



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Vincent Catania MLA
(Member for North West)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 13 November 2008

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Motion

MR V. CATANIA (North West) [3.36 pm]: First, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election as Deputy Speaker. I look forward to providing you with support as an Acting Speaker. I would like to congratulate fellow members on their election and re-election. I am proud and honoured to address this chamber today as the member for the seat of North West. Although this is not the first time I have spoken in Parliament, having been a member for the Mining and Pastoral Region of the Legislative Council in the thirty-seventh Parliament, I can assure members I consider it a privilege to be experienced in both houses of Parliament.

I have lived and worked in the North West for several years, although much of that time has been spent on a plane or in a car travelling between towns in what is, by any standards, a vast electorate. The electorate of North West covers three regions: the Pilbara, Gascoyne and Murchison. It covers more than 400 000 square kilometres, spreading from Shark Bay in the Gascoyne, up to Roebourne in the Pilbara, and east to the inland towns of Meekatharra and Mt Magnet, comprising some 15 towns and communities, numerous pastoral stations and 12 local government authorities. The residential population of the electorate is approximately 16 000 people. However, if one were to factor in fly in, fly out workers and those involved in seasonal employment, the figure would swell by as much as 10 000. The major administration centres are Carnarvon, Exmouth and Karratha.

The North West electorate is the resources heartland of our state and the economic powerhouse of the nation. It is a colossus of commerce, which includes oil and gas, fishing, horticulture, aquiculture, tourism and pastoral industries, the benefits of which make a massive contribution to state and national economies. Landmarks within the electorate include Woodside Petroleum Ltd's enormous North West Shelf joint venture project on the Burrup Peninsula, Exmouth's Ningaloo Reef and the tourist mecca of Coral Bay, the nationally acclaimed food bowl of Carnarvon and, as a point of interest, the largest monolith in Australia, Mt Augustus, which is bigger even than Uluru. Much of the state's uranium deposits are located within or near the North West electorate, presenting an opportunity for a fiery debate if nothing else.

I have travelled the length and breadth of the electorate many times over, discovering untouched remnants of the gold rush, the best seafood exports in the world, the sweetest bananas, the most magnificent sunsets and beaches imaginable, outback horse races that attract people from across the country, dolphins that want to befriend people, whale sharks that amaze people, rock art that will mesmerize people and deep sea fish that make a Perth catch look like bait.

The people of the electorate are a diverse bunch and have come to be there by many and varied routes. The Gascoyne has a very large percentage of steadfast residents. Many have been there for

generations and have no intention of moving on. Their kids and their grandkids grow up and stay put in the region to become the next generation of decision makers. Like most country folk, North West residents accept the lack of government services rather than complain, but when pushed too far we will hear from them. The people are acclaimed for their easy going nature and love of the great outdoors. Carnarvon's Saturday morning growers market is a meeting place where people can socialise while purchasing fresh produce or a morning coffee.

In contrast, Karratha is largely a fly in, fly out community and has a highly transient population. This presents many challenges, not the least of which is the need to provide very costly facilities and services to a percentage of the population that makes little financial contribution by way of council rates and discretionary spending in the town. Karratha and Dampier are major population centres in the state's north. If people have lived in Karratha for more than three years, they are considered to be local, long-term residents, although there are a small handful of residents who have been in Karratha for over 45 years. What change they must have witnessed in that time! The Murchison towns of Yalgoo, Mt Magnet, Cue and Meekatharra consist overwhelmingly of long-term residents who make their living from mining and related services.

The population of the electorate includes several Indigenous communities, which are fortunate to have the commitment of several leaders, who are to be admired for their tenacity and vision. These elders are working hard to improve conditions in their own backyards. The aged community in Carnarvon has suffered a severe blow following the closure of the town's only aged care facility, which was cruelly taken away by the Howard government. It was the only facility of its kind to be found between Geraldton and Port Hedland. This is a situation that I find intolerable, and I shall continue my battle with state and federal governments to bring about a satisfactory resolution to what is now a crisis situation for the aged. The electorate values its senior residents. It is heartbreaking that in the twenty-first century old folk have to be dislodged from their accommodation and relocated hundreds of kilometres from their family. The only acceptable solution is one that enables them to live out their days in familiar surroundings and close to their loved ones.

