

Mr MAUGHAN (Rodney) - Mr Speaker, I consider it to be a privilege that on my first day as the honourable member for Rodney I was able to see the House at its best, when members of all parties paid tribute to three former members. That tribute crossed party lines and was obviously sincere and heartfelt. I feel privileged at having been able to share that occasion.

I also consider myself to be privileged in having carried the National Party banner in the by-election for the seat of Rodney held on 4 March last. I further consider myself privileged to have been selected by the people of Rodney to represent them in Parliament.

I shall comment briefly on the preselection process that led to my being elected. It was a highly democratic process in which all seven candidates vigorously presented their points of view at three public meetings, all of which were attended by the press and open to the public so that people were able to question the candidates on their policies. The preselection decision was finally made by 284 delegates, all of whom live in the electorate, representing the 26 branches and 3000 financial members that the National Party has in Rodney. One could hardly have a more democratic process than that.

The Rodney electorate is considered to be one of the safest Legislative Assembly seats in this State. I certainly intend to keep it that way by hard work and vigorous representation. It has been represented by National Party members for the past 72 years, and I shall briefly refer to them. John Allan, who was a former Premier of Victoria, William Dunstone, Richard Brose, who was Minister of Water Supply, Russ McDonald, and my predecessor, Eddie Hann, who was Deputy Leader of the National Party in this House. He is remembered in Rodney for his hard work and dedication on behalf of his constituents. I pay tribute to the work Eddie Hann and his wife, Jenny, did for the people of Rodney. When I went around the electorate, the comment frequently made to me was, "If you're half as good as Eddie Hann, you'll do me."

Today I thought I might briefly outline my own background, tell the House about the Rodney electorate, and about some of the issues that I consider to be important. I have lived and worked in the Rodney electorate for the past 25 years. I am married with four children and, therefore, believe I know and understand the problems facing the family and those involved in education. I shall certainly take a keen interest in both issues in Parliament.

For most of my working life I have earned my living as a farmer, so I understand farming at the practical level, and have been involved in agro-politics at both the State and Federal levels. I was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study animal welfare and environmental issues in 1982. I hope to use the particular experience and expertise that I have gained over the years in agriculture to assist the people of Rodney and this Parliament, particularly in the agricultural industries with which I have a specific interest.

There is a real need to bridge the huge communication gap between country people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the majority of urbanised Australians living in towns and cities who are completely divorced from the realities of life outside the metropolitan area. In some small way I hope to be able to help bridge that communication gap.

The Rodney electorate is 7277 square kilometres, and is 150-200 kilometres due north of Melbourne. It is bounded by the River Murray to the north and stretches from Strathmerton in the east to Cohuna in the west. It includes the major centres of Echuca, Gunbower, Cohuna, Lockington, Rochester, Elmore, Rushworth, Kyabram, Tongala, Nathalia, and Strathmerton.

The electorate has 31000 voters and about 45 000 people. Its prosperity is based primarily on agriculture and ancilliary industries. The main industry is dairying-it is the most important industry in the electorate-followed by beef cattle, sheep, the pig industry, with which I was closely associated for many years, cropping - both cereals and oilseeds - and the horticultural industries, which while not so large as they once were are still very important. They include peaches, pears, apricots, tomatoes and, more recently, a range of specialist horticultural crops.

The main employers are associated with the agricultural industries. Processing plants in the dairying industry are operated by Kraft Foods Ltd, Bonlac Foods Ltd, the Nestles company, and Murray Goulburn Co-operative Co. Ltd, all of which are of world standing and would hold their own with plants established overseas.

The fruit packing and processing industry is also important. Henry Jones IXL based in Kyabram is the largest of these. Plumrose Pty Ltd has a very modern food processing plant in Echuca which processes tomatoes, produces yoghurt, and a variety of other products. There are also abattoirs and saleyards around the electorate to serve the sheep and beef industries.

Tourism is also an important industry in Rodney, particularly in Echuca with the historic wharf area, in Rushworth, which was an important goldmining area, and the Whroo forest, and in Kyabram with the Kyabram Fauna Park. I am delighted that a recent visit by the Premier to Echuca resulted in the government providing a further \$100 000 to improve the historic and uniquely Australian wharf area which is an important part of our history and of the tourism industry in the Rodney electorate.

The Rodney electorate has a number of manufacturing plants, including the Containers Packaging plant at Kyabram, Nelson Silos of Rochester, DK Concrete Products Pty Ltd at Rochester, which makes precast concrete products; it has a clothing and textile industry which has three important employers - Maryborough Knitting Mills, which has plants at Rochester and Kyabram, and Kortex (Australia) Pty Ltd. at Echuca. These plants are most important because they employ female workers in the Rodney electorate. There are limited employment opportunities for women in the electorate, so more of these plants are urgently required.

