



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Brian Ellis MLC
(Member for Agricultural)

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 14 August 2007

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ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

Consideration of Tabled Paper

HON BRIAN ELLIS (Agricultural) [7.52 pm]: While I am deeply conscious of the honour and privilege that has been bestowed on me by being given this chance to represent the electors of the Agricultural Region, I am also saddened by the circumstances that have led to me being a member of this Parliament. I take this opportunity to sincerely wish Margaret Rowe all the best in her battle to overcome illness. I hope she has a speedy recovery. Her health is far more important than her political career.

I wish to take a few moments to acknowledge those people whose efforts and support have made my entry into this house so much easier than it would otherwise have been. Firstly, I thank the WA division of the Liberal Party for nominating me for this vacancy to represent the Agricultural Region. I realise that a tremendous amount of faith and trust has been placed in me and I do not intend to breach that faith and trust. I am committed to being a worthy representative of the Agricultural Region. Without the support of one's family, none of us in this house would be able to perform to the best of our abilities. I am also very privileged to have a family whose support and encouragement has been unwavering, even at the most difficult times. My wife, Marg, has been my greatest supporter for 36 years and also my greatest critic, so I know that if I neglect my duties or lose touch with the electorate, she will be the first to bring me back to reality. To my son, Toby, my daughter, Lara, my daughter-in-law, Peta, my son-in-law, Bruce, my grandchildren, Jack, Harvey, Olivia and Sienna, I thank you all for your encouragement. I would like to thank Doug Tierney, who started me on a political career when he talked me into standing for the Moora Shire Council to represent the Bindi Bindi ward of the shire. Doug had served on the Moora Shire Council with distinction and had set a high standard as a role model to follow. He has also been a wonderful mentor and someone whose advice I respect. Thank you, Doug. I also acknowledge my Liberal colleagues and other members of this house for the guidance and assistance that they have given me as a new member. In particular, I thank Hon Bruce Donaldson for his advice and encouragement. As the leader of the Liberal team for the Agricultural Region, he has been most helpful with information and advice and what is expected of me to be an effective member. Mr Acting President, I also extend my thanks to you, the President, the Deputy President, the Clerk and the officers and staff of the house for the advice and guidance that they have extended to me since my swearing-in ceremony. I am most grateful.

As is customary in an inaugural speech, I will give a brief overview of my background. I am a third generation farmer from Bindi Bindi and also Calingiri. I was educated at Bindi Bindi Primary School and spent five years boarding at Guildford Grammar School to achieve my leaving certificate. Sadly, my father died quite young and I found myself at an early age supporting a new family and running a farming business that I knew little about. As members can imagine, this was a very steep learning curve for me but it has held me in good stead to this present day.

Even though I have been actively involved in many community groups and organisations, I have not always had intentions of embarking on a political career. It was not until I became a councillor on the Moora shire and, in particular, the 1999 Moora floods when I was deputy shire president that I realised I could make a difference to people's lives for the better by assisting them at both state and federal levels. It is with some pride that the shire president and good friend, the late Michael Bates, and I received a distinguished service award for service to the community from the

Western Australian Local Government Association. Since that time I have become more interested in following a political career.

It is fitting that I am now a member representing the Agricultural Region as I have lived and served in this region all my life. The Agricultural Region is a large and diverse electorate and I appreciate the difficulties representing such a large region. I have had some experience servicing this region through my membership of the Rural Water Council and as a director of the Wheatbelt Area Consultative Committee. The Wheatbelt Area Consultative Committee is a federal government initiative funded through the Department of Transport and Regional Services. The committee covers an area of the wheatbelt the size of Tasmania and has an objective to build community capacity to find local solutions to local problems and create sustainable economic opportunities. During my time on this committee, I gained an insight into the very real social and economic problems that areas in the Agricultural Region are facing, particularly the youth in these areas. It is a great concern to me that at a time when the state is booming economically, the rural areas and towns that support them in my electorate are facing another year of drought and economic decline, forcing many young people to look for a better future outside the region. These people will not return unless economic conditions improve and infrastructure such as roads, employment opportunities and social outlets are provided.

