



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Jim Chown MLC
(Member for Agricultural Region)

Loan Bill 2009

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 24 June 2009

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Second Reading

HON JIM CHOWN (Agricultural) [7.31 pm]: The time between being elected as member for the Agricultural Region and being sworn in as a member of Parliament has been well over eight months. This extended time has been one of mixed emotions—both anticipation and trepidation, especially the latter in respect of this moment. I take courage from the fact that all new members have survived beyond the moment of delivering their inaugural speech! Mr President, please accept my congratulations on your election as President of this house. Your 22 years of service in the Legislative Council will ensure that the proven parliamentary traditions of the Westminster system will be maintained and upheld during your tenure. I take this opportunity to thank you for the courtesy and guidance you have given me as a member-elect. I wish also to express my gratitude and appreciation to the Clerk of the Legislative Council, Mr Malcolm Peacock, and his staff for the highly informative induction sessions they have conducted for the 15 new members of this house.

This is a very emotional moment for me, and superlatives such as “honour” and “privilege” do not adequately express the depth of my feelings about my election as a member representing the Agricultural Region. This is the region where I have spent 47 years of my life—I am a wee bit older than that—working and raising a family. I know what it is like to earn an income in one of the harshest agricultural climates in the world. I have experienced the heartbreak of drought, fire, frost and hail. I have also experienced the warm glow of accomplishment following a kind season, and the lifting of morale that such a season contributes to communities. Rural life is often hard; however, one of the greatest aspects of rural life is knowing that one belongs to a community—a community that values one as a member, regardless of the contribution one makes to that community’s wellbeing. Even in this modern era, citizens of rural Western Australia still unreservedly support their fellow community members who have experienced misfortune, in whatever form, that has adversely affected them. This is the world that I grew up in, and it is a world that still exists today in the wheatbelt. This is the region I represent, and I intend to champion the area’s needs in a forthright, positive and commonsense manner in the Legislative Council and through the Liberal-led government.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Mr President, as you would be aware, one does not arrive in this place unless one has the support of a dedicated family and group of supporters. Many of my supporters are here tonight. I will now pay tribute to my family and my supporters for their commitment, effort and encouragement. My dad passed away in 2002, but my mum is present tonight. I cannot think of a more appropriate way to

thank both of them for the effort, commitment and sacrifices they made on my behalf than by doing so now; my debt of gratitude to them can never be repaid.

To my beautiful wife Sue, thank you. Thank you for your love, dedication and commitment, and for always being by my side through the ups and downs of farming and family life. Your inspiration and sound counsel will always put me back on the right track.

To my three wonderful daughters—Rebecca, Aleca and Tiffany—thank you for keeping me young at heart and always ready for the unexpected; I am extremely proud of you all.

I will now also sincerely thank Mr Murray Nixon, a past member of the Legislative Council, for his guidance, support, and uncanny ability to see trouble coming well before it appears to us mere mortals. To Mr Brian Mayfield, state and national chairman of the Rural Policy Committee, thank you for being the agricultural team campaign manager and for your friendship. I thank the members of the O'Connor division, many of whom were Liberal candidates in the state election, who campaigned on the hustings beside me. I sincerely thank and appreciate the efforts of Chris Wilkinson, who is now the proud father of twins; Jane Mouritz, a tireless worker for the Liberal cause; and Jamie Falls, Steve Martin and Stephen Strange, who are outstanding representatives of their communities as shire members and shire presidents, for the magnificent efforts they made whilst candidates during the state election. I also thank the many branch members of the O'Connor and Pearce divisions for their efforts, and I encourage them to keep them up. I also congratulate Mr Rick Wilson, the new president of the new O'Connor division, and wish him all the best in his new role. My challenge now is to fulfil the faith all these people had in my ability to represent their communities in the political arena. I intend doing so and will expend my energies in this direction to the very best of my ability.

BARK AND BURLAP (PROPERTY RIGHTS)

My family's long and active background in agriculture began in Australia when Charles Chown and his wife Eliza emigrated from England and sailed on the *C.W. White*, arriving in Melbourne on 6 October 1860. In 1868, Charles, a bricklayer, selected a farming block at Holey Plain, Rosedale in the Gippsland region of Victoria. This now greatly expanded property is still owned by the Chown family. The current owner is young Alf Chown, ably assisted by his father—my uncle—old Alf Chown. Ownership of the original block has been in the family for 141 years.

My family's connection to farming in this state began in 1908, when my mother's father, Arthur Bell, and his two brothers, Robert and Anthony, travelled on horseback to take up their recently acquired government-released blocks in Dalwallinu. I can still recall my grandfather telling me about this great adventure into the unknown and of how, for the first two years, they stayed to work only during the winter months because there was no potable water for man or beast during the summer. Provisions were in tins, supported by fresh meat when it hopped past the camp!