Backpackers add to the culture by passing through the electorate, and perhaps staying awhile, to work in plantations, the fishing industry or mines. It is not unusual to hear a multitude of foreign languages in the pubs and cafes of the electorate. Pastoralists, fishermen, small and large business owners and operators and their families make up the balance of this wonderfully diverse group of people. I have a passion for the electorate as well as a dedication to ensure that the region attracts and retains people. We need jobs, government services, recreation facilities and infrastructure. We do not want families to be penalised for choosing to live in regional Western Australia.

The Gascoyne region, which begins in the south at the World Heritage-listed Shark Bay area, has a coastline larger than that of New South Wales and a World Heritage drive that rivals the Great Ocean Road in Victoria.

Denham has almost everything a town of its size could want, including a new school and a new Silver Chain post, along with an \$8 million World Heritage Discovery Centre, where the history and attractions of the region are showcased. In 1616 Dutch skipper Dirk Hartog was the first European to set foot on WA soil on the island that now bears his name. This fascinating piece of history is captured at the World Heritage Discovery Centre with a replica of the plate that Hartog nailed to a post upon arrival. The former Labor government delivered vital pieces of infrastructure to Denham. I said earlier that Denham has almost everything a town its size could want. However, essential pieces of infrastructure are still required. Denham requires an urgent upgrade to marine infrastructure to cope with increasing boating traffic and tourism. A jetty and marina are minimum requirements to service the town's needs.

The heart of the Gascoyne is undoubtedly Carnarvon. Members should forgive me if I appear a bit biased, but this is my home town after all. I can proudly stand here today and say that the former Labor government delivered vital infrastructure that prior governments promised and failed time and again to deliver. For example, Labor delivered the essential Bibbawarra Road crossing. This crossing took 40 minutes off travel time from plantations to the town centre and provided safe passage across the mighty Gascoyne River. It was a common event prior to the building of the crossing for residents to be literally isolated from the rest of the world by flood, with no means of safe passage possible. Labor brought government services back into town. Labor upgraded the Carnarvon Regional Hospital; stage one has been completed and stage two is on the way. Labor upgraded Carnarvon Senior High School, built a new wharf to support the fishing industry and completed the first and second stage of land leases at NorthWater. Labor provided funding to repair the fire damage to the historic one-mile jetty and committed to a \$38 million police station and courthouse on a site that 87 per cent of the community wanted, a site known as the Traders site. There are many more achievements but I will not list them here as there are too many to list. This is why Labor was returned in the north west with an increased majority. There is always more to achieve. For a waterfront town, it is unbelievable that Carnarvon does not have a proper boat ramp.

One of the most exciting towns in my electorate has to be Exmouth. Exmouth is striving to reach a balance between tourism and industry. It has superb tourism potential sitting alongside its rich oil and gas fields. Exmouth is slowly, but with increasing determination, building its tourism product. It now boasts the world-class Novotel Ningaloo Resort. Exmouth has already outgrown its marina, despite having completed only a few houses on some of the 400 lots that are available to be built on. Prior to the election I was chair of the community steering committee, which was tasked to review the need to expand the harbour and provide more boat pens to meet the needs of the growing tourism and oil and gas industries. The community wants this expansion to occur as it will deliver year-round employment to support both industries of tourism and resources.

One cannot mention Exmouth without mentioning the amazing Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range Peninsula. The reef is 280 kilometres long, a fringing coral reef skirting the Cape Range Peninsula 1 200 kilometres north of Perth. The reef is the longest fringing coral reef in the world and one of the last healthy major coral reef systems in existence. If reports are true, 80 per cent of the world's coral reefs are in serious decline due to human influence, so the isolated Ningaloo Reef is of particular international importance and interest. The Ningaloo Reef is an iconic feature of Western Australia's natural environment. Public expressions of support and the realisation of the importance of the reef were brought to a head when the development of Mauds Landing Resort was halted by public pressure in 2003. A rally against the resort attracted around 15 000 people in Fremantle, with simultaneous rallies held in Coral Bay and Exmouth.

Beneath the Cape Range Peninsula lives an extraordinary collection of cave-dwelling and aquatic animals found nowhere else in the world. Cape Range also harbours an ancient history of Aboriginal habitation, providing a fascinating story of the life and culture of these first inhabitants as well as a unique human record of environmental and biodiversity changes. The area is of national archaeological and cultural significance as a unique place recording 30 000 years of habitation by coastal Aboriginal communities, their relationship to the reef and dependence on its resources. Its caves record the earliest evidence of ornamental use of marine shells. Obviously, all these facts are extremely interesting but what do we do with them now and how do we best appreciate them, study them and preserve the area?

