



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Hansard 22 March 2001

**ADDRESS IN REPLY**

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (6.10 p.m.): I reaffirm my allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II and His Excellency Governor Arnison. This debate provides a great opportunity for me to talk about the various issues that are important to my electorate of Warrego, just as other members have talked about the issues that affect their regions. I take this opportunity also to congratulate all the new members of the parliament. They have had their first taste of the parliament in action. I am sure that they will enjoy their time here, although it is pretty hard work and there is no long-term job security in this game, as many people know. I am one of the fortunate ones who has been here for a while. On this side of the House, I am probably the last of the class of '86.

The electorate of Warrego changed quite dramatically following the redistribution of electoral boundaries. The electorate now stretches from the South Australian border to include Cooper Creek and Thargomindah, and on the western side it reaches Dalby. I am not complaining about that and I will get on with the job. However, when redistributing electoral boundaries in future, we really have to consider the people of such areas. How on earth can those areas be serviced efficiently and properly? Each community demands certain attention from their members. I have an aeroplane which helps—when the wheels are working—but many are not in my position and it could be very difficult to service such areas. We have to take a deep breath and think about the size of electorates. With one more redistribution, the Warrego electorate will rest in Cooper Creek at one end and be fishing in the sea at the other end.

The Charleville office has always been the central point of the Warrego electorate. For the first time since Federation that town will not have an electoral office because, as many members would be aware, the shires of Tambo, Quilpie and Murweh, which includes Charleville, will become a part of the electorate of Gregory. Roma, Miles and Chinchilla will be included in the eastern end of my electorate.

For a number of years rural Queensland has not really enjoyed good returns as a result of the drought. That has particularly affected the east, where it seems to have gone on for such a long time. The west does not seem to have suffered too badly this season. A number of issues need to be discussed in relation to this.

The electorate of Warrego has quite a number of diversified industries. Luckily, the beef industry has not suffered too much in relation to prices. Wool prices have been down for 10 years, but they are now on the way up. Let us hope that those prices do improve, because the devastation of the towns has to be seen to be believed. There is nothing worse than having to battle against the odds. The shire councils do a great job pulling the communities together by developing and providing the services that are taken for granted in many other parts of the state. The councils do a great job.

There are farms of all kinds in Warrego. The drought has been particularly bad throughout the electorate. Even though many farms are getting bigger in size, the costs that are faced are beating them all the time. We have to be sympathetic to those people until such time as their markets improve. Irrigation has not been too badly affected. However, the lack of certainty in the industry has been one of the single biggest factors causing many problems and heartache in that area. I will come back to that later.

The tourism industry has done quite well, although there is no doubt that the price of petrol has impacted on it. A lot of work has been put into tourism facilities in Warrego. For instance, the Miles

Historical Museum is a great tourist attraction. A sum of \$500,000 has been provided through the Heritage Trails Network to construct a pioneers of the west pavilion. The local shire is contributing approximately \$200,000 in money and in kind to support that project. That will be a fantastic attraction for the region. It goes to show that the people of the area are prepared to put their money up if they can get a little help.

An attraction called the Big Rig is being built in Roma, which wants to capitalise on the fact that it was the first place in Australia where oil and gas was found. It is quite an historic area. When it is finished, that attraction will be similar to the Hall of Fame in stature. It will give the area a bit of focus.

The Cosmos Centre is being built at Charleville, which is a great place for viewing the stars. There is so much about astronomy that we do not know. The French do a lot of their tests in the area and balloons go up all of the time because Charleville happens to be in just the right place geographically. The view of the night sky is excellent. I am looking forward to that project doing very well.

Most of the communities in my electorate are looking at ways of diversifying to put some sort of a base into their rural economies. Since the regional summit that was held in Canberra a year and a half ago, a lot of funding has been provided through the Regional Solutions Program. That has been a good program and it can help a lot of towns value add and put a bit of extra oomph into their communities, but there is a long way to go yet.

The main problem—and many members would find the same thing in their electorates—is that the rural industry overall is in financial trouble. The rural people do not want subsidies; they just want a price for their products. Some industries such as wool, beef, grain and cotton are picking up and are not doing too badly. However, at the end of the day we have to have consistency. The costs are beating us all the time and that is the single biggest problem that we have faced. If there were better financial returns, there would be less pressure on governments as the people would be able to help themselves more. Great gains have been made in the efficiency and productivity of most rural industries, but the increase in costs is always there.

Government policy impacts on rural areas, particularly when margins are tight. It really does have a significant impact when one is on a very tight margin. For example, policies such as tree clearing, vegetation management guidelines, water allocation management plans and tenure property rights have all impacted directly and psychologically on rural people. That tends to reduce the confidence that people have in themselves. As most members would know, confidence is a big factor in success. Countries run on confidence. If people are not confident that they have security, that will impact on their viability.

Obviously, government services are very important and people jealously guard every employee they have, whether it be a railway officer, a teacher or a departmental officer; they want to keep those people there to provide those services. If governments of the day find ways to increase efficiencies in one area, that is, if they can provide a certain service with fewer people, perhaps other services can be enhanced. That is what the government has to do. Instead of drawing people out, it has to provide more services to close the gap.

A serious issue that needs to be addressed and which has not been addressed at this stage is the situation with respect to drought declarations. We saw delays in relation to the drought declaration of an area experiencing the worst conditions in a hundred years. We could not get the area drought declared. And then there were delays because applications for exceptional circumstances funding, which is a federal government responsibility, could not be accepted because a drought declaration was not in place. A drought declaration covers a once in 15 to 20 years event. Exceptional circumstances covers a once in 25 years event. That declaration triggers assistance for people.

