



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



Hon Dave Grills, MLC
(Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 11 May on the following motion moved by Hon 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 DAVE GRILLS (Mining and Pastoral) [3.47 pm]: To say the last four years have passed quickly is an understatement and testament to that old adage “where does the time go?” In describing my term in this place, I would like to borrow in part from that immortal giant of English literature Charles Dickens —

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ...

My time as a member for the Mining and Pastoral Region has certainly been a remarkable, life-changing experience with its various ups and downs. Since 2013, I have travelled extensively across this massive state of ours and met with people from all walks of life. From the beautiful coastline of Esperance to the rugged frontier wilderness of Kununurra and the East Kimberley, I have spent countless hours on the road, visiting the many fascinating communities that make up my vast electorate.

I have come to appreciate that each community, no matter how small or large, has a rich social fabric stitched together by people who have chosen to make regional WA their home. It has been an honour to have so many constituents share their stories and aspirations with me and I have done my best to fight for their interests in this place. Although I certainly have not always achieved the outcomes I may have wanted, I can say with resounding confidence that I have always sought to put my constituents first. We in this place have been bestowed a great honour by the people of Western Australia—one of the highest honours in our state. Our Westminster parliamentary system may not be perfect but it has given us in Western Australia a period of uninterrupted democratic governance dating back to the early days of European settlement.

I feel humbled and honoured to have played a part, albeit small, in this great democratic tradition as a member of the thirty-ninth Parliament of Western Australia. As others in this place will attest, members of Parliament are often confronted with an array of complex issues when they take office. Constituents will often contact our offices seeking information on government programs and services or simply asking for assistance to help navigate the labyrinth of government. Others will present us with more difficult, sometimes intractable problems needing attention. Many of these problems can often not be solved by simply introducing or amending legislation. Indeed, some of the biggest issues facing WA are social in nature and not easily addressed by any one party or policy prescription. It may be that some people overestimate the power and influence of individual MPs to effect change. We are only human and do not have access to infinite resources or knowledge.

To my surprise, I found that the MLC starter kit did not contain a magic wand. But I knew there was no elevator to success, so I set off up the stairway. For the incoming members of this place I would like to offer the following piece of advice: be sympathetic and listen to your constituents. You may not be able to change the world, but you can be a voice for people who feel like they are voiceless and invisible. Simply raising awareness about a particular issue can lead to constructive public dialogue. This is often the first step in making a real change that can improve lives. I have learnt firsthand that effecting change within government takes a great deal of time and persistence.

Servicing an electorate of over two and a quarter million square kilometres presents its own unique challenges. Anyone who runs for a country seat needs to be prepared to do an inordinate amount of travelling and spend many days and nights away from home. The unfathomable vastness of the Mining and Pastoral Region meant that I could be somewhere different all the time. As my mining and pastoral counterparts will understand,

some days are not long enough when we are trying to service communities dispersed over a large area—larger than New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania combined. Living in Kalgoorlie–Boulder and working from my electoral office in Esperance also contributed to keeping me away from home. To those who raise objections about so-called electoral malapportionment in Western Australia, I would ask that they consider the vast distances covered by country members of Parliament. Perth residents do not need to travel hundreds of kilometres or more to access their local MP. In contrast, regional electoral districts are already expanding as electoral boundaries change and, in my view, no amount of technology or travel options can properly compensate for this growth. Constituents in remote communities, whether it be Hopetoun in the south or Wyndham in the north, often feel detached and disengaged from governments and feel that their voices and concerns are not represented in the corridors of power. With a certain level of local government engagement, we risk denying country people adequate representation and depriving them of opportunities for involvement in our state’s political process. I fail to see how a system that concentrates political power in one city can be considered fair and equitable. In my view, this country political gap is mirrored by a yawning social and cultural divide. Often people in Perth have little understanding of life in regional WA and some politicians and bureaucrats seem to forget that people actually reside outside the metropolitan area. City and country areas see the world differently and the gap is growing. To city residents, a place like Coolgardie or Halls Creek represents an entirely different environment and way of life; likewise, many country residents feel a sense of alienation when they visit the city. In some respects, Western Australia comprises two parallel societies. It is the responsibility of members in this place to help breach this gap and ensure that policy and legislation services all residents of the state. I truly hope that the new Parliament and state government do not forget about regional WA and its people.

