

Debate Resumed

MR GRYLLES (Merredin) [2.52 pm]: I wish to begin by thanking both sides of the House for the warm welcome I have received in the few days I have been here. This includes the parliamentary staff, who already know my name; I now look forward to learning their names.

When contemplating a maiden speech we all aspire to say something that will make a difference. I hope I can achieve that today.

Mr Speaker, I enter this House in a new era of understanding and respect for those members of our community whom the mainstream perceives to be different. I applaud this new understanding. I thank the people of Merredin for allowing me to be a part of this change. I was brought up in a conservative household, but I was always challenged to open my heart and mind to things to which I was not accustomed.

As a new member of Parliament I open my heart and mind to the gay and lesbian members of our community who have fought long and hard for the legislation that has just been passed by this House. I applaud their fortitude and belief that one day they would achieve the equality they felt they deserved.

I open my heart and mind to the new member for the Kimberley. I applaud her effort in becoming the first Aboriginal woman elected to this Parliament. I recognise the fight of all Aborigines to achieve equality and recognition for the inequities that have so affected them since Europeans first came to this land. I look forward to gaining a greater understanding of their culture and traditions and using my influence in my electorate, so that others may share this culture and tradition. I open my heart and mind to all Aboriginal people and look forward to representing their interests in this place with the utmost passion.

I open my heart and mind to the various religions practised in this State. I was raised in the Christian tradition but I look forward to developing a greater understanding of the different beliefs so strongly held by many of my constituents.

I open my heart and mind to the sick and the disabled, who daily struggle to make their lives more enjoyable. I look forward to sharing their problems, to laughing with them in the face of adversity and to helping them create a better environment in which to enjoy their lives.

I open my heart and mind to refugees from lands and situations we know little about. How can we condemn their fight for a better life when we, a country so lucky, know little of the oppression they seek to leave behind? We are such a smart, wealthy, lucky country, surely we can find a better solution to this issue than to simply turn our backs and look away.

I look forward to using my position of privilege, bestowed on me by the people of Merredin, to open my heart and mind to everyone in our society. As an elected member I will expect nothing less of myself than to become more aware of the feelings and beliefs of those people in society whom I know little about. In return, I charge every member of this House to open their hearts and minds to the people of the wheatbelt. I ask members to make the effort to come and speak to me personally about the great people of my electorate about whom they may know little. I ask members to open their hearts and minds to my constituents' concerns about losing their local hospital, and to try to understand the difficulties in bringing a sick member of their family over 400 kilometres to the city to seek medical treatment. I ask members to recognise the great apprehension caused by our unpredictable seasons that turn lush green crops into barren dustbowls, that see golden fields of grain flattened by hailstones just days before the harvest. I ask members to understand the relief and joy we feel when the opening rains come and we can begin to sow the seeds that are the life of our farms.

I ask members to open their hearts and minds to understand a community that will rally, one and all, to help out someone who needs a hand. I ask members to recognise the struggle of regional small businesses which face many more challenges than their city cousins. I ask members to understand the great fears of country people who feel that one vote, one value will decimate their political representation. How can a Parliament that has just passed legislation to end the marginalisation of some members of our community, go down the path of passing new legislation that will further marginalise country people from their right to effective political representation?

I ask members to open their hearts and minds to country people and to understand their concerns. I then ask members to take this newfound knowledge and understanding back to the people of their electorates. I ask members to share with their constituents the issues and concerns of country people, and make it their priority to inform them of the real story.

If members do this for me, and I do the same for them, perhaps we can break down the misunderstanding and ignorance that exists between the different constituents we represent. If we can succeed in this then there is a good chance that we will leave this great State of ours in better shape than we found it.

I am honoured to address you today as the new National Party member for Merredin. This was a great victory for the National Party and I refer members to Hon Hendy Cowan's retirement speech in this House on 16 October this year. In wishing his National Party colleagues well in the future, he said -

Your opponents have been predicting your demise for the past 40 years. It has been your loyalty to regional Western Australia that has ensured those predictions have been wrong.

This loyalty was repaid by the voters of Merredin, and I thank them for putting their faith in me and in the National Party. In return, I commit myself to do my best to represent their interests in Parliament.

What an election campaign it was! With the focus of the whole State on the by-election, it was a political baptism of fire which, I am sure, will ready me for the rigours of Parliament. I congratulate Joanne Burges and the Liberals for running an excellent campaign. I am sure the electors of the seat of Merredin enjoyed the fact there was a good contest between the conservative parties for what had previously been a very safe National Party seat.

