

Darling River Run

Towards the end of May, I took a trip around the far western reaches of the Calare electorate, meeting with locals and officials and having a fantastic time. I always look forward to making these far west trips. The western area of our electorate has historically been the lifeblood of our economy through agricultural enterprise and it's really heartening to see so much optimism among the community, despite the obvious ravages of up to eight years of drought.

The trip took in Cobar, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Wanaaring, Fords Bridge, Louth and Tilpa and was a great opportunity to see the back country, how it's faring under the stress of drought and how the recent storm bursts have been affecting the area.

While there is nothing I can do to bring back regular, seasonal rain, there were a number of issues that I can bring up with the relevant departments.

Pressing issues such as road quality and mobile service were two that were regularly brought up over the course of the three days.

Wanaaring, Fords Bridge, Louth and Tilpa were devoid of mobile service and the quality of the service in Wilcannia is far below what it should be.

Past Telstra managers had told me that they would deal with the Wilcannia issue, which has service but barely works in town.

In regard to Tilpa, I was told some years ago that the installation of the digital concentrators would provide a service, but it is still not fixed.

I will be taking these issues up with Chris Taylor, Telstra's regional manager.

Access to health services in the region is another issue that was brought up. Ironically, the further west you travel, the happier the residents are with the quality of service they receive.

But have no doubt about it, this is because of the fantastic work of the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

Residents of these areas have nothing but high praise for the work of the staff of the RFDS to rural communities.

It's a pity that, as we get closer to more populated areas – those managed by Greater Western Area Health Service – that the problems in accessing basic medical services are more and more pronounced.

It's possibly the one area where the disparity in quality of service turns the other way.



John Cobb unveils a plaque to mark the end of the High St redevelopment project with Carrathool Shire mayor Peter Laird.

Hillston's High St redevelopment launched

I was honoured to be asked to officially launch the Hillston's High St beautification project.

This project, initiated by Carrathool Shire Council, has made an enormous difference to the main street of the town. Ever since the heritage lighting went up two years ago, I have been an enthusiastic supporter of this project. I think it's wonderful.

Full credit goes to Carrathool Shire Council staff and contractors for the excellent work they have done, along with Country Energy and the RTA.

This has been an enormous job over the past 12 months and I know that everyone will be pleased with the finished product.

HOW JOHN'S OFFICES CAN HELP YOU

CONGRATULATIONS:

If you or a family member is celebrating a birthday or anniversary, contact our office to find out how we can make it extra special. For those celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, we can organise for a letter from John as well as the Prime Minister. 60th wedding anniversaries can receive a letter from the Governor General and the Queen as well as the Prime Minister and John.

Letters can be organised from the Prime Minister and John for a 90th birthday.

People celebrating their 100th birthday can receive a letter from the Queen, the Governor General, the Prime Minister and John.

We can also arrange for this information to be given to your state member to organise letters from them and the Premier.

All it takes is a quick call to the office or log on to John's website www.johncobb.com.au with at least one month's notice needed to make sure everything is done on time. We also need to be able to see an official document, such as a wedding or a birth certificate before processing the request, and this can be discussed with one of our staff.

LETTERS OF SUPPORT:

Community groups applying for funding are encouraged to talk to the office about their project and how we can support their application. This is no guarantee of success, but please be sure you let us know how you went.

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Calare *in* Focus



G'day - Welcome to my newsletter

Dedicated to the western region

As we all know there were a number of changes to this region at the 2007 election, which included the arduous task of setting up two new offices. While the Orange office opened almost immediately the election was completed, it was officially opened in August.

In December 2008 I was thrilled to be able to open my office in Cobar, which services the western region of the electorate, including the council areas of Bogan, Brewarrina, Bourke, Central Darling, Cobar and Carrathool.

It has been an extremely busy and difficult period, for the electorate. Our region is still under the grip of drought, which feels like it is never ending. The reality is that since 2001-2002 this area has suffered from one of the driest periods in 100 years and it is getting harder to believe that the Calare electorate was one of the primary grain growing areas in Australia. I will be looking forward to the day when the area I represent is out of drought.

On top of that, the current economic situation has seen hundreds of people in the western region made redundant in the last eight months through mine downsizing as well as the drought. This has had a massive flow on throughout our communities, making it a double blow, with many casual staff being put off so businesses can make ends meet as demand for goods and services drops.

The recent Budget has shown that the Rudd Labor Government has no regard whatsoever for rural and regional Australia. The massive amount of infrastructure funds which were announced on May 12 were directly wholly and solely to the metropolitan areas.

