



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Merome Beard, MLA
(Member for North West Central)

Legislative Assembly

Premier's Statement

Tuesday, 18 October 2022

Reprinted from Hansard

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PREMIER'S STATEMENT

Consideration

Resumed from 17 February on the following question —

That the Premier's Statement be noted.

MS M. BEARD (North West Central) [5.28 pm]: Madam Speaker, thank you for allowing me to address the Legislative Assembly as the member for North West Central for the first time. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners, past and present, of the land we stand on today, the Whadjuk Noongar people, along with the many traditional owners, past and present, from across the North West Central electorate. I would also like to acknowledge my friends and family in the gallery, many of whom have travelled a long way to be here today, and those watching on the web. Thank you all for your encouragement and ongoing support.

Representing the people of the North West Central electorate was not a responsibility I contemplated in the lead-up to the recent by-election, and I thank those who supported and encouraged me to step up to this enormous challenge. I am honoured that many across the electorate have bestowed their trust and faith in me to be their voice in Parliament. It is a responsibility that I will take with passion and vigour for each and every person.

I would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to the previous member for North West Central, Vince Catania. He was a dedicated, committed and hardworking representative who served the people for nearly two decades. He always put his electorate and the people first—thank you to Dani and family for sharing—never shying away from a challenge and standing up and fighting tirelessly to make the regions a better place to live, work and invest. Personally, I thank Vince for his support and friendship and constant support during the campaign. I look forward to filling the very big shoes he has left to fill and to represent every person in the electorate with the same integrity, dedication and passion as he did. On behalf of the North West Central electorate, we thank you, Vince, for the legacies you have left and your unwavering dedication and service.

I would like to thank the Nationals WA and the incredibly committed campaign team that wrapped themselves around me with endless levels of energy, patience and support during the by-election. It was an enormous effort across an enormous electorate in a short time. Thank you to Mia Davies, Shane Love, Martin Aldridge, Peter Rundle, Colin de Grussa and the federal Leader of the Nationals, David Littleproud, who all spent time in the electorate with me to provide support and advice, help me to knock on doors, meet people and man polling booths across the electorate. To the federal Nationals team, including Senator Bridget McKenzie who supported me with the campaign, along with Angus, Harry and Kimberley, who travelled west to help in the electorate, a massive thank you to you all. To our campaign manager, Sebastian Schiano, and his team, Tony Crook, Julie Kirby, Paul Dickson, Vince Catania, Scott Bourne, Monique Warnock, Paul Kelly, Tay Alers, Douglas Rogers, Heather York, Sam Harma, Emily Evans, Emma Zirkel and Michelle Rossouw, along with many, many other people who volunteered to man polling booths and help with signage and gatherings across the 17 towns, a very big thank you, everyone.

To our local Nationals branch president, Paul Dickson, who, with Belynda, is a busy small business owner in Carnarvon and contributed an enormous amount of time and resources towards supporting me and retaining the seat of North West Central, thank you. So many people were all such a great support to me in so many ways during the campaign: Noelene Bassett,

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Paul and Stephanie Kelly, Belynda Dickson, Dudley and Sue Maslen, Bobo, Vicki Bell, Margaret Seaton, Kerry Russell, Daniel Ashcroft, Leanne, Peter and Tessa Daly, Heather and Dom Condo, Sandra Gane, Shane Aylmore, Frankie and Zach Tyler, Cheryl Moncrief, Gail Bellotti, Glen Dellar, Trevor and Jos Clarke, Jamie Money, Turk Shales, Mark and Margy Young, Gordon and Jane Pearse, Peter Grundy, Robin Vanderberg, Kieran Dart, Gary Hill, Rob and Di Tinetti, Raylene Harris, Raul and Ivone from Yalgoo, Lara and Jergen Jensen, Caitlyn Bryant, Murray Criddle, Peter Cripps, Karen Williams, John Spargo, Guy Acosta, Christina Sitompula and Trevor Gibb to mention just a few, I thank you all. It is an enormous electorate and we used a lot of resources.

