Senator WILLIAMS (New South Wales) (20:38): I rise to talk about my recent trip to the Hunter Valley. Two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Hunter electorate in my role as Nationals duty senator for Hunter. I attended a breakfast hosted by the Hunter Research Foundation. What was obvious was the slowdown in the economy because the mining industry has been battling low coal prices and high production costs. The price of thermal coal is down about 45 per cent, according to reports, and this is the lowest since the second half of 2009. At one stage it fetched US$120 a tonne, but earlier this month there was a report that it had slipped to US$66 a tonne shipped through Newcastle. Yet costs, of course, are continuing to escalate. So there are a few challenges, and businesses in the region have to explore the possibilities of greater economic diversity.

One of the greatest businesses in Scone is Hunter Valley Quality Meats, which operates the abattoir. The abattoir employs upwards of 700 people, plus all the ancillary positions it creates. CEO Peter Allen took great delight in showing us around and demonstrating how they have engaged with the community. It is amazing to see an abattoir on the edge of the residential area, and the abattoir has taken steps to ensure that it is a good neighbour. Something they have started are producer days, where producers come in and have a look at the production chain and the end result of their cattle. So beef producers can follow their beef right through the process.

Some years ago, whilst I was in opposition, I raised with the Australian Rail Track Corporation during Senate estimates what was happening with clearing a traffic jam at Scone. For those unfamiliar with this problem, coal trains from the north-west rumble through Scone frequently. In fact, it is forecast that by 2018 there will be 24 coal trains going each way daily. That is 48 times through Scone every day. This forces the closure of the Kelly Street rail crossing, which is actually the New England Highway, where about 8,000 vehicles cross each day, and 1,200 of them are heavy vehicles. In fact, when I was in Scone I experienced first-hand the traffic jam that eventuates: traffic backed up on the highway and the side streets, and it was a good 10 minutes before we started moving again. The federal and state governments are tipping in $45 million to build an overpass so traffic will not be held up. A bypass of Scone is also on the agenda. A noise barrier will be erected on the western side of the rail line to cushion residents from rail noise.

Upper Hunter Mayor Michael Johnsen is eagerly looking forward to this facelift for Scone. He tells me that once the overpass on Kelly Street is built, and the bypass is in place by 2019, Kelly Street will revert to single lanes each way with angle parking and possibly traffic lights. The council and the chamber of commerce are aware of the need to ensure as little disruption as possible to the business centre while all this work is going on. I would like to thank Brett Peterkin, who has been engaged by the ARTC to handle the Scone project. Brett is continually updating my office and the community on where everything is up to.

During my visit, I also spent some time at two aged-care facilities at Scone and Murrurundi. Regardless of which aged-care facility I walk into, I am always struck by the wonderful, caring attitude of the staff. It is comforting to know our elderly are in good hands. The management raised various issues with me that I will raise with the minister. Minister Fifield is doing a wonderful job in the field of aged care and is keen to ensure the sector’s continued viability.

Child care is a big issue with young parents today. The costs can be crippling and, of course, just like with the elderly, we want the best professional care for our children and grandchildren. The Upper Hunter Early Learning Centre is a magnificent complex and it was enjoyable just watching the youngsters playing in the sun, watched on by the early childhood educators.

I also met with the Mayor of Muswellbrook Shire, Martin Rush, and his senior team on a couple of matters. They are keen to see the Muswellbrook bypass underway.

There was further good news for councils in the Hunter today with the announcement of the Roads to Recovery funding. Upper Hunter Shire Council has received a total of $5.18 million to the period 2018-19, Singleton
Council has received $3.31 million, Muswellbrook Shire has received $2.48 million, Maitland City Council has received $3.55 million, and Cessnock City Council has received $4.55 million. These councils can go ahead and fix their roads and streets without any interference from Canberra, so these funds will be very welcome.

Before I finish I would like to pay tribute to the state member for Upper Hunter, the Hon. George Souris, who announced over the weekend that he would not be seeking re-election to the New South Wales parliament in March next year. George has been a state Nationals leader and has held ministerial and shadow portfolios in his 27 years of parliamentary service. In fact, for 23 of his 27 years he was on the front bench. Amongst his portfolios at various times were finance, ethnic affairs, land and water conservation, and—possibly what he will be remembered best for—he was Minister for Tourism, Major Events, Hospitality and Racing in the O'Farrell government between 2011 and 2014. At this year's annual conference of the New South Wales Nationals he was awarded life membership of the Nationals.

George is a personal friend. In fact, he was MC at my wedding, and we worked very well together on issues in his part of the Hunter region. George Souris is a terrific fellow. I wish him and his wife, Vassy, all the best in their retirement after a long and successful political career. He has contributed enormously to the New South Wales Nationals, to our state and especially to the people of Upper Hunter—his constituents for whom he has worked very hard. George, Vassy, enjoy your retirement; it is well deserved.