

**ADDRESS-IN-REPLY**

*Motion*

Resumed from 11 April on the following motion moved by Hon Liz Behjat —

That the following address be presented to His Excellency —

To His Excellency Malcolm McCusker, Companion of the Order of Australia, Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, Queen's Counsel, 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 COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary)** [3.44 pm]: I rise in support of the motion and to thank the Governor for his speech and the excellent job he has been doing in that position for the people of Western Australia. I would also like to welcome back members after being away for a long time—as shown by the amount of papers that were read in. We have had a good 45 minutes to reflect on what it is like to be back in this place—given some of the interjections during the notices of motion, we were quickly reminded.

One of the significant things the Governor touched upon was the role of volunteering within our society; he made special note of it very early on in his speech. I note that this week is National Volunteer Week, and I also would like to acknowledge the very important and integral role that volunteers play in our society. Everywhere we go, in every community or town we visit, almost every hour of every day we can see volunteering in action. It is very much a part of our society that volunteering plays such an integral role. Volunteers should be celebrated, and it should be recognised that our communities cannot function without them. I am interested to see whether other members, in responding to this motion, will refer to doing more to support volunteers in our society. I think we are going along pretty well, but obviously that burden falls more and more to the more senior members of our community because they tend to have more time on their hands. I think that as the baby boomers start to move into their seniors years and retirement we will probably have quite a lot of volunteers available.

But I think we can do more. It would be really useful to encourage and implement programs that get younger people more involved in their civic duty or volunteering within their communities. I think some sections of the community could really benefit from the younger sector getting involved—the emergency services sector; ambulance drivers, bush fire fighters, the State Emergency Service and marine rescue. Those sorts of organisations really need able-bodied people to get involved and help out. More could probably be done from a government perspective to encourage those younger people to volunteer for those roles.

It has been my experience that volunteers in regional Western Australia tend to be fairly well connected to community; obviously in smaller communities where there might be only 400 people it is pretty hard to hide away and there tends to be a lot more opportunity to get involved and volunteer. But, again, I think we could do more in the way of policy settings to encourage volunteerism. Just thinking about the Governor again and his promotion of volunteering, he has obviously led by example in his career and the level of volunteering he has engaged in.

I just wanted to touch very quickly on a policy we ran with in the last state election, which was that of a volunteer fuel card. Our proposal was to actually help those eligible emergency services like St John Ambulance, the volunteer bush fire service, the volunteer fire and rescue service, the volunteer State Emergency Service, the volunteer emergency service and volunteer marine rescue service—those sorts of groups that operate in regional Western Australia. We really recognise that they are a vital part of our communities, and if members go to any bushfire, bush rescue or search party there are always volunteers from those groups in our towns and community helping out with the search or fighting fires. There is no doubt that we cannot employ professional service men and women in every town to fill these roles, so we have to rely on volunteers. Our contribution of a \$2 000 fuel card to those organisations was in recognition of the role they play and how much we value them in our communities. That was one policy we were very keen to run with because we know members of those organisations tend to use their own vehicles, put fuel in those vehicles and run around spending their hours and fulfilling the duties of those volunteer services. A \$2 000 fuel card was in recognition of the work they have been doing and will do.

I want to touch also on one section of volunteering that I know is close to the Governor's heart. He is a patron of Foodbank WA—one of 200 organisations he is a patron of. I had the pleasure of going to Government House and meeting the Governor and many of the Foodbank organisations, where we acknowledged some of the major contributors to Foodbank over the past few years. Yesterday, I was in Albany for a breakfast with the Albany Foodbank volunteers in recognition of the work they do in that community. It is interesting to note that only two

people are employed at Foodbank in Albany, but at the breakfast there were about 26, and I know that many more volunteers could not make it. That organisation could not run at all in Albany and provide that much needed service throughout the great southern without its volunteers. Yesterday's breakfast was a celebration of the contribution they have made to that Foodbank organisation. The people who run it down there and those who lead it from Foodbank WA up here have the right attitude towards recognising and valuing their volunteers. They celebrate them at every opportunity and recognise their efforts. They know that their organisation could not run without them. We gave an award yesterday for the volunteer of the year. Congratulations to John on receiving that. I think Foodbank is the epitome of how communities help communities. Unfortunately, situations arise when people need a helping hand with food and the necessities of life. Foodbank has recognised that need and taken the opportunity to make sure that food is not wasted. Coles, Woolworths, IGA and a lot of growers regularly donate food. Foodbank uses that opportunity to minimise food waste as well as help the neediest in our community. I would like to congratulate Foodbank and, in this week of volunteering, say thank you to those Foodbank volunteers.

