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Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP

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Ms LEY (Farrer—Assistant Minister for Education) (16:10): I am pleased to speak this afternoon in the address-in-reply debate, and in doing so I take this opportunity to update the parliament and the nation about the circumstances of my electorate of Farrer. Farrer is approximately one-third of the state of New South Wales, and it might interest members to know that my colleague the member for Parkes represents another one-third of the state of New South Wales—his electorate adjoins mine to the east—and 46 other members, including the minister at the table, the member for Wentworth, represent the remainder of New South Wales. This illustrates very neatly the city-country divide, which is something that defines my electorate—it always has, and I suspect it always will as we see increasing regionalisation of populations moving to the coast.

But at the moment it is a sad time for my constituents, particularly in the far west, because of the increasing and ever-creeping drought. I think it is fair to say it started in western Queensland and is moving south. Towards the end of January I spent a week driving, not flying—Deputy Speaker Scott, as you take the chair, I acknowledge that your electorate of Maranoa is also experiencing some very tough times—around my electorate. I wanted to take to the roads because as local members we need to see how bad our roads are, and I also wanted to talk face-to-face to as many people on as many properties as I could along the way. So from Wentworth to Broken Hill, to Packsaddle, to Tibooburra, back not quite to Wanaaring, down to White Cliffs and Menindee and back again through Ivanhoe, Booligal and Hay I was confronted with the very sad situations of so many rural properties. I represented most of these areas throughout most of the last long drought. They have probably had three good seasons and now they are slipping back into a similar situation—although, as I said, there is no reason to think that, because it is not raining today, it will not rain next week, next month or next year. I very much want to give a message of hope and optimism, even though that is difficult.

One thing you have to say when you meet the people of this part of Australia is: their resilience is striking and notable and remarkable. But even tough people who are used to tough situations come to the end of the line, and I did see that in many instances. I stood on the bank of a dam in the north-west of my electorate, near Cameron Corner which borders New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, and I heard from the property owner that there were 22 dams on the property and none of them had ever been dry, but now they were. Then I went into town and heard similar stories from so many people. And while people are preparing themselves for a drought—they are doing their best to look for groundwater, to put down bores, to prepare with poly pipe, storing fodder and everything that we are expected to do when this happens—they also called for support from government; they called for support from both state and federal governments, and I have brought that message back to the agriculture minister. I have spoken in depth with him about that, and I appreciate his understanding; as a person from the land, of course he does understand. I also sent the message to the New South Wales agriculture minister, and she, as a woman from the land, understands the situation we are facing. I was delighted today that support that had previously been available in the Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett shires has now been extended to the central Darling and unincorporated areas of western New South Wales. That will help with fodder subsidies, transport subsidies and emergency water grants. So there is hope. I want to say to the people that I represent in that part of my electorate: we are with you. We are unable to wave a magic wand and take away the pain that you are experiencing, but we understand it. We have many rural members in this place, and we are hurting for you.

I want to touch on some of the coalition's commitments and the circumstances, again, that our people are facing. In keeping with the remoteness of much of my electorate, mobile black spots are a key issue for the length and breadth of Farrer. So I am delighted that the coalition's \$100 million regional Mobile Coverage Program is underway. There is \$80 million to improve mobile coverage along major transport routes in small communities and in areas that are prone to experiencing natural disasters. A further \$20 million, through the Mobile Black Spots Project, will improve coverage in locations with unique coverage issues and a higher demand for services. The process includes not only a discussion paper but on-the-ground, face-to-face talks with local communities about the impact poor mobile signals are having on their lives and businesses. I am delighted that the parliamentary secretary responsible for delivering the program has accepted my invitation to come to Farrer.

I can assure the member for Bradfield that we will be keeping him busy when he arrives in May, with a 600-kilometre round trip in store.

I want to list the mobile phone black spots because it is important. It is not a complete list but I have been, obviously, to all of these places and spoken to the people involved. They are located: between Savernake and Rennie on the Riverina Highway; west of The Rock; on the rural outskirts of Jindera; in Booroobanilly and Moonbria near Jerilderie; in Bunnaloo and areas in the Deniliquin-Mathoura-Barham triangle; in Willow Vale, near Balranald; in the Clare-Hatfield region and areas north of Balranald; in Coomealla, on the run between Wentworth and Dareton; in Topar, east of Broken Hill; in Packsaddle, north of Broken Hill; south of the Coombah Roadhouse at Bunnerungie; west of Tibooburra; north of Ivanhoe; on sections of the Adelaide Road, in the Thackaringa Hills; and in Silverton, just north-west of Broken Hill, where, it might interest you to know, the *Mad Max* car is located, because *Mad Max* was filmed in Broken Hill. (*Quorum formed*)

I want to touch on a couple of other key issues for my electorate. One is natural gas. There is currently no provision for natural gas in the townships of Deniliquin, Moama, Mathoura, Jerilderie and Berrigan. With the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the subsequent pressures on traditional, agricultural based industries, the importance of economic diversification in these towns is high. To illustrate this point, the New South Wales Department of Planning forecasts that the LGAs of Deniliquin and Jerilderie will experience negative population growth of 21.9 per cent and 18.8 per cent respectively between now and 2031. It is the joint responsibility of all levels of government to arrest this decline.

The Commonwealth government will release \$32.5 million to the New South Wales government following a signed agreement on the Basin Plan under the regional economic diversification program. It is my firm belief that this money should be used to assist in the rollout of natural gas infrastructure to these townships, all of which have been significantly impacted by the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. There is unanimous agreement amongst residents, local government, local business and industry that the supply of natural gas to these towns should be a key priority for all of us.

