

THE FUTURE OF THE KIMBERLEY

Our speaker on 4 April 2001 was Ernie Bridge, the former Member of Parliament for the Kimberley. Ernie started by saying that he was not going to make a speech but wanted to have a bit of yarn, sharing his views on the future of the Kimberley region, and then have an exchange of views with the members. This format generated a good response.

Ernie had received the Society's invitation to speak before the recent State election but had already reached the decision to retire from politics. His decision to retire reflected the fact that he could not generate enough interest from his fellow parliamentarians about his ideas. Hansard records his views as an advocate of the big picture approach to Australia as a nation.

Australia is, in Ernie's opinion, one of the most over-governed countries in the world. This situation has become worse over the last 10 years and seems irrespective of which political party is in power. The dominance of this process is forcing more and more farmers to leave their properties and is thus leaving Australia in a bad way. Ernie stands by a belief that selling our assets is not in the best interests of our nation and that enough is enough. He also advocates getting rid of the National Economic Policy, arguing that it is counter-productive to our future development.

Ernie divided thinkers into three groups, the first being what he termed 'big thinkers'. The Kimberley needs people who are big thinkers, ie those who know what's right, have great belief in themselves, and can see ahead. The second group he termed 'average thinkers'—those preoccupied with daily events and interested only in short term projects. The third group comprises 'lesser thinkers'—those preoccupied with people and negative things. Ernie believes that our nation lacks big thinkers, that our political leaders fall into the second group, and that most parliamentarians fall into either the second or the third group.

With regard to the Kimberley he observed that the resources of the region are unlimited but should not be open to exploitation by a few. They should be made to work for all of us and we should all share in the benefits. Water resources are his pet project and he felt that there were no big thinkers in this field. He went on to say Australia was the driest continent in the world and that, consequently, we needed to maximise our water resources. The Ord River development is an example of what can be achieved with a sustainable resource. In other areas, however, the water rates are becoming too expensive for farmers who require orderly supplies at the lowest basic cost in order to continue development of our agricultural industry.

Members of the audience were keen to hear Ernie's views on the recent proposal to dam the Fitzroy River. While the proposal was, and is, opposed by many, Ernie pointed out that, each year, the Fitzroy pours some 8 million megalitres of water into the sea and thousands of tonnes of topsoil. To put these figures into perspective, he cited Sydney with a population of approximately 5 million people using half a million megalitres of water a year! He also sees tidal power as another resource that should be used.

With regard to employment and prospects generally, Ernie noted that the pastoral industry is uncertain at present with price fluctuations creating a lot of hardships. He sees tourism as important to the Kimberley, especially in places such as Broome, as it brings about much needed improvements to the infrastructure of the region. In both tourism and the pastoral industry some Aboriginal people have done well but Ernie feels that, overall, very little change has occurred. In fact, even though the Community Employment Development Project (CDEP) has been successful in some areas, recent changes to its administration have resulted in projects now being under threat. Assured opportunity for progress in indigenous programs is needed for continued Aboriginal participation in the pastoral industry.

Ernie concluded by saying the Kimberley region can be developed in an exciting and progressive way providing we all work together. He wants to see the Kimberley region "freed up" rather than "locked up". After 21 years as a politician representing the Kimberley, Ernie feels that people with bold, visionary strategies are needed if the future of the region is to be a positive one.

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