



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



Hon Ken Baston, MLC **(Member for Mining and Pastoral Region)**

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 4 May 2021

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 29 April on the following motion moved by Hon Pierre Yang —

That the following address be presented to His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia —

May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our most gracious sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [3.00 pm]: Madam President, thank you for the time you have put into this chamber over the last four years. It is well appreciated.

Listening to the Governor's speech the other day, touching on everything, one thing that made me prick up my ears related to Wittenoom Gorge. The management of Wittenoom Gorge has been going on for years. Debate on the Wittenoom Closure Bill 2019 had just about finished. I went back and found the explanatory memorandum for the bill. We had gone right through the bill, dealing with the valuation of the buildings et cetera. Now we have to start all over again. The cost of the closure to the Shire of Ashburton is huge. The insurance policy ran out years ago. The shire now relies on contributions from mining companies. It would not survive otherwise. That was one issue mentioned in the Governor's speech.

I then heard a better one—that the government would increase support to \$100 a night for the patient assisted travel scheme, which will be very much welcomed. Virtually all of Western Australia comes under the PAT scheme. It is a marvellous scheme that brings down the cost of medicine and health services.

It has been a great honour to serve in the Mining and Pastoral Region. For the last 16 years, the time really flew. I did not realise that I had been here for 16 years until recently. Everyone asked, "Why are you leaving?" I said that I thought it was my time to leave. Others followed as well, and I did not plan on that. The area of the Mining and Pastoral Region that most members know covers some 80 per cent of the state of Western Australia. It also produces some 40 per cent of the nation's income. When John Howard used to visit WA, and we used to say we produced 40 per cent of the nation's income, he would say, "I don't want to hear about it", and off he went. The commonwealth drew on it pretty heavily because that was before the introduction of the goods and services tax, which resulted in a fairer system.

Not a lot has changed in the Mining and Pastoral Region but the communities have. A lot of work still needs to be done, and I will touch on that in my speech shortly. Opportunities exist across that part of Western Australia. We can harvest them in a way that drives investment in infrastructure, training and building capacity in our regions. We can go a long way towards addressing the high level of unemployment and overreliance on government services. Creating more vibrant and sustainable economies in communities throughout the Mining and Pastoral Region is still very much a work in progress.

A major piece of infrastructure that I have discussed in this place many times is the Tanami Road. I will touch on that a bit more later. I cannot stress how important it is for sustainable development

in northern Western Australia. Its sealing will significantly reduce the distance to the eastern states by about 1 000 kilometres. The problem with that road is that millions of dollars get dished out towards its upkeep and the road is built up to a certain standard so it can be sealed but then along comes the wet season and only one or two trucks need to drive on it and that is the end of that beautiful piece of dirt road. Sealing is the only way to go for the future. Along with reducing the distance to the eastern states, sealing will significantly reduce the cost of servicing many of the very remote Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley.

A number of other important road projects require completion. Doing so will greatly improve access to health services and general freight and encourage economic growth in Western Australia. The Wiluna to Meekatharra road pops its head up every year. Money is spent on it and then we have a change of government and the money goes elsewhere and it comes back again with the next government. When we get to the next government, the money should be coming back again. The Cape Leveque Road is another example. It is a 160-kilometre stretch of road linking communities along the Dampier Peninsula, with Broome as its regional centre. It is already driving investment and economic development in remote Aboriginal communities. Importantly, it is delivering a new sense of home and ambition to harness opportunities that exist in tourism and the resources sector.

Another issue that has been brewing in the north for a while relates to the Broome boating facility. On a positive note, I wanted to discuss the Broome boating facility proposal, which is yet to receive full funding. I sincerely hope it becomes a reality. I think it was a case of “We’ll put up half if you put up half.” I want to take a moment to emphasise the incredible community collaboration that has taken place in order for this proposal to reach such an advanced stage. I will provide a bit of background.