We are all working together. The Deniliquin Shire has already begun some preliminary investigations. Engineering consultancy firm GHD recently provided a quote for a feasibility study into extending the natural gas network to Deniliquin. This would be a logical first step in the process. I have written to the New South Wales Treasurer and I very much hope he will fund the feasibility study as the first step in this very important process.

I cannot mention Deniliquin in my electorate without commenting on the severe impact that my constituents who are involved in irrigated agriculture and the associated value-add, particularly the rice industry, are experiencing as a result of Labor's flawed policies and its complete disregard for the contribution that irrigated farming makes to the region and to the nation as a whole. I am delighted that we are turning the ship around. It is actually a bit of a juggernaut when you look at the amount of environmental water bought by the previous government and parked up in dams high in the headwaters of the Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers in the Snowy Mountains, where it is unable to really achieve a single credible outcome. I always say that, regardless of whether your philosophical position is that you support more of the environmental watering of wetlands and not of agriculture, the previous government's policy did not even achieve that. It was not able to demonstrate that it was improving environmental assets in the basin—not one little bit. That is the huge disappointment.

So I was delighted to see that the Environmental Water Holder is commencing trading in the Gwydir Valley, and that is a first step. I would encourage that to continue in all of the valleys, but particularly in those in my electorate—and I understand that the member for Riverina is similarly placed—where we have people who are desperate for this water if it is not being used for an environmental outcome. We understand that that is what the act says: that it actually be put back into productive agriculture. It is unconscionable that the water holder should hang on to this water and not use it for the purpose that the Snowy Mountains scheme was originally created for.

I have had some talks with the Environmental Water Holder and I am very encouraged. I believe that within the parameters of the legislation under which he operates he can actually do some good things, and I will certainly be at the forefront of advocating necessary changes to the Water Act to make sure that we recognise that irrigated agriculture is an industry that we all do support, that we want to survive and that we believe in for the future.

I should note that about one-third of the population of my electorate lives in the big rural city of Albury. Albury, unlike some of the smaller towns around, is doing very well, which I am delighted to report. It does not face the

significant growth challenges that the rest of the electorate does. It is part of the patchwork economy—it is the good part, as opposed to the part that we have concerns about where we have worries about areas not growing.

Albury is growing and it is thriving. In fact, it was noted, in the latest hot-spotting report on Australia's top 10 suburbs to buy in for future capital growth, that the outer suburbs and regional areas are where investment money is to be made. I am not suggesting that people come to Albury to make money on their houses, but I am suggesting that it is a great time if you do want to move away from the crowded cities on the New South Wales coast. The typical house price is \$260,000 and the typical unit price is less than \$165,000 according to this report. Albury-Wodonga is one of the winners in that regard.

I also want to note something that has come out of Albury because of the sad news we have heard about the car industry this week. The local Australian Industry Group has put together manufacturer activation plans, recognising that in our area some of the original equipment manufacturers in auto need to transition out of that and into something else. They have come up with a scheme that will enable this transition to manufacture motorcycle after-market parts as opposed to car after-market parts.

I think this is really smart. If you look at the facts, the popularity of motorcycles continues to grow—6½ per cent globally—and the four largest motorcycle markets in the world are all in Asia: China, India, Indonesia and Vietnam. We want this pilot project because it will actually help four to five local manufacturers transition to new opportunities, and it could indeed extend the project nationally. I have had some conversations with the industry minister and he is interested. We have, as members will know, a \$100-million fund to facilitate the transition into different industries, and I will be knocking on his door as soon as I possibly can to make sure that we are able to access that fund if we can to get this pilot project underway.

I should note that the circumstances the government faces in terms of the national accounts and the economy generally are not good. As I speak to people and travel over my electorate, which has so many needs and represents so many diverse interests—whether those be resurfacing of the netball courts; building community infrastructure; more places for child care, which is of course my portfolio responsibility in the ministry; or just finding the right niche for a person who has recently lost an income and is looking for a job—there are so many demands on government. Unfortunately, against the backdrop of our increasing debt we are unable to say, 'Yes, we have money for this and we can assist you.'

I know the Treasurer has talked about this today, and it is a message that we just have to repeat: we cannot turn the ship around on a 10-cent coin. The trajectory of government spending that the previous government left us with is enormous, and if left unchecked the deficit would balloon out to \$667 billion from just over \$300 billion at the moment.

So we have no choice, as we have said, but to get our house in order, and that does involve some pain and that does involve some difficulty. But for members of the opposition somehow to attribute the current level of spending to us I think is disingenuous and most unfair, because people need warning. In terms of winding back spending programs and moving money back to pay off our debt, it does take time.

When people come to see me with wonderful requests and good ideas in the childcare area I say, 'When our Productivity Commission inquiry reports'—and we have asked the PC to get its skates on and have a draft report in July and a final report in October—that will reshape policy in terms of child care and early learning for the next couple of decades.' We have exciting things that we can do, and that is not about adding more money, because at the moment, patently, the government cannot do that. But it is about making better use of the money we have, and there is a lot of opportunity for that. So some people may interpret that as a gloomy message; I do not—I see great optimism. Since we have come to government, confidence in business has picked up; people are feeling happier, and if confidence picks up investment picks up. And investment is desperately needed, certainly across regional Australia.

So there are good signs on the horizon, and I think a government that manages the economy responsibly—and it is recognised that the Liberal and National parties are doing that—will engender that further confidence. So, when it rains I will be much happier. Until then, I will look forward to further support from both state and federal governments in terms of the drought that is affecting my electorate and which at the moment worries me the most. I thank the House.