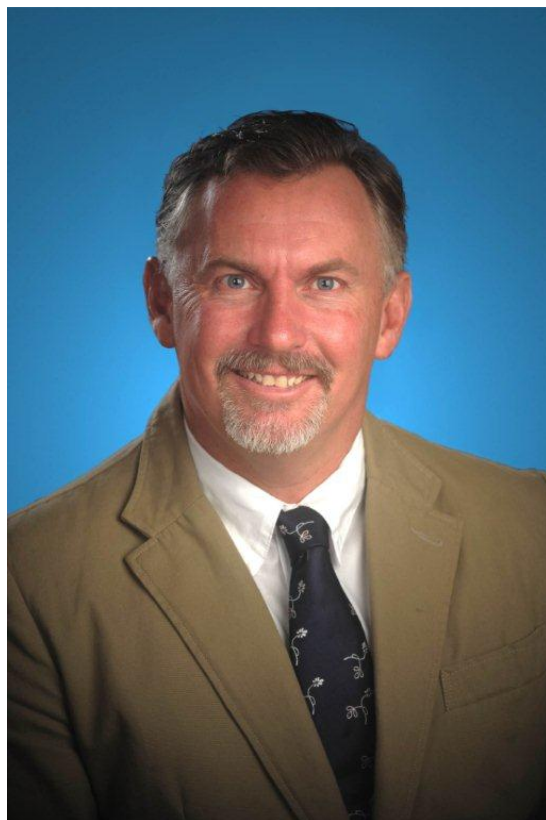




PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Paul Brown, MLC
(Member for Agricultural Region)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 11 June 2013

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON PAUL BROWN (Agricultural) [7.31 pm]: Thank you, Mr President, for the opportunity to speak to the house on this occasion. I first pay my respects to the Indigenous owners of the land upon which we meet, the Noongar people, and acknowledge their elders, past and present. It is with much humility and great honour that I stand before you today to give my inaugural speech to the house. I have been given a great amount of advice about this occasion—what I should say and how I can express myself to lay a foundation for my career as a state parliamentarian. It was all good advice and given by well-respected people who have walked this same path. To them I say thank you and I hope that I can do them, my family and friends and my electorate proud, both today and in the future.

My children are now the fifth generation of our family to live in the Avon Valley, and I take pride in knowing that I now represent this area as part of my duties to the house. The Avon Valley, as I am sure all members are aware, was the first inland part of our state to be settled as the early pioneers moved away from the agricultural restraints that were apparent on the Swan coastal strip in 1831 and set out to expand their estates and provide the certainty of a sustained food source for the developing coastal settlement. Balladong Farm, the first farm in inland WA, is still there at York today. This area became the staging post for the early exploration of the eastern parts of our state. Our new state needed to provide for itself and it was in the Avon Valley area that they found the ability to do this. With its rich fertile soils and abundance of fresh water, this is where agriculture as we first know it kicked off in WA. It was from there that the wheatbelt expanded to become the food bowl that it has been for the past century. We were able to earn our fledgling state its first dollars in export income.

I am just a simple country lad, born in country WA, grown in country WA and have made my life and my family back on our small farm in the Avon Valley. I was born in Geraldton in 1969, a year famous for so many special events, but two come to mind first in many people's minds. It was the year that man first walked on the moon and the year that many tried to descend back into the Stone Age at Woodstock. My father was a crayfisherman and prawn trawler captain and he and mum were living in Dongara at the time when I decided to make my entrance into the world. So off they popped to Geraldton, not quite the easy trip from Dongara as it is today. Many apparently thought that mum was having twins but both then and probably now I am sure she was relieved that there was only one of me. I still take pride when driving past the old St John of God Geraldton Hospital where so many more of my father's side of the family were born. I remember being there many years later for the births of my sister and brother. My mother and I moved back to Merredin, from where we had been living in Exmouth, due to the breakdown of my parents' marriage. My first real memories are of our first house in Todd Street down by the railway line. Maybe that is why I sleep soundly when staying near a railway line these days.