The WA economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture, mining and energy exports that are mainly derived from the regions. The Pilbara region alone is responsible for about 70 per cent of mineral and energy production in WA. In the interests of equity and the state’s long-term prosperity, it is vital that a fair share of WA’s export wealth is injected back into regional communities. Regional WA is the engine room of our economy and should not be an afterthought when it comes to policy or resource allocation. Ultimately, more resilient regions mean a more resilient state.

I am very proud to have been part of a team that delivered record investment to regional WA over the last four years. From the Kimberley to the goldfields–Esperance regions, communities across the mining and pastoral electorate have shared in nearly \$7 billion invested through the royalties for regions program, created and delivered by the WA Nationals in government. Thanks to the strong regional development focus, we delivered real progress and narrowed the gap between the city and the regions in infrastructure and service provision. Since 2008, regional residents have experienced significant improvements in health, community support services, education, economic development, agriculture, tourism, telecommunications, Aboriginal development and the arts. In short, royalties for regions has changed many regional lives for the better. I cannot think of another government program in recent times that has had such a transformative effect in such a relatively short period. This strong regional development focus kindled a sense of optimism in the regions that did not exist a decade ago. But now I feel some trepidation about the future of regional WA. I vividly remember the bad old days before royalties for regions existed. I remember the dilapidated infrastructure and substandard services in places such as the goldfields. I remember how difficult it was for community groups and local governments to obtain funding for new projects and initiatives. I remember the common sentiment among country residents that we would be treated like second-class citizens by a metro-centric government. I hope we do not witness a return to those bad old days under this new government. However, there are already some strong worrying signs. According to its financial management plan released a day before the state election, the incoming Labor government stated it would slash \$2.3 billion from royalties for regions over the next three years. We are still waiting for some details on these planned cuts, but I know that any reduction in funding will hurt our regional communities. Since the election, my electoral office has been contacted by a number of concerned constituents asking whether their Country Age Pension Fuel Card will be renewed or whether their royalties for regions community project grant will be honoured by the new government. I would urge the new government to not rip funding out of regional WA in order to pay for metropolitan projects. If our regions are to develop and prosper over the long term, we need policy certainty and ongoing investment.

As I stated earlier, my team and I were involved in many projects—legislative and parliamentary business and the day-to-day operation of a busy regional electoral office. Like most members, I enjoyed getting out and about, meeting with and working alongside my constituents. From sitting in this chamber I learnt much about how Parliament operates and the business of being an effective member of the Legislative Council. At times I found it was somewhat frustrating, but by sitting in as often as I did, I became more aware of protocol and procedure. One of the unexpected privileges I came to enjoy was serving as a member on the Standing Committee on Legislation. I found the committee different from the Council in that it allowed a less adversarial, more cooperative form of decision-making. That is not to say there was no politics involved, but it felt comfortable and I believe the committee made a number of useful recommendations during the last term.

I would like to thank my committee colleagues and chair, Hon Robyn McSweeney, for their professionalism and knowledge. It was particularly rewarding to work on the committee report into the Mining Legislation Amendment Bill 2015, as this bill was very important to many prospectors and small-scale miners in my home town of Kalgoorlie–Boulder. It is important that local prospectors and small miners are not squeezed out of the industry and I hope the new state government will adopt the committee’s recommendations, such as protecting the diversity of the sector by introducing a tiered approach to the mining industry. I also hope that the new state government will follow the WA Nationals in supporting a transient worker accommodation policy aimed at fostering the transformation of regional communities into thriving and sustainable population centres. Over the years, residents and local governments across the electorate have raised concerns with me about the devastating impact of fly in, fly out workforces on their communities. In earlier times, the resources sector primarily used residential workforces and this led to the growth of thriving communities in the goldfields, midwest and Pilbara. However, the shift to the FIFO model in recent decades has undermined the established towns in regional WA to the point at which their long-term viability is at risk. Supporting the continued development of the resources sector should be a priority, but it must be done in a manner that enhances rather than undermines regional communities. I do not believe that government should sit by and allow these communities to wither while a significant wealth derived from nearby resources flows elsewhere. I do not believe we should quietly wave goodbye to longstanding towns such as Norseman, Coolgardie and Wiluna when there are viable and profitable resource operations within their shires. For the sake of towns in the midwest, Pilbara, goldfields, Gascoyne and Kimberley, we need to move to a new model that encourages mining operations located near an established population centre to co-locate, engage with communities and honour their commitment as good corporate citizens. This would significantly enhance the economic and social wellbeing of those towns and provide resource workers and their families with a more stable and healthier lifestyle.