Broome has one of the highest levels of boat ownership in Western Australia, with approximately 60 per cent of households owning a boat. One boat ramp alone experiences 25 per cent of the boat launching traffic seen at Hillarys Boat Harbour, which is pretty significant for a town with a permanent population of around 16 000. The issue of a safe boat launching ramp has been a fraught issue for at least two decades. Over 20 different locations and concepts have been explored and abandoned for numerous reasons, including costs, the inability to build broad consensus, ongoing maintenance, such as dredging, and environmental and heritage issues.

Finally, after three years of hard work, overseen by the Shire of Broome and the Department of Transport, a plan was released. The concept and location has been endorsed by Nyamba Buru Yawuru, the Broome Fishing Club and the Kimberley Ports Authority and has received qualified support from the Dinosaur Coast Management Group. The plan was released in March 2020 and put out for public comment. It received the most responses ever to a Shire of Broome survey: 1 221 responses, with 74 per cent of responses either supportive or highly supportive. Feedback on the proposal was received and, as a result, changes have been made to ensure that rock cliffs remain untouched. The known dinosaur footprints will remain in place and accessible, thanks to the very dedicated people involved in the Dinosaur Coast Management Group.

I now want to touch on antisocial behaviour, liquor licensing and police. I would like to acknowledge Hon Robin Scott’s impassioned speech at the end of last year and confirm that there is growing anger and frustration in successive governments’ inability to deal with some very serious issues in northern WA. Liquor licensing in the Kimberley is a patchwork of restrictions that vary from location to location, encouraging hardcore drinkers to move to wherever access to alcohol is easiest. A major centre such as Broome struggles to cope with the people who do not have homes in Broome and do not want to use the alcohol-free short-stay accommodation facility. This was built to support Aboriginal people who need to travel to regional centres for various reasons. This results in overcrowded housing and public areas close to liquor outlets, becoming temporary camps where rubbish, hygiene and violent incidents are major concerns.

The Shire of Broome spent some \$70 000 building a fence around the visitors' centre to protect staff and visitors from antisocial behaviour and property damage. Cutting the supply of grog has had some benefits, but the people who desperately require support and rehabilitation move away from their homes and that support in order to keep drinking. A lot has to change. These problems are not easy to overcome, but there is an overwhelming feeling in the community that those in authority with the power to make changes are doing too little to curb this behaviour.

A whole-of-government approach still has not been achieved in dealing with these issues. The patchwork of liquor restrictions moves problems from one regional centre to another and restricts the vast majority of the community who drink responsibly. I would be interested to see just how many metropolitan areas in Perth would react if we were to tell people that they could buy only three bottles of wine or one carton of beer in one transaction.

The absurdity of these regulations was highlighted in questions without notice. The government has acknowledged that residents in the Kimberley are not allowed to buy alcohol in bulk for a special occasion from local retailers, who are willing and able to work with local police. But they can jump on the internet, order as much as they like from a Perth retailer and have it delivered within days to the local post office for \$18.

My office received a phone call from a person based in a Kimberley town who was unable to purchase anything other than lite beer within 300 kilometres of where they live. However, at the house next door, they saw carton after carton of beer being carried out the door on a daily basis. Alcohol is very likely to be brought across the Northern Territory border or via online.

The government's response to a question asked on 4 November 2020 also confirmed that the government has no idea how much packaged alcohol is sent from metro retailers to the Kimberley or Pilbara. It is an incredible double standard. Retailers in the Kimberley regularly have to hand over months of transactions and closed-circuit television footage, and face penalties for allowing couples to purchase their daily amount of alcohol and process that sale as one transaction. It is completely ridiculous that at the end of the day these problems are still there.

The announcement that a banned drinkers register will be trialled in the Pilbara and Kimberley has been cautiously welcomed. However, I cannot emphasise enough that the register needs to be highly dynamic with open lines of communication between police and liquor outlets. A banned drinkers register with no names on it is very costly and an ultimately futile exercise. This situation has emerged in Kununurra, which is very frustrating for all involved, police and retailers alike. Having 800 new police for Western Australia will come as welcome news to many in WA; however, we have to remember that those 800 new police will be spread over the next four years.