Mum was born and raised in Merredin, and her family had been part of the community for decades. We were living in town and mum was working two or three jobs to put food on the table and clothes on our back, either cleaning up at the high school or working down at the

doctor's surgery. I cannot remember ever needing anything as mum always planned ahead, squirrelling money away for Christmas or birthdays to make sure that I was never disadvantaged. I never really grew up with a father in the house but my mum did the job of both, whether it was helping me to build cubby houses, fix my beloved pushie or coach my junior football side. I was always surrounded by the great role models from within the community. But on the down side, for me at least, she was always ready to get the wooden coathanger out and give me a well-earned dose of home-style discipline, frequently.

It was there in the Merredin district that I spent my formative years learning how to catch yabbies in dams, playing footy and cricket and getting up to the general sort of mischief that country lads get up to while growing up. I can still run my hands along my shins and remember which chunk was taken out climbing over which piece of old farm machinery. Every time I look in the mirror, I see the scar near my right eye from when I tried to rearrange my own skull by falling off the pig fence onto the pig trailer. On the frequent times that I spend the night in Merredin, I stay in the B&B that used to be one of the doctor's surgeries where I got stitched back together on quite a few occasions. The bedroom that I sleep in is the old office where this was done.

Merredin was a fantastic town to grow up in back in the golden days of agriculture and general wheatbelt boom. The people were diverse, industries thrived and government departments were giants that helped to support the town with their large staff levels and all the services that they provided as part of the community. It was perhaps the largest town in the region by far, but everybody still seemed to know what everyone else was doing. It was in this environment that I learnt that you did not need to be afraid of a bit of hard work and that getting dirty was part of the job. It was drummed into me at an early age that you will only get out of something equal to that what you are prepared to put into it.

We had a number of great schools full of kids from a diverse selection of backgrounds. Buses full of kids from all over the district disgorged each morning at the entrances and then loaded up at the end of the day for what may be a long journey home for most. My grandfather drove one of those buses that took some to the far reaches of the district and he stayed at the farm overnight during the week. How times have changed. The buses still deliver kids to the wonderful new K-12 college in Merredin but the old schools have closed their doors these days and the numbers of kids carried on the buses are but a fraction of what they once were. I went to South Merredin Primary School for grades one and two before spending grades three and four at North Merredin. Friends made at these two places I count as some of my dearest, even now. We may not see each other with great frequency any more but it is like we have not been long apart when we do. Both of those primary schools are no longer in use and lie dormant waiting for their next incarnation or the wrecking ball.

Schools were an integral part of the social fabric then and I think that they are even more critical to our country towns now in the role of keeping kids in the regions and involved locally. I had some wonderful people help me to develop into a curious young man, perhaps a bit overconfident but certainly not afraid to take on anything. It was here that I learnt that everyone should be able to get a fair go regardless of their background or circumstances. My grandfather was one of my great mentors. He took me with him as a young boy and made me try everything that he was doing, teaching me how to fish, play a mean game of rummy and generally enjoy everything that I was doing. Winning was not big on his agenda as long as you had fun doing it. He and my grandmother even used to subject themselves to Sunday evenings watching *Countdown* on the ABC just so they could understand what I was talking about. My grandmother was a helper at the local kindy that I attended and was a great educator but probably missed her calling as a teacher. If only she liked being with people other than her family.

Our family travelled over the eastern wheatbelt, attending sports carnivals and to Perth for Country Week. My mother was a born and bred Merredin-ite and everywhere we went she was known for her sporting exploits. She was a champion at netball, basketball, swimming and athletics. So along with football and cricket for me, sport kept our family pretty busy. It seemed to me that our family was involved in just about everything that was going on in the community, whether we were participating in the debutante balls, one of those curious coming-of-age events that you no longer see today that have been replaced by school balls, or the continual roster of country barbeques and local dances that we had to attend—parents inside, kids outside or perhaps asleep in the car. The country was a great place to grow up and learn how to make your own fun and make lifelong friendships.