As I mentioned earlier, some of the biggest challenges facing our state are social in nature. At this time, given this will be my last speech in this place, I will take this opportunity to voice my concern regarding the safety and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable in our communities. I remain concerned that many young folk across regional WA may not be realising their full potential. Unfortunately, some still struggle through adversity and have missed out on education, employment and life opportunities. Repeatedly they end up unemployed, totally disengaged from mainstream society and, at times, in trouble with the law. I believe these young people deserve better. Those living in the most disadvantaged areas of Western Australia are eight times more likely to have spent time in prison. Aboriginal people make up around three per cent of the state’s population, yet make up 44 per cent of incarcerated adults and 78 per cent of incarcerated juveniles. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system remains a deep concern. As the late Western Australian historian Geoffrey Bolton observed in his book *Land of Vision and Mirage*, Western Australia will never be able to call itself a contented society while these problems persist. Despite all the symbolism and hand-wringing over past misdeeds, it seems that real reconciliation on the ground remains as elusive as ever.

During my time as a regional police officer, local government councillor and member of Parliament I have observed firsthand, in the goldfields, Kimberley and Pilbara, the well-intended but failed Indigenous policies of successive governments. The cost of failure has been high. It has been high in terms of the billions of taxpayers’ dollars that have been largely wasted on ineffective programs and services over decades, but the real tragedy has been the cost in terms of human lives. Too many lives have been needlessly wasted or cut short. Sadly, despite clear evidence of failure, many in positions of power have sought to double down on the same separatist policies of the last four decades that have contributed to the dreadful living conditions in some Aboriginal communities. These policies have kept many Aboriginal people on the fringes of society and have served as a barrier to their inclusion in the Australian dream.

Confronted with these terrible conditions, the previous Liberal–National government launched the “Resilient Families, Strong Communities” roadmap for regional and remote Australian Aboriginal communities. The roadmap was clear in its objectives, stating —

We believe that all Aboriginal children in regional and remote areas should be well-nurtured and kept safe, be well-educated through to adulthood, have access to employment, and have the skills, hope and resilience to fulfil their life aspirations.

We know there is no silver bullet for dealing with these issues, and reform is neither easy nor swift. However, the status quo is clearly unacceptable. We need policymakers prepared to drive substantive reforms if we are to break the cycle of dysfunction and despair that plagues many communities in Western Australia.

One of the ways in which this dysfunction manifests itself is in the form of crime. Often we see juveniles, with no parental direction, out on the streets running afoul of the law. Following the tragic events in Kalgoorlie in 2016, in which a young man lost his life, we set out to work with communities to develop and deliver a safer communities program targeting troubled youth. This culminated in a policy aimed at reintegrating young offenders into the community, which the WA Nationals presented to the 2017 state election.

Offending has many causes, as noted in the 2016 “Speaking Out About Youth Justice” report released by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. When asked about reasons for offending, the views of young recidivist offenders revealed several key themes, as stated in the report —

- problems with family
- friends who were involved in criminal behaviour
- disengagement from school
- disconnection from the broader community
- personal issues including, crime as a normal habit, drug and alcohol use, cognitive disorders and mental health issues.

Under the Western Australian Young Offenders Act 1994, the police are directed to divert juveniles away from court, with detention used as a last resort. Although there are options under the act to deal with offenders at the lower end, there are often no effective local custodial options for recidivist or serious offenders in regional areas. The only custodial option for repeat or serious offenders is the metropolitan Banksia Hill Detention Centre. Alternatives involving bail, juvenile justice system redirection and curfews are often ineffective. In essence, magistrates are essentially presented with two options—either Banksia Hill or bail, meaning young offenders are sent either back to the street or to Perth. The evidence suggests that neither of these options works particularly well in regional areas.