In recent years intense interest in the area has prompted a push to establish a Ningaloo research centre. The proposal is for a dedicated research centre based in Exmouth. Planning for the centre has progressed in recent years under the guidance of the steering committee and board representing government, university research and local interests, chaired by Hon Peter Laurance. It is interesting

to note that the Great Barrier Reef has eight of these research stations and Western Australia does not even have one. Occasionally, we get a few dollars to send a ship around to look after the reef or monitor what has happened. It is even more important when oil and gas are situated some 24 kilometres off this natural wonder.

These are only some of the opportunities that the region has. It is not possible to list all the projects here but projects such as these must be supported by the government as it supports the ultimate aim of ensuring that jobs, services and facilities in the regions are plentiful and desirable enough to attract and retain families, ensuring a vibrant future for the area.

The fortunes of the towns in the Murchison are intrinsically linked to world markets, whether it is the pastoral industry in Yalgoo and Cue or mining activity in Mt Magnet and Meekatharra. As the price of gold goes up and down, so does the vibrancy of the towns. It is a common misconception that the mining industry has experienced the boom right across the board. This may be so in the Pilbara but in places such as Mt Magnet and Meekatharra, this is not the case. Mines have closed or are in the process of closure. Times are tough when the going is good, let alone when it is not. For far too long this area has suffered declining services. For example, there has not been a permanent doctor in the Murchison towns for many years. The need to improve health services is my priority for these towns.

Karratha is the largest town of both the Pilbara and the electorate of North West. It is a town often referred to as the engine room of the state's economy. Karratha has around 8 600 people on the electoral roll but anecdotal evidence suggests that the real figure is probably closer to 18 000 people living there at any one time. The Pilbara has had many booms and busts but this one has been very different because everyone has been saying, "We've seen this one before; it will end" but it has not yet. The boom has continued for such a time that the town has fully outgrown its infrastructure and put pressure on its services. We must catch up. Infrastructure and services growth must keep pace with economic activity. Much has been done to ensure that Karratha keeps pace with itself. For example, prior to 2001, under a coalition government, Karratha had no permanent doctors but under the former Labor government, Karratha now has 10 permanent doctors. This is a great start but it is not enough to service the population adequately. The area's contribution to the state's economy must be recognised and subsequently reflected in regional investment. Much more is needed both from the state government and the federal government.

The list of requirements for this region is long. Some of them are health services, doctors, specialists, patient assisted travel scheme program improvements, mental health care, mammography unit, computer-assisted tomography scanner, housing, small business support for accommodation and staff, recreational facilities for teenagers, childcare facilities, shade sails for playgrounds, a marina for Dampier, a new school for Roebourne, and Centenary Park in Point Samson. The list goes on.

The Shire of Roebourne, with the support of the former state government, developed the Karratha 2020 project, which conducted a survey of residents to find out what the town of Karratha needs to reflect the demographic it has today.

Recreation facilities for teenagers, more facilities for families, education facilities and more indoor facilities such as a shopping mall with cafes, have been some of the suggestions. Karratha needs a town centre where people can meet and socialise if it is to become a vibrant community and a major town centre that can rival Kalgoorlie. I urge the state and federal governments and companies like Rio Tinto and Woodside to contribute to a great vision for revitalising Karratha—a true "royalties for regions", as this is the region producing the wealth.

There has been much debate recently on the issue of establishing a uranium industry in our state. I take this opportunity to urge that further formalised debate be undertaken before any action occurs. This chamber and its members have a duty to represent the desires of the people of Western

Australia. It is our responsibility to facilitate considered debate on this emotive subject. We must weigh up the facts and try to remove the spin from the arguments presented by people and organisations with vested personal and/or professional interests. The suggestion that Western Australia should take the world's uranium waste is highly incendiary. The economic, social and environmental—or “triple bottom line”—impact of establishing a uranium industry cannot be fully understood or appreciated without vigorous debate and public consultation.

No discussion can be had about industry and development without regard for the people who do the work and make it all happen. All employees must receive a fair go. Fair play, fair conditions, job security and safety must never be sacrificed in the name of profit. Protecting and supporting working people is the foundation of the Australian Labor Party. Central to this is the workers' right to a safe working environment, the re-establishment of family-friendly working hours and rosters that have sustained a profitable mining industry for more than 100 years. Many people in the Pilbara have shared their concern with me about the encroachment of the fly in, fly out policy in our community. I support the concept of fly in, fly out exclusion zones to ensure that our communities benefit from the resources in their own backyard. There must always be a balance between the development of resources and the needs of regional communities.

