



Rick Wilson MP
Federal Member for O'Connor

First Speech to the Australian
House of Representatives

2 December 2013



Rick Wilson's First Speech

I rise for the first time in this House with enormous pride and a real sense of honour to be representing the electors of O'Connor. To be their voice in federal parliament is a responsibility I will take very seriously indeed, and I thank them for their vote of confidence in me.

Madam Speaker, let me take this opportunity to add my congratulations on your elevation to the Speaker's chair, a role I know that you will fill with distinction.

I begin by acknowledging the efforts of the previous member for O'Connor, Tony Crook. Though we came from opposite ends of the conservative political spectrum, I always understood and respected the challenges that Tony faced in representing a massive electorate, such a long way from our national capital.



I am only the third member for O'Connor. Tony served for one term. His predecessor served 11 terms in parliament over 30 years and his name is instantly recognisable in Australian politics. Wilson Tuckey has been a friend and supporter for many years, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge his distinguished service to the O'Connor community.

My home town of Katanning is in the geographic centre of O'Connor. It is in the heart of the agricultural region, and I grew up on the family farm that was carved out of the bush by my great-grandfather in 1867. So my roots are firmly entrenched in the rich soil of my electorate.

My great-grandparents William and Bridget Grover were real pioneers, and their stories of hardship and endeavour have been passed down through the family. Bridget gave birth to 11 children in a mud-daubed hut and, remarkably for the time, all of her children survived to adulthood. Raising and educating a large family in remote Western Australian in the late 19th century inevitably meant great adventures but also trials and tribulations. Bridget recorded them all in her diaries, which we are proud to say reside here, in Canberra, at the National Library. They are a testament to the grit and determination shown by so many of our pioneer families.

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A family that has lived nearly 150 years in the same location has, of necessity, developed very strong community bonds. My parents and my grandparents taught my siblings and me the value of community service. They taught us about commitment and dedication, about loyalty and reliability, about kindness and compassion. They showed by their deeds that self-reliance and hard work do bring rewards. They taught us that the greatest reward and the greatest responsibility is family and community.

My 87-year-old mother, Mary, who is in the gallery today, epitomises all that is good about family and community. She was a child of the Depression whose family suffered financial ruin. She educated herself via correspondence lessons and became a much-loved and respected nursing sister. She has spent her life giving of herself for others. Even today, she still works tirelessly for many community organisations. She is an adored mother, grandmother and now, to her delight, great-grandmother. Her selflessness has been an inspiration to all her family, and we strive to live up to her example.



I am the youngest of six children. I am a farmer. For the past 25 years, I have farmed in partnership with my brother Allan. When our father, Archie, died suddenly, I was just 14 and Allan was 17. Circumstances forced us to accept the enormous responsibility of maintaining the family business from a very young age and, while there were many difficult times, we have succeeded in developing an outstanding farm operation.

I am proud of my hardworking, salt-of-the-earth ancestors. I am a social conservative and an economic liberal. I

believe family is the primary social unit of society, just as small business is the primary economic unit of our economy. Marriage is the cornerstone of family life, and I strongly believe that marriage is and should remain the union of a man and a woman.

I believe the institutions that have formed the basis of our government for the past 112 years have served us well. We should not tamper with our system of government without compelling evidence that the system is broken. It is

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not broken. In fact, I stand here today as a proud Australian, a citizen of undoubtedly the best country in the world.

I stand proudly for the Liberal philosophy of free markets, vigorous competition, small government and individual responsibility. These are the principles that guide me in my life and in this place. My track record in public life shows clearly that I am prepared to stand up for those principles.

As a member, deputy chair and then chair of Western Grain Growers, I helped lead the campaign to deregulate the Australian wheat industry and end the Australian Wheat Board's monopoly. Many farmers saw the AWB single-desk monopoly as a bastion against what they saw as the evils of free markets. A very small group of us saw it as a system that stifled innovation and investment, distorted market signals through cross-subsidisation and reduced returns for Western Australian growers.

My personal battle to effect this major reform to our industry lasted 11 years, from 1997 until its deregulation in 2008. For others, it had been a lifelong battle. Leon Bradley, the chairman and leader of our organisation through this period, was one such individual. A humble and unassuming farmer with a towering intellect and unimpeachable principles, Leon stared down an organized campaign of denigration and derision. That campaign was led by a billion-dollar ASX 200 company, almost every major farm organisation in the nation and powerful political interests at both state and federal levels. It was Leon's simple dictum that 'truth and logic will always win out' that sustained us when it seemed that politics and patronage would triumph.