Now I move to the very challenging issue of juvenile crime. Over a year ago I spoke at length about this issue in this place, and I am concerned that most people would say that little has changed. It is clear that the police in regional centres such as Broome are under incredible pressure. Regarding the juvenile justice strategy, this year we have seen teenagers and sometimes younger children being involved in violent attacks on other people in their community, both in and out of school. The north has a strong need for more appropriate juvenile detention options to be made available. Juveniles who reach the sentencing stage are flying to Perth for a short period—about three weeks, I am told—and then returning to the community.

We need a far better way of dealing with this matter. The regions need facilities closer to home. These facilities need to be places where serious juvenile offenders can go to receive intensive supervision and an assessment of their needs, such as health, learning abilities and behavioural problems, while still being on country and accessible to family, rather than thousands of kilometres away in Perth.

The answer to this problem requires far more than extra policing and it requires options other than short custodial sentences at Banksia Hill Detention Centre or a slap on the wrist. Banksia Hill

Detention Centre, by the way, handles 10 to 17-year-olds. If children exhibit seriously violent behaviour in school, options need to be available to remove those students from the mainstream school community. Victims of these incidents deserve to feel safe when going back to school. The perpetrators need to get the support required to address their problems by continuing their education but with the understanding that, for a time, they have lost the privilege of attending school.

One of the first committees that I sat on in this Parliament in 2006 was the Standing Committee on Legislation. The committee looked into the Parental Support and Responsibility Bill 2005. One of the witnesses was a person with impeccable insight into many of the problems facing young Aboriginal people who had researched evidence-based strategies to address the very complex issues that exist in many communities today. Dr Tracy Westerman was the name of that witness and she has grown in renown ever since, including being named WA person of the year in 2018. Professor Tracy Westerman, as she is now known, has developed evidence-based best practice programs and services that aim to provide culturally competent mental health services for Aboriginal people. Significant resources are directed towards closing the gap and improving outcomes for Aboriginal people. But I believe many of us agree that those resources are not always directed in a very effective way. Dr Tracy Westerman, I have to say, had 85 per cent of her work in the eastern states and she should never have been allowed out of this state. In fact, she could be put up on a banner, and I think the changes in this state would be impeccable.

Regarding transport, the road network throughout Western Australia requires improvement. I know that most of the routing network comes from the bigger funding from the feds, but it is still important for the state to have its foot in the door. Commencing work on the Tanami Road to finally seal the WA section would be a huge boost to the East Kimberley when it has suffered tremendously from the economic slowdown attributed to COVID-19. An influx of workers required to complete this would be a huge boost and would create transport infrastructure that would provide ongoing benefits to the whole region.

A sealed Tanami Road would support a number of resources projects that would further diversify the East Kimberley economy. One project in particular is Agrimin's Mackay potash project, located in the East Pilbara. This project is forecasted to be the world's lowest cost producer of sulphate of potash, or SOP, which is an important mineral used widely in agriculture to improve crop yields. The plan is for the finished product, which will be processed on site at Lake Mackay, to be shipped directly from Wyndham port. Production capacity is designed to be 450 000 tonnes of SOP per annum over an initial 40-year mine life. Approximately 250 kilometres of the Tanami Road will be used by Agrimin in the journey from Lake Mackay to Wyndham. Wyndham, of course, always needs a bit of work because it is dredged one day and then they have to come back and dredge it again in a couple of days' time when there is a storm as it gets such big high tides.

Regarding our national parks, the plan for our parks is to continue with the funding allocation of \$26 million over four years. However, there appears to be an issue with the level of consultation occurring at the community level. The towns and communities most affected by changes or expansions to national parks in the region deserve a seat at the table when we are deciding on these parks. Shark Bay residents, in particular, are feeling that they may lose access to areas that they hold very dear and feel they may have their town surrounded by a national park, which will inhibit further growth of the town. Consultation is of paramount importance to ensure that the right balance is struck when creating these parks, and I know that there are problems in the Kimberley as well.

I will now talk a little bit about electorate office work. I am sure that all of us would agree that some of the most satisfying moments in our parliamentary careers sometimes come from being able to directly improve a constituent's situation. It is not always possible to sort out a problem that a constituent has come to your office with, but it is great when you can help restore at least one person's faith in politicians.