In Kyabram, J. N. and R. Engineering are involved in general engineering and also in the manufacture of laser grading equipment which the company has exported interstate and overseas. Laser land grading originated in northern Victoria and has made an important contribution to agriculture in that area. McMillans plant is about to be established in Echuca, and there are a variety of other small engineering plants.

I shall now refer to some issues that I consider to be important to the Rodney electorate and which I hope to pursue in the weeks and months ahead. The main issues involve the maintenance and extension of essential services in the electorate. I refer particularly to schools, hospitals, medical and ambulance services, and to community services such as preschools, the State Electricity Commission offices, the Rural Water Commission offices, and so on. Although in some instances there are sound logical reasons why facilities should be regionalised, the social implications are often overlooked. It is not always understood that schools, preschools, ambulance services, and so on are frequently in existence only because of the hard work and dedication of the citizens of local towns. These people hold the facilities in high regard and are prepared to fight strongly to retain services that involved much work on their part to establish. It is a battle to maintain the services, especially in smaller towns in the electorate.

Fuel is an important issue in the electorate of Rodney. Country people drive to Melbourne and find that the price of fuel is anything from 10 cents to 12 cents a litre less than they pay in their home towns. They find that extremely difficult to understand. It is totally unfair to country people that such a differential exists between the price normally paid for fuel in Melbourne and the price usually paid in country areas.

Fuel is an important component of many activities in the country. Most goods must be transported to country areas and, therefore, have a fuel and transport component included in the price. Most of the commodities produced in the country are transported to the metropolitan area. The fuel component is, therefore, most important.

Not only is the price of fuel important but also the excise paid on that fuel. The meagre amount the Commonwealth government allocates for road funding from the excise on fuel is of great concern. Of the approximate \$8 billion paid in excise, only \$1.2 billion, or 20 per cent, is allocated for road funding. The lack of funding results in the breaking up of roads, and that is a problem in the Rodney electorate. It is not the fault of the municipalities concerned; there is a desperate need for a large percentage of the excise to be allocated to improving road funding.

As I have already stated, the prosperity of Rodney depends on the prosperity of its agricultural industries. People in the area are, therefore, concerned about water charges. They see the proposal to increase charges by the consumer price index plus 2 per cent as being totally unfair when the same principle is not applied to other government instrumentalities, for example, the metropolitan transport system.

Salinity is a large and increasing problem in the area. If it is not tackled soon, it will dramatically reduce the capacity of the State to produce income from its agricultural industries. Salinity is not simply the problem of the farming community; it is a community problem and must be solved by the community. The question of who will pay for that must be sorted out. I commend the government on the initiatives it has taken with regard to salinity.

I also direct to the attention of the government the importance of continuing agricultural research and extension services. I was pleased that the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs was recently in my area and I was able to accompany him to see at first hand the excellent services provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. I point out to the Minister the importance of the Kyabram Animal and Irrigated Pastures Research Institute in providing the technology that will enable our agricultural industries to further increase their productivity to assist in making a greater contribution to the overall objectives of improved economic performance for the State.

In the small business area, there is an urgent need for more decentralisation initiatives. All of the initiatives in place some years ago have been completely abolished. Some of them need to be restored to encourage business to establish and develop in country areas thereby creating the employment so desperately needed. The type of initiative to which I refer is, for example, an extension of the natural gas pipeline from Kyabram through Tongala to Echuca. Rather than waiting for the consumers to be in place before extending the pipeline, I suggest it would be a fillip to the electorate if the government could see its way clear to put the pipeline in place now. That would encourage industries to the area, and I commend that type of initiative to the government.

Educational opportunities also concern me. I am worried about the number of country students

who must leave their homes to further their education. I am particularly concerned about the integration of handicapped children. I commend the government for the initiatives it has taken in that direction, but I have already found many instances where the resources are not being provided to enable handicapped children to be integrated into the education system.

A need also exists for further opportunities for apprenticeship training. I know of several instances in the metal industry where students have jobs, they have employers willing to give them every help and assistance, but they are unable to be absorbed into the apprenticeship training scheme, in this case, at the TAFE college at Shepparton. It is a tragedy that, at a time when the community needs skilled workers and people trained in a variety of trades, sufficient places cannot be provided.

I am delighted that the Minister for Transport will be in Echuca on Sunday to open the new rail bridge. I hope it will not be too long before he is in Echuca again to open a new road bridge across the River Murray into New South Wales.

I have touched on some of the topics in which I will be taking a particular interest in the future. I have referred to some of the problems of my electorate and some of the areas where I intend to vigorously present the case on behalf of the people of Rodney. I thank honourable members from both sides of the House for the courtesy and friendship they have extended to me and for making me welcome. I trust that, with time, I shall earn the respect of the House.