Two others who were part of that wonderful team are here today in the gallery. Gary McGill, a great friend and supporter, is a truly fearless advocate for the free-market principles that underpinned our philosophy, and Slade Brockman's outstanding policy work meant that we were never bettered in the economic argument. We had very few friends in this place at that time. The former member for O'Connor, Wilson Tuckey, was one. At great political cost to himself, he stood firm for his principles and for what he believed was in the best interests of his electorate. So, too, did the late Senator Judith Adams, a much-loved friend to me and my family and to many others in O'Connor. She is greatly missed.



As we now know, the wheat market was deregulated in 2008 and the impact on Western Australian wheat growers was immediate. A sustained price rise of between \$20 to \$30 per tonne has been achieved, which equates to around \$50,000 per annum for an average-sized farm business. Simple maths tells us that an extra \$1 billion has found its way into the pockets of Western Australian wheat growers since deregulation. The supporting role that I played in this major economic reform of one of our key export industries is my signature achievement, and I am very proud of my part in that success.

During the deregulation debate, Leon, Gary and I spent many long hours in this place, lobbying senior ministers and shadow ministers on both sides of the House. I saw firsthand that many of the important decisions that impact on my industry and my community were made right here. That was when I first started to think about a career in politics. Five years later, I stand here representing the electors of O'Connor. I will fight hard for the principles I believe in and for the good of my electorate. I will fight hard to deliver to O'Connor what all Australians have a right to expect: an opportunity to succeed, to raise a family, to not be burdened by unnecessary laws and regulations, to take a risk and to keep the rewards of their hard work.

“ I have a great sense of optimism for the future of our agricultural industries. ”

O'Connor is a vast and diverse electorate. In this season, we will produce an estimated seven to eight million tonnes of grain, almost a quarter of the nation's crop production. We are also a major woolgrowing electorate. Over the past 150 years, my family has made a small contribution to both industries. I have a great sense of optimism for the future of our agricultural industries. We are well positioned to take advantage of the rapidly growing markets in the Asian region. I believe my children will have a great opportunity to follow in their forefathers' footsteps in pursuing a career in agriculture, if they choose to do so.

O'Connor also has significant viticulture and horticultural industries, along with timber, tourism and fishing. We have major mining operations across the electorate, including—among others—gold, nickel and iron ore. We have thousands of small manufacturers and service industries in our towns and cities. Small business is the beating heart of O'Connor. It is our small business that provides the jobs and opportunities for the future.

Our agricultural industries are predominantly based in the central Great Southern region, where I live. As well as agriculture, it is where we find spectacular wildflowers in spring, remarkable bird life, the beautiful Stirling Ranges and the lovely heritage buildings that remind us of our pioneer past. O'Connor

also encompasses the Warren Blackwood region, based around the towns of Manjimup, Pemberton and Bridgetown. It supports a timber industry, and the quality of its horticulture, viticulture and dairy produce has earned it the title of the food bowl of Western Australia. From apples and potatoes to truffles and cherries, as well as its prime beef, the Warren Blackwood produces a wonderful variety of produce.

Albany is the biggest population centre in the electorate. It was the site of the first European settlements in Western Australia in 1827. It has a proud colonial history. Albany is a port city that services the agricultural hinterland of the Great Southern. Along with the nearby towns of Denmark and Walpole, and the renowned Frankland and Plantagenet winegrowing areas, the south coast region is an important tourist destination for local, national and international tourists.

Albany was also the last sight of Australia for the troops aboard the fleet of more than 30 ships that left our shores in November 1914. Many of these young men, who served in Gallipoli, in Palestine and on the Western Front, never returned. One of Albany's most popular and moving attractions is the Desert Mounted Corps Memorial. It is situated on top of Mount Clarence, overlooking King George Sound, where the people of the town waved goodbye to those brave young men.

O'Connor is populated by people who epitomise the spirit of regional Australia: hardworking, resilient, good-humoured people with plenty of backbone, people who look for solutions, people who are keen to explore innovative alternatives in their quest to do things better.

