



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Mia Davies MLC
(Member for Agricultural Region)

Loan Bill 2009

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 23 June 2009

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Second Reading

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [8.10 pm]: Thank you, Mr President, and I congratulate you on your recent election. I look forward to working with you in this chamber. I also extend my thanks to the Clerk and staff of Parliament House, who have made the new members feel welcome and have provided us with valuable guidance. I also acknowledge, with respect, the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet. I also acknowledge my friends and family who have joined us this evening in the public gallery, and those who are watching via the World Wide Web. It is wonderful to have them close by as I shake my way through my first address to this house.

It is indeed a humbling experience to realise that I have been elected to be one of just 95 people who sit in this Parliament and have responsibility for legislation that will impact on the lives of every person of this state. I remember the day that Hon Col Holt, Hon Philip Gardiner, Hon Max Trenorden and I were confirmed elected, for more than one reason. Without doubt, there was a sense of personal achievement to think that a girl from the bush could end up in this place. More importantly, I recall the moment my name, along with those of Hon Philip Gardiner and Hon Max Trenorden, appeared on the screen at the Fremantle Passenger Terminal on the day the count for the Agricultural Region was finalised as being a triumph for the WA Nationals and the people of regional Western Australia. On that day, our small political party with the lofty aim of holding the balance of power in the Parliament and delivering our key election commitment, royalties for regions, achieved what the pundits had claimed would be impossible.

I will talk about royalties for regions later. At this stage I ask for the indulgence of members as I tell them how a girl from the bush ended up in this place. If what my colleague Hon Col Holt said in his inaugural speech is true, that all the things we have done in our past are preparations for what we are about to take on, it would seem that a life in politics was a path set for me some years ago. I grew up in the central wheatbelt on the family farm in Yorkrakine, an area between Tammin and Wyalkatchem, approximately 200 kilometres north east of Perth. I will paint a picture for members that illustrates the humble beginnings of many families in this region. In April 1908, the then Minister for Agriculture and Lands, James Mitchell, having traversed the area between Tammin and Yorkrakine Hill, arranged for 51 sections to be surveyed in the Yorkrakine and Korrelocking areas. Blocks of country were valued at 10 to 12 shillings an acre, with the payment to be made over 25 years. In 1899, labourers' wages started at seven shillings per day, and a man, horse and cart could be hired for 10 shillings a day. In today's currency, this equates to land prices of \$1.20 an acre, labourers' wages at 70 cents a day, and a bargain price of one dollar for a man, horse and cart. How times have changed! Unemployed and married folk with large families were invited to apply

through the local press and, of the original settlers, five of the families had 10 or more children, and the smallest family consisted of six. These families eked out a living in a harsh and unforgiving environment. They lived in houses made of hessian bags and corrugated iron with dirt floors while they cleared the land for farming. They did it with no mechanical equipment, just sheer hard yakka. In amongst this work, they found time to build their community, open a general store, build a town hall for gatherings and form sporting clubs. The schools, hospitals and sealed roads came much later. They built their communities from scratch, with little assistance from the government of the day. In fact, James Mitchell was criticised for his bland optimism in allegedly throwing new settlers into the bush with just an axe, claiming that new railways and a little muscular activity were all that was required for success. He became the prime target for the Farmers and Settlers Association, founded in 1912, and two years later the association returned eight Country Party members to the Parliament.

Today, there are fewer families and bigger farms. Ten families remain in the area taken up by the original 51. Names like the Hutchisons, Ryans, Everetts, Tilbrooks, Charltons, Nocks, Naughtons, Maitlands and Falkeners are still there. Other early settlers, including my family, are also in the district along with the dePierres, the Divers and the Mackins. My childhood was spent on the family farm. My mum returned to Wylie with dad the year I was born, and remained there for the next 20 years. Dad, his brothers and their wives worked with my grandfather, Lloyd, and my dear Nanna Iris and built the property and merino stud into a successful business enterprise. I know that nanna and pop would have been so proud to see me standing here today.