They say it takes a village to raise a child and, for me, this is absolutely true. Steph and Paul Kelly have been an enormous support to our family and Rubes when I was not able to be home, just as our friends Sarah Clancy and Quentin Sims have been a tower of strength and support for both our family and children studying in Perth—a very big thank you. I also wish to thank and acknowledge my parents, Dudley and Jill Hall, who provided me, my sister, Suanne, and my brother, Ross, whom I also need to thank, with a wonderful childhood on a station in an isolated Gascoyne pastoral region. They made enormous sacrifices to provide us with endless opportunities, love and support. They taught us to be resilient, independent and self-reliant, to work hard and contribute and, above all, to take the good with the bad. Thank you so much for everything, Dad and Mum. Last, but not least, an enormous thank you to my family who have been a pillar of strength throughout this journey. To my husband, Tony, one of my greatest supporters and advocates who always encourages me to take up new challenges and enabled me to step away from our business, along with our children, Gabriella, Samuel, Finnian and Rubes, thank you all for your endless love and support.

My pathway from outback regional Western Australia to state Parliament was made possible as a result of being afforded a sound education and opportunity along with a secure, loving and stable environment where strong role models instilled a strong work ethic. That is something I believe is the catalyst for change in our troubled regional towns. As a proud fourth-generation local, I was raised on a pastoral station, completing my seven years of primary education through the Schools of the Air, generally under the watchful eye of my mother, Jill, with my other classmates scattered across the vast region. I was naturally a strong advocate for saving SOTA, understanding that education is everything and is relied on by many regional families and businesses. Everyone deserves an education no matter where they live. I am also a supporter of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, an organisation my family always supported, with my mother being a foundation member of the Ashburton branch. My grandmother, Jill Salmon, was also acutely aware of the importance of education, having educated her own children remotely, and was instrumental in the evolution of the ICPA *Pedals* magazine.

Through necessity and isolation, I completed my secondary schooling at boarding school in Perth, some 1 200 kilometres from home, where my world was widened. I was provided with new opportunities that many in the city would take for granted—more subjects, music and arts, sports, new ideas and extensive friendship and social networks. During this time, I took up the sport of rowing, for which I was later selected for the first Western Australian Institute of Sport squad under the guidance of Warren Gibson. I thank Warren for his friendship and the significant role he played in my career, during which I represented Australia as a junior and a senior. Warren was a driver over many years in creating a level playing field for women in sport, which saw me, during this time, join the Swan River Rowing Club, which had been a men's only club for around 100 years. Later, I was the first Western Australian rower to be awarded an Australian Institute of Sport scholarship. This sport taught me commitment, dedication and the importance of teamwork, trust and precision.

After studying and working in various roles in Perth and, at times, in Sydney in the finance industry, such as being a manager of communications and promotions and manager of adviser

services, along with being a consultant in project management and sports administration at the North Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club, my husband and I returned to Carnarvon in 2003 where we developed and still operate the Port Hotel. Over the past 20 years, I have also worked with local government and community groups, as a business adviser for the Small Business Development Corporation and as an electoral officer. Having experienced the vast differences between living, investing and doing business in the city and the bush, I know the breadth and depth of my experiences and roles I have had will stand me in good stead and greatly assist me in understanding and representing the people of North West Central and shining a light on the regions.

As a small business owner and community member who has raised our children in the electorate, I live, work and walk in the same shoes as others across the region and understand the opportunities, challenges and barriers we all experience. When Vince was asked what advice he would pass on to me, he said, “Get a comfortable car, a good swag and try to see your family as often as you can.” The North West Central electorate spans some 820 000 square kilometres, the largest in Australia, with hundreds of kilometres between the 17 towns. They include Tom Price, Paraburdoo, Pannawonica, Onslow, Exmouth, Coral Bay, Carnarvon, Gascoyne Junction, Shark Bay, Kalbarri, Meekatharra, Mt Magnet, Cue, Yalgoo, Murchison, Sandstone, Wiluna and the Ngaanyatjarraku lands, and with almost no flights connecting these towns, it is very sound advice, Vince.

