



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**Federation Chamber**

**GOVERNOR GENERAL'S SPEECH**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 22 March 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Ms LEY** (Farrer) (12:11): It is terrific to be here giving a speech on the address-in-reply, the first one where, as the member for Farrer, I represent the new boundaries of my electorate, and on a day when I am inviting the food producers who make this part of western New South Wales so magnificent to come and showcase, here in the parliament, exactly what they do and the contribution they make both to the wining and dining boom and to our national economy.

At the last election the boundaries of Farrer changed, as I just mentioned, and they now take in the Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers. That, in fact, is almost all of the irrigated agriculture in the southern Murray-Darling Basin, so I like to say that my electorate is the home of irrigated agriculture. The person who has that responsibility here in this place has a very big one, because irrigation that feeds the nation and the world is not well understood by so many of Australia's citizens. That is not, in any sense, their fault; it is just that people who live in New South Wales east of the Great Divide have little opportunity to visit those of us west of the Great Divide and see what we do. Over the years, debate between environmentalists and irrigators has become very tense, as if they are polar opposites in any debate. That is not true—farmers are the best environmentalists, as I know many people have heard me say. There is no fun in living in an area of rural Australia where the environment is not well looked after.

One of the things I have committed to do is to make sure that the interests of irrigated agriculture are my No. 1 interest here in the parliament, because every community that I represent—the small businesses, the manufacturing businesses, the freight businesses—depends on farming, and most of that farming depends on access to water to grow crops, food and fibre. The complex Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the interests of so many people across a whole basin are very much brought together in my electorate, because we see the effects and we struggle with many of those effects. I am pleased that the MDBA recently announced that they would have a presence in my home town of Albury-Wodonga, which will enable their officials and their staff, I hope, to see beyond the world they live in here in Canberra and to live, work and raise their families in the areas that depend so much on the policies that they implement. I am quite excited about that; it is an important start. It would be terrific to see much of the MDBA move out of Canberra, and I know that once the message spreads about how great it is to live in rural Australia more will follow.

The important thing from my perspective is that we understand that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is here to stay but we also understand that it is not a hands-off exercise, it does not have the confidence of rural communities, it does not have the investment in it by rural communities and we are not at all certain that it does not need some fairly major strategic resetting. I want to see that happen with the support of everyone, because there has been too much division in this area for too long, but I have to say that you only have to mention '450-gigalitre up-water' anywhere in my irrigation communities to get a really negative reaction—because, from the perspective of the people I represent, they have already given up enough. The recent announcement of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council that there would be no more buyback is incredibly welcome and I support that, but we still have a job to do to manage the recovery of water for the environment in a way that does not harm agricultural producers—and I mean that in a literal sense: the recovery of water must not harm them by flooding their property—and in a way that gives them, as I said, the confidence that the water being recovered actually will do some good and provide some benefit for the environment. If we are going through all this pain, we want to know that there will be gain and that it does make sense in a holistic way for the entire basin. No-one argues that the communities that I represent have given up the most, have lost the most and have experienced the most pain, but it has to be for some gain—that is vital.

In addressing this problem, I am looking very closely at what I can do to persuade my colleagues in this place that there should be no additional diverted water above a total cap of 2,100 gigalitres, which represents the diversion target of 2,750 gigalitres less the 650 that can be provided with water-saving projects that drop that target—and that is all. Let's find a way. When we have reached that and established that it works and does what it was supposed to do, then we can look at an additional 450 gigalitres, because right now the river systems do not have the ability to deliver that. It does not work in the real world. You only have to look at the floods that we

experienced late last year—which could have been an environmental flow, and some people describe them as such—and the damage they did to really appreciate that this is not something that you can do via numbers on a page and dollars that would seem to satisfy various interests. So I am watching that 450 gigalitres very closely and hoping it can be delayed until a time when we can guarantee that it can in fact be delivered. I would love to see the total cap on diversions at 2,100 gigalitres be announced in some way to give my communities confidence. The third thing that I alluded to was that there be an audit of the environmental flows to recognise that they actually are delivering what they are supposed to deliver.