I realise that there are time constraints but I would like to raise a few issues of concern to me. While the Agricultural Region has a variety of different industries, ranging from fishing and mining to tourism and aquaculture and many more, it is agriculture that particularly concerns me. As I mentioned before, I come from a small town called Bindi Bindi, which has suffered the same fate as many small towns throughout the Agricultural Region. When I first came home from boarding school, there were four basketball teams, a football team, a cricket side, day and night tennis, approximately 50 children at the school, two shops, a post office and a church. It was a thriving community. Now none of these things is left. Even the wheat bin is in mothballs. I accept that this is inevitable as demographics change and populations reduce. I believe that those who choose to live and work in these regions have to adapt to the changes taking place and embrace the opportunities that can often come with change. However, governments can help by making sure that regional infrastructure is in place. We need good roads so that people have reliable access to their major centres and towns, health facilities such as hospitals and doctors, and law enforcement, with police and police stations, so that people can feel safe in their communities.

One thing that no-one can control is Mother Nature, and that is a major concern facing the Agricultural Region as many areas enter another year of drought. As one of very few practising farmers in the Western Australian Parliament, I am sure that members of this house will understand my concerns for the agriculture industry. Apart from a small percentage of my electorate, most farming areas are entering their second year of drought conditions, with yields expected to be 30 to 50 per cent below average. Some shires, such as Northampton, Morawa and Dalwallinu, are the worst affected, with wheat yields expected to rank among the worst 10 per cent on record for those areas. Even though many areas have received good rain over the past month, it has come too late for some. These farmers will be facing a very bleak future as they meet with their bank managers to try to find ways of surviving so that they can continue to farm next year. I am sure that the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Food is concerned about the situation and the economic and social ramifications of another drought. Hopefully, he can find ways of assisting those in dire need before it becomes too late to help them. I encourage the minister to consider the proposal put forward by the opposition spokesperson for agriculture, Gary Snook, MLA, to subsidise by 50 per cent the rates of drought-declared shires. This would give tangible support to those shires and assist everyone in the shire, not just farmers. It would allow councils to carry on with their works programs. If I can assist in any way, I would be only too pleased to help wherever possible.

Although I congratulate the Minister for Agriculture and Food for granting a trial of genetically modified canola in the Esperance area, I think we are past trialling genetically modified organisms. I believe there is an urgent need for the Western Australian government to reconsider its opposition to the commercial production of GM products, because biotechnology will give farmers hope for the future. Biotechnology is winning surprising support internationally, with the United States, Canada, many South American countries, China, India and a significant number of European countries now planting biotech crops. It is my understanding that, globally, the total area of biotech plantings rose some 13 per cent in 2006 over previous years and involved 10 million farmers and more than 100 million hectares. I believe it is time to move on from the argument about Frankenstein foods promoted by special interest groups that encourage a fear campaign. We need to have a rational debate based on facts and scientific information. Furthermore, although many farmers will want access to new biotechnologies such as drought-tolerant crops, others will choose not to grow these crops for various reasons. Nonetheless, if there is no scientifically based reason for denying access, farmers should have choice and the normal rules of the market should prevail. Western Australian farmers must have access to this technology as soon as possible if they are not to face compromised competitiveness and miss out on moving to better environmental management.

Another area of interest and concern to me is the problems that many Aboriginal communities are facing today. Earlier in my career, I was president of the local football side that amalgamated with an all-Aboriginal football team. These players

had skills that members would not believe and were a joy to play with as team mates. Sadly, some succumbed to alcohol abuse, and their football careers, and in some cases their lives, were brought to a premature end. I also worked with Aboriginal leaders when I was a Moora shire councillor and have an understanding of how difficult it is for these leaders to combat the problems facing their communities. I applaud the federal government for having the courage and initiative to tackle this issue. I encourage the state government to work with the federal government in a bipartisan way and not play politics with this issue. This is about children's health and their future. All sides of politics have not handled the issues facing Aboriginal communities well in the past, but now there is an opportunity to correct that. It is time to get past the handout mentality and put in place worthwhile programs that will help these communities to help themselves. Through education and meaningful jobs, I am sure that the other problems can be overcome.