I would like to recognise the contribution of Hendy Cowan to the Western Australian Parliament. The high regard in which Hendy is held in this State is testament to his achievements in both regional Western Australia and as Deputy Premier. I thank him for his support during the campaign and wish him well in his retirement back to his farm in Narembeen.

It is with great pride that I acknowledge the presence of my family and friends in the public gallery. To my wife Susan, who is a constant inspiration, and I look forward to sharing my political career with her. To my father, John Grylls, who instilled in me from an early age all the principles I hold dear, I thank you for your his exceptional work in running the campaign and for your tireless work in the streets introducing me to the electorate. It is a credit to you and mum, Jeanie Grylls, that I am in this House today. I thank the rest of the Grylls family and also Daryl Cormack and the Cormack family for your love and support during this most exciting time in my life.

I thank the National Party and its members for the opportunity to represent this great country party, and I look forward to playing my part in its resurgence. This can be achieved only if we look at new and innovative ways of promoting and running the party, and it will be exciting to play a leading part in its change. I applaud the efforts of the State Director, Jamie Kronborg, for running the campaign, and my leader Max Trenorden. I also single out Eric Charlton, Jack and Jenny Lewis and the wonderful Sue Muntz for their advice and support. I thank everyone who was involved in my campaign and on polling day, and look forward to honouring their faith in me.

The electorate of Merredin encompasses 65 000 square kilometres and 19 local government councils. From Dalwallinu in the north to Hyden in the south, and from Cunderdin in the west to Westonia in the east, this electorate is the breadbasket of our State. I will be representing a population of 19 000 with the largest town being Merredin, which is central to the electorate. The electorate does not quite cover the total wheatbelt region, but I would like to advise members of the economic data that is available. Latest figures show the wheatbelt's gross regional product to be worth \$2.7 billion. Grain production is the major component of this and wheatbelt grain producers should be recognised for adopting world's best practice and embracing quality control systems that are enabling them to access premium grain markets. Other significant agricultural production includes wool, mutton and lamb meat production, beef and aquaculture. Export hay production is increasing with the establishment of new processing infrastructure, and mining is a very important industry in the eastern part of the electorate. My electorate also contains a diversified small business sector that supports the agricultural and mining industries.

Without a doubt, the greatest resource in my electorate is the people. I have met many of them and look forward to meeting them all. These are people with the hardest of work ethics, who have devoted their lives to developing farms and small businesses for the benefit of their families and the State. These people suffer at the whim of mother nature - which this year has been especially harsh - but do all this with a smile on their faces and would not hesitate to help a neighbour in times of need. This region was built through the hard work and cooperation of our pioneers and I offer my gratitude to them. These people have inspired me with their tales of developing the wheatbelt with no more than an axe and a swag, and it is the descendants of those great pioneers who will fight for new and innovative ways to meet the challenges that a changing world requires. I am privileged to be elected to lead this fight.

In introducing myself to this Parliament I would like to inform members of my life before I became the member for Merredin. I attended Corrigin District High and was a boarder at Wesley College. I completed one year of a law degree at university, but the fresh country air beckoned me and I returned to the family farm to pursue a career in agriculture. It illustrates the changing face of farming that my family's traditional wheat and sheep farm that was established in 1950 now includes a flour mill producing bread mixes which are sold Australia-wide, an aquaculture project farming marron and freshwater fish, a contracting business including concrete and harvesting, and a bakery-cafe-art gallery venture aimed at the tourism market travelling to Wave Rock. My family has accepted the challenges in agriculture and attempted to diversify to ensure the sustainability of our enterprise. This diversification has involved an incredible amount of hard work, and it has certainly been a valuable learning experience. This experience will be of great benefit to me as I represent the electorate of Merredin.

It is with this background in small business that I tackle what I believe to be the most crucial issue facing my electorate. The survival and expansion of regional small business and farms is essential. My election campaign took me to these small business owners and I am not happy to report that these businesspeople are finding it very difficult to survive. Bad agricultural seasons combined with a changing marketplace are placing incredible pressure on these businesses. If we add to this the compliance costs of administering a business or farm, it is clear that without some major changes, our small business sector will continue to struggle.

Regional business cannot continue to bear the burden of excessive insurance and paperwork. They are now operating in a market that has no local boundaries and their response to these imposts has been to stop employing staff. They are prepared to turn away work rather than have to put on employees and endure the burden that this causes. This position should be ringing alarm bells for every member of this Parliament. Unless we put in place a business environment that will promote growth and employment in regional business, it will continue to struggle. We need to look to expanding apprenticeship schemes, overhauling the workers compensation and superannuation charges and rewarding business for employing people, rather than penalising them. I look forward to helping shape a new deal for small business.

