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Guy Barnett, Minister for Resources

Speech to Tasmanian Minerals and Energy Council Annual Conference

I am pleased to be here today to speak at the Tasmanian Mineral and Energy Council's annual conference.

This morning, I want to take this opportunity to outline my background to give a clear understanding of my direction as Minister and how it aligns with the Tasmanian Liberal Government's policies and plans for the mining and mineral processing industry.

In many respects, it is fitting that this is my first official engagement since I was sworn in as the Minister for Resources and Minister for Building and Construction last Monday morning.

Together with agriculture and forestry, mining is one of Tasmania's traditional, productive industries.

On a personal level, these industries are in my blood.

Born and bred on a farm, I have a long family history of commitment to productive industries.

My father pioneered live sheep exports from Tasmania in the 1970s, and judged beef cattle at every royal capital city show in Australia, and in North and South America.

When studying law at the University of Tasmania I imported from Taiwan marble products, tables, vases, chess sets and the like. The benefits and challenges of international trade are well known to the Barnett family.

Throughout my entire working life – whether in business or in public service – I have been an advocate for our productive industries; those that generate wealth and provide jobs, particularly across regional Tasmania.

In the mid 1980s, as a young lawyer, I was an advocate for our rural industries in Washington, D.C., representing Elders International and the Australian Dairy Corporation in lobbying and negotiations.

In the late '80s, I was a senior adviser to then Tasmanian Premier Robin Gray, advocating for growth and development, and was a strong supporter of the Wesley Vale pulp mill.

In my own business which I established in 1989, employing 15 people in Hobart and Canberra, I represented both the Minerals Council and the Forest Industries Association, together with clients such as Comalco.

During this time, one of my more significant projects was writing a paper for the Minerals Council titled Keeping Our Options Open.

This was about addressing the Green movement's never-ending campaign to restrict our productive industries by seeking to lock up more and more of our land.

In Federal Parliament as a Senator the first major piece of legislation I argued for was the Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002. This legislation provided resource security in the forest industry and its passage was greeted with applause in the gallery. The threat of more lock ups was held off, at least for a time.

As Senator for Tasmania I visited the North-West and West coasts regularly, including donning the hard hat and learning more about our productive mining industry and their caring communities.

I always found these communities resilient, caring and proud and I also enjoyed visiting their schools. One of the more modest but proud achievements as a Senator was gaining funding support for a skate park at Queenstown. The students appreciated it.

More recently as a State Member, I have continued to advocate strongly for our traditional industries.

Supporting these industries today means standing firmly against those who would lock up our land as part of their extreme ideology or in the interests of political expediency.

You would all recall that the Liberal Party went to the 2014 State election with a clear and unambiguous commitment of no more lock ups.

We have delivered on that commitment.

Indeed, not only have we stopped the lock-ups, for the first time in 30 years, land was taken out of reserve (in this "future reserve" land) and is now classified as "potential future production forest" – potentially available for harvest from 2020, should the circumstances require.

There has been much said recently about innovation and about new, emerging industries.

While it is important that we do take advantage of new opportunities, we also need to build on our strengths.

We must never lose sight of those strengths or of the value of those sectors that have long been the backbone of our economy.

They have been the backbone of rural and regional Tasmania, and the backbone of rural and regional jobs.

There can be no better example than the mining industry.

We all know that external factors – particularly low commodity prices – have made for challenging times in the sector of late.

But the reality is that this industry, and the companies represented in this room, remains a key employer across Tasmania, and particularly in our regions.

Mining not only provides jobs, it provides good jobs, well-paying jobs, and a flow-on effect that sustains communities.

In fact, ABS data has long shown our West Coast communities having among the highest average wages of any postcodes in Australia.

You wouldn't know it by what you read, but the mining and mineral processing sector makes up more than 50 per cent of Tasmania's exports, with a value in excess of \$2 billion.

And it continues to provide employment, directly and indirectly, for thousands of Tasmanians.

