



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Regional Community Leadership**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 18 June 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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# SPEECH

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**Speaker** McKenzie, Sen Bridget

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**Senator McKENZIE** (Victoria) (23:09): This week I had the pleasure of meeting representatives from right across regional Australia to discuss a range of issues as the representatives from local councils have been in Canberra for the Australian Local Government Association national general assembly. But also this week two community leadership groups, the Loddon Murray leadership group and the Northern Mallee leadership group, travelled from my home state of Victoria to discuss their priorities in Canberra. The Loddon Murray Leadership Program aims to develop leaders for vibrant and sustainable communities. The community leadership programs right throughout regional Victoria are having a significant impact on developing capacity within our regional towns and centres, working to engage, encourage and empower members of the community in leadership roles.

The delegation this year to Canberra was made up of 23 community leaders from right across the Loddon Murray area, which covers north-central Victoria. A cross-section of age, gender and professional backgrounds was represented and they spent two days here in Canberra. They came up on a bus. I shared a meal with them on Monday night and was able to bring them into the gallery here to see some of the commentary around the EPBC Act. They were quite fascinated to see the difference between a question time performance and an in-committee performance of their parliamentary representatives. They met a range of political representatives and government agencies. Over that two days it has been very inspiring to hear how actively they are engaged in their community and how passionate they are about the future of regional Victoria, particularly the Loddon Murray area. It is these leadership groups that help build local capacity.

We had a group of them in the National Party's party room yesterday quizzing us and found their questioning quite challenging as they went right to the heart of what we are doing here and why. I think it is very useful when we meet community groups to be challenged to ensure that we are actually delivering for people on the ground. Local councils and leadership groups both provide systems for feedback about what is happening on the ground in towns, on farms and in local communities. They help communicate the challenges and triumphs of the areas to representatives and senators such as me.

The electorate of Mallee, where most of the people I have met over the last two days have come from, is located in north-western Victoria, covering 73,879 square kilometres. I know, Madam Acting Deputy President Boyce, that when I compare that to North Queensland electorates it may seem kind of small, but it is actually larger than Tasmania, with only one representative and a 12th of a senator. The main centres are Mildura in the North; Warracknabeal, St Arnaud, Horsham and Stawell in the south; and Swan Hill and Kerang in the east. The Mallee produces a wide variety of food and wine. According to the Nationals candidate for Mallee, Andrew Broad, with the exception of coffee every ingredient for a meal can be sourced from the Mallee: milk, cereal and orange juice for breakfast; Mallee lamb with vegetables and a glass of red; fresh fruit for afternoon tea; some cheese, almonds and sultanas for a snack; and, if you catch one, a Murray cod for dinner. The Mallee is also home to a range of manufacturing companies and thriving tourist destinations, in Mildura and the Murray River in the north, and Halls Gap and the great climbing opportunities that draw so many international and domestic visitors to the Grampians in the south.

As a National Party senator, there is nothing more important to me than the interests of the seven million people who live outside our metropolitan cities. Regional and rural areas face unique challenges which my predecessors and my colleagues have championed since the 1920s as Nationals and also in our prior iteration as the Country Party. The Nationals are 100 per cent committed to fighting for a better deal for regional communities. We are dedicated to securing a better deal in the areas of education and health and securing a better deal for regional infrastructure.

As the 41st Parliament is in the last few days—most of us hope, at this time of night—I would like to pay tribute to my colleagues who are preparing to retire. They are John Forrest, the member for Mallee, Senator Ron Boswell, and Paul Neville, the member for Hinkler and the Nationals whip in the House of Representatives. It is sad to see colleagues go and I am sure we will spend a lot of time over coming days listening to the valedictory speeches and, over coming months, attending those parties we like to have for colleagues to give them a send-off and a good old roasting, in the way of the Nats. But it is exciting to preselect the next generation of Nationals

parliamentarians, such as Andrew Broad, our candidate in Mallee, who will continue to represent the people of regional Australia, building on our legacy as the party whose heart and soul resides in country Australia and, whilst building on that legacy, ensuring that we respect and advocate for the diversity that exists in the regions.

Andrew has committed to speaking up for the needs of the people in his electorate and he has been lobbying me quite a lot about the issues of Mallee per se. He is a former VFF President and board member of Australian Made, Australian Grown. He is passionate about regional developments and capitalising on increasing wealth in Asia through Australian food production. His policy priorities essentially centre around wanting to ensure electorates like Mallee continue to thrive and that the inhibitors to growth are removed. He is focused on infrastructure—roads and better rail services—and most particularly as a new-gen Nat he understands the importance of communications in the regions and wants to see improved broadband services and technology for regional areas like Mallee. When we had the shadow minister for regional communications in the seat of Mallee last month, it was fantastic to get into Mildura and talk to local businesses and community leaders about the coalition's broadband plan and how Mallee will not have to wait until 2021. The community will be getting more than 25 megabits per second from 2016 and they are quite excited about that happening.

When it comes to stimulating the economy, Andrew believes the best strategy is to leave money in people's pockets and allow them to invest locally. He has been visiting farms and listening to locals' concerns. He has been hearing what we Nationals know all too well as does the coalition more generally, and that is that increasing costs, including the carbon tax, are raised often when we visit communities and talk to not only businesses but community members more generally. The impacts of the carbon tax, according to Andrew, on communities in Mallee are clearly very serious.

