



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Martin Aldridge, MLC **(Member for Agricultural Region)**

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [7.31 pm]: Mr President, it is with great trepidation that I stand here tonight delivering my first speech in this place, not because this is my first speech but because I stand here tonight knowing that the people of my region have charged me with the great privilege and responsibility to serve them in this place. I would like to extend my gratitude to you, Mr President, and to the parliamentary staff who have made me feel so very welcome since my election on 5 April. Nothing has been too much trouble and the wise counsel that has been offered has been very beneficial in these first few weeks.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I am the son of farming parents. I am a first generation Australian. My parents are two of the rare few who spent their entire childhood growing up in Perth and who then went on to make the bush their home and agriculture their living. I was born in Byford, Western Australia in 1982. My parents at the time were working at a small piggery in the area. It was not long before my brother joined me the following year, and this young family headed for new opportunities to the wheatbelt north of Merredin. My parents were young and we were by no means wealthy in a material sense but my childhood was rich. My father worked three jobs; by day at the piggery and by night at either the local roadhouse or the steel fabrication factory. It was whilst we were in Merredin that my brother and I were joined by a sister.

Some of my strongest childhood memories were of living there in our small fibro house with rainbow carpets; being entertained by dad in the cool of the afternoon; being pulled behind the motorbike in our pedal carts, the pedals going that fast that I am sure if we had put our feet near them, we would have broken our ankles or worse; and weekends spent on the farm dams catching juglies with the Gray family—lots of memories. It was when I was seven years old that my family moved to Gingin. Gingin was very different from Merredin. It was a greener, cooler place. We had a brook, the ocean was only half an hour away, and for the first time our family lived in a new but modest brick home. It was in Gingin that my siblings and I developed a love for horses that my father had, and over the coming years we all had the pleasure of riding fine equine specimens from the free section of the *Quokka*. One thing is for sure that after that baptism of fire, we could ride any horse—or so my father would tell us.

Gingin had only a district high school; so, as year 11 approached, I faced the decision of heading to Perth for my senior high school education or to board in the country. I do not recall the decision taking me very long. I had known only country life at this point, apart from the rare occasions when we would stay with our grandparents during the school holidays for swimming lessons in Perth. It was a decision that I remember making swiftly but one that I have never regretted. Whilst my friends were off to start trade apprenticeships or to attend schooling in Perth or at agricultural colleges in Cunderdin or Morawa, I was heading to Central Midlands Senior High School in Moora. I boarded at St James Residential College, along with about 40 other country kids from across the state. Moora was quite a change. Not only was it the first time I was to live away from my parents, but also it was the first time I had any interaction with

Aboriginal people. Although Moora is only an hour up the road, or two hours on the TransWA bus on a Sunday afternoon, it was a vastly different community from the one I had grown up with. It was not until my last year of school in Moora that I learnt just how strong and resilient this community was. On 20 March 1999, 80 millimetres of rain fell within six hours in the Moore River catchment as a result of severe tropical cyclone Elaine. This in isolation may not seem extraordinary but after two days of relentless rain it was enough to become a serious problem. Locals had seen the river rise and fall over the years and there was nothing to be alarmed about as the river continued to rise on Saturday afternoon, but by early Sunday morning, dogs were waking locals as water advanced into backyards and others awoke to find the water already knee-deep in their bedrooms.

This town, which I had known for only a little more than a year, amazed me. It did not matter who you were, where you were from or what task you got assigned to do, everyone just got on with it. Much of my class was shipped off to neighbouring schools to continue with what was to be their final TEE year as the State Emergency Service set up operations in our high school. As the head boy of the senior high school, I could not return to my studies at that time. I felt that, like everyone else in the town, I had a responsibility to do my bit. Once the water had receded, I returned to the town and began work setting up the relief centre in the school gymnasium. It was not long after that that donations of clothing, food and cleaning equipment started rolling in from across the state and it was my job to manage its collection and distribution. It was only a small task, when we consider the enormity of the recovery effort, but one that I remain proud to this day to have done and to have played my part during those rough few weeks in that community.