A few years later, we moved to Perth due to the illness of my grandfather, who was not expected to live much longer, and so I found myself living close to the beach and going to school in Scarborough. It was time to make new friends and learn the ways of city living, although in those years it was still pretty simple and we did not think much about the possible dangers that concern us about living in the city these days. I learnt how to surf and added this to football, cricket and squash as sports that I spent most of my time involved in.

I started high school at Churchlands, and I finished at Scarborough High, which has actually been demolished as well, so there appears to be a bit of a theme with the schools that I attended. I then went to TAFE to study horticulture. This appeared to be a good choice, as it was outside mostly and was physical in nature. I enjoyed this career for many years, becoming manager of a nursery, and having my own small landscaping business. I then went on to join the Department of Agriculture and as part of my duties became a stock inspector for the live export section of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

After a few years working for the Department of Agriculture, I resigned and went to work for the live export industry, starting with Emanuel Exports and spending a few years learning about the internal workings of the industry. I decided to continue my studies at this point, and after some inward reflection I decided that many of my teachers at school had been a fairly good influence on me over the years, so it was off to Edith Cowan University to do a teaching degree. It took about two and a half years to realise that I wanted to keep working in the live export industry, which I had still been doing to put food on the table while studying. For those keeping score, the Edith Cowan campus that I studied at has long been demolished.

I went on to work for Wellard Rural Exports and spent the next eight years working as a livestock officer—stockman and had the pleasure of working in some great parts of the world that I would never have seen had it not been for that job. A small list of some of the middle eastern countries that I worked in includes Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Turkey and Israel. Combine those with many parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, along with a little spell in Namibia, and members can see that I was fairly busy and always on the move to or from somewhere. But I learnt a lot from doing this job and was part of a small management team, and I look back fondly at the time I spent with them.

The agricultural industry has been the backbone of Western Australia since shortly after Governor Stirling first arrived in this state. We are an agricultural export state, and, long before the minerals boom, WA was exporting its produce, thereby feeding and clothing a good part of the world. Whether that produce is grain, wool or meat, or fruit and vegetables, WA has been at the forefront of agricultural innovation, and our farmers are widely regarded as the best dry land farmers in the world, operating in what now appears to be some of the most marginal conditions that one could ask anyone to farm in. The size of some of the farms in this region is considerable, rivalling some small countries, in fact, and the grain and produce that these farmers are able to grow in a good season is staggering.

The livestock export industry is a large part of agriculture in Western Australia. It has provided our sheep and cattle producers with a stable, competitive base that has allowed them a diverse income over many decades. I have been involved in the live export industry now for some 23 years, starting firstly with the Department of Agriculture and then moving to the private sector, as I stated earlier. For many years, I worked at two of Australia's largest exporters, as well as many of the smaller ones, throughout the Middle East and many South East Asian countries, and spent much time in Indonesia. I was lucky enough on many occasions to be involved with these companies when they were opening new markets for Western Australian produce that was in demand. I was also fortunate enough to be in many of these countries during times of political and social change.

The live export industry is currently going through a considerable period of re-regulation. With the introduction of the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System into all of the Australian markets that our livestock is exported to, we have seen a near halving in the number of animals exported, and the industry faces a growing army of the public that wants to see this number reduced to nil. Quite simply, the vast majority of the members of the public who oppose the live export industry are unaware of the fundamental dynamics of the global meat trade within which they want us to totally immerse ourselves. The animal welfare lobby wants the industry to be abolished and blames it for the loss of tens of thousands of Australian jobs. This claim is just fanciful. A wide range of structural changes within the meat processing sector, coupled with increased wage levels, had made smaller, more distant abattoirs unviable. Many of the larger companies within the animal processing sector were modernising and moving production into larger complexes that were located close to the main population centres. The reality is that the live export and meat processing industries within Australia actually complement each other. The type of animal that has generally been bought and exported live for many years is not of the standard that the meat processing sector has sourced, with the meat processors typically buying younger, ready-to-kill animals, while those for live export have traditionally been older, larger-framed ones.

Animal welfare is now a weekly headline that is thrown around as an accusation at the live export industry, and farmers, by the welfare lobby and a poorly informed public without any real understanding of what changes have taken place and the implications that their calls for abolition will have. One wonders whether they are aware that what they are also doing is engaging in racial and cultural discrimination towards our trading partners.

