



Legislative Council

11/10/2000

Rural Assistance Amendment Bill Hansard

Extract

The Hon. R. H. COLLESS [11.49 a.m.] [First speech]: It is with great humility and approbation I stand in this House as I embark upon my political career. This, the oldest House of Parliament, the original House of Parliament in Australia, is steeped with the history and tradition of European settlement in this land. I address this House in the company of contemporary members, and some who have gone before. I acknowledge the seven busts of John Blaxland, James Macarthur, William Bede Dalley, Sir Alfred Stephen, Sir John Hay, Sir John Lackey and Sir Francis Suttor as they preside over the debate that occurs here.

I believe it behoves all who take their place here to be cognisant of the minds of great men and women who sat on these benches in times past. In that regard I wish to acknowledge the contribution made to this House by my National Party predecessor, the Hon. Richard Bull, during his parliamentary term. Renowned for his hard work, his dedication to his parliamentary duties, he was described by the Hon. John Hannaford in his final address to this House as probably the best member of Parliament never to have become a Minister. Thank you, Richard, for your dedication, perseverance and commitment over the 16 years you served the people of New South Wales in this House as a National Party member of the Legislative Council.

I would also like to acknowledge that one of the best-known members of the National Party in Australia, the Rt Hon. Ian McCahon Sinclair, also commenced his long and meritorious parliamentary service in this very House in 1961, before moving into Federal Parliament as the National Party member for New England in 1963. Ian Sinclair was one of the most talented debaters and toughest politicians to serve in any parliament in Australia, and I was very honoured to serve as Secretary of the New England Electorate Council when Ian was member for New England.

I wish to also acknowledge two of my ancestors who served in the first Parliament of New South Wales and I would like to share with honourable members the history of some of my family members who made a significant contribution towards making New South Wales and Australia what they are today, and the impact this history had on me as I developed my own philosophies to life.

Richard Hargrave, whose name I now bear as my first and middle names, came to New South Wales in 1838 aboard the sailing ship *Argyle*, carrying introductions to John Macarthur and Messrs Hughes and Hosking, who had business dealings with Richard's father Joshua in London. Hughes and Hosking gave young Richard a start working on stations at Bombala and Delegate. Four years later he was entrusted with moving 5,000 head of cattle from Delegate to new runs in the northern districts, to be known as Callandoon and Goondiwindi on the McIntyre River, and Beebo and Whyemoo on the Severn River. In 1843, only one year after they arrived in the northern districts, the fledgling colony suffered a financial disaster, with Hughes and Hosking failing and Richard Hargrave losing everything except the clothes he was wearing, his horse and his saddle.

The hardships that are currently being faced by many in the rural industry are nothing new in this land, and the image of Australian primary producers as the financially fortunate in our society, while it may be the case for a small number of producers for a small number of years, is an absolute fallacy for the vast majority over the history of farming since the early 1800s. Richard Hargrave was fortunate in that his father refinanced him and he was able to take up a grant of 21,000 acres known as Hillgrove Station, east of Armidale, and a 50-acre block adjacent to where the city of Armidale now stands. At this time there was but a single shepherd's hut in the vicinity.

Richard married Mary Williams and they lived on Hillgrove Station for 40 years, raising seven sons and three daughters. A son Matthew married Anne Victoria Hall and my paternal grandmother, Blanche Doris Anne Hargrave, was born to them. Richard and Mary's third son, Richard Jr married Georgina Mary Hall and acquired Kulki Station north of Inverell in 1878, where they lived until Richard Jr died in 1910.

Richard Sr also acquired an interest in Broadmeadows Station and Kangaroo Creek on the Clarence River, held leases for Bostobrick and Tyringham and held Hernani in New England, although they always lived on Hillgrove Station.

Richard embarked upon a political career, being elected as the first member for New England and Macleay in the first Legislative Assembly of New South Wales. It was said of him at the time that no constituency ever had a better or more conscientious representative. Richard Hargrave later retired to the Armidale property, which he named Harewood after the ancestral home in Yorkshire. Harewood was sold in 1899 and Richard and Mary moved into a cottage near the Armidale railway station in what is now known as Hargrave Street until they passed from this life in 1905.

Richard Hargrave's older brother, John Fletcher Hargrave QC, arrived in New South Wales in 1856 and served in the Legislative Council from 1859 until 1861. He was further appointed as a Representative of Government in the Legislative Council and served as Solicitor-General and Attorney-General until 1865. One of John Fletcher Hargrave's sons was Lawrence Hargrave, aeronautical pioneer, inventor, scientist and engineer who was recognised on the original \$20 note.