I had been an emergency service volunteer before moving to Moora, but I think my experience there encouraged me to continue to serve my community. Returning home to the farm after completing year 12, I commenced my university education by distance education while I worked for mum and dad. I became more active in my local fire brigade, and at the age of 18 was elected captain of my local fire and rescue service station. I was on a steep learning curve, as my station had responsibility for two major highways, the Brand and Great Northern. Shortly after, I was accepted into the career fire and rescue service. I would spend the next six years as a career firefighter, most of which was served at Belmont Fire Station. It was a great job but even greater were the people I worked with, who became my extended family. We shared our ups and downs together and I made lifelong friends from the time I spent on B platoon at Belmont Fire Station.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

My involvement with politics commenced in a formal sense in the early 2000s. I was nervous about joining a political party. I do not come from an overtly political family; however, I hazard a guess that they were traditionally conservative voters. My family had no connection with the Nationals and I hesitated. “What am I signing myself up for?”, I thought. It was not long after I received a phone call from Darren Moir, the president of the Young Nationals at the time. He sounded normal, apart from calling me tiger and the odd tickety-boo thrown into the conversation. He was from a farm in Borden and not much older than I was, and all of a sudden it was not so scary after all. There was a good group of young Nationals at the time I joined who probably had the greatest influence on me: Hon Brendon Grylls, Mia Davies, Michael Rose, Daniel Spillman, Jo Hawksley and, of course, Darren, to name a few. We were more of a social club of country kids who would get together a few times a year, have a beer and knock some ideas around. We were encouraged by some of our more senior members such as the late John Saint and party stalwart Marjorie Green, who backed us young ones, including our controversial civil unions motion at our state conference. It was a great time to be involved. Our party was on the cusp of change—a new leader, new policy and rejuvenation in our party’s base that reflected

the changing landscape that is regional politics. Hon Grant Woodhams and Hon Murray Criddle had a great influence on my being in this place today. These two gentlemen encouraged me to achieve what I thought not long ago was impossible. Both have been outstanding representatives for regional Western Australia and tonight I acknowledge their contribution.

It was this time last year that I was preparing for my second preselection, after having contested the same region in 2008, fourth on the Legislative Council ticket for the Nationals. Our Parliament needs a mix of people to make it fully representational of our electorates and although that includes ethnicity, gender and background, I also believe that one's age is an important factor that political parties need to consider. If there is one thing that our small political party could not be criticised for, it would be its encouragement of young people and women to become involved in politics. Although I was not active in the party when Brendon Grylls was first preselected to contest the seat of Merredin at a by-election, I understand he was not the natural choice in a field of much more experienced candidates. I am sure that there were similar rumblings within the party at the time about this energetic young man from a farm near Corrigin who had upset the preselection process and won. On many occasions over the past 12 months I have reflected on the advice provided to me at the time by Hon Brendon Grylls. He said to have faith and trust in the members of our party as they have not got this wrong before. I hope that I honour the faith and trust that those members have placed in me and in my service for my electorate over the next four years.

I often reflect on the contemporary political debates with my peers surrounding vexed issues and wonder whether there will be a point when we look back and wonder: What was all that about? Why did it take us so long to get there? Generational change is real and that means that the values and beliefs of each generation are different. If members accept my argument that each generation has differing values and beliefs, how can this place be truly representational of the community until we have a much broader cross-section of the community represented here? With half the region's voters aged 44 years or under, how do we challenge young people to seek office in this place? I hope that I am able to connect with my region's young people and help restore some of the trust and respect that was once associated with political life. Too often politics gets in the way of good policy. I am sure I will be guilty of it too at some stage. However, some issues are just too important for us to accept failure.

