



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Margaret Rowe MLC**  
**(Member for Agricultural)**

**Address-in-Reply Debate**

**Legislative Council**

**Thursday, 26 May 2005**



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#### ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

##### *Motion*

**HON MARGARET ROWE (Agricultural)** [12.34 pm]: As an incoming member of Parliament it gives me pleasure to address the house first with a quote from an outgoing member of Parliament, Hon Bill Stretch who, after 22 years in this place said -

... it is not the huge things one does in the electorate for which a member will be remembered, because there are few opportunities for us to change the world. ... The majority of the time of members is spent rescuing ordinary people and small businesses from the inevitable grind of the bureaucracy. It is important to realise that this happens whichever party is in government, because the very process of government is a slow and clumsy business. It is not like the law and it does not “grind exceedingly fine”; it grinds extremely roughly at times.

#### MY ELECTORATE

After 13 years as a Greenough Shire Councillor, two of them as deputy president, and 10 years as an electorate officer, I know too well the frustrations and inequities endured by some people in their dealings with bureaucracy. It has been said “that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass”. Although giant oaks might topple if they are not well-rooted to the earth - a lesson for us in this lofty place - the grass is walked upon every day. The electorate office is the grassroots ear to the world. That is why I have chosen to locate my electorate office in the country in Geraldton.

Like many regional centres, Geraldton has a proud history. I follow in the footsteps of Edith Cowan, OBE, the first woman elected to Parliament in Western Australia. She was born in 1861 at Glengarry Station near Geraldton. The Premier is a Geraldton boy. An outgoing member of this chamber, Hon Derrick Tomlinson, taught literature at the Geraldton Senior High School. Award winning author Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton and immortalised the town in his book *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. Tim Winton’s novel *Cloud Street* has its origin in Geraldton. Actor Ernie Dingo was born at Bullaroo Station and studied at Geraldton Senior High School. Another famous Aborigine, Warrandy, was born in the Murchison around the 1830s, and was anointed as “King Billy” by Governor Weld. Former Western Australian Premier John Forrest is said to have

given him a room in his Perth bungalow whenever he required one. I, however, am currently homeless. I understand that it might be several months before my permanent electorate office is leased and furnished. Perhaps this is inadvertently fortuitous, as it will give me time to begin to know the broad expanse of my electorate. This will take some time, as it stretches from Kalbarri in the north to Esperance in the great southern area. It comprises 68 local governments and in excess of 90 000 constituents. I am fortunate to share this responsibility with Hon Bruce Donaldson and Hon Anthony Fels.

I noted that, in his inaugural address in 1993, Hon Bruce Donaldson observed the reluctance of most Western Australians to settle beyond the great Darling scarp. This reluctance continues today with the majority of people clinging to the long strip that hugs the coastline. How much do they know about life on the other side of the hill? My country experiences go back a long way. I was born and educated in Kalgoorlie, where my family ran a small business. I understand first-hand the issues affecting families who live in remote areas. As the second eldest in a family of seven children, I am well aware of the challenges faced by large families in rural environments. My colleague Hon Anthony Fels has already spoken extensively about Esperance in his inaugural speech. I have chosen to base myself in Geraldton because I have established a close relationship with the Geraldton community. In fact, I worked for 12 years with the Mid West Development Commission.

I also chose Geraldton as my base because it has some important common links with other parts of the Agricultural Region.

### **THE FISHING INDUSTRY**

Like Kalbarri and Esperance, Geraldton has a significant fishing industry that has progressed from the pioneering days of tiny wooden boats to the current multimillion dollar high-technology industry. Even in the 1950s, fishermen still had no easy communication with land. They said goodbye to their families and set up camp for months at the Houtman Abrolhos Islands. The wives and families stayed in port and waited for messages sent back on carrier boats, and they tuned into the local radio station in the evenings for the fishermen's requests program when families could send brief messages. The boats these days are highly sophisticated, high powered and high tech. The skippers and their deckies can speak to their families and conduct their business with the push of a button, and they can read the bottom of the ocean like a map and track their catch. Their bounty feeds an international trade. Salt water is in their blood, and often their children will finish university or some landlubber's job, and then come home to work the boat. These fishermen still brave the open seas, especially those on the Great Southern Ocean and live with danger in pulling their pots, setting their wet lines or trawling their nets. They are the farmers of the ocean.

In port, the farmers of the land battle their own problems with salty water. Therefore, I was pleased to see that the government last week, after some prompting by the opposition, recommitted to spend \$315 million in the joint commonwealth and state programs that will include salinity control.

### **THE FARMING INDUSTRY**

But Geraldton has more than salt water in common with the rest of my extensive electorate; it also has a hinterland of mixed farming that mainly involves grain and sheep. While people in the city tend to take for granted the fruit, vegetables, processed grains and trays of meat in the supermarkets, we often forget that they tell the story of family members who have waited with their eyes turned to the sky for the first drops of rain or cursed a downpour at shearing time or watched a crop, lush and ripe and ready for harvest, laid flat by hailstones. We do not think about the farmer driving around all night in a dark paddock ploughing and seeding. We do not think about the farmer carting hay to handfeed sheep, which are sold or have the gun taken to them when the drought in the bank matches the drought in the paddock. We do not think about country children waiting at the farm gate for a bus to take them 30 or more kilometres to a little school in the nearest town. We forget that women

are more likely to die of breast cancer and men are more likely to die of prostate cancer if they live in the country. We do not think about the road trauma victims being flown to Perth for treatment away from their family support. We close our eyes to the terrible statistics regarding Aboriginal infant mortality and morbidity, and we cannot bring ourselves to think about the high rate of rural youth suicide. We forget that while we idealise, farmers have to survive the politics and realities of controversial issues such as the live sheep trade, genetically modified crops, the mulesing process and the flatulence tax on animals. We prefer to remember the days when the country rode on the back of a sheep and farmers reputedly charged around their paddocks in Rolls Royces with a ram or two in the back. Those days were short, and they have gone.

