

The Hon. R. A. BEST (North Western Province)- - Mr President, may I firstly congratulate you on your appointment and assure you of my respect for your position. Having heard the words spoken about you, I do not doubt that you have the qualifications necessary to hold that office.

It is a very proud moment for me to take my place in this Chamber as the elected representative of North Western Province. As you will be aware, the province was represented for nineteen years by the Honourable Bernie Dunn. Members on both sides of the House would acknowledge his ability and the respect in which he was held.

May I take this opportunity of expressing my loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen, Elizabeth If, and also of congratulating His Excellency the Governor, Dr Davis McCaughey, on the fine job he is doing in his performance as Her Majesty's representative in this State.

I also take this opportunity of acknowledging Mr Ken Wright, the other representative of North Western Province, and of assuring him of my support and cooperation in attending to the needs of the electors of the province.

As honourable members will be aware, North Western Province is the largest province in Victoria, covering some 57 000 square kilometres. It has a population in excess of 175 000. It encompasses the Legislative Assembly seats of Bendigo West, Bendigo East, Swan Hill and Mildura, with the main centres being Castlemaine, Bendigo, Kerang, Swan Hill and Mildura.

Agriculture has been and still is the most important industry to the economy of North Western Province and our producers deserve the recognition and support of the State. Today, approximately 80 000 people are employed in the agricultural industry. Areas - in North Western Province produce or are involved in grain, fat lambs, dairy products, vine fruits, horticulture, citrus industries, fresh fruits, and table grapes. In fact 93 per cent of all wine grapes and 100 per cent of all dried vine fruits produced in Victoria are grown in the Swan Hill and Mildura areas.

Only last week, a new \$3.4 million packaging plant was opened in Mildura. It will rationalise the packaging operations of the Mildura Cooperative Fruit Company and will initially be used for packing oranges, grapefruit, lemons and mandarins.

There are five main areas of concern in respect of agricultural production: the need for the continued orderly marketing of domestic wheat; an attack on farm costs; an increase in the responsibilities of the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs; farmer finance; and an increase in staffing levels within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

With an expanding world population-estimated by the United Nations to move from 4 billion to 6 billion by the year 2000 - agricultural production will be of vital importance. Since 1982, many Malice farmers have suffered a dramatic financial downturn. This resulted from a major drought in 1982; seasonal conditions far below average in 1984 and 1985; a 25 per cent fall in the on-farm price of wheat; a 50 per cent rise in the cost of production; and a major rise in interest rates.

Many farmers have had to borrow to continue their farming operations. For the 50 per cent of farmers in debt, average debts have increased from about \$70 000 in 1982 to more than \$200 000 in 1986. An estimated 10 per cent of these farming families will have to leave the industry in the next few years. The severe cash flow restrictions on farms due to low profit margins have resulted in a dramatic flow-on effect on the small businesses in the towns throughout the dry land parts of the Malice.

Salinity is the single greatest threat facing the environment of Victoria. In parts of Victoria, communities are faced with income losses, degraded landscapes, and social hardship because of the salinity problem. It is distressing that 75 per cent of Melbourne people do not understand what salinity is or appreciate the effect it is having.

In May of this year, the government launched the Victorian salinity strategy which provides guidelines and a set of action plans for joint involvement by the affected communities and government agencies in salinity control. It intends to work towards the further replacement of open channels with pipelines in the Wimmera-Mallee system as a salinity control and for water conservation measures.

One of the ongoing challenges facing politicians representing areas such as northwestern Victoria are the difficulties and problems associated with the mining industry. I shall face these difficulties and work with all parties involved to try to find a solution to the problems faced by the industry. The Mines Act has served the State of Victoria for over 100 years, but it is now acknowledged that some changes need to be made to it.

Mr President, you will be aware that the government commissioned the Small Towns Study of Victoria for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and that the report was finalised in July of this year.

The previous Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Honourable Evan Walker, has publicly recognised the plight and difficulties of smaller country towns, and said that country towns throughout Victoria have suffered at the hands of "unthinking government agencies". He said the government's push towards centralising its administration has caused unnecessary hardships in small towns. I am heartened by the Minister's assurance that he gave orders, that no Department of Agriculture offices in small towns would be closed when regions were being consolidated. These towns have existed solely to service the wheat industry, and now many businesses are also facing severe financial difficulties.

The small towns report found that manufacturing, while important to the State, did not play a major role in the economics of small towns. In fact, only 6 per cent of Victoria's manufacturing employees are located outside the provincial cities or Melbourne. North Western Province has a number of small towns with populations of under 1000. Examples of these are Murrayville, Woomelang, Boort, Inglewood, Quambatook and Bridgewater. They may be foreign to honourable members but they are very important to areas in the Mallee.