PROTECTION OF FIREFIGHTERS

One matter that is close to my heart is the protection of both career and volunteer firefighters. Tonight, as I deliver my first speech to this place, firefighters employed within commonwealth jurisdictions at our airports and our defence facilities have a far superior level of protection than those employed by the state or engaged as volunteers. Fire protection in this state and all states of Australia is predominantly delivered by volunteers. In Western Australia, the volunteer fire services number more than 30 000 in comparison with 1 000 career staff. An incident tonight at Perth Airport would trigger a massive response from fire agencies, including those employed at Perth Airport and those stationed around Perth within the fire and rescue services. While these commonwealth and state firefighters work alongside each other, the protections offered by the state to our career and volunteer personnel remain inferior. In 2011, the federal Parliament, off the back of a Senate committee's findings, strong scientific evidence and action globally, moved to protect firefighters by passing rebuttable presumptive legislation. This legislation reversed the burden of proof required from the employee to the employer. In the event of a firefighter contracting one of 12 prescribed cancers and then satisfying several criteria, including varying lengths of service for each cancer type, the development of the cancer is assumed to be as a result of their exposure to the hazards of firefighting. Firefighters and their families fighting a bout of cancer, some quite seriously, need to remain focused on their treatment and recovery. They do not need to be worried about a legal battle with insurers or how their family may be

able to survive financially should they lose that fight. I could talk extensively on this issue, but being conscious of the time, I will not. I will say, however, that this Parliament needs to address this as a matter of urgency.

THE AGRICULTURAL REGION

The electorate that I represent in this place, the Agricultural Region, is some 200 000 square kilometres of Western Australia's finest country. To put that into some perspective, my electorate compares in size with the state of Victoria at 227 000 square kilometres. It stretches to Kalbarri in the north, to Merredin in the east and to Bremer Bay on our south coast. It adjoins the metropolitan area and the South West Region on its western boundary. The region has great diversity in its local economic drivers. Spread over a large geographic area, making comparisons with the rich farming and viticulture area of the great southern and the tourism and pastoral base of Kalbarri is often difficult. However, one strong factor transcends these communities—that is, country people.

Agriculture, fishing and forestry are the major sources of employment in the region, and have been for the best part of the last century or more. Whilst all three of these industries have experienced fairly tumultuous times for various reasons over the last decade, I remain optimistic about their future. The production of food and fibre in Australia is one of our natural and economic strengths. At the risk of sounding clichéd, the exponential growth of the global population will inevitably place immense pressure on our environment and our ability to feed the world's people. I strongly suspect that within my lifetime, we will experience our markets more closely watching agricultural commodities in the same way that we seem to be so fixated on gold and oil today.

I spent my early years growing up on a farm; my partner's parents are farmers from Jitarning, near Kulin, and I come from a region that derives much of its wealth from agriculture. I think I am close enough to my community to understand the challenges facing the sector, not only in the agricultural industry, but also in small business more generally. In a recent interview on ABC NewsRadio, Mr Stephen Carroll, a director of the Australian Bankers' Association, referred to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures released recently that showed that one per cent of agribusinesses were having difficulty accessing finance, in comparison with the average figure across all other industries, which was seven per cent. Whilst I do not intend to shift the focus from the challenges in agriculture, because they are real, we must consider them in the context of other small businesses, because they are facing similar financial challenges.

Mining is a growth industry and a major contributor to the region and the state. Whether it is natural gas, mineral sands or iron ore, mining has been part of this region for many decades. That may have become more apparent in recent years, with the proposed development of the Oakajee port and the magnetite projects planned for the midwest and the great southern; however, this industry is by no means new to our region. Mining offers our communities the ability to diversify local economies, create local jobs and provide more sustainable growth. It is often claimed that agriculture cannot coexist with mining—a claim that I do not accept. We need both industries to remain strong for our communities to prosper. I often hear the statement, repeated ad nauseam, that we cannot eat rocks; as an attack on the mining industry, this narrow view fails to consider how important minerals such as iron ore are to our industrialised world. A scarcity in the supply of iron ore and other minerals would undoubtedly place pressure on agriculture, an industry that has mechanised and modernised by enormous proportions over the last 50 years. Competing land and water use amongst industry is not new and will continue to raise its head from time to time. Good planning and governance is needed to manage these competing interests.

With the Agricultural Region bordering the Perth CBD on the northern, eastern and south-eastern boundaries, there is enormous potential for tourism. The opportunities are too many to list fully; however, towns such as Kalbarri, Jurien Bay, Lancelin and York, and areas such as the Avon Valley, the Pinnacles, the Porongorups and the vast array of national parks across our region, offer great variety to tourism ventures and tourists alike. Royalties for regions has invested heavily in tourism over the last four years, an investment that I support and hope will continue in this term so that we can exploit the unique opportunities that our state offers and attract more interstate and international travellers.