Lawrence was a man of great social and scientific vision, foreseeing the need for a child endowment scheme, the development of Papua New Guinea, a bridge across Sydney's harbour and the need for nations to pool scientific knowledge. He was also responsible for developing many concepts of aviation, including curved wing design and radial aeronautical engines. Lawrence Hargrave's contribution to the successful Wright brothers inaugural powered flight in the early 1900s has never been truly recognised and many of Lawrence's original drawings and designs are now contained in the Power House Museum. Richard Hargrave of Hillgrove Station—my great, great grandfather—and John Fletcher Hargrave—my great, great uncle—are both persons in my ancestry of whom I am extremely proud, and who have provided me with the genetic framework for vision, for hard work and for commitment to a cause.

My ancestor on the Colless side arrived in New South Wales aboard the *Barwell* on 18 May 1798, complete with a set of leg irons. George Colless was arrested in Birmingham in February 1793 for the theft of a gown piece. He was sentenced to death for burglary, reprieved and sentenced to seven years transportation and finally put on board the *Barwell* in December 1797. George Colless served out the remaining two years of his servitude in Penrith and became a free man in March 1800. After working as a share farmer he purchased and was granted various parcels of land, having accumulated some 80 hectares in total by 1823. This land is opposite the Castlereagh Uniting Church on the road between Penrith and Richmond. The church is adjacent to the now famous Sydney International Regatta Centre at Penrith Lakes.

George was assigned a convict lass, Ann Goodwin, as his housekeeper and together they had 10 children. The eldest, William, was born in 1805. William overlanded cattle to Coonabarabran in the late 1830s, later moving further north to take up land on the Culgoa River in the 1850s. William and his sons returned to an area south of Walgett in later years to take up more land in the Bungle Gully area. He named it Come By Chance and a common question at family reunions is, "So, are you from the Come By Chance Collesses?" Two generations later on 19 June 1898 my grandfather Keith Kenneth Colless was born at Ningawalla Station, Fords Bridge on the Warrego River, north-west of Bourke. He married Blanche Doris Anne Hargrave in 1924 and my father, Kenneth Hargrave Colless, was born in Sydney in January 1926.

As a sixth-generation Australian, I am aware of the interaction my ancestors had with the Aboriginal people at the time, and there is no doubt that without the assistance and advice the early Collesses received from the local tribal people, they would have perished in an unknown land, with abundant feed and water in good seasons, but wrecked by drought and poor quality feed and water on a regular basis. In recognition of the role the Aboriginal people played in our early family history, I say a very sincere thank you to them for assisting these early settlers to survive a harsh land, very different from their English upbringing and the kinder climes of Penrith and Castlereagh.

In March 1949 my grandfather Keith Kenneth Colless and his two sons, Kenneth Hargrave and Robert Henry, moved east from the western plains and purchased Bendemeer Station between Tamworth and Armidale. Kenneth Hargrave Colless, my father, married my mother, Yvonne Tipling, in 1950 and I was born in Tamworth in 1952. Grandfather died unexpectedly in 1955 and Bendemeer Station was sold in 1957. My parents purchased a property at Bundarra, between Inverell and Armidale, where I spent the early years

of my youth learning the skills of the land and being schooled at Blackfriars Correspondence School in Sydney. My secondary education commenced at Tamworth High School and was completed at Singleton High School from where I won a cadetship with the Soil Conservation Service to Hawkesbury Agricultural College specialising in soil conservation and agronomy.

In 1976 I married Toni Christine Brown from Windsor, and we now have three children, Michael, Belinda and Danielle, all in their late teens. I say a very sincere thank you to Toni and our children for the support they have given me over the last year, in my role as Mayor of Inverell and since my preselection as a National Party member of the Legislative Council.

I spent 26 years working for the Soil Conservation Service, from Henty in southern New South Wales, Cowra, Goulburn and Gunnedah and finally returning to Inverell in 1987. During those years I focused on many innovative programs, including conservation farming, dryland salinity management and vegetation, pasture and grazing management, in addition to the structural soil conservation works programs for which the New South Wales Soil Conservation Service won worldwide acclaim. I resigned following the change to the Department of Land and Water Conservation and the final dismemberment of the Soil Conservation Service by the Carr Government. Since resigning I have enjoyed working as an agricultural and environmental consultant, focusing on balancing soil, plant and animal nutrition, improving the environment and fulfilling the role of Mayor of Inverell Shire.

Honourable members may be wondering why I have detailed so much of my family history. I do so for several reasons. Firstly, my family is extremely important to me, and the Colless family is a very close and tight-knit family. The history of one's family can instil an immense sense of pride, of loyalty and stimulus when reviewing the trials and tribulations our forefathers had to overcome in order to survive and achieve what they did for our nation. The National Party, which I am extremely proud to represent in this House, has a belief that the family unit is the basis of a strong and stable society, and that is also a fundamental philosophy I firmly believe in.

