



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

## **INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Colin de Grussa, MLC**  
(Member for Agricultural Region)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 23 May 2017



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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

Resumed from 18 May on the following motion moved by Hon Dr Sally Talbot —

That the following address be presented to Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson, 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 COLIN DE GRUSSA (Agricultural)** [8.26 pm]: Thank you, Madam President, and may I congratulate you on your new role. It is great to see, finally, that we have a woman in charge here. I look forward to plenty of robust and, no doubt, very complex debates in this place, and I trust that I and my colleagues in this place will not make your job too difficult! I would also like to take the opportunity to extend my gratitude to the staff here at Parliament House who have done a wonderful job ensuring myself and the other newbies feel welcome and are well equipped for the job ahead. It is a privilege to serve the people of Western Australia and one that cannot be understated. It is a role that I certainly do not take lightly and it is a role that I look forward very much to executing with passion, diligence and commitment.

I would like to talk a little bit about where I come from and my history. I was born in the coastal town of Esperance, which is one of the jewels of this state. Our glorious south coast is well known for its unblemished white beaches, crystal clear waters, some of the most spectacular scenery in the state and a great opportunity for tourism anywhere in the nation. I think it is one of the greatest opportunities for tourism in the world. This variety of natural wonders should make us a top tourism destination for travellers from here and from across the oceans. To me this represents a huge opportunity for our regional communities. It is an opportunity for them to grow investment and help diversify and revitalise those regional economies. I hope that in this place we can help realise that opportunity.

Esperance Bay and Recherche Archipelago were named by French explorer D'Entrecasteaux in 1792 after ships of those names. British cartographer Matthew Flinders famously sought shelter from storms east of Esperance in 1802 and so named the iconic Lucky Bay, which is also Australia's whitest beach. The town of Esperance itself was gazetted in 1895 and a year later the *Esperance Times* newspaper reported the following: "Very few men care to go to Gaol, but to be in prison in Esperance is 'a little bit of alright'". Esperance is indeed a beautiful place, even for those on the wrong side of the law!

Agriculture as an industry in that area really started to boom in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s as land was developed at a fast pace and many a family moved to the area to enjoy the spoils of this new industry. In 1956, Mr Alan Chase and a syndicate of American businessmen entered into an agreement with the government of the day to buy 500 000 acres at 5s an acre, just under \$8 today. It is indeed true to say that the boom in agriculture was driven by foreign

investors, many of whom failed to meet their obligations and thus their land ended up in the hands of locals, allowing many families down there working for those investors to begin their long relationship with agriculture in Esperance. A good many of these families still farm in the area today. One of those American investors was Art Linkletter and he is quoted as saying: “The promise of Esperance is real and rich and whatever the outcome, there can’t be the slightest doubt that the tremendous stimulus of American interest in the area must be beneficial.” The growth of agriculture since those early days, not just in Esperance but across the state, has been precipitated through the rapid adoption of new technologies and practice change. It was Esperance farmers who got the ball rolling on minimum tillage and direct sowing techniques to preserve the very fragile soils from which they sought to earn a living. I am very proud to say that my father was one of those early adopters of minimum tillage, and the benefits we saw on our own farms were not just to our advantage but also to the preservation of the natural environment and the life therein.

I will talk a bit about my family now. My mother was a ten-pound Pom and the youngest of 10. She left her family in Romford, Essex to travel to the other side of the world in 1970 for opportunity. She began her working life in Australia as a governess on a station near Carnarvon before moving to Perth to work for Coventry’s automotive parts division. It was during this stay in Perth that she met my father’s sister Anne while staying at Ladybird Lodge. It was Anne who introduced my parents, and after a short courtship, they married, and Audrey moved to live with my father, Ken, in the shed on the farm just north east of Esperance. Dad was also one of 10 children—the fourth—and started life on my grandfather’s farm at Ballidu. He was a man who could have done anything. He was very good at school and hardworking. Apparently, his headmaster was quite distraught when he left school at 15 to become a farmer and immediately ordered a meeting with my grandfather to try to change my dad’s mind. Needless to say, it was what dad wanted to do and he did it, and at 18 he purchased the farm on Wittenoom Hills Road that we called home.