My primary school years were spent at Wyalkatchem District High School. It was a small community and I am privileged to say that I still count some of these schoolmates as my close friends. Boarding school was the next challenge, and at 13 years of age I left home and headed to Perth to attend Methodist Ladies' College. If nothing else, boarding school broadens a person's horizons. I learnt to be independent and to look after myself. Many members may know that MLC and Christ Church Grammar School are located side by side. In those days my boarding house, Langsford House, was located right on the boundary of the school. On the other side of the fence, not 10 metres away, was the Christ Church boarders' year 10 common room, with a gate that was usually unlocked. But that is not where this story is going. What was always curious to me was that the girls in the boarding house were expected to manage their studies and attend to domestic duties such as their own washing and ironing—and we cleaned on the weekend—while it seemed the boys on the other side of the fence were able to put their washing into a bag and have it delivered back to them the following day while they had fishing passes and day leave. It just goes to show that even at that young age women are able to multitask. I enjoyed those years and the opportunities the school offered me. My interests tended towards art and music, but my upbringing meant I also played a bit of sport. I hasten to add that I was much better at literature, art and music than on-field pursuits. Unfortunately, the only sporting prowess I inherited from my father, who was an accomplished sportsman, is my love of the Fremantle Dockers.

School was followed by university where I studied science for a year, followed by three years of studying marketing and the media. Again, the friends I met during that time have remained some of my dearest. On graduating, I left Australia for two years to travel and work overseas. I did everything from working for London Underground, pulling beers at a pub in Ascot to selling cocktails to tourists in Majorca, and I was a housekeeper-cum-maid in a stately home in Essex. I had a fabulous time.

Mr President, I have had a privileged upbringing. My family gave me the best possible start in life, a safe and loving home and an education that was second to none. Sadly not every child has the same opportunity. An education is something that once gained can never be taken away. It is a pathway to employment, understanding and empowerment. Education breaks down barriers—racial, social and economic. It can put people on a level playing field, depending on how they choose to

use it. It is a reality that people who live in regional WA may not have access to a school, university or TAFE close to their home, or their school may not have a teacher who is qualified to teach science or English literature. It is also a reality that students from regional WA are poorly represented in the state's universities. We must get better at supporting families and students to make sure every child and adult gets the education they deserve. My mum, who is here in the gallery tonight, has taught more year 1 students than she probably cares to remember. Those early years are so important. We must get better at supporting the people who teach our children. They are an important part of our community.

Members may recall that I mentioned the names of the pioneering families of Yorkrakine, including the Charltons, the Divers and the Davies. Some members of this house will also recognise these names as people who have served as members of this house. Sir Leslie Diver, Hon Eric Charlton and Hon Dexter Davies have all represented country people as members of the Nationals, and its forerunner the Country Party. As history has it, I believe I have Eric Charlton to thank for my family's involvement in state politics. He was a close neighbour and he convinced my father to attend his first branch meeting, and from there stemmed a long association with the party. Dad was the state president of the Nationals for 10 years. He took his place in this house in 1998 on Eric's retirement, and his time here ended in 2001. Since then, he has continued to work tirelessly on behalf of regional communities. I will strive to apply the same dedication and tenacity that he exhibits in daily life. I know him to be well regarded by members on both sides of this house, and he is and will remain an inspiration and a mentor to me.

Despite this political category my real interest in politics grew from my first job. My professional career started in Hon Max Trenorden's leader's office working as a receptionist, and a research officer. Having shown little to no regard for the political process throughout school or university, I felt I had come home to the Nationals. I thank Max for giving me that opportunity. Opposition is a great training ground, and my pre-season has been a long one.

I continued working in the leader of the Nationals' office under the leadership of Brendon Grylls until the private sector beckoned and I took a position with the Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia. This role took me to the north west of the state. I was a regular visitor to Port Hedland, Karratha, Newman and other towns throughout the Pilbara. That is a vastly different environment from the one I grew up in, but the people and their stories are the same—different faces, same stories.

I turn now to my electorate, the Agricultural Region. The Agricultural Region covers the four Legislative Assembly electorates of Geraldton, Moore, Central Wheatbelt and Wagin. It stretches from Kalbarri in the north to Bremer Bay in the south and is home to a diverse number of communities. The Western Australian Electoral Commission defines the Agricultural Region as a region in which the land is used primarily for agricultural purposes. This may well be the case, but there is also a wealth of activity beyond farming in this region.

