



Speech by

## Howard Hobbs

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Hansard Tuesday, 29 November 2005

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### CUNNAMULLA FELLA

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (12.11 pm): It was a great privilege to witness and take part in the historical occasion of the unveiling in Cunnamulla of the double-life-sized bronze statue of the Cunnamulla Fella. To provide a bit of background for members, since Cunnamulla and the Paroo shire were settled in the 1860s with the taking up of Cunnamulla Station, primary industry has always been the mainstay of the community, in particular the wool and beef industries. Never was this more so than in the 1950s and 1960s when Australia was riding on the sheep's back. The vibrant era provided endless employment opportunities for young lads just out of school when most finished at year 8 to work on the sheep and cattle stations.

Those young fellas, many only 15 or 16 years old, worked long, hard hours from sun-up to sundown, often seven days a week, mustering sheep and cattle and chasing scrubbers and breaking in horses. At the end of a hard day's work they would squat around the campfires on their saddles or swags and talk about the day's events.

Cunnamulla was booming as the stations employed so many men. When they came to town the pubs would overflow and these young fellas could be seen squatting around the streets in the classical pose. It was around this time that Stan Coster wrote the song *Cunnamulla Fella*, later immortalised by the late Slim Dusty. Having been brought up in station life myself, I clearly recall from a very young age waking up in the mornings to the *Country and Western Hour* which would be blasting away from the kitchen where the cook was working and men were coming in for breakfast. Slim Dusty and *Cunnamulla Fella* regularly echoed through our kitchen, but never did I imagine in those days that the words of that song would be immortalised in bronze and I would be participating in such a significant event.

Many of us have been guilty of trying to emulate Slim Dusty in that famous song after many hours in the pub, generally without success but with great satisfaction. I, like many, feel a close affinity with this legendary fella from Cunnamulla whom we heard about and who could be many people. I clearly imagine what he did, how he lived and how he drifted from town to town. I understand how he felt when he was aboard that outlaw as he came out of the chute and many other situations that he got himself into.

Thanks to Stan Coster and Slim Dusty we can identify that Cunnamulla is his rightful home and this statue will remind future generations of the contributions these young fellas made to the building of this nation, the Paroo shire and Cunnamulla in particular. I say to all those young fellas who rolled their swags out on the veranda or who drank at the bar of the New Western Hotel that used to be on the site where the statue now stands: we hope you approve of the statue. In fact, to all people, locals, those who travel through or camp the night or boil their quart on the Warrego or the Paroo: I hope you get great satisfaction and enjoyment from this monument to the legendary Cunnamulla Fella.

A crowd of 2,000 people flocked to the shire hall on the Friday night to witness the unveiling of this statue by Anne Kirkpatrick, the daughter of the late Slim Dusty. Tracey and Russell Coster and Jayne Kelly, family of the late Stan Coster, writer of the *Cunnamulla Fella*, were there. It was a two-year project by the Paroo Shire Council and I congratulate the council on their initiative and seeing this right through to fruition. Mayor Ian Tonkin, in his welcoming speech, said that in time the *Cunnamulla Fella* will become as

well known as the Dog on the Tucker Box or the Swagman at the Stockman's Hall of Fame and will draw not only visitors who are fans of the late Slim Dusty but also those who come to admire an incredible piece of art.

The pulling power of the *Cunnamulla Fella* was ably demonstrated at the opening ceremony with the largest crowd ever witnessed in Cunnamulla, surpassing even the centenary celebrations of 1979. It is very significant. Mayor Ian Tonkin said that the idea to turn a folk legend into a reality was first accepted by the council in late 2003 when it was decided to run a nationwide competition asking those interested to sketch up in any medium their vision of the Cunnamulla Fella. The winning entry, however, chosen by council in early 2004, was of a young squatting stockman after a hard day's work sketched by Mike Nicholas who, it turns out, has strong family connections with Cunnamulla. Mike has many portraits of previous premiers in this parliament. Mike worked in Cunnamulla as a policeman in 1960 and witnessed for himself the way of life in western Queensland. He is extremely well known throughout the art world. At about this time the search was on to find a sculptor for this project and Archie St. Clair was contacted. Archie is territory born and bred and from his early teens had been involved with the cattle industry as, amongst other things, a rigger, stockman, rodeo rider and helicopter pilot.