The North West Central electorate is rich in history, with unique and diverse landscapes, communities, industry and experiences all contributing significantly to the state and national economies and encompassing parts of the Pilbara, the Gascoyne and the Murchison and Ngaanyatjarraku lands. Industries across the electorate coexist, include mining, fishing, horticulture, aquaculture, tourism and pastoral. Communities in these regions are defined by the people who live, work and invest in the towns, with each town and community having its own history and identity, but, despite this, there are many shared similarities and challenges. Most people from the regions are resilient and self-motivated, highly resourceful, self-reliant and independent. They pull together in times of crisis, celebrate wins, share losses and support each other while looking to grow their region, businesses and secure their futures. The electorate boasts some of the most unique and diverse landscapes and experiences, such as the Shark Bay and Ningaloo World Heritage areas between Denham and Exmouth; Dirk Hartog Island; the OTC Dish, Gwoonwardu Mia Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Centre, and the One Mile jetty precinct in Carnarvon; the Ningaloo Centre and Cape Range National Park in Exmouth; along with Karijini National Park near Tom Price; Mt Augustus, the world’s largest monolith; Coral Bay; several amazing station stays dotted throughout the regions; and the Skywalk in the national park in Kalbarri, just to mention a few. Numerous events showcase these communities and landscapes, such as the Gascoyne Food Festival, the Gascoyne in May events that showcase local performance and talent, the Gascoyne Dash, GameEx in Exmouth, the Astra Fest in Mt Magnet, many iconic country race meetings, including Landor, the Junction, Mt Magnet, Meekatharra, Yalgoo and Carnarvon—all are primarily run by groups of dedicated, hardworking volunteers.

I would like to acknowledge the hundreds of dedicated and selfless volunteers who take time out of their businesses, jobs and personal lives to work tirelessly for our communities and provide essential services, such as ambulance services and other emergency services as part of the State Emergency Service, marine rescue, fire and emergency services and bush fire brigades, along with keeping community groups, events and sporting clubs alive in the regions. Thank you to everyone.

From living and working in the regions, and after receiving feedback on the campaign trail, it is evident to me that some people in the regions are feeling forgotten and, at times, penalised for living in the regions, and they often feel misunderstood. Most people in the bush do not

expect freeways and underground railways, but given the immense wealth that is generated in the regions and the \$6 billion surplus, they do expect their fair share. They need a leg up when it comes to the basic infrastructure and services that are needed so that we can take the next step in growing and developing the regions and attracting people to build a life there. COVID-19 challenged each and every one of us—some did well, while others were left under an immense financial strain and are still trying to fight their way back—but it also highlighted just how underdone some of the regions are and how we need to continue to build and develop these areas, as industries and tourism numbers grow. We must ensure that people are safe and can access the same basic services and facilities afforded to those in the metro area.

A massive influx of visitors to the electorate as a result of travel restrictions, coupled with a loss of critical workers, including backpackers, saw infrastructure, many services, businesses and volunteer groups stretched to breaking point—physically, mentally and financially. Small towns with small rate bases find it difficult to develop and maintain the infrastructure required to support the thousands of visitors who travel to these locations. Some towns are not yet equipped to meet basic infrastructure needs, such as facilities to adequately house police when they make visits to these locations to enable them to undertake their roles. Essential services are generally provided by volunteers, who have limited capacity yet they are expected to save lives. This situation will again be highlighted during the solar eclipse in April 2023, which is expected to attract thousands of travellers. A dire lack of housing, including workers' accommodation, and worker shortages continue to cripple towns and small businesses, with some locals forced to leave the regions. The horticultural, fishing, pastoral and tourism industries are suffering. Coupled with the increasing cost of doing business in the regions, this is challenging many, to say the least. We need to find new and innovative ways to provide housing and to attract and upskill workers.

Regional health services are in urgent need of attention. They are struggling to keep up or attract resources, with inadequate housing often contributing to this. Vital services such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service are stretched, as the RFDS now juggles emergency lifts with an increasing number of patient transfer services. Many women cannot have their baby in a hospital in a regional centre due to a lack of obstetric and specialist services. When women across the regions are prevented from safely delivering their babies near family and friends and must travel to Geraldton or Perth instead, at enormous expense and stress to families, the system is broken.