The Governor spoke about some of the challenges this new government faces, particularly the around the unparalleled growth we are experiencing in Western Australia. He indicated in his speech that more than 1 000 new people have been arriving in Western Australia each month from either interstate or overseas. That highlights to me that pressure will be put on this government, on our infrastructure, on our communities and on our government and non-government services to meet the demands of those new arrivals as well as to look after the people who already live here. In the past four years we did a pretty good job. But no job can be completed when that sort of growth is still happening. We have more challenges ahead, for sure. We all know the pressures we are facing on housing, transport, health and education. Some of the key services government provides will be stretched. Until we find the right solutions, we will keep working on them to ensure that the new arrivals and the people who already live here are looked after as best as possible.

I think also that sort of growth provides opportunities for this Parliament. As a regional member representing regional Western Australia, I see some real opportunities for our regional communities arising from this growth. I am sure that everyone in government and in this Parliament would not like to see all those new arrivals located in Perth. We talk regularly about the strains on Perth infrastructure. One of the key issues in the election was public transport and the congestion on our roads. I am sure there is an appetite to encourage some of those new arrivals to live away from Perth and live in regional Western Australia. In fact, we want to encourage them to see regional Western Australia as a place to make their home and raise their families and, obviously, to work in. Some of the opportunities that will come through getting more of those people out into regional Western Australia are the increased services that arise from the creation of a critical mass of people. Much of the economy of Perth is driven by the fact that a lot of people live here. A lot of people need access to retail shops. I am surprised how often retail centres are built. New shopping centres are being built all over the place. Where I stay in Perth I was surprised to see some vacant land levelled to build a small shopping centre that I thought would never be built in an area like that. But obviously investors see a demand for more and more retail shopping centres. That demand is based on people living here who earn an income and who are willing to spend. I think some of those same sorts of things apply to regional Western Australia. The fact that we do not have more regional cities is a bit of a missed opportunity. Along the coast of Queensland there are regional cities of 50 000 people or more. Although they may have started through different economic drivers, be they a port, mining operations, fishing or pastoral activities, part of their sustainability and growth now is around the people who live there. Obviously, things such as tourism and diversification of their underlying economic drivers maintain their sustainability. We need more people to move into regional Western Australia and we as a government need to prepare those communities for more people to be living there. We should proactively look at what might encourage them to live in regional Western Australia, or at why they would like to live anywhere. There is no doubt that with larger populations comes a sense of vibrancy and a sense of community and culture. Many people look for that when they move to a new location or even a new state or a new country. We should be encouraging our communities to take that next step.

I think the previous government started that process pretty well over the last four years. During the last term of government, there had obviously been a focus on regional development, regional economies and regional communities. I can think of many programs—I am sure regional members here could think of many opportunities—whereby investment from government has brought about a change, a new development or an improvement that has helped a community become more liveable and be able to employ more people and provide the services required at a community level. I think every community of regional Western Australia has been touched by that investment. We have made a pretty good start but we need to keep going and look at how we can help attract people to those communities that wish to grow. Obviously employment is one of the main drivers of where people choose to live. Many people in our regional communities already have employment opportunities. We all know about the mining boom in the Pilbara and the midwest, which in itself is attracting people to live there. We also know about the challenges those communities face of fly in, fly out workers. Many

people who move to Western Australia from interstate or overseas come here because of the employment opportunities. They might already have a job or they might be hoping they can land one when they are a bit closer. One of the challenges the government must face in the future is how to promote and encourage other industries and sectors of economic development to those communities that are driven by only one or two economic drivers so that we can diversify and help underpin the sustainability of those communities. It was not long ago when people moved away from places such as Goldsworthy and Shay Gap, which were basically towns built for one purpose, when the mines closed and the purpose for the town's existence ceased. We still have some challenges to not allow that to occur. One of the modern-day challenges is Hopetoun and Ravensthorpe where BHP Billiton had a nickel mine. The mine provided a great incentive and boost for the towns in that region when it was open but there was a whole lot of community angst when BHP decided to pull the rug from under that project. A lot of people had moved there with the aim of establishing businesses that supported the mining operation or who were working on the mine itself. We need to be mindful of that and see whether we can develop other opportunities and sustainable industries that hang off the initial opportunities so that we minimise the boom and bust cycle in those communities.