One such constituent who springs to mind is a lady from Derby who was not afraid to get on the phone when she thought something was not quite right. This lady, Mrs Ah Chee, is in her early 80s but still drives her four-wheel drive 2 600 kilometres to Perth once a year to do her Christmas shopping. Of course, she required a medical assessment to renew her licence. Derby Hospital wanted to charge Mrs Ah Chee \$280 for a medical and she was not having a bar of it. Her instincts were proven correct. After a few questions without notice, the WA Country Health Service realised this service should be free for pensioners. An audit revealed that up to 206 pensioners across the Kimberley had been incorrectly charged for this service and up to \$57 680 was likely to be refunded. What can seem like small wins in the scheme of things can make a big difference to people's lives and that is one of the best parts of being a member of Parliament.

I would now like to touch on my time as a minister. When I became a minister, I was advised that most ministers fail to leave their mark on a portfolio and at best can expect to have one major achievement a year. Although only a portion of my time in politics has been as a minister and much of the good work I feel I did was in supporting my electorate or sitting on a committee, I can say with confidence that my time as a minister was a highlight and I have no doubt that I left my mark on the portfolio, driving more than three big issues in three years.

The most notable issue would have to be the rolling out of the comprehensive wild dog strategy, including my bounty trial, which, I would add, was a success, contrary to what anyone else might tell you. Then, of course, there was the shark cull trial. That did not go down very well with the western suburbs. And then there was the deregulation, with compensation, of the Potato Marketing Corporation. Nobody was going to touch the Potato Marketing Act 1946. Eventually, we got people onside and some funding was put forward as an incentive for it to happen.

I also travelled all over the world, especially to check the live export of cattle and sheep. Of course, one probably would not do that today. As game leaders, we were able to do it then. It was a very important part of gaining confidence in the export market and continuing that market.

The biggest issue of them all, of course, was the repeal of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003. That took nearly three years to do. I thought it could be done really simply, but it took a long time.

As a minister in the Barnett government, I am very proud of my achievements in the departments of both agriculture and fisheries. I still believe having separate departments is the way to go for the future when the minister builds that new building. One of my first jobs as a minister was dealing with the water issues in Carnarvon. At the time, the river had not run for two long summers and things were looking grim for irrigators in the Gascoyne. I will diverge to tell a little story about former member for Gascoyne Ian Laurance, who was Minister for Lands years ago. Once again, the area was in drought. The honourable member at the time decided it was desperate and they needed to have a church meeting to pray to get the river to flow. That did happen. It was positive. The river flowed; the town flooded. He was not so popular when they saw the first street flood. It was a two-pronged result—you need to always watch out!

As a former resident and shire councillor, I have a passion for the unique town of Carnarvon, which offers so much. Addressing the water issues was always going to be one of my priorities. We appointed a Carnarvon ministerial advisory committee. The work that we did ultimately led to a large investment in water. The drilling of 30 new bores and putting power alongside the river has gone a long way to improving water security in the Gascoyne horticultural precinct.

We also instigated an independent review of investment and the administration of animal welfare. This started a long overdue process of improving the delivery of animal welfare in the state.

Although royalties for regions was a big-ticket funder of projects in agriculture during my time, I focused on driving practical outcomes that would bring more dollars through the farm gate for farmers. Irrigated agriculture is not only in Carnarvon, but also in the Pilbara. I was around

the table when the decision was made to invest some \$12.5 million into the Pilbara Hinterland Agricultural Development Initiative, which trialled mine dewatering projects at Woodie Woodie. It was an important way to address both mine dewatering and droughtproofing the north. We also did a lot of work proving up the water resources in the West Kimberley, putting down 12 bores at Roebuck Plains, with the former Department of Agriculture and Food doing all the soil and farm planning. The only problem was that as fast as we proved we could develop new irrigation districts, other groups had mobilised to stop us, which means very little has happened in the Kimberley to utilise our massive water assets in the north.