Secondly, my family has been involved in agriculture and developing this State for many generations. I am acutely aware of the contribution my ancestors made to this development. We did not always get it right, and I say that with the benefit of hindsight, keeping in mind that as they arrived here from England they brought with them English farming technology and skills. They had to quickly adapt these skills to better suit the Australian climatic conditions, Australian soil types and Australian vegetation communities. I come from a long line of family farmers, and my focus on productive, wealth-creating ecosystems developed as I began to understand the importance of managing the environment in order to maintain or improve productivity while also maintaining environmental stability.

I believe we live in an anthropocentric society, which views man as being all powerful, all conquering and in control of all things. The increase in human knowledge over the last 100 years leads us to believe that this knowledge can bring ever increasing social, economic and environmental benefits, as we can now control all things with science and regulation. This is an incredibly arrogant and egotistical viewpoint, and one I believe we must rethink if the human race is to survive in the longer term. Science and knowledge are very important for our future survival; but they are not a panacea, they are merely tools we must use appropriately.

Anthropocentric societies are resource and energy hungry and do not realise they are depleting natural resources on an unsustainable basis. Decisions are made essentially on an economic basis, and when environmental problems begin to appear, governments and bureaucratic decision makers are convinced the only solution is to control the environment through regulation. The symptom of such a society is aberrant behaviour such as aggression, conflict, consumerism, additions, egotism, paranoia, hysteria and extremes of anxiety. I have observed many of these emotions in my primary producer clients as they attempt to grapple with the Carr Government's green reform agenda, manifested as regulatory extremes such as the Native Vegetation Conservation Act.

We must move towards an ecocentric society, which views the balanced natural world, of which man is an integral part, as the central power in control of all things. Decisions are made on social, economic and environmental grounds. It is of great concern to me that the words "social, economic and environmental" have become a cliché in recent times, with many who use the phrase not understanding what they are

saying. To make a decision on this basis, the first consideration is the needs and quality of life aspirations of the people involved. There must be a statement developed and enunciated by the people themselves, not an assumed statement developed by politicians and/or bureaucrats remote from the community, as so often happens in reality.

In order to achieve that quality of life, the community needs to generate enough income to pay for the enunciated quality of life. This income can be generated by creating real wealth or by accumulating wealth created by the primary or mining industry sector of the community. Real wealth creation can only occur through the mining industry or primary industry. Mining removes a finite supply of a resource base, which results in an injection of real wealth, which can be recycled many times, into the community. The final environmental result, though, is simply a hole in the ground. Primary industries, including farming, forestry and fishing, are the only truly sustainable wealth creating industries as long as the sun continues to shine and the rain continues to fall. The fundamental resources of energy from the sun, minerals from the soil and gases from the air are mixed with water to produce all the food, fibre and building materials that the community needs on a truly sustainable basis. There is an infinite supply, so long as the natural resource base is managed to maintain the ecological balance and health.

It is because the natural resource base must be managed to ensure a productive ecosystem for as long as humans wish to inhabit the earth, that environmental considerations must underpin the decision-making process. It concerns me that many decisions are made with the environmental considerations placed before the social and economic considerations, and, within a regulatory framework, it is an anthropocentric decision-making process. We must ensure we maintain a healthy, productive natural environment, to provide our communities with the food, fibre and building materials they require in order to enjoy the quality of life they aspire to. The natural environment is the only sustainable source of wealth creation, and it is the primary producers of this nation that must be in control of the management of this resource base if we are to continue to enjoy the fruits of wealth creation indefinitely.

An ecocentric society is characterised by an understanding of and dependence on the natural world for health, wealth and happiness. The National Party is the natural political party to pursue this agenda, as we are the only party that can truly represent primary producers and develop policies that will integrate the balance between social justice, sustainable productivity and environmental stability to keep our nation competitive on the world stage. The National Party stands for the family as the basis of a strong and stable society, for equal opportunity to contribute to and share in the benefits of wealth creation, for freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of philosophy. We stand for free enterprise, for private ownership of business and for minimum interference in industry, commerce, production and distribution, and we stand for the development of our economy, the decentralisation of population and services and for the balanced protection of our environment.

The National Party is truly the natural vehicle to develop the concept of ecocentrism and to integrate this concept into our daily decision making process. I hope to be able to contribute to the debate in this place in this regard, so that real progress can be made for the people of New South Wales and the anthropocentric regulatory approach can be reversed as we head towards a more pragmatic approach to the environmental debate. Fundamental to ecocentrism is the removal of essentially regulatory processes and reinstating processes that provide incentives for primary producers to change management practices. Such incentives are feasible and can achieve the desired result at much less cost to government than by imposing a regulatory, confrontational process such as we have recently seen with the Carr Government's green reform agenda.