He is also aware of the barriers to education faced by people in his electorate. He is particularly keen to see young people in the Mallee electorate access tertiary education. He understands that there is a high cost on regional families to send their children to university, and this disadvantage should be acknowledged by government. People in country areas should have the same educational opportunities as their city counterparts. The Nationals understand this and we have been quite strong advocates attempting to redress that balance. Education is also key to ensuring a bright and sustainable future for regional communities, as it is the regional students who will be more likely to contribute to their regional communities via either returning in person or, as I think is more important,

getting into the boardrooms of international companies and our national leading companies to bring in that country perspective and an understanding of how we live and work in the regions. That would probably make a bit of a difference to some of our issues as well.

When we had the shadow minister for mental health, Senator Fierravanti-Wells, in Swan Hill a little while ago, Andrew and Senator Fierravanti-Wells met with local mental health providers and aged-care providers. They spoke through some of the challenges, particularly for the Swan Hill region which as a community has one of the highest rates of teenage self-harm in Australia. That community has been seeking a headspace project for a long time, but because of the size of the town—it is under 20,000 people—the community is really struggling to bring that to Minister Butler's attention. They hope to look for other solutions. People who need a high level of care in mental health should have a choice on where they relocate to. They should not be forced to move to get the care they need.

Similarly, Andrew Broad is keen to raise awareness of access to quality accredited childcare services. In small towns there is not enough demand to warrant a full day care service, and parents are left with fewer options. He believes structural changes to the childcare funding model could see smaller towns gain access to extension services from larger neighbouring towns. This could make life a whole lot easier for many families living in small towns.

Andrew strongly believes that the people, products and natural assets of his electorate have a lot to offer and deserve recognition and support from the federal government. He believes that Australia deserves a government it actually can be proud of—a government that builds things; a government that rewards initiatives and endeavour. He believes the federal government should favour Australia first in access to agricultural land, in defence policy, in trade policy and in natural resources. Andrew wants a government that believes in small business. He knows that small business is the driver of the Australian economy. It is the pursuit and endeavours of individual Australians that create the wealth and prosperity that we often take for granted. It is precisely that group of people in our Australian society who have been feeling the pressure and are lacking the confidence in the current government. Andrew will be another strong voice for regional Australia in the Nationals party room post-election following the retirement of a very popular local member, John Forrest. He will advocate for better education and better health services. He will speak up for the farmers who feel their voice has not been heard and he will fight for greater investment in regional education.

Andrew is lucky to be taking over—hopefully, if all goes well for the Nationals in the electorate of Mallee at the next election—from a very experienced and passionate local member in John Forrest, who has served the electorate of Mallee for a couple of decades now. John Forrest is championed and celebrated right throughout the Mallee. As I mentioned earlier, the breadth of food produced within the Mallee electorate is largely as a result of John Forrest's advocacy on the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline. If you go through the Mallee, he is actually known as 'Mr Pipeline'. That pipeline secured a water source for the electorate of Mallee going forward. A member in a safe conservative seat, his passionate lobbying over a long period of time brought that to fruition. As an engineer, he was quite stoked and probably even has the drawings for it—I am sure they are in a back pocket somewhere. He has dedicated 20 years of his life to the Mallee electorate, and it has become the safest conservative seat in Australia.

He was the Chief National Party Whip from 1998 to 2006. He was shadow parliamentary secretary for trade from 2007 to 2008 and shadow parliamentary secretary for regional development from 2008 to 2009. His legacy is one that Andrew Broad is more than proud to carry on. As I said earlier, as the Nationals grow and expand, we are entering a new phase where, whilst we may have been viewed once as the farmers' party, and whilst that is a core aspect of who we are and one that we are very proud of, at the moment we are also obviously strong advocates for regional education and regional health.

John Forrest is looking forward to seeing Andrew Broad continue his representation of Mallee if the electorate so decides. In John's words: 'Andrew has the acumen and boldness that such a vital region of Victoria needs to ensure that strong representation continues to occur.' As I was talking to John about Andrew, he wanted to ensure that his best wishes and strongest encouragement are offered to Andrew in his task of winning the confidence of the very discerning electors of Mallee at the forthcoming federal election.

The Nationals are committed to providing good governance within the coalition, and this was demonstrated by the motions passed at the recent Nationals federal council. Motions passed included support for a code of conduct for supermarkets, the lowering of the GST threshold for online purchases from overseas, and allowing alpine grazing back into national parks, particularly the Alpine National Park in Victoria. These motions are practical, achievable and, if implemented, could effect positive change for farmers, primary producers and graziers, as well as small-business owners, the backbone of our local communities.

As we know, small businesses are facing increased cost pressures to compete with online trading where items are sold much more cheaply—and it is not just the high Australian dollar that is making the purchase of online goods so cheap; it is the fact also that they do not attract GST.

A recently released report by Ernst & Young looked quite deeply into how we could have a similar scheme operating within Australia. One of the voluntary schemes, where e-retailers such as Amazon contribute voluntarily to paying the particular country's version of the GST, was quite successful, and it would contribute a lot to our state governments' coffers as they seek to deliver services in their communities.

The code of conduct governing the relationship between suppliers, processors and supermarkets, ensuring a fair return for all, is a practical policy that would make a real difference for farmers, primary producers, facing unprecedented challenges. The EU has a green paper out on this and is looking at a code that will be governing the relationship between all three aspects within the supply chain. The UK has its own very recently minted code of conduct primarily dealing with the relationship between processors and retailers. But there is some work that needs to be done in this space. If we look at the Senate inquiry into food processing which was chaired by Richard Colbeck last year, that was one of the key issues that we found in the relationship between producers, processors and supermarkets. It was leading to a downfall in integrity in some of those relationships and very real issues within the supply chain.

The Nationals have the candidates and the policies to deliver for the regions. Come the end of next week, we are looking forward to getting out there on the ground and taking our message to the Australian public.