Small towns are fully equipped as community units, with hospitals, health care facilities, schools, and sporting facilities. An example of this is the local commitment to the alterations undertaken at the Birchip Bush Nursing Hospital. The project was completed at a cost of \$825 000, all of which was raised locally. Over the past four years some \$1.329 million has been spent on health care facilities at the hospital, and in the construction of Wirrim Lodge, a nursing home on the same site as the hospital. Some \$1.153 million of the \$1.329 million cost for both projects was raised locally, at a time when the whole Mallee was experiencing difficult times. This is an indication of the sort of commitment that exists within small towns in country Victoria.

Since 1982 unemployment outside the Melbourne statistical division has grown by a massive 90 per cent. The 1986 Commonwealth census showed quite clearly that living standards in Victoria's regional areas were among the poorest in the nation, lagging far behind Melbourne.

We do not believe in elevating country people above other sections of the community, but we believe it is time the problems of rural and provincial areas were recognised and addressed. Unless something is done immediately to reduce the population drift from country areas to Melbourne, severe social, housing, and transport difficulties will be experienced in the metropolitan area.

Bendigo and Castlemaine are two areas that have been established with a strong industrial base. Bendigo is now known as the "Dragon City" because of its association with its Chinese heritage. It is home to the famous Sun Loong dragon, the largest dragon in the world, despite what people in Melbourne say.

There are a number of large industries providing employment opportunities within Bendigo. These include manufacturers such as Perfectfit Clothing Co. Pty Ltd, Stafford Ellinson Eaglehawk Pty Ltd, Bradmill Textiles Pty Ltd, Empire Rubber (Aust.) Ply Ltd, railway workshops and the Commonwealth Ordnance Factory. We are proud in Bendigo to have two financial institutions of the standing of the Sandhurst True Company and the Bendigo Building Society. The Sandhurst Trustees Company has just celebrated its centenary, and should be congratulated on its achievement. Bendigo Building Society, which was formed in 1858, was the first building society established in Australia.

The Bendigo College of Advanced Education has some 2866 students and more than 400 staff. The input to the economy of Bendigo and the region is vital. I urge the government to assist in the college's push to affiliate with La Trobe University because it will enhance the higher educational opportunities of all people within a northwestern region.

The Loddon Campaspe College of TAFE in Bendigo is a training college for trade development, and there is also a college in the Sunraysia region. It is important that a higher profile be given to these colleges, I am particularly mindful of the special educational requirements of those who live outside the metropolitan area. The use of \$250 000 of high tech equipment which involves a system of computer and Fax links has been made available, and is shared between the Sea Lake, Manangatang, Ouyen, Murrayville and Robinvale schools. This use of technology in education along the Malice track relieves some of the problems associated with distance and remoteness. We should seek to further introduce and develop systems throughout country Victoria.

The North Central Technical Centre at Charlton is fulfilling an important need within the region for the smaller high schools in north western Victoria. A magnificent driver training complex that has been set up is another example of community commitment because it was built in conjunction with the community and the staff at the college. In my view it is definitely attacking the problems of driver training in the right direction.

Castlemaine is very well known for its historic gardens. The tourist information centre being built at a cost of between \$40 000 and \$50 000 is an example of the commitment of the community and the local tourist committee to give Castlemaine every opportunity of attracting the tourist dollar. The construction of a new gaol at Castlemaine is a major development for the district. The prison, expected to house 250 prisoners, was commenced early in 1988, and is scheduled to be completed in late 1989. The present Castlemaine gaol is 150 years old and can accommodate 95 prisoners. However, I urge the government to consider retaining this gaol to alleviate the revolving door system which exists because of overcrowding in our gaols.

Mr President, I direct your attention to issues that were raised with me during the election per by concerned constituents of North Western Province. They include law and order; a plan by the Land Conservation Council to turn much of the Mallee region into national parks; the state of the road network within country Victoria; and the educational opportunities for all country people.

I express my disgust and dismay at the shootings that took place in Walsh Street, and offer my sincere condolences to the families of the young policemen involved. A significant boost in police numbers and resources is needed to stem the tide, and I welcome the Premier's commitment that that will take place.

I am concerned about the push by private health insurers to withdraw bed allowances from long-term patients, particularly in bush nursing hospitals. That is certainly the case within the North Western Province, where the future of some bush nursing hospitals is in jeopardy. The government or health insurers must pick up the costs associated with long-term patients. It is unfair that the hospitals in question should meet these costs.

I come to this chamber with a vision - a vision of hard work and sincere representation for all electors within the province I represent, regardless of their political affiliations. I thank the Chamber for the courtesy extended to me today.