

## MEEKATHARRA RACE CLUB

### *Statement*

**HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral)** [5.27 pm]: I would like to mention the Meekatharra races. For those who do not know where Meekatharra is, it is located nearly 800 kilometres north of Perth and about 500 kilometres inland. It is located on the Great Northern Highway and is one of the largest centres in the Murchison region. The Shire of Meekatharra has a population of some 1 800 people and covers 100 000 square kilometres. Considering these numbers, it is easy to see why the people living in this region face considerable challenges on a daily basis. This is why I would like to spend a few minutes drawing the attention of members to the incredible effort made by the Meekatharra Race Club that put on a spectacular day on 22 September: “Back to Meekatharra”. The Meekatharra Race Club was officially incorporated in 1911, but its history goes back even further. The results of the 1907 race published in *The West Australian* noted —

The Meekatharra races held yesterday were a great success. There was a record attendance, big fields and good racing. Betting honours were equally divided between punters and bookmakers. Everything went off without a hitch.

I can say that, 111 years later, the words used to describe the event are still very much the same. It is with some sadness that I must report that this year was the last time the races are scheduled to be held at the Meekatharra club. The Meekatharra races receive funding and support from businesses that operate in the region, mining companies in particular, but it lacks a new generation willing to take on the volunteering aspect of running a race club. This is concerning, as regional and remote race meets are such an important part of the social fabric in these areas. They are a chance for everyone to come together, relax and celebrate. These events break up the year and everyone looks forward to them.

One can look to a number of reasons to explain the decline in the number of regional race meets. It requires attention, as it can be a signifier of broader problems in regional and remote areas. According to Peter Clancy, as quoted in a recent ABC report, 20 years ago there were 3 000 people living in Meekatharra; now there are probably about 700. Obviously, the rise of the fly in, fly out workforce has drained centres such as Meekatharra and significantly reduced the pool of people available to pitch in and run such events. Of course, this affects not only country race clubs, but also schools, sporting clubs and other community volunteer organisations.

Going back to when an entrepreneur, Ross Atkins, ran the goldmine in Meekatharra, every worker who wanted a job with St Barbara mines had to live in Meekatharra. Also quoted in the report I just mentioned is the Country Racing Association of Western Australia secretary, John Biggs, who noted that the industry has become far more demanding with increased costs, tougher health and safety regulations and fewer racegoers. The concentration of prize money in the metropolitan area has also added to the pressure. Stakes in the metropolitan races have increased fivefold in the last 25 years, whereas stakes in country races have increased by only 70 per cent over the same time frame. I presume that from selling Tabcorp, the 35 per cent fund should probably be earmarked a bit more, in the sense that it should go into regional race clubs.

The Mining and Pastoral Region covers many of the small centres that produce so much of our state’s wealth. I encourage all members in this place always to consider the effects of the policies that encourage people away from the regions and that increasing regulation can tip marginal events over the edge. Two years ago, I was up at Meekatharra Race Club and there is a nice lawn from the bar area across to the bookies’ area, across to where the horses are. Of course, families with little kids were there. The police stamped down on the race club because it had not sought a licence to allow kids to be in the area in front of the bar where alcohol was being drunk. A few of us intervened and a decision was made to continue the racing.

People living in places such as Meekatharra work very hard and go without a lot of things that people in the central areas take for granted. It is incredibly important that decisions always take into account how they will affect the people living in a sparsely populated area. I hope that the Meekatharra Race Club finds a way to continue. It has kept its date at this stage, but it will need a new and youthful committee to take it on board. Of course, it is not only a race meeting. There is a band, dancing and fashions on the field. The club makes a good two-day event out of it.

I feel sad for this race club, but a sadder event took place recently. Dave Poletti had been a bookmaker for a number of years and had always been around regional racing. He was a life member of the Meekatharra Race Club. A couple of days ago, he passed away in Kalgoorlie. Dave used to attend race meetings as far north as Broome, down through Marble Bar, and right down through Mingenew, Carnarvon and Gascoyne Junction, and I believe even at Northam. He was well recognised from travelling that area and he was always a colourful character; that is probably how I would describe him. I think it is really sad; his death was very sudden and nobody expected it. When we see someone at one of these race meetings and then they are not there the next time, it brings it home to us very quickly. I express my sincere condolences to his family on their sad loss. I believe that Dave is an inspiration for the young to get involved next year and see whether they can have the Meekatharra races once again.

*House adjourned at 5.34 pm*

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