One of the most concerning issues facing our society today is drugs. When we hear of another violent attack or bashing, road rage incident or many other law and order issues, I cannot help thinking in many cases that drugs have played some part. I feel that drugs can be linked to much of the antisocial behaviour we are being confronted with today.

I find it impossible to accept that taking a soft approach to a drug such as cannabis is sending the correct message to those people who use it. The laws we have now send the message that we do not consider cannabis to be a serious problem and there are no health issues connected with its use. I cannot accept that we, as law-makers, are prepared to send a message to young people that smoking marijuana is harmless. There are some serious health problems associated with the use of cannabis and it often leads to much harder drugs. I support the calls from the Australian Medical Association and police for an overhaul of the state government's soft cannabis laws.

A trend in society that concerns me greatly is the lack of responsibility taken by an individual for his or her actions. These days it seems that if something happens to an individual, it is everyone else's fault and never his or her own fault.

I am sure that we have all heard of incidents such as a person picking up a hot piece of metal after welding it and burning his hand, and then saying that it is the employer's fault for not telling him that it was hot, or someone twisting his ankle in a hole while walking across a park and then suing the local council because he believed there should have been a sign warning of the hazard. Where should this responsibility start? I believe it must start at home with parents, not with some government department telling parents and their children how to behave. Parents must instil in their children that they must take responsibility for their actions and have respect for authority and their elders. It is not acceptable to just send children off to school and expect teachers to take on the role of both teacher and parent. I do not accept that it is more difficult to bring up children today than it was in previous generations. Just because mum and dad both work does not excuse them of their responsibilities. Why is it any harder to bring up children now than when our parents brought up large families without all the assistance that is provided today? How did the mother of eight children manage to get up at 5.00 am, light the wood stove with the wood that she probably chopped the night before, cook breakfast, get the kids ready for school, help her husband on the farm, get the housework done and prepare more meals before getting to bed at about 10.00 pm that night? How did she deal with little Johnny falling out of a tree while looking for bird eggs? She would have given him a cuddle, said that everything was all right, sent him outside and told him to be more careful next time. Today, the mother would probably rush outside and cuddle little Johnny but she would then send father outside with a chainsaw to cut down the tree, because it would have been the tree's fault. Of course, the next morning, a government department official would be knocking on the door threatening to prosecute little Johnny for taking the bird eggs, and probably by the afternoon there would be an official from another department threatening the father with prosecution for illegally clearing the tree. It probably would not finish there, as the next morning an official from another department would be on the doorstep to take little Johnny away from his parents because they should never have let him climb the tree in the first place. Mr Deputy President (Hon Ray Halligan), I do not mean to make light of serious neglect or employers who do not provide safe workplaces, but I fear that we have gone too far towards a nanny state. I do not want our state to end up like the United States of America, where the first thought is to go to litigation to solve a problem. I believe that it is time for good old, basic commonsense to be used by government departments. Governments should interfere in people's lives only if it becomes absolutely necessary to do so. Governments should provide amenities through infrastructure and good management of the economy, so that people can get on with their lives in the knowledge that they have a secure future.

When I mentioned to a friend of mine while we were having a beer together that it looked like I would be elected to represent the Agricultural Region, he was shocked. He probably did not use the words that I am going to use, but he asked me: "Why on earth do you want to be a politician? They are perceived as living off the taxpayer and are not in touch with the real world." I know that the vast majority of politicians are hardworking, trustworthy and conscientious people, but the public's perception of politicians seems to be more in tune with that of my friend. I hope that I can contribute in some small way to changing that perception of the public and to maintaining the high standards set in this house in order to build the confidence of the people in us as legislators. It was interesting that when I asked my friend to give me an example of a better system of government, he could not come up with anything, so he just said, "You had better buy me another beer before you lose touch with the real people." I had not changed his opinion!

In summary, I have touched on only some of the issues that are of concern to me. There are obviously many more, and no doubt they will be explored and debated at a future date. In conclusion, I thank you, Mr Deputy President, for the opportunity to address the house. I also thank the members of this house for their attention. I hope that I can make a positive contribution to the good government of this Parliament and our great state of Western Australia. Thank you.