Renal dialysis services are urgently required across the regions, with people relocating off country to Perth and waiting for services to become available, often at a cost they cannot afford, not to mention the cost to their health. It is no surprise that the escalating cost of living is having an enormous impact on people in the regions, none more so than our regional pensioners, who are struggling to travel to health appointments with the current patient assisted travel scheme and fuel card allowances. A common comment I hear is, "Surely, it is time to stop this blame game and just look past who did what, when and how, and at least review these allowances and try to align them with the cost of living today." With a \$6 billion surplus, we need the government to take the foot off the hose in the regions. It promised upgrades to the Tom Price and Meekatharra Hospitals, while Paraburdoo Hospital is continuing to fall into disrepair, as is Onslow Police Station. We still need nurses, despite the resourcing issues we have for posts such as Yalgoo and Cue. Denham has no resident doctor, but the population can swell from approximately 700 residents to 7 000, leaving locals waiting for weeks for an appointment. We need to find innovative ways to attract essential workers to the regions. This includes nurses, teachers and police.

We need a permanent fix for the fascine in Carnarvon to reignite tourism and improve liveability for locals. The Wiluna–Meekatharra road still has a 144-kilometre section that is not sealed—it is the only state highway that is not sealed. Much of the Kalbarri community is still in disrepair

after 18 months. It needs a multipurpose emergency evacuation centre and repairs to the Kalbarri foreshore, not to mention some essential requirements to assist them in moving forward as a community and a region.

Crime has been a focus across the region, with an emphasis on towns such as Carnarvon, Meekatharra and Mt Magnet. This is in no way a new issue for any of us, but one that has been evolving. Crime is a result of a number of underlying issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, dysfunction, neglect and abuse. Those things all contribute to the crime issue and heighten the need for support services, including mental health services and transitional housing.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms M. BEARD: It is a sad indictment on our society when we consider ourselves to be rich while continuing to look past what is happening in our own backyard, with high suicide rates in the Gascoyne and kids who roam the streets at all hours of the day and night, often hungry and unwilling to go home, where they do not feel safe. Groups of young people regularly tell me that they do not want to go home. A young boy told me a few weeks ago that juvie is so good—good food, good beds, good Xbox. These are basics that most of us take for granted. Education is the key to creating change, yet some children do not have an environment in which they are able to take advantage of opportunities; their school attendance may be low or sporadic and they may have the added disadvantage of poor housing and a need for family support, with high levels of drug and alcohol abuse within some groups.

We live in the middle of town. I see and experience this regularly. The front door of our pub has been smashed twice in the last three weeks. Our shopping centre went into lockdown a couple of months ago due to an out-of-control group of youths terrorising customers. In some suburbs in Carnarvon, this behaviour occurs daily. Locals do not want to be there, tourists do not want to be there and government service workers do not want to be there, all because a few are making life difficult for the majority because they are in desperate need of help. The previous member for North West Central presented a petition calling for holistic change across all agencies. Expectations have changed. Society has changed. We must have the courage, as politicians, to work together with communities. We need to take up the solutions that communities believe will improve their situation, take risks and find new ways to change how we do things. Significant change will take time. If we, as a society, do not start to find innovative and new solutions to turn the dial and improve the lives of what will otherwise be a lost generation, we will be having the same discussions in 10 years' time and we will all be responsible for the fact that things did not change. We cannot keep doing what we are doing. We need change and we need reform.

My great-great-great-grandfather, Sir Thomas Cockburn-Campbell, was a pastoralist and the co-owner and editor of *The West Australian* prior to being part of a three-person delegation sent to the UK to advocate for responsible government in WA. The Parliament of WA was given control over the colony. In recognition of his contribution, he was given the role of first President of the Legislative Council in 1890, after being successfully elected, coincidentally, in a by-election. Never in his wildest dreams would he have ever thought that a great-great-great-granddaughter of his would eventually follow in his footsteps and grace the doors of Parliament House, as he did. If I can be a part of significant change for the benefit of our communities and this state, then I am sure I will have lived up to his expectations. But it is thanks to the women before me that a pathway forward was carved, including by my grandmother, who always said, "You are no better than the person next to you, but you are as good as them, so never shy away from a challenge." Thank you.

[Applause.]