The benefits of this new deal will flow directly to the most important resource in our country towns - our young school leavers and young adults. Unless we provide exciting and sustainable opportunities for the young members of our communities, we are kidding ourselves about regional development. I was inspired by the calibre of graduating students from the Western Australian College of Agriculture in Cunderdin. Although these students recognised that finding traditional employment opportunities in the region may be limited, they were determined to skill themselves to a level that would enable them to gain employment in new agricultural industries. This provides a clear challenge for me and this Parliament to ensure that those opportunities are available. We simply cannot afford to lose this most critical resource if there is to be any future for the agricultural region - we must make this a priority.

I congratulate the National Party on its bold decision to endorse a young candidate for this most important election. It clearly demonstrates that the Nationals are prepared to look to the future. My success in this election signals to the communities of Merredin and further afield that our party wants to ensure that young people living and working in the country can aspire to any opportunity and turn it into reality.

The major issue concerning the electorate during the campaign was the uncertainty surrounding regional health services. Country people regard their health facilities as a vital component of their lives and they are very nervous about the changes proposed for rural health. Concerned electors are already mobilising in communities where district hospitals have been earmarked for downgrading to nursing posts - they are extremely angry at yet another attempt to withdraw vital health services from their towns and they are gearing up to fight. They are totally bemused at the concept of dismantling local hospital boards. The concept of local knowledge and ownership of these facilities is a principle that should not be tampered with. I was advised by hospital management that for the first time in their memories, they were running only on a month to month basis, not knowing how they would meet the costs of the next month's operation. That untenable position must be recognised. I call on this Parliament to recognise the importance of rural health and make available the funding that is required to secure its future.

Another issue that concerns my electorate is the effect of globalisation. Although I recognise that these changes are inevitable, I am concerned at the far-reaching implications for the agricultural industry. A vast majority of farmers are having trouble equipping themselves to deal with the rapid rate of change in their industry. We as a Parliament must be mindful of the need to allow those in industries affected by deregulation to become key stakeholders in these changes. After seeing the results of deregulation on the State's dairy industry, and the devastating effect it had on the farmers who were not fully equipped to deal with it, I remain suspicious of those who promote deregulation.

I have a clear message from my electorate that they are not ready for the removal of the statutory marketing authority for wheat and I believe that they will be ready to go down this path only when clear benefits can be demonstrated to them. As a Parliament we need to fight to represent the views of these farmers, and not those of the American grain traders who see our statutory authorities as an impediment to their access to our hard won markets. It seems to me that in our haste to globalise our markets we have failed to give our producers time to fully understand these changes and how they will affect them.

To me the concept of a level playing field for our agricultural products is a long way from reality. We only ever speak about the deregulation of our peak marketing bodies. For a truly level playing field we need to deregulate the input side of agriculture as well. A level playing field would enable an Australian farmer who is subjected to a world price for his wheat to access his labour, fertiliser, chemicals and transport requirements at a world price. The anomaly of the system can be clearly demonstrated at the moment. It has been reported in the media, so members might have heard about it. A multinational chemical company is using all its resources to pursue a group of farmers through the courts to prevent them accessing herbicide at a cheaper world price, rather than an inflated Australian price. I cannot find anything too level about this playing field, and I look to work with farmers to address these issues.

I strongly refute the assumption held in the city that farmers have no regard for the lands that are so important to their livelihood. The number of hours spent by farmers and country people on land care initiatives must be recognised and commended. A drive around any country town late at night will see the lights still on in the local Landcare office, where committed citizens continue to seek innovative solutions to the serious issue of farmland degradation. I applaud the efforts of these volunteers, and I look forward to assisting them at a local level. It is not for this Parliament to decide the solution to land care issues. Solutions differ from one catchment group to the next. It is the responsibility of this Parliament to adequately fund these local land care groups so that they can implement their plans. A major concern is that land care funding does not find its way on to the ground - it gets caught up in bureaucracy, and this will never result in finding long-term solutions to this most serious problem.

The state of our vital road networks is of particular concern to my constituents. I have already spoken of the importance that agriculture and manufacturing have to my region. For this reason, it is essential that we maintain our transport networks. I am very concerned that this is not occurring at the moment. I make special mention of the Corrigin to Hyden road. This is a major route for both industry and tourism, and at the moment it is simply unsafe. The proposed upgrade has been delayed, and I would like to submit to the House that this should be addressed as a matter of extreme urgency. Wave Rock is the number one regional tourist attraction for Asian visitors to this State, and they all have to travel on this dangerous road. The situation at the moment is that a road train and a tourist bus both have to drop a wheel into the gravel to pass each other. I do not know whether any members have ever been in this position, but it is not one that they would like to be in every day. To me, this is absolutely unacceptable, and this issue is one that I will continually bring to the attention of the minister until it is rectified.