My grandparents were also very important role models in my life. I spent many a school holiday roaring around the suburbs in Perth to cricket clinics in my grandfather’s mustard yellow Corona, while praying that his one good eye did not give out as we turned across the traffic at Beaufort Street. There was nothing he liked more than a good discussion on politics, and I guess that is what helped to instil the interest in me from an early age. His life through the years of the Great Depression, raising a large family and later opening up land near Gibson in the 1950s, is a story very much of hard work, determination and a can-do attitude. He lived a very full life until he passed away in 2012 at 100 and a half. I have no doubt that if he was still around, he would certainly be up in the gallery tonight.

I came into the world in April 1973. I began my childhood in living quarters in the farm shed, occasionally sharing that cot with a tiger snake and spiders. With the help of some of the Pommie backpackers who frequented the area, mum and dad built the farmhouse that we lived in. We moved in there in ’74. Probably my first interest in politics of the day was during primary school. My friend Sean in the gallery might remember this one. I recall being mightily annoyed that the rules at the school said that my cousin could not kick the footy with me because she was a girl, and girls were not allowed to play football. I was pretty upset with that, so I wrote a letter to the education minister—I think I was 10 at the time—and vented my frustration at this policy. Of course the response I got back then was that girls are not as strong as boys and the risk of injury was too great, so they could not play football. It is pleasing to say that there have been some improvements since then, and I note your election, Madam President, as one of those changes where we now see women in important roles in our community. After high school I undertook studies in computer systems engineering through TAFE, which was a prerequisite for modern agriculture. I worked for a number of years in Perth before I went back to the farm and it was then that I made the decision to study

at Muresk Institute. This was a great experience at a fine institution. I am very pleased to say that I attended Muresk's annual open day just last Saturday. It was fantastic to see that place still offering opportunities for young people, as well as training for those already involved in agriculture. It is great to see more and more people going through there, and I hope it continues to develop courses that suit the modern industry. It was at Muresk that my interest in governance and leadership was discovered, undertaking one of the WA government's foundations for leadership programs, which I have to say were exceptional programs and a really good opportunity for young people in our regional areas to gain those leadership skills that they need in life. I also led the Muresk Students Association in my final year there, which was a good experience that introduced me to a quite heavy governance role.

My first involvement in politics and the National Party came about over a number of years. I first joined in 2009, but I had been introduced to Brendon Grylls at the Pier Hotel in Esperance not long after he took the helm of Nationals WA, in about 2005, from memory. My friend and a former member of this place, Wendy Duncan, was instrumental in bringing me into the fold and indeed for encouraging me to stand for election in 2013 for the seat of Eyre in the other place. We did not quite get there then, but I certainly was keen to have another go this time round. I was impressed by the drive, passion and commitment that Brendon had, as well as his obvious desire to improve the lives of those who choose to work, live and play in regional WA. In late 2013 I took on the role of state president. This was a fantastic introduction to the workings of the party and the many dedicated and wonderful members and volunteers who keep the wheels turning. The job was immensely challenging and rewarding, but in 2015 I stepped down from that position as I fought a different battle against stage 3 melanoma, which I am pleased to say I won. It was a very challenging time indeed, but as they say, what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. I am very grateful to the Nationals family for the opportunities that I have had along the way and of course for their faith in me as a candidate and newly elected member of Parliament. I give my pledge to them and to the people of this state that I will do my utmost to be a faithful servant of them.