As luck would have it, last week *The West Australian* published a booklet titled "the wheatbelt: inside the state's heartland". That booklet provides a snapshot of my electorate and the diversity of the communities I represent. It begins with Burracoppin, noted as the starting point for the construction of the state's first rabbit proof fence. It highlights Meckering, a tiny town, once flattened by an earthquake, that is currently promoting itself as the perfect base for fly in, fly out workers. It speaks of Westonia, home to the 98-year-old Edna May goldmine, once one of Western Australia's richest mines, and set to reopen on the back of improvements in the price of gold. It speaks of Merredin, soon so be home to one of the biggest wind farms in Western Australia. It speaks of Mukinbudin, the men of which are about to hold the first "Men's Shed Conference". That conference will be held in what is said to be "one of Western Australia's most impressive men's sheds, built in 2007 after it was decided that a group of local retirees restoring farm machinery needed somewhere to work". What started as a group of men tinkering on machinery has grown into

a forum for promoting men's health, combating depression and isolation, and raising funds to assist the local community. What a wonderful story. It also mentions Wickepin, once home to Albert Facey, author of the Australian classic *A Fortunate Life*. It highlights the innovation of the Moora Shire Council, which came to the rescue of long-term residents of the Kingsway Tourist and Caravan Park in Madeley who had received notice that the park was about to close. People from the Moora shire bussed residents up to the town and presented a pitch for them to move into a purpose-built lifestyle village on the outskirts of the town. The booklet says that 10 of the Kingsway residents will be relocating to Moora. The booklet also talks about Jurien Bay, which boasts a ballet school run by a former member of the Royal New Zealand Ballet and Europe Dance Troupe.

The booklet also mentions Darkan. While I am speaking of Darkan, I would like to acknowledge another special person who is in the gallery tonight—my granddad, Mr Donald South. Granddad is my mum's dad. He and my nan, who is no longer with us but is certainly watching over us, raised my mum and her brother on the family farm in the wheatbelt shire of West Arthur. You see, the country is in my blood, on both sides of my family. My nan and granddad, as with my nanna and pop, were committed to their family, their farm and their community. My granddad is a true gentleman—softly spoken and generous, without pretension or a need for material things. In this fast-paced, materialistic world, I am pleased to say that we still have time for the odd game of Scrabble. While my granddad's preference would be to not step foot in Perth for the remainder of his years, he has made the journey to be here tonight.

I return now to the towns of the Agricultural Region. In Katanning, almost seven per cent of the population are Christmas or Cocos Islanders. Originally attracted to Katanning to work in the meat works, they are now a valued and unique aspect of the Katanning community. The booklet also mentions Wagin and the Wagin Development Association. The Wagin Development Association has come up with a novel idea to deal with excess groundwater in the shire and create a new industry in the town. It is proposing to pump excess groundwater into fish tanks or ponds that will be appropriate for farming saltwater fish species. Finally, I come to Geraldton, a thriving town, 450 kilometres north of Perth, supporting agriculture, fishing and mining industries. It is on the cusp of major growth. I could go on. Every town has its own story—far too many to recount tonight.

The great qualities of innovation, adventure and pioneering spirit are in the blood and bones of the people in these regional communities. My dad said that in his maiden speech to this house just over 10 years ago. They are people who ask for little and give generously, even if the only thing they have to give is their time. It is not unusual to find that the person who drives the ambulance for St John Ambulance also umpires the kids' sport on the weekends and turns up for the busy bee at the school. It has been, and always will be, the case that country people wear many hats to make their communities work. They will adapt themselves to their environment and find new ways to sustain themselves. But there is no place for rose-coloured glasses when we are looking at life in the regions. Life can be tough. Our rock lobster fishery—one of the most valuable in Australia—is under immense pressure, and the livelihoods of many families are under threat. Our farmers, whose livelihoods depend on the winds of Mother Nature, find themselves working in an ever-increasing competitive global market. As a government, we have recently given them another tool to deal with this changing world. I support the Minister for Agriculture and Food's move to introduce genetically modified organism trials throughout the state and will watch with interest as they progress.

New mines are being opened throughout the region, and with the promise of a diversified economy, towns are faced with new population dynamics. Geraldton will become the hub for mining in the mid-west and it will take the commitment of all tiers of government, the private sector and the community to apply lessons learnt from other parts of the state to maximise the opportunity for this region.

Balancing care for the environment with development continues to challenge us all. It is not a new phenomenon in the Agricultural Region. Long before it was fashionable to be green, our farmers and country towns were finding new and innovative ways to deal with rising watertables and the scourge of salt. I am firm in my belief that regardless of whether scientists agree or disagree with climate change, we all have a responsibility to reduce our carbon footprint.