I will talk about some of the programs the previous government instigated. The SuperTowns program is about trying to ready regional communities to make the most of the opportunities that their communities offer. One of those SuperTowns is Collie, which in my view has a few underlying economic challenges. It is way ahead of many other communities in the south west and is often called the engine room of the south west, for good reason. There is a lot of activity there but we need to be mindful that it is based on one sector. I think Collie can really build on that. It would be good to see the Perdaman Industries fertiliser plant in Collie go ahead to add another string to the bow of not only Collie, but also the whole of the south west. Collie is recognised as a very important community sector and industry base in the whole of the south west. I would like to see the Perdaman fertiliser plant get going. I think there are some moves around tourism in Collie. Lake Kepwari is an absolute gem in Collie. It would be good for the government to sort out that issue and finally open it for recreational opportunities. The SuperTowns program is about working on not only what we have now, but also providing other opportunities.

Agriculture is another opportunity that we talked about during the election campaign. The National Party put out a discussion paper on its policy position on this issue. We would like to invest in agriculture over the next four years to make the most of the opportunity it presents. I have no doubt that the regional members in this house who are involved in agriculture would say that there are opportunities locally, nationally and internationally for our clean, green produced food to be sold into large and sustainable markets. Our task is to access those markets to provide the food that they want and to make sure that our house is in order in being able to supply that food. The National Party sees the opportunities that are there. We just need to seize the opportunities by investing in agriculture and being proactive about driving investment in agriculture.

I will talk about the National Party's vision for agriculture and promote to members some of the things we are looking at and are interested in promoting to drive agriculture. I will outline and build on some of the things that we believe are important to help our agriculture sector take advantage of all the present opportunities. One area is research and development. I refer to not only scientific research to examine how new crop varieties, crop technology or farming practices can come about and be promoted, but also economic and market research to ensure that we are growing the type of food that our national and international customers want. We need to drive new technologies to make us more efficient so that we can compete on a price-per-unit-basis and people can see that Western Australia is at the forefront of providing their food security needs in the future. In the past, we have committed \$30 million to establishing the Australian Export Grains Innovation Centre, which is a national centre for excellence in economics, science and innovation to improve the competitive advantage of Australian grain in the international marketplace. We are looking also at establishing new headquarters for the Department of Agriculture and Food as the lead agency to drive that sort of innovation, research and development in the sector. The government has established a new genes and environs facility in Merredin and Katanning and a genetically modified technology research and management facility in Merredin for research into conventional crops. This is supported by research centres such as the Centre for Grain Food Innovation in Bentley, the Frank Wise Institute of Tropical Agricultural Research in Kununurra and the Manjimup Horticultural Research Institute. The development of Kununurra and the Ord expansion were very big projects in the last government. Again, that provides a fantastic opportunity to produce and export food to our near neighbour to the north.

The next research and development phase in agriculture is the establishment of grassroots research and development organisations. Much of the research now is done by farmers themselves through supported networks such as the Facey Group and the Mingenew–Irwin Group. There are quite a few of those types of groups scattered throughout the agricultural regions of regional Western Australia. Farmers themselves are driving the innovation and development that they want to see and that meet their skill set and the way they work their farms to get the most out of what they do best, which is growing food. These groups have been around for

quite a while now. They were first established and supported by the Department of Agriculture and Food, they are still supported to a great degree by the department, they are doing a great job and they are well recognised and well respected within the community. The National Party is really very keen to continue supporting those groups to do what they do best, driven at the grassroots by what farmers see as their greatest needs in research and development. We are also very keen to establish a northern beef industry centre in Broome and sheep industry development centre in Katanning to support those industries locally at those centres and help them to grow the best food that they can. Organic agriculture is also a growing, demand-driven industry. There are now many growers in that space and again, we should be supporting them. If organic food is what people want to buy, we will invest in an organic food industry resource centre in Bunbury to help fill that need.

We are also keen to invest in Western Australian grain growers to better manage their risks; risk management has been quite a headline over the last few months in terms of how we manage the changing climate that all farmers operate within. No matter where in Western Australia people farm, I am sure that the climate is changing in one way or another, and we need to ask how we will respond to that. Again, we need to help farmers manage the risks and better understand what the risks are so they can make informed decisions about changing how they do things while still remaining viable.