The current federal government is rushing this industry headlong into structural change and legislative over-reaction, and the void being created by our removal from these markets is happily being filled by a number of other countries. This over-regulated removal of our industry from these markets will undoubtedly lead to further detriment for our farming families and communities. It will also lead to a poorer animal welfare outcome for animals globally, as Australia is the only country that exports live animals that is investing in fundamental change in animal welfare, not only here at home, but in our client nations. Be clear on this! No other country is investing in animal welfare in the foreign countries for which their livestock is destined.

The rhetoric and accusations that are constantly being aimed at the people in the farming and live export and associated industries has now reached hysterical levels, with farmers and their families being demonised and abused, along with truck drivers being spat on and their trucks being tampered with on occasions. Some of the activists have even been found trying to release animals from trucks parked close to main roads. Do these activists not think of the ramifications of their actions, both on the animals that would be wandering along these busy roads if they were to be released, and on the people in cars who might be adversely impacted by what they have just done?

The changes to the live export industry, initially brought about by footage from Indonesia, is causing massive ongoing hardship within the livestock farming sector. Pastoralists throughout the north of the state are under daily pressure to find market for their livestock that they have spent a few decades building into a large animal reservoir that would go on to feed a good portion of the planet. I know a number of these pastoralists who are hanging up the “for sale” sign, as upward pressure on inputs, combined with downward pressure on their meagre returns, has conspired to create a perfect storm, forcing many to leave the land and the industry forever. Many of the pastoral stations in the north of the Agricultural Region are finding that they have been removed from access to many of our markets because our client countries have removed themselves from trading partnerships that have lasted for decades and served our agricultural industry well. Combined with this is the detrimental environmental impact being caused to these pastoral properties by large numbers of livestock that can no longer be sold into traditional markets and are not being bought by the meat processors. The animal welfare lobby and the meat workers union say that the processors will increase their slaughter numbers and these animals will be sold as box meat around the world. Quite clearly, those statements are not grounded in the reality of what is actually happening to the livestock production sector and I consider them to be fallacious at best.

Having been an owner and operator of a number of agricultural businesses, I am well aware of the monetary struggles that many of our pastoralists and farmers are currently going through. A few years ago my partners, Drs Chris Cooper and Rob MacPherson, and I identified a demand in the Pilbara region for more cattle services. We looked at the predicted weather models, and, along with the burgeoning demand for Australian livestock overseas, it was apparent that it would be wise to invest in building a feedlot and depot for exporting cattle. For a few years we appeared to be geniuses, with our business undergoing a rapid expansion while we outperformed our competition. Then came the federal government’s decision to suspend the trade with Indonesia, and our feedlot now sits nearly mothballed, with employees laid off and a service nearly lost to the wider industry. It is only now likely to hold cattle again as they make preparations for a shipment bound for the Middle East, only the second to leave the Pilbara in over two years thanks to our federal government’s mismanagement of the trade and the relationships with our long-time partners overseas.

This pressure is also reflected in the eastern wheatbelt and other farming regions of Western Australia. With climate change contributing to varying rainfall from year to year, large increases in both input costs and bank finance restrictions, competition in a global market hampered by an Australian dollar that has been at record highs, along with a supermarket duopoly that restricts competition and supplier returns, it is little wonder that, when we combine this with the meagre returns to farmers from their livestock due to federal government intervention in our overseas markets, we country parliamentarians are being inundated with greater calls for assistance.

But the people of this region and our agricultural industry are very resilient and will continue to apply themselves to their trade with all the vigour and ingenuity that has been shown here for decades. Sheep and cattle will be bred, wool will be cut, and crops like wheat, barley, canola and lupins will be grown. Prices will continue to fluctuate with the vagaries of international demands and markets and the rain will also be a wish on the lips of its citizens. But the sun will still come up every day and the agricultural industry will continue to provide the backbone to this state long after the resource booms have faded into distant memory. The Nationals WA recently campaigned with a vision for agriculture that will help the industry set itself for what many say will be the Asian century, and we are committed to investing the \$300 million that we believe will lead to Western Australia becoming a major contributor to the Asian population expansion. We announced a package of investment that includes \$75 million for infrastructure and tens of millions of dollars for research and development innovation across a range of sectors

for the development of projects to carry the industry forward to capitalise on our already considerable relationships with our near neighbours.