The experiences of my forebears were similar to those of hundreds of other pioneers throughout the wheatbelt. I am certain that when these farming pioneers returned to their bark and burlap bush abodes after a gruelling day's work they talked about the future of this state whilst they supped over the campfire and surveyed, to the horizon, an area full of trees and scrub; a vast area that had to be cleared with the aid of axe and animal. The challenge in front of them must have appeared overwhelming, but they persisted and in time were successful in establishing productive farms. These early settlers understood that the opportunity to own land as private treaty holders would secure the financial futures of themselves, their families and their communities. They may not have understood that the right to own land as titleholders is the financial keystone that underpins the financial wellbeing of this state and nation. I wonder how they would have reacted to the fact that this state now has 31 separate acts that have the ability to devalue private property when exercised in the name of the public good. The reality is that in this state, if a person's property is not reserved

under a gazetted scheme, that person is unable to receive any compensation for losses incurred. That is the situation for the majority of landowners in Western Australia. I believe the Liberal Party is the only political party that values the integrity of private property rights. I encourage this government to implement private property legislation that addresses these inequities. I personally believe that such legislation is well overdue because if we do not implement it, there is no other political party with the ability or wish to do so.

ROYALTIES FOR REGIONS

I also use this occasion to congratulate the government on its royalties for regions policy. This policy encompasses both National and Liberal Party campaign promises that will enhance regional infrastructure and improve rural and regional communities' standards of living. Liberal Party election commitments within the royalties for regions policy include a \$30 million boost to the Royal Flying Doctor Service; increasing the patient assisted travel scheme to \$30.8 million; and \$40 million to the northern town development fund. I note also that the Treasurer, Troy Buswell, has recently allocated \$200 million under the program to build 400 new residences for government officers and Homeswest applicants throughout the wheatbelt and the regions. It has also made a \$50 million commitment to the redevelopment of Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital, as well as approximately \$135 million for a new Albany hospital. The program is also providing much-needed funding for regional airport development, and a natural gas pipeline to Albany is also on the agenda. I look forward, along with my National Party colleagues, to supporting and promoting the benefits of royalties for regions throughout the area I represent.

However, the royalties for regions policy on its own will not maintain or enhance the long-term fiscal viability of rural communities; other government initiatives, programs and policies will. These include initiatives such as the red tape reduction committee, also known as the red tape razor gang, which, at this time, has received more than 600 submissions from small business operators. It is anticipated that once its recommendations have been adopted, commercial enterprise will save approximately \$1.7 billion over a 10-year period in regulatory requirements; that is based on the Victorian model. Programs such as the jobs protection package recently announced in the budget will apply to businesses with payrolls of up to \$3.2 million. This translates to a large number of small businesses in the Agricultural Region that will be eligible for a significant payroll tax exemption, thus helping small business to survive in these challenging times.

Another recent policy that will enhance the viability of rural communities and rural small businesses is the Wheat Export Marketing Act 2008. This act deregulated the export of wheat in Australia, and its success is best demonstrated by the fact that Western Australian wheat growers have received a \$35 a tonne premium above what they were previously getting. This premium relates to a \$294 million premium over and above what growers normally would have received under the old marketing regime. With a multiplier effect of three or four, this equates to more than \$1 billion going into the wheatbelt and rural Western Australia. In fact, my feedback from a number of small businesses in the region is that this year is one of the best they have had regardless of the financial downturn internationally. Policies such as this will enhance the financial longevity of rural communities.

GMOs

In 2006 I was present when the then opposition spokesman for agriculture, Mr Gary Snook, launched his policy on the trialling of genetically modified canola at the Dowerin Field Day. It was a gutsy move by Gary, but he understood that the industry exists today as a viable entity only because it has always adopted and adapted the latest technological and scientific advances. Genetically modified organisms are the next step in food production for an ever-expanding population and as such must be explored in a managed way to assess the benefits of GM canola. I

congratulate the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mr Terry Redman, for his courage and foresight in implementing a similar policy. This sentiment also applies to the 17 farmers who are actively participating in a demonstration of GM canola crops on their properties. There has been some local opposition to this policy, so it is interesting to note that in 2007 the Victorian Labor government called for an independent review on GM canola. Based on the report, it found that there were no valid grounds to maintain a moratorium that prevented farmers from having the choice about the type of canola they wished to grow. Consequently, the Victorian GM moratorium was lifted on 29 February 2008.