If I had my time again, I would like to have the role of Minister for Environment at the same time as Minister for Regional Development, but I am not gonna get there. Of course, what I am talking about is the hyper risk-sensitive departmental approach to things like Rhodes grass, which was endemic in the Kimberley. Sometimes departments and governments cannot see the wealth from the weeds.

The Bravo apple hit the news this morning. The Bravo apple has finally arrived after 20 years of development. One thing I did was to make sure that the department did not stuff up the royalty rights, as happened when we lost part of the royalties for the Pink Lady. It was a challenging journey, but I am pleased to see that industry leaders like Dr Ben Darbyshire have stayed the course and ensured that the end structure will generate good income for Fruit West and the industry development fund that oversees the apple. I thought the apple should have been called the wicked apple, and we probably would have sold a lot more. It took years to get it on the market.

Although some work on wild dogs had happened under Terry Redman, it was probably my number one priority, and I pushed for the \$75 000 trial bounty at \$100 a scalp, which I mentioned earlier. I think \$20 000 was consumed by bureaucracy and the rest went out to pay for scalps. The number of scalps rose and a department fellow said it had failed. I asked, "Why has it failed when we've got more dogs? Why was it rejected when we're getting more dogs?" We did not fail because we did not get more dogs. The people getting them were the doggers. We put a dollar sign on wild dogs, and they went out and got them. That is not a bad contract. I recall the briefings from Viv Reid from the department. He could not believe what had happened. We went for total exclusion via big ring fences around stations, like Rawlinna on the Nullarbor and in Kalgoorlie and the Gascoyne. Ultimately, we spent millions on doggers, fences and culls, including \$10 million for 820 kilometres of fencing through the Shire of Yilgarn. This work led to the extension of the Esperance fence, which is a big deal for the sheep industry in that part of the world.

The new Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act was rolled out under my watch. The act replaced 16 older acts. A lot of work on this was done in opposition and I was pleased to be there when the new act came to fruition. When I first came to Parliament, Kim Chance was pushing along that legislation. I followed it through. It went to Committee of the Whole. We waited for the regulations. It came out of committee and we were still waiting for the regulations. It was not until I became minister that we ended up with the regulations catching up with us. It was quite amazing and a good lesson in politics. Under the act, recognised biosecurity groups were formed, with matching funds from the state government. These groups are an important instrument to help control feral animals, like wild dogs.

I undertook trips to China and other countries. As I said, I would not go back there for a while now. I was also keen to support our live export trade, something that is incredibly important to sheep and cattle producers in this state. I battled cabinet to get some \$23 million of royalties for regions funds for the Newdegate, South Doodlakine and Marchagee Doppler radar stations, which have been a game changer for short-term forecasting in the south west of the state. I believe this program paid a dividend recently, tracking the cyclone that hit the northern and

north-eastern wheatbelt. It gave farmers detailed knowledge of what was coming. Ultimately, I put a farmer's view on the portfolio, as I believe that only a farmer can really understand how to get the best out of the department and not get sidetracked into issues that are not relevant to the portfolio or a priority for farmers.

In summary, they were good years, and I am proud of the fact that fishers continue to fish and farmers continue to farm. I was not there closing down fisheries or banning live exports; rather, I was pushing to open up more agriculture and support more rural jobs.

I would like to pay my respects to my wife, Robin, who had to put up with many late nights. She had to kick the cat off the bed and make room for me at about four o'clock in the morning, but I was still welcome at home!

My sons, Derek, Richard and Thomas, were also very patient and good supporters. I would come to this place, we would battle away at a bill all day, and then I would go to one of my sons and say, "What do you reckon?" and they would sum it up in about five minutes. I would go back the next day feeling relaxed that we were doing the right thing, whatever bill it was.

I will miss this place. Getting up in the morning and not putting on a suit will be quite a change. I see the only farmer in here making comments! But I will drop in here from time to time. I see the old farmers et cetera who come back here and actually participate, having an office, using the gym and other facilities, and enjoying the meals on the right days. Thank you. I really appreciate the support that I have had over the years. I have enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you.

Members: Hear, hear!

[Applause.]