Both the Prime Minister and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs have expressed their strong commitment to making sure that Albany's place in our Anzac history is appropriately honoured during the period of the national commemoration of the Centenary of Anzac. Expect to hear much more of Albany and its unique place in our history.

Among its many attractions, Esperance has the whitest and the most pristine beaches in the world. In Esperance, O'Connor can boast a region that has developed from a small community of fishermen and a few pastoralists to one of the most vibrant and successful agricultural regions in the country—in just 50 years. The sandy soil has been transformed, and this season the grain growers of Esperance are on target to deliver 2.5 million tonnes of grain, a record for the region. Esperance is a testament to the innovation and determination of its residents, who are always looking for ways to do things better and to do things smarter.

Today, as we debate the merits of foreign investment, it is worth remembering that foreign investment transformed Esperance. It was syndicated American money that was behind the development of the sand plain into an extraordinarily productive farming region. A community of around 1,000 residents in the early 1960s, Esperance shire is now home to 14,000 people. In an era in which many farming communities throughout Western Australia are in decline, Esperance is a wonderful example of success.

Mining, of course, is the lifeblood of the goldfields. Kalgoorlie has a rich history. It was established in the gold rush of the 1890s, when prospectors from all over Australia—and indeed the world—came to seek their fortunes. Today, the gold industry lives on. In 2012-13, the region produced \$5.7 billion worth of gold. Its gold rush history is evident in Hannan Street, the statue of Paddy and the gracious and beautifully preserved colonial buildings, but what makes Kalgoorlie is not its buildings; it is the spirit of its people: hardworking, resilient and optimistic. They have seen the booms and they have seen the busts, but they are always ready to have another go. They are quite remarkable.

Mining is the lifeblood of Kalgoorlie, but it is also the lifeblood of Australia. It is our largest export earner and its flow-on impact in the economy cannot be underestimated. Across the region, revenue from mining topped \$9 billion in 2012-13. It was a tragedy to see the contempt with which the previous government treated this industry. The mining tax, which I have proudly voted to scrap, was a textbook example of bad government. I saw firsthand that tax suck the confidence out of the miners in my electorate. Mining needs confidence. That is why I am a strong supporter of the exploration tax credit. If we are to see the big projects of tomorrow, we need people to invest their capital today.

These, then, are the five major regions that make up the electorate of O'Connor. It is populated by people who epitomise the spirit of regional Australia: hardworking, resilient, good-humoured people with plenty of backbone, people who look for solutions, people who are keen to explore innovative alternatives in their quest to do things better.

But we are faced with some very particular challenges in O'Connor, challenges



that are shared by people in other regional centres throughout Australia but which in our case are compounded by the tyranny of distance. Western Australia produces 16 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product and 46 per cent of the nation's mercantile exports. Much of this wealth is produced by the people who live in the regional and rural communities of O'Connor. They deserve to have adequate access to health care. They deserve for their children to have same educational opportunities as their city cousins and for their parents to grow old with dignity and in comfort in the communities they have served all their lives. And we need to find solutions that address the significant disadvantage that Indigenous communities in our electorate face. I look forward to working with the Prime Minister's Indigenous task force to find those solutions. These are the key areas in which I have committed to work tirelessly to find solutions that work for us in O'Connor.

As a Western Australian I cannot ignore the inequity of the GST distribution formula. In the financial year 2013-14, we will receive just 45c for every dollar

I will fight hard for the principles I believe in and for the good of my electorate. I will fight hard to deliver O'Connor what all Australians have a right to expect: an opportunity to succeed, to raise a family, to not be burdened by unnecessary laws and regulations, to take a risk and to keep the rewards of their hard work.

of GST that we pay. This is projected to fall to just 7c in the dollar in 2016-17. The Commonwealth grants formula was designed so that the more developed states would give a hand to the developing states, and in Western Australia's development phase we were grateful recipients of that assistance. But now the system is being used to support states which do not maximise economic development and investment. So, while we Western Australians are happy to help our compatriots who are working hard to improve their economies just like we did, we resent propping up those states who are not making every effort to maximise their resources and opportunities. They are seen by many Western Australians as bludging off the system. No part of Australia should be encouraged by the system to do anything less than their best. The planned review in March next year is an opportunity for me and for other Western Australian members to make the case for a more equitable arrangement.

