

CARNARVON TRACKING STATION

Statement by Minister for Science

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Science) [9.09 am]: The world recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the *Apollo 11* moon landing, but there is a Western Australian aspect to this story that many people are unaware of. In 1964 Carnarvon was a small coastal town; however, there was one new addition—a state-of-the-art NASA tracking station, complete with its own power plant, air conditioning, the latest radio equipment and a new occupational group called the “trackers”. Over the next 11 years, the NASA Carnarvon Tracking Station supported the Gemini, Apollo and Skylab programs and at the height of its operation had a staff of 220 people. It was the largest NASA tracking station outside the United States. For the *Apollo 11* mission, it was used to uplink commands to the *Apollo* spacecraft to set it on a trajectory to arrive at the moon, and it was the prime link for the last hours of re-entry to earth.

Although the station was decommissioned in 1975, and sadly bulldozed in 1996, today I want to pay tribute to the enduring contribution and the spirit of those who worked at that station. Although some specialists were brought in from overseas to work at the station, the core of the operational staff were Western Australians. Unsurprisingly, there was not a huge talent pool of space experts in Western Australia, so a range of TV technicians, telephone operators, and interested locals took on the roles. They had a steep learning curve and they quickly became proficient in their roles and gained a reputation for their strong work ethic and problem-solving skills. For the Carnarvon trackers, these historic events are forever etched into their memory, and lifelong friendships were made.

I had the pleasure of joining the trackers in Carnarvon for the *Apollo 11* fiftieth anniversary celebration. I was impressed by the pride they took in the roles that they played in the space race. They were vital to NASA’s success. I was also impressed by how many women had taken on those roles. These women stepped up and got the job done. The Carnarvon celebration was a great weekend in which old friends got together and told stories. But there was a serious message: the Carnarvon trackers want to ensure their story is remembered by all Western Australians. Many Australians know the story of the Parkes Observatory and the dish. We should also know the equally important story of the Carnarvon trackers. In this regard, I acknowledge the great work by Phil Youd and his team for establishing the Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum that opened in 2012. The museum tells the trackers’ story. I am told it is now Carnarvon’s number one tourist attraction.

As WA positions itself to take a greater role in the space industry in the future, I want to recognise the long and proud history of space activities in this state and, on behalf of all Western Australians, I thank the Carnarvon trackers for their contribution to the space industry in Western Australia.