I also thank state members Phil Reeves and Paul Lucas, who, despite their own senior government roles, went out of their way to assist in any way that they could. My staff, who are in the gallery, were also supportive friends and volunteers throughout the campaign. They are Melissa Webster, Michelle Curran, Toby Broughton and Susan O'Connor, without whom the campaign office would not have functioned, and Lynne Moffat, Christine Cosgrove and Darren Godwell.

I wish to make special mention of Glenda Venn. Glenda and I have worked together in my capacity as a councillor for 17 years, and we have gone through many political and personal upheavals together. Glenda alleges that she is retiring by the end of the year. Just in case we are unable to talk her out of it, I wish to put on record my deepest and sincerest thanks for her loyalty, her support, her sanity, her incredible ability to organise my chaos and, most importantly, her friendship. At this point I would also like to mention her husband, Graham, and his friend Tony Watson, who are listening today.

My thanks also go to my campaign organiser, friend, mentor and sounding board, Lindesay Jones and his wife, Norma. Those who know him know that I could not have been blessed with a better campaigner. Lindesay's passion for the Labor Party, combined with his sporting coach background, has made him one of the most successful campaigners Queensland has ever produced. To the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party, in particular, state secretary, Milton Dick, I say thank you and wish you well in your new career—a great choice.

My deepest thanks and love go to my three children—Emma, Charlotte and Liam. Their love and support keeps me going. They keep me grounded and remind me that, whatever my day job is, my most important

and enduring role will always be as their mother. My husband, Ian, is in the gallery today. When we met on a polling booth 20 years ago this year, neither of us would ever have imagined that we would be here together. We have shared so much—not just a love of politics. It is Ian's support, care and love that has enabled me to succeed. Not everyone is lucky enough to find their soul mate, and I am so grateful that I have. My wise and loving mother, Monica Rea, cannot be here today, but my brother Robert and sister Vicki are here on behalf of mum and my four other siblings—that is seven altogether, if you cannot count. It is very special to have them here.

In conclusion, I wish to dedicate this speech to my father, Jack. For the first 21 years of my life until his early death from cancer he was not only my father, he was my best friend. He instilled in me a deep respect for the Labor Party and its values. He gave me a sense of humour based on never taking yourself too seriously. Even though it is over 24 years since his death, I still seek his approval for everything I do because it was always so hard to attain. But today I think I can almost hear him say, 'Well done, kid.'

Mr SECKER (Barker) (5.52 pm)—I congratulate the new member for Bonner on her first speech in this parliament. Those of us who have been in this chamber for a while have seen some very good first speeches by new members on both sides of this parliament and it certainly augurs well for the future of this country when we have such good maiden speeches.