Although it may be called a secondary industry to the resource industry, tourism is vitally important to our state. It brings vibrancy to otherwise dry and dusty mining towns that hold no attraction other than as places in which to make a good salary by working long, hard days. Imagine a state without visitors, cafes, restaurants, resorts, entertainment facilities, marinas, discovery tours and adventure activities. That is a state without tourism. There is no question that our resource industry brings the big bucks and offers employment, stability and profitability, but the two industries must work together to ensure that we have opportunities for play and enjoyment alongside our hard-working ethos. I call upon not only the government but also companies like Woodside, Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton to get behind tourism development. I call upon them to consider tourism opportunities alongside their considerations for fly in, fly out transport needs, accommodation requirements, town developments, infrastructure projects and staffing requirements. Let us work together to ensure that our state is a vibrant, exciting and attractive place to live in and to holiday in.

It is a fact of life that not all members of society share the benefits of our economic prosperity. We live in the twenty-first century, and even with all the advancements in health, education, recreation and social infrastructure, some of our local communities have among the highest infant mortality rates in the world, and some people in our community are suffering from Third World diseases. Tragically, many children are born with foetal alcohol syndrome and die from malnutrition. They have no chance of life, and no opportunity to speak of. They have lost the game even before conception. The life these children face after birth is one that all too often consists of routine abuse and extreme hardship. Suicide rates are shocking, but not surprising given the life these children suffer through as they move into the adult world. Families are being ripped apart by the scourge of drug, alcohol and solvent abuse. Regardless of the current economic prosperity, no amount of physical fortitude can wipe away centuries of tears and lost fortunes and the decline of culture. However, recognition of these facts will assist in the healing process.

Two per cent of the Australian population is Aboriginal, yet, shamefully, in my electorate over 90 per cent of the prison population is Aboriginal. Does this mean that Aboriginal people commit more crime? Yes, that is obvious. That may be one answer, but the question we should be asking is: why? We need better mechanisms to cater for the needs of all Western Australians, black or white, from the country to the city. All this has been said before. I do not know what the answer is, but I do know that we simply must find answers and we must act now to change this dreadful and shameful situation. What can I say but that a bipartisan approach is needed to support policies that will last a generation in order to change a generation from the problems they have.

After an election campaign we all have a lot of people we need to thank, and I am no different. I wish to thank those who assisted me during the campaign: John Little; the Hardie family, particularly Debbie; Paul Semple; Dave Shelton; Jenny Walsh; Belinda Coniglio; Jim Murie; James, Lynn and Fynn Donnelly; David Volts; Cameron Smith; Stan Kostanich; Len Paggi; Shane Alymore; Karl Brandburge; Rebecca and Clive Reandon, Kerry White; Fiona White-Hartig; Elaine Walsham; Macca from Shark Bay; Kelvin Matthews; John Carey; Megan Anwyl; Lyn Snook; Doug Hunt; Brad Snell; Des Roth; Patrick Baroni; Tony Shaw; and the unions, particularly the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association. My greatest debt is to my family: my mother, Rita, who is here today; my father, Nick, who has also been a member of this place—let it be known to members that every time you call me Nick you are automatically required to make a donation to my campaign; my brothers, Mark and Stephen; my sister, Angela; and my brother-in-law, James. I thank my extended family—the Ramsay family—in particular, Lesley. I thank my wife, Johanna, and son, Nicholas, who are here today, and have hardly seen me over the past year, although Johanna would probably say “I haven’t seen you for the past four years.” I thank her very much; I cannot operate without her.

Most people of the north west just want to get on with it and, while they do not expect city features like stadiums and trains, they know their rights and expect the basics like schools, hospitals, police services and roads so they can get on with their productive lives. They do not look for handouts and often have the tenacity to take matters into their own hands if required. For this, they have my admiration and respect. Even without royalties for regions, Labor spent a lot in the regions, particularly the north west, and the new government must continue this. Labor policy calls for the fair distribution of the benefits of economic growth, continuous improvement in the welfare and living standards of the Australian people, and the reallocation of resources to those most in need. We do not need a program labelled “royalties for regions” to adhere to this policy.

[Applause.]
