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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH**

**Address-in-Reply**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 19 November 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Bird, Sharon, MP

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**Ms BIRD** (Cunningham) (18:10): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and it is my first opportunity on my feet to also extend my congratulations to you on arising to that position as well. I know it is a challenging one. I have occasionally sat in that chair so I wish you all the best with it.

The **SPEAKER**: Thank you very much.

**Ms BIRD**: I appreciate the opportunity, as we do when we come back to this parliament, to deliver an address-in-reply speech. It is one of the great pleasures at the beginning of each term to be able to listen to your colleagues deliver their first speeches to this chamber. It was a more fulsome pleasure in past years than this year, I have to admit, having to observe that from the opposite side of the chamber. There is a really encouraging group of MPs across both sides of this chamber delivering their first speeches to the parliament. I look forward to engaging with all of them over the coming parliamentary term.

I take the opportunity today to, first of all, extend my own thanks. It is an enormous privilege and responsibility to return to this place on behalf of the electorate that you represent and it is the case that I have had the great privilege of the support and faith of my own local area since I arrived at this place in 2004. I thank them for their ongoing commitment to the task of the nation and their belief that I am the right person to achieve that for them in this place. I only wish that more electorates had the foresight and wisdom of those in my electorate but that was not to be the case on this occasion.

I want to outline some of the issues that have arisen in the electorate of Cunningham over the previous term and some of the issues that I hope to pursue during this term of the parliament, particularly in light of the contents of the address provided by the Governor-General to all of us.

During the last term of the parliament, as many members would be well aware, my area had a fairly difficult and traumatic period of time with a major announcement by BlueScope Steel about a restructure that had the result of a significant number of local people losing their jobs. It was the case that the federal Labor government under the leadership of Prime Minister Julia Gillard took a very active role in helping our region address the challenge that we faced as a result of that restructure. It was not new. We are a region that has been going through a transformation since probably the mid-1980s. We have been through a number of mining crises that that industry sector tends to experience—the ups and downs that go along with that—and indeed some of my uncles in the mining industry reckon they have had more experience writing CVs than mining because that is the reality of that industry. Obviously, major manufacturers like the steel industry also are undergoing the challenges of the modern international economy.

I am an optimist about the manufacturing sector. Having lived in a region that has gone through those sorts of transformations since the mid-1980s, I know that there is a great legacy in the Australian character that, in particular in the manufacturing sector—and others may have experienced it in other industry sectors that are predominant in their region—there is a characteristic that has innovation at its heart. The original tradesmen would put together a new piece of equipment just to solve a problem that they saw in the workplace and create a whole new level of innovation productivity as a result of that.

That ethos where you see a problem, apply your mind to it, pull together whatever it is that you can find and create a solution is profoundly reflected in the trade history in Australia. It is certainly the reason I am so passionate about skills development in this nation. It has been a comparative advantage for our nation for a long time. It has driven the fact that we punch above our weight. It has been transformed over recent decades in the experience of the university sector where we see a lot of innovation. But I believe that at its heart it grew out of the men and women on the tools from previous generations. Indeed, it is reflected in the culture and traditions of the early settlers and the farming sector. It is a part of our character that has driven an innovative spirit and it is reflected in our manufacturing industry. That is why I am optimistic about its future. It will be a different type

of manufacturing. We will compete in a value-added chain. We will compete in an innovative, problem-solving sector of the manufacturing international challenge. It is something where I think we will do well.

In our region, we have also diversified and it is no surprise, as is often the story, that the service sectors, education, health and aged care, are the growth sectors that are providing far more employment than was previously the case. Indeed, places like the University of Wollongong and TAFE Illawarra are major contributors to that. Given all that, in the last term of government we identified some things that the region could particularly benefit from in terms of government support to progress that transformation, particularly around creating jobs for the future so that families have security and the support of regular work and a decent wage with safe conditions. I think that should be the foundation of every family and every community.

In response to those challenges and in support of our region, the federal government took some decisions about some significant investments in our region. The first one I want to touch on is the National Broadband Network. Our region was targeted as an early rollout site in order to support the diversification of businesses. In our region, the National Broadband Network became a major transformative piece of infrastructure. A lot of work was done across the government and the private sectors to look at how we could take up this new infrastructure and transform our economy and our society.

We are an hour south of Sydney. We are a beautiful place to live. There are lovely people there, and the minister at the table, Minister Billson, quite rightly identifies that. We are well serviced with university and TAFE facilities. It is increasingly the case that people want to relocate out of Sydney and live in our region for the great lifestyle and the proximity to the major capital city and the airport. Part of making that real and therefore creating new businesses and jobs around that is to have a lifeline out of the region into the capital city, into the neighbouring regions and, increasingly in the modern world, to the rest of the nation and internationally.

The National Broadband Network had the capacity to completely transform regions, to make the tyranny of distance meaningless between regions, capital cities and the world. It provided the capacity for businesses to be based outside capital cities and participate in the international economy. To me, that was the most significant effect of the rollout of the National Broadband Network. Not only should it be a national broadband network; it should be a network that takes fibre to the premises.

The reality of the future is the delivery of services by small and micro businesses such as those that support the aged in their homes, and by the 'mumpreneurs' who are trying to establish themselves. And I am sure the Minister for Small Business would be well aware of this. I know my colleague the member for Ryan did some work on the committee where we met many examples of this. Home based businesses where people are being very creative and establishing their own small businesses rely on fibre to the premises. It is not just about broadband download delivery. That will not be a model to build a business upon in the long term. It is about upload as well. This is why it is so significant to have fibre to the premises and why it is so disappointing that the government has walked away from that. I obviously await the outcome of the review with great interest. There was outstanding evidence to say to the government that fibre to the premises is more than a luxury; it is actually a need of a modern economy, particularly for our regions and for emerging small and micro businesses across the country.