I often hear the claim that young people are no longer calling the bush their home, and that they are moving to the big smoke for opportunities that no longer exist in the regions. The facts are something quite different. The Agricultural Region is home to some 137 000 Western Australians, and 43 per cent of them are younger than 34 years of age. I found that statistic astonishing when it was released in 2011 by the ABS. As governments scramble to meet the challenge of caring for the ageing in our community over coming decades, I hope we do not lose sight of the potential in our young people. They are innovative, educated, adaptable and prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

VOLUNTEERING

This leads me to the next point I wish to make this evening, and that is about volunteers. With the majority of my extended family living in Perth, I am convinced that many Western Australians take for granted the availability and provision of services in our regions, especially essential and emergency services. We all expect that when we dial 000, help will be on its way. Not for one minute do I think that this is an unreasonable expectation; however, the majority of these responses—whether by the State Emergency Service, the fire services, St John Ambulance or the marine rescue services—are carried out by volunteers. I recognise that it is not viable for small country towns to have paid staff performing these functions, for a range of reasons—the first being that, as a state, we cannot afford it. There are more than 30 000 fire volunteers and 2 000 ambulance volunteers in this state alone. I think just about every regional community is being affected by dwindling volunteer numbers and, as a product of that, volunteer burnout is on the rise. According to the Department for Communities in the report “Economic Value of Volunteering in Western Australia”, based on 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the annual value of volunteering in publicly oriented fields was in excess of \$1 billion. Of that, \$59 million was the estimated value of volunteering in emergency services alone. That is not to say that if the government was to do away with emergency service volunteers, it would cost only \$59 million. I believe volunteering in our country communities has a bright future, but as policymakers we often need to remind ourselves of the community’s expectations in relation to service delivery, whether for emergency services or for a host of other volunteer organisations within our community, and the cost benefit to government of having volunteers provide that service. I was in Kalbarri on Monday this week and I met with Mr Mac Holt, deputy unit manager of the Kalbarri State Emergency Service. Whilst touring the emergency service facility, which in recent years has received support from royalties for regions, Mac explained to me the investment it is making in its volunteers and how it has grown its membership base from a limited few to a reliable number, with succession planning well underway.

One area that government needs to address to relieve some burden on volunteers is the arrangements for non-urgent patient transfer. I attended many of the Southern Inland Health Initiative consultation meetings last year and the two common issues raised were non-urgent patient transfer and the patient assisted travel scheme. Our expensive emergency ambulances and our increasingly precious volunteers are becoming burdened with inter-hospital transfers of a non-urgent nature. For a town such as Jurien Bay or Moora, this is taking emergency response resources, as well as a volunteer crew, out of town for five or more hours. For a one-ambulance

town, as many towns are, this would mean that for that length of time the local emergency response capacity would be severely diminished. I am told that this is taking its toll on our ambulance volunteers. I was pleased that during the election campaign the Nationals announced an initiative to in some small way recognise the work of our emergency service volunteers. A \$2 000 fuel card will be provided to each emergency service group in regional Western Australia to recognise their contribution to the community. This card is not intended to fill up the tank in the fire truck; it is to recognise the contribution, which frequently is a financial contribution, that volunteers make to their community.

PATIENT ASSISTED TRAVEL SCHEME

I also make some comments in relation to the patient assisted travel scheme, or PATS, as it is commonly known. I am very proud of the much-needed investment boost of PATS that the government funded through royalties for regions when it came to government in 2008; however, the time has come for a more comprehensive review of this program. The line-on-the-map approach as a sole eligibility measure is not providing the safety net that regional people need to access specialist medical care. During the election I met a family living in Bindoon that had two disabled children requiring ongoing specialist health care that was available only in Perth. Bindoon is their home and, more importantly, is where their extended family is located, which provides them essential support to care for their children. I was told that on occasion the family travels three times a week to Perth for health care. Because Bindoon is 80 kilometres from the Perth CBD, this family is not eligible for PATS, which requires a minimum distance of 100 kilometres from the nearest eligible medical specialist. Staying in Perth overnight is not an option for this family either. Getting by on a carers payment, even with PATS eligibility, would offer them only \$75 a night towards commercial accommodation. There is no doubt they are doing it tough. The program must be more needs based and responsive to individual family needs. I appreciate the requirement for eligibility criteria, but there then should be some way of allowing the department to provide some discretion for applications based on exceptional circumstances.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