One of the reasons I joined the Nationals WA in the period after the 2008 state election was I saw how regional Western Australia was again being given the credence it had long been craving after many years of neglect by successive governments. The royalties for regions program has been able to instil in our regional communities a sense of gratitude made from the recognition that these regional communities have for so long held themselves together with their own ingenuity and sense of bloody-mindedness and that they forever just got on with looking after themselves. The royalties for regions program has been a godsend to many of the small country towns in the local shires. Ideas and projects that were for so long left to collect dust on the shelf due to the sheer financial burdens that would have been levied onto ratepayers were taken down and presented to a program, and a team, that was finally capable of determining a positive outcome.

To our leader, Brendon Grylls, I am proud to be able to say that after watching you change the face of state politics and cheering you on, I can now count you among my good friends. To my colleagues within the Nationals WA, thank you for your guidance and friendship, and the trust you have given to me. Particular thanks must go to the Nats' most recent president, Hon Col Holt, for the wise counsel he has given to me since I began to give voice to my potential candidacy. The blame falls squarely at your feet, brother, for me being here today! I would also like to acknowledge another one of my mentors in our party. Mia Davies has been, and continues to be, a good friend to my family and I, and the considerable amount of time I spent with Mia throughout the recent campaign showed to me the enormous expectations she puts on herself as her electorate's representative, which I can only hope to be able to emulate throughout my parliamentary career.

Royalties for regions will forever be synonymous with the Nationals WA. It has begun to revitalise our communities and is delivering fundamental economic and social change to Western Australia. I am proud to say that I have now become part of the team that was the catalyst for this momentous program and the vision that we have for our electorates and the people of regional WA.

The recent election campaign was a baptism by fire for me. Any particular ambitions for preselection that I may have been harbouring were tempered with the reality that I was standing against some great servants to the National Party. There were obviously a few contentious moments through the process and I finally found myself at number 2 on the ticket alongside Martin Aldridge, Jill Sounness, Cathie Bowen and Rosalba Butterworth. We had a great team that managed to cover the whole of the Agricultural Region throughout the campaign and our good management allowed us to provide a great level of support to our lower house candidates in Mia, Shane Love, "Tuck" Waldron and Shane van Styn. We were supported by a fantastic team of staff and volunteers who worked above and beyond the call, Joe Lundy, Jamie Forsyth, Heather Giles, Sue Middleton, Clare Creegan, Bryn Butler, Dexter and Leonie Davies, Barb Silvester, and Lisa Cole. I would also like to thank one of our great supporters in Sue Muntz, who is currently gravely ill, and I would like to let Sue and David know that we are all thinking of them. I apologise to anyone that I have not mentioned, but I am sure that you will know that your contribution was valued greatly by our team and I.

It is great to be part of the Nationals family and I would like to express my gratitude to all of the staff and members, particularly our volunteers from the eastern states who came over to help. To my personal support team, new and old, the Fullgraves, but in particular my Aunty Lyn; to Leon Musca, Jeff and Rebecca Miller, Glenn Thiele, Shannon and Debbie Metcalf, Chris Cooper and Rob MacPherson, I say thank you.

The Agricultural Region is a vast tract of land full of diverse people and backgrounds. It has in its 200 000 square kilometres places of such extreme harshness that have broken both men and machines since our European pioneers first started moving out into its rugged wilderness, areas that in some parts could only be tackled with camel trains in the early days. Nestled alongside this harshness are areas of such majestic beauty that their images would fill whole photographic libraries. Farming, forestry, fishing, tourism and mining are just a few of the industries across the breadth of the Agricultural Region that bring wealth to the local communities. The region has the luxury of vast resources and its hard-working citizens have been able to exploit this wealth to create a great variety of communities and fill them with vibrant, passionate people. It has only been over the last four years that the certain collapse of some of these regional towns, their clubs and local groups has been stalled and we have been able to see some revitalisation take place.