In 2014 I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to undertake a Nuffield Australia farming scholarship. Nuffield is an incredible organisation that transcends the boundaries of nations, politics and ideology. It offers scholars in our nation and others the opportunity to live and breathe the primary industries in those other nations and to form lifelong networks. I cannot speak highly enough of this opportunity and the experiences I have had along the journey that is Nuffield. It is a tradition for those Nuffield scholars who are privileged enough to enter public life that they wear the Nuffield tie for their inaugural address, and I am proud to say that I am keeping that tradition alive with this delightful green and red number, although I am not sure if it will see another day. My own research for Nuffield was based around the disconnection that exists between modern consumers and our agricultural producers. It is that challenge of social license that is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing our food and fibre producers across the globe and certainly here in Australia. As our populations become more urbanised and less connected with those primary industries, the challenge for our producers and agribusiness in general is to find a way to reconnect with them. For example, in Australia today only 0.6 per cent of the population is directly involved in agriculture. About a hundred years ago it was 14 per cent, so there are a lot fewer people involved now.

The growth of other industries over a similar period has seen a decline in Australia's reliance on agriculture, which is consistent with trends in other countries, although it is important to note that Australia's agricultural output as a proportion of the economy is among the highest in the OECD. In my view one of the first and most important roles for our food and fibre industry is to significantly improve its links with the education system. It is critical that children across Australia are given a clear and balanced understanding of food and fibre

production and the many opportunities that exist or do not yet exist in this exciting industry. Despite the unending challenges of climate, markets and economics, our food and fibre industry has an exciting future. The rapid advancement of technologies will usher in a new era of robotics, automation and genetic advancement and a host of other things that will provide opportunities for jobs that do not yet exist but must be planned for. These things will require a commitment to educating our young people, ensuring that world-class research and development is catered for and securing continued investment in our regional communities so that they may provide a place for this to happen. In the words of John F. Kennedy —

... our farmers deserve praise, not condemnation; and their efficiency should be a cause for gratitude, not something for which they are penalized.

Of course, the Agricultural Region, which I am privileged to represent in this place, is home to much of the state's agricultural industry. There can be no doubt that the challenge of representing our large electoral regions in country WA is massive—I am sure others here can attest to that. The region itself occupies over 280 000 square kilometres and presents extraordinary challenges in providing adequate representation to the people who live there. Covering such a large area and providing the opportunity for constituents to engage effectively with their representatives will require a lot of driving, a comprehensive flight schedule and a great deal of hard work, and I very much look forward to that. I am proud to follow in the footsteps of previous representatives of the Nationals in this place—people like Murray Criddle, Dexter Davies, Wendy Duncan, Mia Davies and Paul Brown.

Centralist policies of past governments have seen services and basic infrastructure in decline across this and our other regions for decades. I am extremely proud of the work my colleagues and friends in the Nationals have done to try to repair the damage that had been done through this neglect with a structured, credible and well planned investment strategy underpinned by the visionary royalties for regions program. It was this program that allowed communities to provide and upgrade services and facilities essential to their future. Royalties for regions provided funding for aged care so that elderly residents of our regional communities could remain with friends and family in the communities they have been a part of all their lives. Child care was supported so that parents in those communities could return to work and contribute to our vital regional economies. Hospitals and health care were funded, as were telehealth services, which have been mentioned tonight already. They provided much needed access to specialist services, which were otherwise inaccessible to so many in country WA. Schools were improved so that children in regional areas could get the education they need in a contemporary environment.

These projects and the thousands more funded through the royalties for regions program, provided real, tangible benefits to our regional citizens. Most often these are things that those in our state's capital take for granted and do not tend to raise an eyebrow over. In the city, much of this investment is normalised. But the reality in regional WA is that these things were not happening and had not been for years. The people and places in our regional areas simply were not on the map, consigned to a destiny of neglect and political abandonment by city-focused governments and policies that see regional representation eroded away. The challenge for those who live in our regions is to make sure that they do not find themselves consigned to the same fate, facing the same issues of neglect we dealt with in the past. I will certainly work hard in this place to try to prevent that. The royalties for regions program is much more than a name, much more than a bank account or a list of projects. It has been a lifeline for our regional communities, transforming them into contemporary regional centres, giving hope to forgotten communities and providing those bare essentials so desperately needed to attract and retain people in our towns. I want to acknowledge the work that my Nationals colleagues, past and present, have done in helping drive a new era of regional investment.