The second component about seizing the opportunity is around land and water. One of the key issues for anyone in agriculture in Western Australia is water availability. It is a scarce resource and probably getting scarcer in terms of rainfall. We know that it is an issue in country towns and communities, and also in Perth, but it is also an issue for agriculture. There is a well-recognised trend of a drying climate for agriculture in the south west, so how do we change and adapt to ensure that our farmers in the south west can continue to be viable and make the most of potential opportunities in the new markets that we would certainly like to pursue?

We have already invested in dewatering mines in the Pilbara, which water at the moment is being used to grow hay for local cattle stations. That is just one example; when we have water, we can grow stuff. I am sure that that will expand in the near future beyond fodder crops and hay to include other food items that can be shipped and transported to other markets, to make the most of opportunities. Obviously, there are some challenges involved with that in respect of transport and in making sure that we can grow the food cheaply enough to be able to sell it for a profit without going broke growing it.

We will continue to invest in the land and water sections of the industry; we want to implement a statewide food and water initiative and put some real dollars behind that to ensure that regions like the Swan coastal plain, the horticultural regions of the south west, and the initiatives that are happening in the Pilbara and the Kimberley can continue so that we can make the most out of them.

In agricultural policy, we want to find ways of growing food in the best and most efficient ways we can, and to achieve the best yields we can. However, if we do not have somewhere to sell it, it is not much good. I think it is well recognised throughout the world that Asia is a developing region; countries in that region have growing middle and upper classes, and their diet and food habits are changing. We should be looking to those markets to absolutely promote the clean food that Western Australia produces. We want to invest heavily in seeking ways in which we might access those markets; not only access the markets, but also get the food and produce, whatever it may be, into those markets. We would like to provide funding to carry out a statewide infrastructure audit to find out where some of the bottlenecks are occurring or where there are some possible opportunities to invest in infrastructure that will help farmers and agricultural producers to get their food to those markets, create a sustainable industry and level out some of the peaks and troughs that we tend to experience in the agricultural sector, often based on seasonality and changes in markets. One of the biggest issues in agriculture is price-takers. Hon Ken Baston as Minister for Agriculture and Food will be well aware of the challenges around the Carnarvon horticultural basin and the fact that if a perishable food item is grown, the producer is at the whim of the marketers and the people who buy their produce. How can we level that out a bit and get more buyers into the market so that they are competing for the produce?

Another plank of seizing the opportunity is about providing farmers and those who work in the agriculture sector with opportunities to improve their skills, if that is what they need. Australian farmers are already technologically advanced and quite capable of growing fantastic food; it is well recognised that they are probably among the most efficient farmers in the world. However, if we are talking about seizing new opportunities, there will probably be pressure on farmers to do things differently. That might involve changing the crops produced, changing agricultural systems, or responding to the risks of a drying climate and getting produce to market. We will be investing in farmers to make the most of those opportunities, but the government cannot do it all. Cockies are very good; give them the opportunities and the skills and they will pursue many of these things themselves.

I have touched on only a couple of economic opportunities that we need to think about in terms of diversifying our regional communities. Tourism is often touted as a fix-all for regional Western Australia's woes, but in my

experience it is just one part of the jigsaw puzzle. Not everyone can make a dollar out of tourism; issues such as the high value of the Australian dollar are really having quite an effect on our tourism industry. I go to places like Albany regularly; what is the economic driver in a city like Albany? One would have to say that it is a service city; it has retail and all the services that governments provide.

Does the member want me to wind up?

**Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm:** No, I'm just trying to get you to suggest that there's a wine industry down there too!

**Hon COL HOLT:** The member should have done this with his hand instead!

Albany is a pretty interesting case study. It has little bits and pieces of everything, but not necessarily a key underlying economic driver. Tourism is probably a cornerstone of the economics, so when the Australian dollar goes up in value, international tourists tend to visit less often; and when things get tighter on the economic home front, obviously people travel less often to places such as Albany. We have some challenges to pursue those opportunities for regional cities and centres such as Albany and many others and to diversify our economic drivers and employment opportunities, but that is something this government should be seriously looking at to promote and take hold of those opportunities.

One of the other things we know people look for when they move to or want to stay in a regional community is obviously access to good health services. I was very pleased to visit in the recent past the opening of the coronary care unit and the cancer care unit at the South West Health Campus in Bunbury. Interestingly, the coronary care unit is a fantastic facility, but St John of God, which runs the unit, has some challenges to find cardio specialists to go there. It is a fantastic building, ready-made for St John of God to use in the best way it can. Only two or three weeks ago I was in Bunbury for the opening of the cancer care unit. Cancer care treatment has been provided in Bunbury for a while now. This is a special purpose-built facility. The many patients in the south west suffering from cancer no longer have to travel to Perth for a one, two or three-hour treatment; they can get treated in Bunbury, which is the sort of thing the government should aspire to provide. If we want people to live in regional Western Australia, we need to provide access to health services.