Our communication networks are far from satisfactory for country people. A mobile telephone network that city residents take for granted is unavailable to the vast majority of people in my electorate. As well, their access to the Internet is impeded by outdated telephone lines. Country people are told that they will not be disadvantaged by the loss of eight members of Parliament because the tyranny of distance is negated by new communications technology. Many must have been advised of this by mail, because they have no access to mobile phones, the Internet or, in some cases, even a reliable free-to-air television reception. Perhaps some of the city members should spend some time working from the regions to see the vast difference between city and regional service levels.

Law and order is also an issue concerning my constituents. Police officers are being withdrawn from service in many wheatbelt towns. It is disturbing that a lack of major crime seems to lead to a town losing its police presence, when petty crimes perpetrated by juveniles are on the increase in many centres. These crimes will be deterred only by a police presence. I commend the police officers assigned to one-man stations - they must be available 24 hours a day and their commitment to their duty should be recognised. It is of great concern to me, as we embark on the holiday season, that when these officers take their holidays, their station is left unattended for days. The only access to police is a phone diverted to the next town, often hours away. Country towns pride themselves on their safety and security. It is still normal in country towns to leave one's car unlocked and the windows open at night. I hope that this lifestyle is not threatened by the withdrawal of police services. It was heartening during my campaign to meet many older residents who had recently moved to my electorate and who listed safety and security as a major reason for their move. I will encourage more people to consider moving to the wheatbelt to retire, and I will fight to ensure that country towns continue to be regarded as an attractive option for retirees.

An election campaign is a great introduction to the rigours of politics. To meet people face to face for the first time and introduce oneself as a prospective politician is quite a confronting moment, for both parties. My campaign team was welcomed by some, abused by others, and our knock on the door was ignored by many. On reflection, it was a very rewarding experience, and I would like to introduce a number of issues that were raised. Many people are antagonistic towards both politics and politicians. It is hard to argue with this antagonism when they only ever hear from a politician during an election campaign when a glossy bulk mail-out arrives.

I am committed to a return to grassroots representation, with direct contact with my constituents, and I look forward to following in the distinguished footsteps of Hendy Cowan, who will be long remembered as a statesman of the Legislative Assembly. I will promote high standards of parliamentary behaviour, and I will engage in strong, but controlled and sensible, debate. I will represent the people of Merredin with the same respect they have bestowed on me as their new member of Parliament.

In conclusion, my electorate cannot afford bandaids solutions to the issues I have raised here today. My constituents have asked me to lobby hard on their behalf to find long-term solutions, rather than quick fixes. Unless we are prepared to look outside the square and find innovative solutions to their problems, we will continue to see a decline in rural Western Australia. We cannot afford to allow this decline. I implore members on both sides of the House to make themselves aware of the issues and concerns of country people. We have seen in past weeks a strong recognition of the rights and concerns of minorities in this State, and rural Western Australia asks that it receive the same recognition and support from the Parliament. Country people do not expect to have access to every service that is available in the city, but they do believe that they should be able to access basic government services, such as health, education, policing, a safe road network and effective representation from their members of Parliament. If country people feel that these services are being taken away, they will continue to feel disfranchised and disillusioned. The further we go down this road, the harder it will be to turn these feelings around. This is not something for a conservative Government to fix when it gets back into power. This has to be dealt with by the current Government with great urgency.

As the new member for Merredin, I represent not only the 43 per cent of the electorate who put a one next to my name on polling day; I represent every single person in my electorate, and I will fight for the advancement of every person in this great State. I will represent my most ardent opponents with the same passion as my strongest supporters. I call on all members in this Parliament to do the same, and inspire renewed enthusiasm in rural electorates that feel deserted by their Government.

From humble beginnings in 1950, the previous two generations of my family established a thriving farm. This farm was carved from virgin bush. Like so many wheatbelt pioneers, they endured amazing hardships. They had no access

to the machinery or the support systems that we take for granted today. That farm has allowed me opportunities and experiences that they could never have dreamed of. I am proud that I have used these opportunities to enable me to sit in this Parliament today. It is now the responsibility of my generation to ensure that these farms remain viable, and that the businesses, community organisations and services that support these farms continue to prosper. As the member for Merredin, I will endeavour to empower my generation to achieve these goals.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House today. I look forward to playing my part in providing good government for this great State of Western Australia.

[Applause.]