I have been campaigning for the past eight years for solid and appropriate infrastructure for the western region. We have one of the busiest highways in Australia, in the Newell Highway, which is becoming more and more dangerous for all road users, truckers, travellers and locals. We desperately need the Inland Railway, which can relieve much of the future traffic on the Newell, providing a rail freight service between Melbourne and Brisbane. We desperately need the Bell's Line of Road Expressway to give our producers access to Sydney ports and markets and Sydney businesses and markets access to us.

Our individual communities have also missed out, with the Rudd Government's obsession with only seeing the value in large projects. But it is the smaller projects, those that could have attracted funding under Regional Partnerships, which are suffering. Local people are missing out.



Cobar Mayor, Cr Lilliane Brady and John Cobb cut the ribbon to mark the official opening of John's Cobar office at 25 Barton Street



Cobar Jobs Forum

Cobar was the recent site of a Jobs Forum, one of many which have been held around the electorate.

Shadow Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and Nationals Member for Cowper, Luke Hartsuyker, also attended the meeting and came away with an even stronger understanding of the issues facing inland communities.

Cobar, as a mining town, has felt the brunt of the drop in copper prices – possibly more than any other area in the electorate. Coupled with the loss of its air service and the ongoing drought, the town is doing it tough.

These jobs forums have highlighted a number of issues, many of which are common throughout the electorate.

Red tape, the ongoing cost of compliance and payroll tax are just three of those.

In Cobar, one of the most isolated centres in the electorate, the loss of the Regional Airlines service in December 2008 was also an impediment to jobs growth.

Our mines and larger employers are now in a position where they need to keep a fleet of pool cars available so they can travel to and from Dubbo to collect new employees, potential employees and other business people.

This is an issue which also affects the professional services visiting the town, including medical.

Cobar is by no means alone in this problem. The withdrawal of services in the western area included Bourke which is suffering from loss of income through the sale of Toorale Station, as well as drought and the lack of irrigation water for crops and orchards. Our smaller communities are also finding it difficult to attract and retain staff, or to find work for those people who have stayed in the region.

Most people want a job. They know it is one of the building blocks for the future of themselves, their families and their community. The Nationals are committed to delivering jobs and jobs creation to rural and regional Australia and I thank everyone who has participated, either by attending the forums, or by providing information on their problems.

Pictured: John, Luke and Cobar Enterprise Facilitation group when we met at lunchtime.

Brewarrina Dental Service

In February this year, Brewarrina welcomed the first students to the Griffith University sponsored dental school. It was very exciting to be part of the afternoon tea to welcome the students and tutors to Brewarrina for a very exciting project.

Since the service opened, there have been more than 500 patients go through the new centre, which was funded by Brewarrina Shire Council and the previous Coalition government through the Department of Health.

Latest reports from Brewarrina show that this has been a valuable service to the community, with oral health education programs taken into the schools of the region, including primary schools.

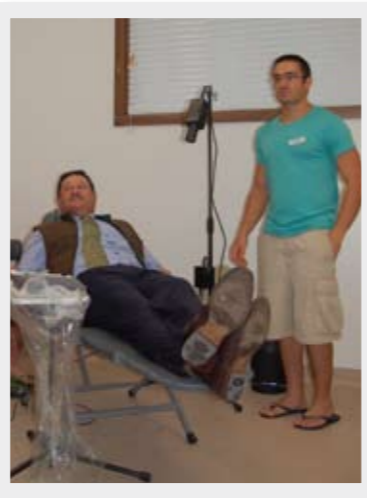
This is a project I have been extremely proud to support. It is increasingly difficult to obtain health service professionals in rural Australia, and the electorate of Calare is no different.

For the Queensland based university to take on such a project and give its students access to rural health placements is a credit to them and everyone involved in the project.

As part of the project, students participating in the project are required to report on their experiences. From what I have seen so far, many of them have had their concerns about the isolation of rural practice alleviated. A lot of this has come from the excellent work which has been done in setting up the clinic building.

It is also a credit to the wonderful nature of the people of Brewarrina, who have made the students feel very welcome.

I hope this project can be replicated in other rural and remote areas. It will go a long way to assisting with addressing the health professional shortages we have, if simply by removing some of the myths that stop young students from taking up rural practice.



John Cobb tests out the equipment in the newly refurbished Brewarrina Dental Clinic with students from Griffith University.

Nation Wrecking Budget

AGRICULTURE

The latest Rudd budget targets agriculture to pay for Labor's reckless spending, with a massive \$908.234 million cut to the department's budget next year.

Agriculture was the only bright light in our economy and the only sector to record any growth in the last quarter and has now been gutted by the Rudd government. In February this year (seasonally adjusted) Australia's rural sector employed 359,000 people making up 3.3 percent of total employment. For the year to December 2008 the rural sector generated \$28 billion in exports. The most up to date figures (Census 2006) show that the electorate of Calare is ranked 7 in Australia for employment in the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, with 17.1 percent of the electorate's workforce being employed in the sector. Despite the massive contribution agriculture makes to our economy in export revenue and Australian jobs it is being hit from all sides by Labor government policies.