I was also at the opening of the new Albany Hospital the week before last, which the community has been waiting a long time to see. It is a magnificent facility. One of the greatest things I noticed there was the integration of telehealth and remote access health throughout the whole state. There is a great deal of opportunity for investment or a response to be made by the government to help our regional communities, some of which are very remote and very difficult or expensive to supply 24-hour health care or doctors to. Telehealth will become a great tool for those regional communities to ensure that people with primary healthcare needs, or even emergency healthcare needs, can be assessed and treated. Through the Southern Inland Health Initiative, some really serious work is being done on and some serious investment is being made into the infrastructure for telehealth, remote health care and health care over the internet to ensure that we make the most of the opportunities that come along. We know that we can no longer do things in the traditional way; we need to find a way to provide that service that is a little outside the box. In my view, telehealth is an exciting innovation. I know it has been around for quite a while and has been talked about for quite a while, but some serious investment is starting to see it really work for remote and regional communities.

Obviously, a new hospital is planned for Busselton, as well as a series of refurbishments and rebuilds of many district hospitals. Again, it is about recognising that district hospitals, or the smaller and larger hospitals in the regions, are an important part of any regional community. Health is a challenging sector. There are always changing needs. When people move to a region, they have to be provided with good healthcare services. Although we welcome 1 000 new people to Western Australia each week to be part of the Western Australian community, the health sector will obviously be stretched and strained to accommodate them.

One of the other issues related to health is aged care. Earlier I talked about the baby boomer bulge of our demographics heading into retirement and into elder statesmanship. We will need to provide greater aged-care services to those people as they grow older. The Nationals and this government have been promoting the notion that people should be allowed to grow old around their family in their community and with the support of the community that they have grown up in or worked in their whole life. That presents a whole heap of challenges; we all know that. There probably will not be a perfect solution everywhere, but we certainly believe that people do not necessarily have to move away from their family or the community they love to be cared for when they grow old.

Another issue I want to touch on briefly is education. As a regional member of Parliament working in regional Western Australia, I know that many people make decisions about moving away from or to the bush based on education. Every parent wants to provide their child with the opportunity to have the best education they can. Often parents see that their children need to be in Perth to get the best education. I think that belief is changing. I think it is recognised that there are many fine schools in regional Western Australia that can be accessed even

though people do not necessarily live in that community. This government has made a great deal of investment in the regional hostels system to ensure that there are hostels around regional Western Australia so that those people who do not want to send their children to Perth to perhaps to a more expensive boarding option can access the same level of education that would be expected anywhere in the state. There is a very good example at Merredin.

**Hon Peter Collier:** Yes, I opened it. It's fantastic; it's like Club Med.

**Hon COL HOLT:** They could not get enough kids to live there.

**Hon Peter Collier:** Now they're bulging at the seams. It's a fantastic college.

**Hon COL HOLT:** Yes. They could not get enough kids from the region to take advantage of the education opportunities at Merredin. The school was rebuilt and the associated hostel was refurbished and now it is seen as a very viable alternative. It now has a waiting list. I have some information with me, but I cannot think of the number of kids there.

**Hon Peter Collier:** There are around 80 in the residential college.

**Hon COL HOLT:** There are about 80. I will give those figures later. We have made some really good investments in some of the regional hostels to encourage people to send their children there. Children can still get a really good education in regional Western Australia.

The other day I was at the University of Western Australia campus in Albany to see its science building.

**Hon Peter Collier:** I opened that, too.

**Hon COL HOLT:** Is that all the minister does?

**Hon Peter Collier:** I was with Brendon on both occasions.

**Hon COL HOLT:** Yes, I know. I spoke to the guys at the UWA campus in Albany and I was really surprised at how big a part UWA is playing in the provision of undergraduate courses from the first year to the third year. People can complete their undergraduate bachelor's degree in certain areas; they can certainly do the first year for just about every course at the UWA campus in Albany. These are the sorts of innovations and investments that the government needs to make to ensure that excellent education outcomes are provided for the kids in our regional communities. We do not want whole families moving out of those regions to Perth just because they perceive that they cannot get a good education in regional Western Australia.

I also visited the Great Southern Institute of Technology. I am sure that the minister has been there, too!

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

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