I will talk briefly about the election campaign and make some specific mention of those who provided me with a great amount of support. Firstly, having been involved in several state and federal election campaigns, the role that the Western Australian Electoral Commission plays in conducting these enormous logistical operations is not fully recognised, in my view. There were 456 candidates vying for 95 places in the state's Parliament. There were nearly 800 polling places run by nearly 7 500 casual staff. This state government department has only 49 staff, yet it performs one of the most important functions of our democracy, the successful operation of our elections. The Agricultural Region is a big place, and I would like to acknowledge Paul Brown, Jill Sounness, Cathie Bowen and Rosalba Butterworth. These four fine people ran alongside me on the party's ticket, with enormous support from their respective families I am sure. We had a lot of fun, amongst the more serious moments of the campaign. I recall the first door of the campaign that I knocked on was out the back of Bindoon, in the country club estate, where I caught the resident by surprise as he was taking a leak off the back veranda. I am not sure who was more surprised or embarrassed. I still left my flyer with him in case he had any questions—not offering a handshake on this occasion—and then continued on my way. Whilst doorknocking will always provide us with an endless supply of near misses and funny stories, I continue to find it a valuable tool to receive feedback and engage with my constituents. It was doorknocking that gave me the confidence to stare down our detractors who suggested the Nationals faced devastation in the Agricultural Region and its Assembly districts at this election. Whilst this story was being printed week after week in our rural newspapers, this was not the feedback I was getting from the community, mostly through my doorknocking.

Because of my natural association with the northern Agricultural Region, I found myself spending more time supporting Shane Love in the electorate of Moore. I had met Shane only a handful of times prior to his preselection, including when Hon Grant Woodhams and I approached him to run for the Nationals. I am confident that he will be an excellent representative for the people of Moore, and I wish Shane all the best for his parliamentary service in the other place.

I would like to recognise the contribution to my election made by the Nationals candidates for the other place: Shane Van Styn in Geraldton, Mia Davies in Central Wheatbelt and Hon Terry Waldron in Wagin; thank you.

I would like to acknowledge some of the people who assisted me personally during the campaign. Firstly, the energy and support provided by the Young Nationals were fantastic—Bryn Butler, Cale Hill, Jamie Forsyth, Jake Ash and James Wishart; Douglas Martin and Henry Travers from Sydney; and Cameron O’Neill from Brisbane; thank you for your support. To my federal parliamentary colleagues Hon Warren Truss, Senator Barnaby Joyce and Senator Fiona Nash, thank you for the time you spent assisting me during the campaign. I am sure it is not easy for you to find that time, and I appreciate it.

I would like to acknowledge the support of my amazing family. My mum and dad, especially, helped me on several fronts: putting up billboards, catering at campaign functions and transporting our team around the electorate. I am very privileged to have such a supportive family.

Polling day is never an easy task and there are far too many people to mention individually: friends, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and parents-in-law; as I said, too many to mention, but I would not be here today without all of your hard work on that long warm day in March.

Mr President, I took your wise advice and have two very capable staff supporting me. I would like to recognise Vanessa Shehan and Joe Lundy tonight—whilst we are only a few weeks in, your support for me has been superb.

Last but not least, I must save a special mention for my much-loved partner, Dale Spark. I have found that many people have offered advice on how to look after one’s family whilst in public life, which I must say I have not needed yet. Even through the busy months leading up to the election, when I would not be home for weeks at a time, I knew I had your 100 per cent support. You are an amazing person, who backs me every inch of the way.

I look forward to the next four years in this place. I hope that we can tackle some of the big challenges that stand in the way of making Western Australia even greater. I thank the house for its patience.

[Applause.]