I want to mention one more thing. If it rains and water has been recovered for the environment that is not needed because it has rained—and, of course, you cannot predict the rain—doesn't it make sense for that water to be delivered back into productive agriculture? Amendments to the Water Act have in fact allowed for that, but we need to get it happening. We need to have some sort of offset account that says, 'This much rain came into a particular area of the basin at a certain time and environmental water, therefore, is not needed and that environmental water needs to be traded back to agriculture.' In that way, again, we see the environment and farmers as partners. Ultimately, if we want the world to look at what we do and recognise the great steps we have taken in preserving both our environment and our farming systems, then we need to have that partnership working very well—and of course I absolutely welcome the Prime Minister's announcement about Snowy hydro 2. I used to have Snowy hydro in my electorate. It is a demonstration of a project that was built not just to generate electricity but actually to irrigate the inland and transform the inland of New South Wales.

In making those comments about my electorate and how I see it going forward, there are more things that I will say in due course about access to telecommunications, the NBN and the very real need for an inland freight route to develop the produce that is being grown in the electorate. We are quite excited about the prospect of an airport at Deniliquin to link with the airport at Toowoomba, which will allow fresh produce to be flown to Asia. All of those things bring an exciting future to our manufacturing industries. So, when you think of us as farmers, do not just think of us as growing the raw material in the paddock, important though that is; think of us in terms of the value add, which is fantastic.

I want to make some comments that relate to my own personal circumstances. Earlier this year, following intense media speculation about the circumstances surrounding my purchase of an apartment on the Gold Coast in May 2015, I asked the Department of Finance to review my travel records inasmuch as they involved travel to, from and transiting the Gold Coast, for the entire time that I had been a government minister, namely between September 2013 and January 2017. I have recently received the Department of Finance's final report and, as I indicated that I would do at the time, I am making the report publicly available at the first opportunity, which is today. To assist the Department of Finance, I provided whatever records were required or requested, way beyond what would be normal for acquittal of ministerial travel claims. In doing so, some of the information that I provided was personal and related to government processes, and, for this reason, I shall not be releasing the attachments to the report, as they are regarded as cabinet-in-confidence. However, the 15 pages of the report itself and the conclusions that were reached I shall be tabling today.

The department found that over a 3½-year period there had been one claim that was outside entitlements. This was for a five-minute car trip. Even so, to avoid any doubt, I had already repaid the entire amount in January this year. As I stated at the time, my unplanned purchase of a property changed the character of that trip from business to personal, and I repaid the total cost. As it drew so much attention, I would like to place on the record the circumstances around this purchase. I know that the notion of buying a property on impulse might seem quite strange to some and, while the purchase of this particular property was on impulse, the decision to purchase a property was not. I was in Queensland on ministerial business. I had an important announcement in Brisbane first thing Saturday morning, followed by a meeting with doctors and patients. I then had a meeting on the Gold Coast mid-afternoon, which was the reason I was travelling there. It also meant that, in the normal course of events, I had a couple of hours where I was at a loose end. I had been considering purchasing a property for some time. In mid-2014 I had received preapproval from the Hume Bank in Albury for such a purchase. On Friday night, when my attention was drawn to something suitable and when I was going to be on the Gold Coast as a matter of course, I went along to the auction. It was an entirely incidental and unplanned activity in what was an otherwise busy weekend schedule. The first time that I saw the apartment was 20 minutes before the auction commenced and the first time that I spoke to an agent about this property was when I registered, as I walked through the door.

There are two other matters that I would like to address. The first is the issue of the number of times I travelled to the Gold Coast. This has also been the subject of substantial media commentary and public speculation. During

the 703 days that I was a cabinet minister, I spent 15 nights on the Gold Coast. To put this in perspective, as both a minister and cabinet minister for some 1,100 days, I spent over half of that time—684 days, to be precise—away from my home electorate. This might seem an enormous amount of travel, but it is explained by two factors. The first is that I had two very busy portfolios: health and sport—three, really, if you include aged care as part of the health portfolio. These portfolios have a very substantial number of constituent and interest groups, with whom a minister needs to be visible. This is a massive workload. I am not complaining; I loved it. I simply raise it as a matter of fact. The second factor is that, unlike most ministers, I represent a rural electorate. Flight schedules and connections make frequent travel more challenging. For example, while most ministers may be able to fly home on Saturday afternoon and fly out to another destination on Monday morning, for someone from a rural electorate, this is often simply impractical. Quite apart from the substantially longer travel time—assuming that one could get flight connections on a weekend in the first place—and the ridiculously short turnaround time when one was at their home base, there is the issue that to do so would involve considerably greater cost to the taxpayer than staying put. A minister from Melbourne or Sydney can get a six o'clock morning flight to Brisbane, a minister from Albury cannot.