Mr President, although the physical environment can sometimes define regional Western Australia, it is the social fabric that makes a community. Recent events have shown that we still need to work hard to break down the barriers of racism in our communities. Is it too much to ask that everyone stops to take a moment to walk in another person's shoes? We are a lucky country. Our forefathers fought and died for the freedoms we enjoy today. In his inaugural speech, President Barack Obama said that America's "patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness". Australia is not so different. I was proud the day Prime Minister Rudd said sorry to the Aboriginal people of this nation. There is still much work to do and it is incumbent on leaders of our community to continue to reconcile past deeds, but surely the first step in healing any rift is to utter that simple word.

The unique social fabric of each of the communities in the Agricultural Region is what holds them together. They have chosen to live, work and invest in the region. Some, like my family, have been there for nearly a century. I hope that others will move there tomorrow. I stand here ready and willing to listen to each of these communities. I will be their voice in this place. I ask all members to listen and learn along with me, and I will do the same when they are representing the needs and aspirations of their regions.

Mr President, it will surprise some people in the gallery that it has taken me this long to mention President Barack Obama. Last year I joined the world watching the American presidential election with great interest as Barack Obama campaigned on hope, change and progress. It is my great hope that his presidency is marked by the same stunning moments created during that campaign. I truly hope that he can deliver on his promise to Americans and the world that change is possible. The context within which Obama took his message to the people of America was not dissimilar to our approach in Western Australia. I am not overstating the point when I say that people living in regional WA were feeling neglected and forgotten. We are a resilient lot—self-sufficient and stoic. But in the lead-up to the 2008 state election, the electorate was apathetic. We had told people that one vote, one value would destroy their political representation. In fact, we had done such a good job of convincing them that it would spell the end of regional representation that it took a lot of convincing on our behalf to show them that the Nationals had rallied in the face of adversity and were ready and willing to deliver the change they were looking for.

I think it is true that in each of us there is a Barack Obama waiting to burst out. Who has not dreamt of giving a speech that captures the imagination of thousands of people? Who has not dreamt of giving a nation of people hope and creating a sense of renewal and excitement? Who has not dreamt of giving the "yes, we can" speech? Under the leadership of Brendon Grylls and Wendy Duncan, the Nationals took the "yes, we can" message to the regions. We stepped out of the election cycle and out of the campaign box and started the process of rejuvenation by inspiring the electorate. There was no room for the left or right of politics in this message. We were simply saying that if regional people wanted representation in the Parliament, they needed to back the team that could deliver change. Of course, we did it without the pomp and fanfare that goes hand in hand with an American election campaign; we would have been laughed out of town. Instead, we travelled to each corner of the state, telling people that their vote could make a difference. Along the way, we collected people who had never considered voting for the Nationals before. We found the challenges facing communities in Port Hedland, Kalgoorlie, Kununurra and Tom Price were the same as those faced in any town in our traditional heartland—different faces, same stories.

Every person has the right to a decent health service, an education system that supports and nurtures their children and the opportunity of gaining employment. Further to this, every community should

aspire to make their town or city a better place to live, work and invest in. Royalties for regions will assist many communities to do just that.

A bill to enshrine royalties for regions in legislation will shortly arrive in this house from the other place. It is my hope that all members will support this bill. It is my great hope that all country members of this house will support this bill. Royalties for regions is much more than the sum of royalties quarantined in the proposed fund.

With some programs, what people see is what they get. For example, funding this state's Royal Flying Doctor Service was the right thing to do. Most country people do not have a Royal Perth Hospital or a Princess Margaret Hospital for Children in their town. The Royal Flying Doctor Service is the next best thing.

The Country Age Pension Fuel Card is a \$500 fuel card to mitigate the cost of living and match both the Australian Labor Party's and Liberal Party's promise of free travel on public transport for pensioners.

Developing the Ord will bring benefits to the entire state. It is much more than a commitment to agriculture. It is about developing communities outside Perth, creating employment and wealth for everyone who lives in Western Australia. It is absolutely the role of government to facilitate development, and not just in the city where it may be cost effective.

Royalties for regions has also increased the boarding away from home allowance, a long overdue measure to support country kids and their education. Similarly, it has provided funding to create incentives to encourage our small and mid cap mining companies to continue to invest in greenfields exploration. We should be supporting industries that create jobs in and revenue for our state.

These initiatives have obvious benefits. The effect will be almost immediate. Not all royalties for regions initiatives will have such an immediate impact. Some of the funding will create intangible profits. The real story behind royalties for regions is empowerment—communities taking control of their destiny and shaping their future. The regional grants scheme, the country local government fund and funding for community resource centres is a first step towards decentralised decision making. The notion that these communities will squander or waste these funds is laughable. They know the value of a dollar, and they know how to turn it into three. At the risk of sounding clichéd, this policy has delivered hope. Change is happening and progress is not far behind.