In order to improve justice outcomes, I believe magistrates need a third option—to remand young offenders in a local intensive behaviour management facility, where serious and repeat offenders can get the assistance they require to prevent recidivism. This kind of reform is sorely needed to catch younger offenders who are falling through the cracks, to make sure that their behaviour is punishable but also allows them the opportunity to become better members of their community through working more closely with their families, their culture and government agencies. In concert with the Young Offenders Act, appropriate youth custodial behavioural facilities should be established in regional areas. Such facilities would provide homegrown options tailored to local youth and reduce the need for young offenders to be sent to Banksia Hill at significant expense. In the case of Aboriginal young offenders, rehabilitation programs at regional youth behavioural facilities would be enhanced by engaging the local Aboriginal community to provide greater support and guidance for troubled youth.

I have consulted at length with communities and shires in the Kimberley and goldfields and I believe there is real support for this proposal. I note that the Kimberley Regional Group, comprising the Broome, Derby–West Kimberley, Halls Creek and Wyndham–East Kimberley shires, has sought to secure support from government to establish a youth justice facility in its region. On behalf of all the young folk in Western Australia struggling to make their lives better, I ask this incoming government to please continue driving change for the better and make our communities safer places to live, work and raise a family. It would be a great shame if the reform momentum in this area was lost.

As my time in this place comes to a close, I would like to briefly reflect on the March 2017 election. It is fair to say this was always going to be a tough election, especially with changes to the Mining and Pastoral Region electoral boundaries and the multimillion-dollar scare campaign waged against the WA Nationals by big multinational miners. Irrespective of the outcome, I believe the election has raised disturbing questions about the influence of multinational corporations and vested interests in WA’s political process. It is my view that WA needs to secure a better deal for the use of its natural resources. I am proudly pro-mining and, as a goldfields resident, I acutely understand just how important the sector is to the economic health of many of our regional communities. However, I do not believe it is fair for ordinary Western Australians or smaller miners that the two biggest mining companies operating in WA are exempt from indexation, and continue to pay a special lease rental that has not been reviewed or updated since the 1960s. The 25c-a-tonne special lease rental may have been a fair price when Sir David Brand and Sir Charles Court were governing the state, but it is not any longer. Western Australian households and businesses face the prospect of higher fees and charges as this new government attempts to find more revenue. I would like those opposite to explain why the giant multinationals, BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, deserve to be shielded from modern economic realities when everybody else pays more year after year. Western Australia should obviously welcome further investment into our mining sector; however, such investment must be on our terms. We need to become the masters of our own finite resources and ensure we maximise the public benefit deriving from their extraction. It is my hope that WA will be able to follow the example of a country like Norway, which, through prudent and long-sighted policies, has successfully turned its non-renewable resources into a financial asset that can last forever.

As with all valedictory speeches comes the heartfelt thanks and appreciation for the marvellous folk who have joined me during this journey. It would be my wish to be able to acknowledge them all individually today, but time will not allow for a cast of thousands.

The PRESIDENT: Take your time.

Hon DAVE GRILLS: If my Army cadets could see me now, they would laugh.

Thank you to my beautiful girls, Sue and Arddun, for loving me and always being there for me. Thank you to my wonderful family. Thanks to my steadfast friends and loyal constituents across the Mining and Pastoral Region for your support over the last four years. You have helped keep me concentrated and my feet firmly on the ground. You may never know how influential and important you have been.

Thank you to my fellow National Party members and parliamentary colleagues. Thank you to our dedicated staff and dependable volunteers who worked alongside me and assisted me during my term in state Parliament. Thank you to every one of my brilliant electoral staff who worked alongside me. Thank you to my current team, Kelly McCarthy and Samantha Scott, and my trusted confidante, Rex Drabik. Our hard work speaks for itself and I believe reflects the success of the Nationals in the seat of Roe.

Last but not least, thank you to every one of the wonderful folk who make this Parliament run so smoothly and effectively. You have always been there to assist, share a laugh and have a chat. Your friendship and benevolence have meant a lot to me during my time in this place.

I would like to pass on my best wishes to all the members of the new government and those who have come to this place for the first time. I trust you will govern for all Western Australians and do what you believe is right for our state and its future.

And so it goes—still navigating the stairs. One door has closed, and I look forward to opening the next and serving the people of regional Western Australia in a different capacity. As I am fond of saying, change is a constant; development is optional. Thank you.

[Applause.]