Another issue of particular importance to agriculture, not just in O'Connor but across Australia, is the live export trade. I am very proud that the Australian livestock industry has for many years been engaging with our markets to improve

the treatment of our livestock in the supply chain. In fact, we are the only one of 109 countries who export live animals to do so. While our systems are not perfect and there have been some regrettable instances of cruelty, we are making progress. But to withdraw arbitrarily from this trade will see our livestock replaced with animals from other countries where animal welfare has a much lower priority. I welcome the strong commitment of the Prime Minister and the Minister for Agriculture to rebuild and strengthen this important trade.

It is impossible to campaign across an electorate the size of O'Connor for 2½ years without the support and assistance of an enormous number of people. I now take the opportunity to put on the record my deepest and sincerest thanks—to my campaign chairman, Steve Martin, whose partnership on this journey extends well beyond the campaign and, I know, will continue well into the future; to my campaign committee, who gave an enormous amount of their time over such a long period, because they believed not just in me but also in the greater Liberal cause: Dom Della Vedova, Bob Morgan, Alana Lacy, Tom and Victoria Brown, Liz and Kel Parker, Don Green, Helen Inglis, Beau Ashton, Amanda Robideau and my wonderful niece Danielle Power.



To our branch presidents, members and supporters, who did such a magnificent job manning the 133 polling booths across our enormous electorate, my deepest thanks. Thanks to our Western Australian state director, Ben Morton, whose commitment to winning back the seat of O'Connor was unwavering and who gave me great confidence that the work we were doing at the coalface would be rewarded. Thanks to Ben Allen, my campaign director, whose dry sense of humour always managed to relieve the tension in a crisis.

My sincere thanks go to the two senators with special responsibility for O'Connor. Chris Back, with his expertise in all things livestock, is always a great hit amongst rural people. He and his wife, Linda, worked tirelessly on my behalf. And Senator Dean Smith, with his energy and incredible attention to detail, gave my campaign impetus and momentum at precisely the right time.

To Senators Mathias Cormann and Michaelia Cash: I thank you for your invaluable assistance along this journey. And I thank Julie Bishop, our senior Western Australian Liberal, who was so generous with her time.

I also owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the 27 shadow ministers and parliamentary secretaries who visited the electorate, some on several occasions, and, in the case of Senator Ronaldson, on five separate visits. To our state MPs, Jim Chown and Graham Jacobs: your support and guidance have been greatly appreciated.

The fast and efficient establishment of my electorate offices in Kalgoorlie and Albany is a testament to the professionalism of my staff, and I thank them for their hard work so far.

In a long and arduous campaign, where a candidate is constantly seeking assistance and favours, it is inevitable that we turn to our family and close friends, and it is here that I direct my warmest thanks. To my big brother, Allan, who throughout my life has allowed me to pursue my dreams while he has steadfastly kept the business running, I owe a debt that I can never repay. To my big sister, Kate, whose amazing media and communication skills, along with her commitment, dedication and sense of purpose, were an inspiration to me and all of our team: I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To Michael Pedley: your contribution to the campaign was amazing and I cannot imagine how we would have managed without you. To my sisters Deb, Jane, Bev; my brother-in-law Gary; my nieces Danielle, Lucy and Amelia; and my nephew Scotty: I thank you for your contributions, big and small.

My final and most important thankyou is to my wonderful wife, Tanya: throughout the long and at times difficult campaign, you have been my support, my reassurance, my rock. You have endured the sacrifices without complaint, and without your courage and strength I could not contemplate this journey that we are about to embark on. To my beautiful children, Emma, Annalise, Phillipa and Archie: I apologise in advance for the birthdays missed, the sports carnivals I could not attend, the milestones achieved when Dad was busy somewhere in the electorate. It is my fervent hope that, at some point in the future, we will reflect back on this time and we will all agree it was worthwhile.

“ To the electorate of O’Connor, I reiterate the commitment that I have made to work tirelessly on your behalf, to always be frank and honest about the challenges we face, and to work cooperatively and collaboratively to improve the lives of the people who live in the greatest part of the greatest nation on earth. ”

Finally, to the electors of O'Connor, I reiterate the commitment that I have made to work tirelessly on your behalf, to always be frank and honest about the challenges we face, and to work cooperatively and collaboratively to improve the lives of the people who live in the greatest part of the greatest nation on earth.

Thank you.



Rick Wilson





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