I would like to thank a number of people who have been an important part of my life and who have assisted me in this role. These are the people who have provided me with support, guidance and belief, without which I could not be here. Firstly, to my three gorgeous girls, Chloe, Mya and Nyree, who are now turning bright red in the gallery. Thank you for putting up with all we have been through in the last few years and thank you for the love and joy you bring to my life. To my incredible partner, Ali, and her two beautiful girls, Amelia and Evie, sitting up there, who are also here tonight, it is a busy house when we are all together, but the love, support and happiness is a beautiful thing. Sometimes you just know when it is right.

To my parents, Ken and Audrey, my sister, Kathy, and brother, Ian, thanks for sharing the journey with me, and whilst it has been a heck of a ride over the past few years, I am very proud to have shared it with you. To my good friend Tori—this was our second campaign together and I am so very grateful to you for all the efforts you have put in on that campaign and the wonderful effort in 2013 as well, thank you. My ex-neighbour and one of the most passionate people I know—Marg Agnew and her husband Rob; Marg, you are an inspiration to us all and it is people like you who motivate us to improve the lot of those in our regions. Thank you for your unending commitment to the Nationals. David and Trina Eagles, also in the gallery tonight, your support, advice and friendship over the years I have known you have been fantastic, thank you. Jamie Forsyth, again, thank you for your support and friendship over the years and the great morning coffees down at Scotty's Cafe, if anyone is looking for somewhere to go for a coffee!

To my friend and former member here Wendy Duncan, thank you for convincing me to take the plunge and put my hand up to be a representative of the people. Your support and advice along the way also is very much appreciated. Sean, up there in the gallery; it has been a long time. Sean was one of the first people who introduced me to politics. He scared me off, though, because he took me to a Young Liberals' meeting, so it took a while to recover! Thanks for driving down to Esperance, Sean, and standing on the booth with us. It was much appreciated.

To Brendon Grylls, our former leader, I thank him for his passion, his commitment and the work he did while he was leader of the party. He took on an incredible workload, but he did it with passion, with dignity and with incredible energy. He is certainly an inspiration to me and I thank him for his guidance and support over the years. I would also like to thank our current leader, Mia Davies. Again, your belief in, and passion for, the people of our state is to be commended and I thank you for your support over the years.

To the Nationals team in general, thank you for your outstanding efforts and dedication to the party throughout the election campaign and beyond, in particular those who worked on the campaign, in our campaign central as well as our local campaigns, our ag region candidates, Martin Aldridge, Leigh Ballard, Fred Block, Steve Blyth and David Kennedy, our campaign volunteers, doorknockers and booth workers. Thanks also to the Young Nationals team in their canary yellow shirts for the doorknocking and fun you bring to a campaign. Thanks, Lachie, for coming down tonight. Thanks also to Peter and Andrea Rundle. It has been an absolute pleasure working alongside Pete, as he sought election for Roe in the other place and was successful. He is an absolute gentleman and will be a fantastic member of Parliament.

Thank you to my colleagues in this place, Marty, Jacqui and Holty. I am looking forward very much to working with you over the next few years.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the people of the Agricultural Region for their support of the Nationals WA. As I said earlier, I look forward to representing all those people who live, work and play in the ag region, and, indeed, the people of Western Australia.

There are plenty more people I could name and to whom I am grateful for their friendship and support, but we would be here all night, so I wish to acknowledge and thank them all.

I will close tonight with some words from former US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, who said —

In a nation of millions and a world of billions—the individual is still the first and basic agent of change.

Madam President, in this place I hope we can all be agents of change and that, collectively, that change will see benefits flow to all of us in this great state, no matter where we live. Thank you.

[Applause.]

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