In the same year, 2007, the New South Wales Labor government announced its independent review, and found that the introduction of GM canola to New South Wales would have minimal impact on market access or prices for the majority of Australian canola growers, and that the potential impact on markets and trade from GM food crops necessitated a clear path to market approach to regulation. The New South Wales moratorium was lifted on 14 March 2008. GM trials last year in both Victoria and New South Wales have demonstrated increased yields and a reduction in herbicide application, and in both cases there has been no evidence of cross-contamination through pollination or during the transport process. The major concerns of segregation, coexistence, market access and price premiums have all been addressed through these cultivations, with no findings that would support the need for the continuation of a moratorium. In fact, the trialling has been so successful that the demand by growers in both those states for GM canola seed has outstripped supply in the months of March and April.

By way of background information, GM canola was introduced into Canada in the late 1990s and since then the Canadian canola industry has left this country behind, and we need to catch up. In the past decade, higher margins in Canada through lower costs and increased yields have seen canola plantings expand to 80 per cent of the area planted in western Canada. This increase has also led to solid growth in associated industries, such as a 60 per cent expansion in canola oil crushings in that country. Genetically modified organisms also impart significant environmental advantages. The Canola Council of Canada reports that the amount of chemicals applied to Canadian GM crops annually has been reduced by 6 000 tonnes. Less field operations have been required in the growing of GM canola in Canada with a consequent saving of 31 million tonnes of diesel fuel per annum. This equates to a saving of \$13 million for growers. These figures are based on a 2001 report. GM foods are the most scrutinised, analysed, and peer-reviewed food source in human history. In fact, tens of millions of GM meals have been eaten by millions of people over the past decade, and there have been no documented cases of any adverse effects from GM-derived food consumption. I look forward to seeing the data from this year's trials in Western Australia.

DEREGULATION

This state had partial regulation of its coarse grain industry under the Grain Marketing Act 2002. This act allowed the Grain Licensing Authority to issue special licences to exporters for coarse grains. Western Australia was the last state in Australia to have such a system for pre-described grains. In 2008, the Economic Regulation Authority review found that the GLA was no longer needed. The Minister for Agriculture and Food has acted on this advice and repealed the Grain Marketing Act 2002, thus dismantling the GLA. At the next harvest, this state will have full deregulation for all grains. This deregulation will put significant pressure on both Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd and the transport system, because price and marketing premiums are achieved by exporting as much grain tonnage as possible during the northern hemisphere winter. In fact, industry has a desired export target of two million tonnes per month. This challenge, while significant, can be achieved if the key stakeholders in the transport and handling chain work cooperatively to implement a workable, competitive strategy that will meet the demands of the deregulated market. In regard to this, I congratulate the Minister for Transport, Hon Simon O'Brien,

for his public statements that he will support and encourage competition, both at portside and within the transport chain.

TRANSPORT

On transport matters, I am confident that this government will uphold its election promise to enshrine the harvest mass management scheme in legislation. This legislation will, hopefully, be implemented at a convenient time, and I encourage the Minister for Transport to keep the current harvest mass management standard at a 10 per cent variation above the legislated axle loads for heavy vehicles carrying grain.

EDUCATION

I would also like to take this opportunity to voice my concern about the proposal to have year 7s moved from primary school to secondary school. A large number of wheatbelt towns that have primary schools in their areas use these schools as educational and community focal points. If this proposition were to be adopted by the Department of Education and Training, it would negatively impact on not just the child but the viability of schools in these small country towns. We already struggle to find teachers and resources. Such a proposal would also impact on the emotional and financial welfare of parents and students who at the age of 11 would be required to move to either the city or to a larger regional centre to continue their education. The culture of regional primary schools would also be deprived of the leadership that the senior year 7s provide to the rest of the school. In my mind, this proposed transition for year 7s has no educational benefit. I ask that the minister consult widely with rural education specialists before making a decision on this matter.

Due to time constraints I have mentioned only a number of electoral concerns that I have been recently involved in, and I look forward to discussing at a future time issues arising from fishing, mining, tourism and the many commercial enterprises that make up the communities in the Agricultural Region. I look forward to working with a government that understands how unique Western Australia is—a state within a nation, which has an abundance of natural and produced resources that are urgently required by an insatiable world; a state of 2.2 million people whose contribution to the country is 27 to 30 per cent of the nation's gross national product. I look forward to working with a government that has a "can do" attitude, a government that will ensure that we will advance the prospects and prosperity of all Western Australians.

I will finish, Mr President, by stating that as a new member in this place, I have observed over the past two and a half sitting weeks both conciliation and confrontation; in fact, at my first division I witnessed Labor members crossing the floor to vote with the government. I am fully aware that all members of this Council on both sides of the house have the sincere intent to facilitate legislation so that it is not only workable, but also complies with the requirements and expectations of today's Western Australian community. I look forward to actively participating in this process over the next four years.

Thank you for your politeness in listening to me.

[Applause.]