As the former Minister for Regional Communications, I follow some wonderful Twitter feeds from people who are real advocates of the importance of fibre to the premises. Many of them are home based businesses. Many put up information and run blogs talking about why that technology and infrastructure was so critical for them, and it was critical for our region. My colleague the member for Throsby and I were very disappointed to discover overnight that whole suburbs across the Illawarra had simply disappeared off the NBN map. It seems, as I have reflected to others, that the new version of transparency from the Minister for Communications is invisibility. I think someone should explain to him that invisibility is not the ultimate form of transparency; it is exactly the opposite of transparency.

The argument was that more accurate information was going to be put up, that the information was indeed going to be more reliable. There are a few very small spots in our area and all that tells us is what has actually commenced. Previously we could hold government to account. Across the map, there was an indication of what building was going to commence in 12 months and what building was going to commence in three years. You could, as I regularly did, have local constituents contact you and say: 'Where am I on the map? What is the time frame? What happens if I am in that time frame?' And they could hold you to account for those things. Now you cannot do that. It is not more transparent, it does not deliver greater responsibility by government and it does not deliver

more information. Indeed it is quite devastating because a significant number of those homes were actually on the schedule for construction to commence within the current 12 months and people were very much looking forward to having that new technology available. So we have started a campaign: 'put us back on the map, Malcolm'. I am very much determined with my colleague the member for Throsby to continue to pursue on behalf of our residents and businesses some updated information on what is actually going to happen with those suburbs.

One of the purposes of developing the National Broadband Network in the format we put it forward in was to cut down on the digital divide. There was an emerging divide between capital city services and those in regional and rural Australia. Most members here, I am sure, were lobbied. I have got whole black spots in my own area and we are only an hour south of Sydney. We were lobbied about people who could not get decent broadband. Now you are going to have areas where one half of the street is going to have fibre to the premise and the other half will not. I think this is going to become a real equity issue for suburbs, for regions and between different individuals in our community if they are not going to have that equal foundation for their infrastructure.

Also, sadly, there were two other major commitments the former Labor government made that the new government walked away from after the election. Clearly, we have the new infrastructure for the future in broadband but we also need traditional infrastructure, in particular road and rail infrastructure, because our region is a coastal strip with an escarpment at the side. The topography in itself creates real challenges. Road and rail services are not cheap to build in that environment.

We have been lobbying for quite a long time to have improved access in and out of our region. In particular, there was a \$42-million commitment by the Gillard and Rudd governments for the Mount Ousley Road upgrade listed as a line item in the last budget. It was a joint project between the federal government and the O'Farrell state government so no ideology could be blamed for this particular piece of road infrastructure. It is the major road in and out of the Illawarra to Sydney. It was an \$84-million upgrade to that road that the federal government, under Labor, was delivering \$42 million towards. We have been advised: no guarantees.

The Maldon to Dombarton rail link is the No. 1 important infrastructure issue for our region. It comes up regularly when people are surveyed about what they would like to see make a difference to our region; it is something I have been campaigning for since I first joined Paul Neville, former member for Hinkler, who was the chair of the transport committee, when I first came into this place. I had great the pleasure of being on that committee with him. The committee produced a report called *The great freight task: is Australia's transport network up to the challenge*. The inquiry looked at all the ports around the nation and what infrastructure was needed to connect the ports to the hinterland to maximise their efficiency. The Maldon to Dombarton railway was one of those projects we talked about which became very obvious and important to me as the local member. Construction had commenced on this rail link.

The current Premier was an adviser to Nick Greiner at the time when they decided to not continue with Maldon to Dombarton railway in the mid-eighties. The coal industry had a downturn; they thought there would not be a need for the rail line, so they bought out the contract. Sadly, with hindsight you could see that if they had not bought out the contract and simply let the construction be completed, it would have been a long-term positive investment. But they stopped the project. I am sure, Acting Deputy Speaker Kelly, you would be aware that it has quite a visual impact. You can see it because it is a bridge across a significant gorge. It goes about a third of the way across and stops. People see that and think, 'Why would you build that much of the piece of infrastructure and stop?' I think many members of the Liberal Party in the state and federal arenas around New South Wales, around this region, now agree that it is worthwhile seeing that project continue to completion. Indeed, we had provided \$25 million to the state government to do the preparatory work to recommence building that line, with design, planning and environmental work currently underway.

To find some private investment opportunities, which we understand there are, for completing that line—it is not a cheap task, as I said—Labor had put \$50 million on the table. The member for Grayndler, as the minister, announced that we were willing to go out and have a talk with private money to see what could be built on that seed funding to commence and complete that line. It is a critical line for us, for our port of Kembla. We want to see it grow, see it diversify and see the new jobs that will be created. Again, sadly, post election, we discover that this is also 'not guaranteed'.

I have raised these issues with the minister casually, but I will continue to follow up on it. I think they are projects that stand on their own. They are viable and important to the region. They are well supported across party lines

in our region. And they are important opportunities for our region to create the jobs that we need, particularly for our young people. Like many coastal areas, we have persistently high youth unemployment.

It is the case that Labor, over six years in government, delivered significantly to our regions because it understood the need for support in the transformation process and the need to create jobs. It was very disappointing to see all of those projects knocked on the head so quickly after the election, and I can only say that I am sure the new government will see the error of its ways and decide to recommit to those very important projects for the benefit of our local regions.

Debate adjourned.