Mining, together with forestry, is in Tasmania's blood.

This industry is intrinsic to Tasmania's cultural heritage, with the history of mining intertwined with the history of our State.

One of the projects that I was pleased to work on as a Senator was the Trail of the Tin Dragon, which is, of course, now an important visitor attraction in our North-East.

From Launceston to St Helens, the Trail tells a story of early mining in North-East Tasmania that is rich in the human experience, good, bad, and all things in between. There is a special exhibition of the Trail at the St Helens History Room.

We have heard this morning from renowned author Garry Richardson of the history of mining in this region, which is fascinating in itself.

I had the pleasure of speaking at the launch of Garry Richardson's book on the 'History of Binalong Bay and Humbug Point'.

The story of mining in Tasmania is not, however, one that belongs in the past.

As I said, the mining and mineral processing sector remains a key pillar of our economy today.

But, more than that, it has a bright future.

The geologists tell us that within our State is one of the most highly mineralised regions of anywhere in the world.

The minerals are there.

What is important – and the Liberal Government understands this – is that we don't lock them away.

We need, as I wrote for the Minerals Council some years past, to keep our options open.

As the new Minister, I want to commit to you that I will continue to fight for this industry, for its present and for its future.

The Government was elected with a Plan, and a key part of that was our Mining for Tasmania's Future policy.

Since day one, we have been working to implement this policy.

At its heart is the relocation of Mineral Resources Tasmania to Burnie – our mining hub – to better align the agency to the industry.

The clear message that I believe should be taken from this initiative is that we want to work more closely with mining companies to increase investment, exploration, development and job creation.

Importantly, our Director of Mines, Brett Stewart, is overseeing an organisational restructure that is running in parallel with the relocation.

I am pleased to report that Stages 1 and 2 of the relocation have been completed, and that we now have 11 positions in the Burnie office.

One of the benefits of this exercise is that it has provided an opportunity for workforce renewal and new staff members have brought with them years of experience working in the industry, both here and abroad.

The Government has provided an additional \$2.6 million over the next two years to complete the relocation and provide for ICT upgrades.

When complete, MRT will have its office in Burnie and, as we said we would, we will maintain the core library at Mornington.

The Government is also investing a further \$1.4 million in our new Geosciences Initiative Program.

Tasmania has led the way in providing geoscience datasets and geological mapping to potential explorers.

We recognise, however, that we are competing not only with other states but with jurisdictions around the world for the exploration dollar.

So it is important that we work to attract that investment by providing more detailed information to help reduce risk.

The recent launch of the new Geological and Geophysical 3D Model for Western Tasmania was a credit to the work of MRT.

It also highlighted the value of the working relationship between MRT and the Centre of Excellence in Ore Deposits – CODES – at the University of Tasmania.

We expect that this collaboration will continue through the new Geosciences Initiative, which is funded over four years.

Research and development is vitally important to future progress.

MRT also has a role to play in actively promoting Tasmania as a destination for mineral investment.

Again, this is a key focus of the Government's Mining for Our Future policy through our Mineral Exploration Investment Attraction Plan.

Under this Plan, MRT officers are presenting at conferences interstate and overseas, with the aim of increasing the awareness of Tasmania's mineral potential.

While we will never be immune to global commodity prices and fluctuations in the Australian dollar, there is good reason to have optimism that mining has a brighter future in this State.

The recent sale of the Henty gold mine to Pybar, and its plan to resume mining in the near future, is very positive.

There remains strong interest in new projects, and no one should forget the investment involved in retaining mines on care and maintenance, ready to resume mining when market conditions are more favourable.

I look forward as the new Minister to working with mining and mineral processing companies and their communities – established and new – towards a brighter future for the sector.

In closing, I want to assure you, the mining industry, and its employees, and their families, and their communities and all involved in Tasmania's resource industries of the Hodgman Liberal Government's ongoing support and my personal commitment to be not only Minister for Resources but a champion of the resources sector.