I have a long family history in the north and north-west of New South Wales, from different strands of the family. As my family was instrumental in developing the wealth-creating industries in these areas, I now feel a great sense of responsibility to participate in rejuvenating primary industry in New South Wales, armed with current knowledge and a desire and a vision to improve our knowledge base to ensure environmental stability while improving our ability to continue to create real wealth. I understand the land management and environmental issues the community is facing and I look forward to working with people all over New South Wales as the National Party further crystallises land management and environmental policies over the next couple of years.

In this regard, it is an honour to deliver my maiden speech in this House speaking to the Rural

Assistance Amendment Bill. I have seen throughout my career the hardships and difficulties the wealth-creating primary producers of this State have suffered as a result of disasters such as fire, flood and drought being inflicted upon them. There is a tremendous community benefit to be gained from making sure this section of the community receives adequate support to enable them to continue to create the wealth we all benefit from.

The Rural Assistance Act in its current form does not contain a clearly defined objective, and the proposed amendment clarifies the objective of the Act to promote the efficient delivery of programs of assistance to farmers and other persons engaged in rural industries. It will work towards encouraging the wealth creators to adopt land management practices that are more efficient and more sympathetic towards the environmental stability we must strive to achieve. The Rural Assistance Authority is managed by the Rural Assistance Authority Board, and the current Act is inadequate in describing the functions of the board. The amendment clarifies the function of the board by ensuring the Minister is advised of the assistance provided, the effectiveness of assistance and the performance of the authority in the delivery of that assistance. The board will also be required to determine the general policies of the authority through setting guidelines for implementation of assistance programs.

The amendment also improves the accountability of the Rural Assistance Authority to the board and the accountability of the board to the Minister. It also requires the Minister to review the composition of the board to ensure the board truly reflects the community needs and aspirations with respect to rural assistance and disaster relief. The current Act has separate sections for general assistance, special schemes and disaster relief schemes. While working with the Soil Conservation Service, I assisted many New South Wales farmers with applications for assistance under the Special Scheme for Soil Conservation, and this scheme was responsible for funding many integrated soil conservation works programs throughout New South Wales.

One of the problems of this scheme, from an administrative viewpoint, was that a whole farm improvement program typically involved a soil conservation earthworks program to control or prevent soil erosion, refencing to suit the earthworks, pasture improvement to improve ground cover, stock water conservation works, fodder and grain storage facilities and genetic improvement to the livestock. While some fencing and pasture improvement work was able to be justified under the special scheme, many other farm improvements could not, and this substantially increased the administrative workload, both for the applicant and the authority.

The amendment now allows for all components of a whole farm improvement program to be dealt with as one program, and this will substantially improve administrative efficiency for both applicant and the authority. It is pleasing to note in the amendment that sustainable land and water management practices and permanent improvements to help the farmer prepare for drought have been identified, but it does concern me that there is no specific identification of farmer education as a purpose for assistance. I would call on the Minister in that regard to give the House an assurance that farmer education programs, particularly for training in improved land management practices, would qualify for assistance under new sections 18 (1) (d) or 18 (2) (d).

I support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill, as the amendments will streamline the provision of assistance to the wealth creating primary producers in this State. It is an excellent start, but there remains much to do to free the shackles and impediments from farmers as they go about their daily task of creating wealth. I look forward to making a substantial contribution in that regard. I wish to offer my thanks to some very special people in my life: my wife Toni, my parents Von and Ken Colless, my brother-in-law Laird Stewart and my good friend, political advisor and confidant, John Williams, who are all here today. I sincerely thank them for the support and guidance they have given to me as I have embarked on this career. To my family members who are unable to be here today—my sister, Jenny Stewart, and my brother and sister-in-law, Bill and Marie Colless, and my children, Michael, Belinda and Danielle—a very personal, very sincere and heartfelt thank you to all. To my parliamentary assistant, Jan Tydd, and my good friend Gaye White, many thanks to you also for your assistance as I prepared for this speech today.

I wish also to thank the people of Inverell Shire, for the support they have given me in my local government career since 1991 and as Mayor of Inverell Shire, albeit for only one year. I received many very positive comments from the Inverell community since my preselection for this position, and it is very

important to me to know that my local community is firmly behind me. Thank you, people of Inverell, for all your support over the last nine years, and I hope to be able to continue to represent you at the New South Wales parliamentary level.

Finally, I wish to offer my sincere thanks to all present here today for the welcome I have received from all sides of the political spectrum. It is a great honour to serve the people of New South Wales in this House and I have been warmly welcomed by all. I would also like to thank my National Party colleagues in this House, in the other place and, in particular, in the central council of the National Party for their support and guidance as I scale the learning curve towards becoming an effective contributor to the legislative process in New South Wales.