While royalties for regions seeks to redress years of neglect and centralised decision making, it is incumbent on us to start planning the next step. We need to re-examine the way we govern the regional and remote areas of this state. Cost shifting between tiers of government, siloed approach to delivering services and infrastructure and centralised decision making has not served us well. I give notice that I will use my time in this place to better understand these processes and how they can be improved. It is a lofty ambition, but we should all be aiming high. To succeed would indeed be progress.

Mr President, I am the sum of my life experiences and I have shared these with many people. To begin with, as this is the first opportunity I have had to speak, I would like to thank the Leader of the House, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Greens for supporting the motion that passed through this place last year to reinstate me as a member of Parliament. My journey to this house has not been without its challenges, but it has been said that, "What does not kill you, will only make you stronger." I am expecting the powers of Wonder Woman to kick in any time soon.

I would like to thank my parliamentary colleagues for their support and advice. To Brendon Grylls, you are an inspiration and the journey has been a blast. I look forward to the next four years. I extend a big thank you to the members of the Nationals for the opportunity to represent this great party; in particular, Pat Hughes, Allan Marshall, Ian Robertson, Leigh Hardingham and Darren Moir. I thank them for backing a young woman to represent this great party. On that note, I will

have to include a gratuitous tickety-boo and acknowledge and thank Darren for his advice and guidance over the past years. To Mr Doug Cunningham, a man who has taught me much, and the team in the leader's office—Jill, Aila and Jane—who have shared so much of my journey, thank you. A special thank you to Susanna Ling and Marty Aldridge; it is an honour to have them as friends and colleagues. Thanks must also go to Hon Murray Criddle for his advice and counsel on my decision to run as a candidate.

I am nothing without my friends and family. My friend Claire, whom I have known since the first day of university, is, at the ripe old age of 30, about to become Dr Smallwood and I am Hon Mia Davies. That is not too bad for two chicks who have slept in nearly every train station and bus port in Europe, stood in the rain to watch Jimmy Barnes at the Doodlakine pub and had a strategy for getting tickets to the AC/DC concert. The dePierres family—Colleen, Paul, Madeleine and Juliane—are an extension of my family. There are not too many people in the world who can say that they have friends whom they have known their whole life. I thank Mads and Rich for sharing their house with me last year as I saved to buy my own.

Mr President, you will be pleased to know that I am nearly done. My last thank you is to my family. I have spoken about my father and the contribution he has made to this state through public life. At the end of the day he is my dad. He is one of the most patient and generous people I know, and I love him. I spoke earlier of my mum and her contribution to this state as a teacher. She has stoically turned up to every National Party function as dad's partner—and continues to do the same for me. She is a confidante, a counsellor and a friend, and I love her. Finally, my sister Emma. Em, you make decisions about people's health and wellbeing on a daily basis and deal with people when they are at their most vulnerable, yet you remind me that there is more to life than just work and I love you for it. This path will no doubt be challenging, but my promise to all is that friends and family make me a better person, so there should always be time for them.

I will leave members with one last anecdote. I recently attended the funeral of the father of one of my friends. They are a large family from the wheatbelt, and as is the case at many country funerals it seemed that the whole town had turned out. I had never met my friend's father, but his story seemed familiar to me: family farm, boarding school, kids—not too different from my own family. My friend gave part of the eulogy and he has given me permission to relate this story. His father was at boarding school in Perth and, by all accounts, was a fairly outgoing fellow. He had reached a crossroad in his schooling and had decided to return home to the family farm rather than stay on at school. On learning this, the principal called him into his office for a chat. He asked him why he was leaving and urged him to stay on to complete his matriculation. He was puzzled and said, "Sir, I'm not sure why you want me to stay. I'm not the brightest in chemistry or maths and I'm not your star footballer or track and field athlete." The principal responded that he was the "sort of person they wanted at the school" and that "he had qualities that had earned him the respect of the staff and fellow students". Mr President, it is my great hope that I can acquit myself and my duties as a member of this house with similar aplomb—perhaps not as the brightest or best, but to make a contribution that will allow this Parliament to make good decisions and to provide governance that will bring change and progress for the benefit of all Western Australians. Thank you.

[Applause.]