The Deputy Prime Minister was quoted this week as saying that Australia is in danger of running out of farmers in a decade because conditions on the land are so difficult. He spoke in response to the drought crisis in the eastern states, but what extra pressure will apply to WA farmers if eastern states farmers collapse? Will Western Australian farmers find themselves carrying the load of a nation? Will our farmers be able to survive without tax incentives for drought proofing their properties and for land improvements and the old killer, transport subsidies? According to the WA Farmers Federation, at least half of WA farmers are battling the cost price squeeze. It is not that farmers are not working hard. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has reported that 59 per cent of farmers, compared with 19 per cent of all employed people, worked 49 hours or more a week in 2001. Farmers often work beyond the traditional retirement age, with 15 per cent of farmers in 2001 being aged 65 years or over. Indeed, the proportion of farmers aged 65 years and over is greater than the proportion of farmers younger than 35 years of age. Fewer young people are becoming farmers. The Farmers Federation also stated that business imperatives and succession planning is a key risk for Western Australia's primary industry. Perhaps it is the quiet pride and tenacity of our farmers and graziers, and their remarkable capacity for economic survival in a changing weather global system and volatile international markets, that allows us to live our illusions about the good life. The reality is that farmers have no pay cheque in the bank each fortnight. Even when a fortnightly pay cheque arrives in the letterbox in the small marginal towns that service these farmers, the income and employment security in that town depends on the wool clip, the amount of grain delivered to the local silo or the size of the catch. Country WA also owes much of its existence to small business - retail, commerce and hospitality - and government-based health, education and housing input. We must recognise and support the retention of the townships and the small business model.

I am pleased to say, however, that there are some encouraging signs. Major findings of the 2003-04 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey include an overall increase in wheat production, with Western Australia showing one of the largest state increases with production up by 174 per cent. That was a welcome relief after the 2002 drought when production was effectively halved. Lamb and sheep numbers also showed signs of recovery following the low of the previous year. The largest increases were in New South Wales and Western Australia: our state's figure was up four per cent with a value of \$24.8 million, which is a credit to our farmers given that over 80 per cent of agricultural production is exported. In a globalised marketplace, farmers are the price takers rather than the price setters. All this effort and risk is for a 20c return on a \$3 loaf of bread.

### **TOURISM AND REAL ESTATE**

On the other hand, real estate agents in my electorate are getting better returns. The high cost of housing in the eastern states is driving investors west. The City of Geraldton and Shire of Greenough are booming with some of the hottest real estate in the state. Esperance and Kalbarri have some of the most beautiful coastline and spectacular gorges in the nation and are attracting thousands of visitors. Geraldton now has more visitors per annum than is the case with Broome. One of my great passions is tourism. This passion was heightened when I served as chairman of the

shire's standing committee for tourism and community development. We have seen a tourism explosion in the south west and our far north, and the mid west will be the next to experience this growth when Indian Ocean Drive is completed. All that remains is an approximately 40 kilometre section between Lancelin and Jurien Bay, and I intend to work stridently for that completion date to be brought forward.

It is not surprising that city dwellers are drawn to the country to refuel their souls, not only because of the open skies and big horizons, but also because of the people. The strength of the family unit has served the Agricultural Region well, and has my support and respect.

Mr President, I congratulate you on your election as President of this house, and I congratulate Hon George Cash on his re-election as Chairman of Committees in the Legislative Council. Although I appreciate the privileges and protocols of this house, I am under no illusion that being a member of Parliament will be glamorous. My introduction to my new role kept my feet well and truly on the ground: I doorknocked in temperatures in excess of 40 degrees, lost six kilos and was bitten by a dog. The Liberal Party's pre-selection personnel must have recognised some tenacity in me, and I thank them sincerely for their faith. I thank all the people who assisted so capably and selflessly during my election campaign, especially my family and friends for their love, support and friendship. Although there are too many to mention by name, I record my particular thanks to my father, Arch Trahair; my son, Bradley, and his partner, Rebecca; my daughter, Donna, and her partner, Nigel; and my wonderful grandchildren Hannah, Jonah, Ruby and Daisy; as well as my close friends Bill Perry and Kim Stokes.

#### **MY VISION FOR RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

So, what brings me to this place? Although I always made a contribution to the community as a shire councillor, an electorate officer and a sportsman, I felt I could make a more extensive contribution as a member of Parliament. In this position, I can endeavour to ensure that my constituents receive their lawful entitlements; however, I can also represent their views in how those laws are formulated and amended. According to the Western Australian Farmers Federation, there are 31 acts with 86 high-level regulatory areas governing agriculture. In Western Australia most of these are under the jurisdiction of two, and sometimes three, departments.

The Westminster system of government is based on representation. I will make no apology for the fact that I will speak for the bush. At a time when the country voice is smaller in Parliament, I will just have to speak more loudly. Despite adversity, in 2001-02 the gross value of agricultural production in Western Australia was \$5.5 billion. However, when all the other industries tied to agriculture are factored in, agriculture fuels in excess of 12 per cent of the state's gross domestic product and between 17 per cent and 20 per cent of the jobs. The Agricultural Region is the heartland of Western Australia, and I am proud to speak on its behalf. I would like to think that when it comes my time to leave this house, I can rest comfortably with the words of poet Robert Frost -

Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by  
And that has made all the difference.

[Applause.]

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