To return to the issue of my overnight stays on the Gold Coast, of these 15 overnight stays, six were related to me being the keynote speaker at a conference. A moment's thought would confirm that an organisation such as the Pharmacy Guild will have more success having their annual conference—whether it be on child care, aged care or health—over a weekend on the Gold Coast than attempting to run it at Darling Harbour midweek. Another six stays were for major hospital openings and/or sporting events in my capacity as Minister for Health and Aged Care and Minister for Sport. The 2018 Commonwealth Games are being held on the Gold Coast, so it is hardly surprising that the Commonwealth sports minister will be required to be there from time to time in the lead-up. Two of these six trips were specifically related to discussions around the 2018 Commonwealth Games. One newspaper article suggested that, because a meeting to inspect sporting infrastructure went for only an hour, that was the sum total of my working day. It is a pity that the person writing that article did not seek the full facts before going to print. In fact, the day in question contained a full morning's discussion of Commonwealth Games infrastructure, a working lunch and a youth mental health visit. Two trips involved no more than landing at Coolangatta airport, utilising it as a hub before travelling into northern New South Wales on parliamentary business. Regardless of these facts, the public impression was cast. In politics, I understand that the facts can get lost in the search for a good story. I would like to draw attention to the section in the finance report which notes overnight stays where I did not claim travelling allowance, and I quote: 'The itinerary of the trip was shaped in part by considerations that could be categorised as personal in nature. Ms Ley had given thought to such matters at the time of submitting her claims and did not seek to be paid travelling allowance for a number of overnight stays.'

In revisiting this period and reflecting on the standard I set myself, I determined, in the course of this review, that, while not required to do so, I have nonetheless chosen to make further voluntary adjustments, which, together with the earlier repayments and including a 25 per cent loading, amount to just over \$5,000. Most of this amount is attributable to three nights accommodation for business meetings in Brisbane where an overnight stay was required and I chose to stay on the Gold Coast; two flights to get to Canberra for parliamentary sittings that originated from Coolangatta rather than my home base; a flight back home after a business meeting in Brisbane where that meeting had been followed by personal leave; and taxi fares where I had not made a diary note and whose purpose I cannot recall, totalling approximately \$200. I was within the rules in claiming reimbursement for such expenses. However, I have always believed in listening to the electorate and one thing became clear to me: the parliamentary expenses guidelines did not align with the community standard. When I reflected on both the community standard and the standard I set myself, I decided that standard had not been met. Up until now, because the rules and regulations have been unclear, members of parliament could not always be 100 per cent sure when the line of public expectation was crossed. That decision-making is set to be taken out of our hands with the announced changes to work expenses, and I think that is a good thing.

I take this opportunity to comment on further allegations made against me concerning ministerial charter and my pilot's licence. I have held this licence since I was 19 and, from time to time, I fly a small four-seater single-engine Cessna in my electorate. Claims suggesting I booked a ministerial charter between capital cities in order to maintain flying hours as a pilot are ridiculous. Yes, as a pilot myself, I may have sat next to the pilot on some of these charters, and sometimes I tweeted from the cockpit. That is perfectly legitimate. The simple fact is: I am not endorsed to fly any of the aircraft that were ever booked for ministerial travel or travel to Canberra. The thought that I might have logged flying hours on such flights is laughable.

When I resigned as minister, I did so because the facts could not overcome the story. The repayments I have chosen to make entirely voluntarily are because I recognise that I have fallen short of community standards, and I want to put the matter beyond further commentary. I am releasing this report as I gave a previous commitment to make it publicly available ahead of time, not knowing what it would contain. In no way do I seek to complain about my situation or the way events played out. I simply table the outcome of the investigation, as I said I would. In doing so, I allow people to draw their own conclusions.

I accept the mercurial world which is politics today, although if I could pass on an observation that I am sure others have experienced: the front-page news and associated conclusions drawn about me talk of someone who bears no resemblance to me. Even so, I have been incredibly fortunate to serve in Malcolm Turnbull's cabinet and even more fortunate to represent the people of Farrer here in the federal parliament. I thank my colleagues and friends for their support and I thank my constituents from the bottom of my heart for the faith they have shown in me.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER ( Ms Vamvakinou ): The member for Farrer seeks leave to table a document.

Leave granted.