WATER

The Treasurer Wayne Swan, didn't mention the word 'water' once in his entire budget speech.

BROADBAND

The public-private broadband company Mr Rudd wants to set up will be high-risk and could be the biggest white elephant in our history. The Budget reveals Labor will spend at least \$54.2 million on lawyers and consultants over the next two years to implement its \$43 billion broadband proposal, which comes on top of about \$20 million wasted on the original failed broadband tender.

At the same time the Budget confirms Labor has turned its back on regional Australia because they are cutting \$23.1 million from the Australian Broadband Guarantee program, which was established by the Coalition to provide subsidised support for Australians living in under serviced areas.

ROAD AND RAIL

A breakdown of budget figures show that Rudd Labor will spend almost \$1.5 billion less on road and rail in 2009-10 compared to the current financial year – at a time when a recession-hit nation will be crying out for more infrastructure spending, not less.

The government is trying to argue that funding to the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) and untied grants to councils make up part of the difference between spending in the two years. However, the budget makes no mention whatsoever of ARTC funding being provided in 2009-10 and the council grants will be largely used for purposes other than road building.

SUPERANNUATION

We will all be working longer, retiring later and living on less under the Rudd government's budget. Labor has cut by one third the superannuation co-contribution scheme, which bolsters the retirement savings of low and middle income earners. Low and middle income earners will now receive \$1 instead of \$1.50 for every \$1 contributed. Raising \$4.3 billion by attacking superannuation sends a conflicting signal to people planning for retirement.

HEALTH

The 1.1million Australians with private health insurance have been dealt a blow by the Rudd Government's attack on the private health insurance rebate. Australians will now pay more for their health needs. With the result being that more people will be pushed onto public hospital waiting lists. This is a clear breach of an election promise. In Calare about 36 percent of people have Private Health Insurance which amounts to 46,323 people with private cover.

Changes to the Medicare Safety Net will also impact on essential services such as obstetrics and cataract surgery. Another clear breach of an election promise.

CATARACT SURGERY

Labor's plans to cut rebates for patients needing cataract surgery has angered and bitterly disappointed people across the electorate. I have been contacted by councils and Ophthalmologists very worried about the implications of the cuts.

Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness in the world. 200,000 cataracts are operated on each year in Australia.

Labor wants to virtually halve the Medicare reimbursement for cataract surgery from November this year, an attack on some of our most vulnerable people.

Doctors tell me the current waiting list for cataract surgery is 12 to 18 months in our area. The cut in rebates will make private surgery unaffordable for many patients further overloading the public system.

PUBLIC HOSPITALS

Labor has failed to honour a key health promise (made at the last election) to fix our public hospitals by mid 2009. The Prime Minister's deadline to fix hospitals is up within a matter of weeks. But the hospital system remains under intense pressure and measures taken in this budget will only make things worse. More people will be forced to rely on the public system – queues and waiting lists will grow longer.

PATHOLOGY

More of us will face increased gap payments for pathology services. Pathology has the highest rate of bulk billing of the medical specialities including general practice. Cuts to funding in this budget will see pathologists cut the level of bulk billing and increase co-payments by patients.

AGED CARE

The Rudd Government has done nothing to secure the future of aged care in Australia.

They are increasing the age at which people will be able to retire with the pension to 67 years, which has caused a lot of angst among older Australians.

APPRENTICESHIPS

Failure to invest in apprentices will see us face a critical shortage of apprentices when the economy recovers. The Keating Labor government failed to invest in apprentices during the recession of the 1990s, resulting in a significant shortage of apprentices when the economy recovered.

Labor has broken an election promise to apprentices, to maintain all incentives and subsidies to employers and apprentices. Labor has abolished the Apprenticeship Training Fee Voucher, which provided up to \$1000 to apprentices to help pay for their training. Labor has also failed to make good on an election promise to provide an \$800 Skills Account for every apprentice, which they promised prior to the 2007 election.

EDUCATION

The government has changed the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance. This will leave more than 30,000 students who would currently be eligible for this income support out in the cold.

PAID PARENTAL LEAVE

The government's Paid Parental Leave is nothing more than a con. Labor has announced a sweetener before the next election but then asked us to trust them and give them another shot at running the country before they implement their proposal.

Rudd Labor has actually announced nothing. They have simply told us they will provide money for a scheme but not until after 2011. Clearly they're not fair dinkum about this because otherwise they would have introduced it now.