Today I was speaking to a lady who has never asked for help in the past but who is finding it difficult because they cannot sell their property and have nowhere to go. If they borrow more money, they cannot pay it back. They want to try to do the right thing. An opportunity exists under exceptional circumstances, for instance, for them to be helped out in the short term, just as would happen when somebody loses their job and gets family allowance, the dole or whatever the case may be. People on the land often cannot get that unless exceptional circumstances funding is triggered, and then they can be helped out and the situation can return to normal when the season changes. Some thought needs to be given to streamlining the process and to putting a better system in place to deliver that assistance.

I was disappointed that a few major projects were lost. The Kogan Creek power station at Chinchilla was going to be a great project. It got to the stage at which all of the approvals were in place and it was highly anticipated that it would go ahead. At the very last minute it was knocked out of the ring. That was one of the biggest kicks in the guts to any community that I have ever seen. The government needs to look at this very carefully. Instead of changing its mind on major projects like that, it should have thought a bit further ahead.

A very interesting project in the Chinchilla area based on methane gas seems to be going very well. The Linc Energy coal gas project at Hopelands will be supported, provided its technology works. If it can gain financial backing, a powerhouse could be built in the area. The indications are that it can produce electricity from coal gas at a price much cheaper than any coal-fired power station. It is looking pretty good. The project also produces considerable amounts of oil and some chemicals in the water taken from the gas, which could be the basis of some value adding industries in the future. Those are the types of things that we want to do, that is, build on the existing local industries.

The coal from Glen Wilga for Tarong does offer some opportunities. But I remain opposed to any of the proposed routes for a rail line across the brigalow flood plain. If Tarong Energy must use Glen Wilga coal, I believe the coal line should use the existing coal corridor to the east.

Water development in the Chinchilla area is an important issue. Better uses can be made of the weir at Chinchilla. The community proposed that a small weir be put downstream to try to utilise that water better. We want to be able to pursue that and make sure that the most economical and beneficial uses of that water can be put in place. We will be pursuing that as hard as we possibly can.

A lot of other towns out there are working on a few issues. In the Miles and Condamine areas one of the big issues is water development. They want to be able to do more, for example, through the weir at Condamine or through better water harvesting opportunities. A great opportunity exists there. The soil is great. It is highly unlikely that the area would have any salinity problems. I believe we can do a lot more if we put our minds to that. I request that the government look very favourably on further development in the Miles-Condamine region.

A number of issues are pretty important to a few shires. One is the shire funding through the Grants Commission. Three shires in Queensland have a serious problem in that they are 'donut' shires; they are actually town councils. One is Roma, one is Goondiwindi and the other is Dalby. Those shires have a serious problem insofar as the general grants that come through the Grants Commission are based on a formula which includes roadworks in their area. Because they are towns they do not have a great distance of roads and, therefore, the funding does not come through. Some people may argue that they do not have the cost, but they do have a lot of cost because people come in and use those roads. A better system needs to be put in place. I do not believe it is up to the surrounding shires to try to fix the problem. It really has to be done through the Grants Commission formula itself, and that is by putting in place a formula whereby those shires have additional funding taken off the top of the overall funding available through the Grants Commission.

Mobile phone coverage has been extended into that region, which has been well accepted. A bit more work needs to be done on that and we need better facilities in some areas. But certainly it has been great.

There are a few issues in towns such as Mitchell. There does not seem to be enough Main Roads funding provided in that region. It has all been cut back and there is never enough. But there does seem to be a problem in relation to the amount of funding that it was promised but which has not eventuated.

The school library issue has been going on for a long time. The school library is an historical building and it should remain at that site. The Education Department did provide funding for it. For some reason, that funding was withdrawn. It seems to have been lost somewhere. I believe we need to pursue it a bit further. The community wants that library to stay there as an historical building. I think that should happen.

In relation to power supplies, most of us around the countryside and in the cities can turn on a light or turn on the kettle and get 240 volt power. But there are some places where that does not happen. Mitchell and Glenmorgan are such places, and the businesspeople there are burning out their fridges because there are too many power fluctuations. In many instances, Ergon Energy has been able to put in place some measures to fix the problem, but these have not worked. I do not think enough money is going into the system to solve the problems. They just do not seem to be able to resolve them. I think there needs to be a lot more attention put into those areas. We cannot have those people having to replace fridge motors all the time; their businesses are struggling just like everyone else is. They really do not need those extra cost burdens.

Another issue of importance is the dingo barrier fence. As many people would be aware, it has served a great purpose over many years. At the moment, there is a lack of funding. It does not require a great deal in government terms—probably \$200,000 or \$300,000—to do the maintenance and bring that fence up to standard. There is an old saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The dingo barrier fence must be secure and have all of the holes blocked up. At present, it is very difficult to maintain that fence and keep the dingoes out. The wool industry is now hopefully starting to improve. The last thing we want is dingoes coming in and eating the sheep. We need to do some more work in that area.

In relation to Cunnamulla, a while ago we heard the minister speak about the bilbies. The Currawinya National Park, where the bilbies will be located, is in Warrego, near Hungerford. I am looking forward to their presence there. It is a project we have been pursuing for a very long time and one that I commend.

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