Throughout the Agricultural Region we face many challenges to ensure that these communities that have provided the lifeblood of WA for generations can continue to thrive and provide the diverse wealth that we as a state currently enjoy, and opportunities exist across the region to ensure that we are part of the mechanism that drives this state forward. Large wind farms in Geraldton, Merredin and Badgingarra are creating green power to help supply our towns and industries and solar farms are on the way. What was a fledgling mineral exploration and mining industry in our midwest has now turned its early efforts into vessels full of valuable resources and is now sending them off to our client nations to earn export income for our state. Towns like Morawa and Perenjori are ideally situated to capitalise on this development and the communities in that area are beginning to reap the benefits of collaboration with the companies.

The Turquoise and Batavia Coasts, from the north of Perth right up to Kalbarri, a coastline of stunning beauty, have now been made more conveniently accessible due to the opening of the Indian Ocean Drive. Tourist numbers through this area have exploded, bringing with them the additional demand for services and amenities, along with prosperity to the small businesses that have held on for so long and are now beginning to expand. Perth-based business and industry is now aware that many of the towns within the region can become supply and engineering centres and that their needs are being readily accommodated by the shires that welcome the investment into the area. These towns are able to leverage this expansion in local industry into better services and a more diverse range of business opportunities for their communities and those nearby.

The needs of the various individuals and communities within the Agricultural Region are too numerous to mention here in detail and I do not want to outline a litany of what I want to achieve during my time in Parliament. But what I will say is that my vision for the region is aspirational and I would like to say to the citizens of the electorate that my office will always be ready to help and that the phone will always be answered or calls returned so that they may raise with me any issue that they think is of enough concern that they need this great institution to be involved. I do not choose to gloss over any of the other particular hardships being felt within my electorate, but I feel that by highlighting only a small number here, I will be seen to be giving undue focus to those at the expense of other equally important concerns and this is not my desire. I would like to thank the people of the Agricultural Region for their trust in me and the Nationals to advocate on their behalf for what we believe is in their best interests.

Can I also say thank you to you, Mr President, and to all of the staff here at Parliament House for making me feel very welcome over the last few months and I look forward to a long and healthy relationship with you all. To my new colleagues here in the chamber, I say thank you for your good grace and for the best wishes that you have shown to me, and I look forward to working with you for many years to come.

I would not be standing here today without the unconditional support of my family. To my brother, Ashley, and sister, Melissa, my father and my wider family, I say thank you. To my mother, thank you just does not seem to be enough to express my gratitude and love for you or for the way you selflessly gave of yourself to ensure that I had everything that was needed, but thank you anyway. My wife, Rebecca, has been my constant companion and able partner for 13 fantastic years. She has raised our two wonderful children, Jaymee and Jack, and has provided to me something akin to the wisdom of Solomon on many occasions. She is my greatest cheerleader —

[Interruption from the gallery.]

Hon PAUL BROWN: Shush, dear!

She is my greatest cheerleader and harshest critic, and I still cannot see that her decision to allow me to follow this path was the wisest she has ever made. Knowing that I will be absent for much of the next four years and given that I have already been absent during much of the campaign, as well as with my business and work commitments over the preceding years, Rebecca was all too ready to support my endeavours and was an integral part of the campaign team and has been able to add many of the Nats to her list of good friends. Who could have foreseen that a drink and a dance at the footy club one night may have led to this? She actually does not like politics very much and I am sure she will learn to loathe it in time, but she still drove all the way out to Mt Walker on polling day by herself to set up and man the booth when a few of our volunteers had car trouble the night before, and we won that booth. I am sure that I will be coping flak about that for years to come—I am sure. But the love of my wife and my kids will always be victory enough for me. Regardless of what the future may hold, my life is better for them being in it. Thank you, Rebecca. I love you, Jack and Jaymee above all else.

[Applause.]
