



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Robyn McSweeney, MLC
(South West Region)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council, Thursday 31 May 2001

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Motion

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [4.37 pm]: Mr President, thank you for this opportunity to address members of the House. I congratulate you on your election as President and wish you well - a nice birthday present for you. I also extend my congratulations to the other new members of the House on their election, and look forward to working with them all. Although we may have different philosophies and backgrounds, we are all here for the betterment of all Western Australians. Congratulations also go to the existing members on their re-election, and I hope they remember how they felt when they were first on the floor of the House. It is indeed very daunting, but the friendship shown to me has been very welcoming.

I thank the electors of the South West Region for their confidence in electing me as their representative. I was born in the region and, as a country person, I will represent the south west's interests very diligently. I thank most sincerely all those people who assisted me and the Liberal team during the election campaign. I will not single out particular people who helped me achieve this position. They know who they are and that is all that matters. I will, however, thank my husband, Michael, who has been extremely supportive, and my children, Kristy, Jenny, Jason and Holly, who have had to put up with a mother who knew where she was going and never deviated from that path. Lastly, but never leastly, I thank my wonderful mother and father, Richard and Coralie, who have always been there for me no matter what. How does one put unconditional love into words? One never can. I thank them for being mine.

I take this opportunity to recognise my predecessor, Hon Muriel Patterson, who represented the South West Region for the past 12 years. Muriel chaired the ministerial task force for Western Australian families, was the Government Whip and put in many hours for the people of Western Australia. I know from personal experience that she was well respected in the south west, was diligent in her electorate and was well known for her commonsense and humour. I quote from her maiden speech in 1989 when she said -

We must all be Australians, all sharing the same rights and, just as importantly, the same responsibilities because the two go hand in hand. One cannot claim rights on one hand and ignore or deny responsibilities on the other. The combination of rights and responsibilities will be our strength.

As I said previously, her commonsense was well known.

I recognise the pioneer women of Western Australia in this Centenary of Federation and acknowledge that without their sacrifices and hardship I would not have found it as easy as it is to be standing here today. At the Centenary of Federation celebrations, Judy Maddigan, Victoria's Deputy Speaker, read from a speech by Frank Madden to the Victorian Parliament in 1895, which I thought well worth repeating. He said that two kinds of women were clamouring for the vote: the chaste, honest, amiable matron whose charity outruns her discretion and whose knowledge of politics is so small that she cannot see the impossibility of her objects; and the shrieking women whose idea of freedom is polyandry, free love, lease marriage and so on. He asked whether these were the qualifications for the franchise; whether women who would sap the very foundation of the nation would be allowed to have votes; and whether women who do not understand the meaning of the word "home" would be allowed to have a voice in the government of the country. I am extremely pleased that times have changed during the 106 years since that was said.

The last position I held was as coordinator and lecturer of the New Opportunities for Women courses at TAFE, and previously I was a member of the Women's Advisory Council, WA. Although I do not hold radical feminist viewpoints, I believe women have come a long way, and rightly so.

As is customary, I hope members will indulge me an excursion into my Western Australian family history starting with my great grandfather, Albert Edmund Cockram, who said -

If old-time native-born West Australians who had never been abroad were to take a trip to the UK and the Continent, noting carefully all they saw on the way, they would when they came back, come to the conclusion that, after all, there is no place like their native land and no land so full of possibilities.

It was then written into the history books that thus spoke Mr Albert Edmund Cockram, one of the best known of our native-born citizens. He was indeed a man far advanced for his time. He was born in Gingin in 1870 and educated at Bishop Hale School. He became a farmer, and on his farm bred stud sheep and thoroughbred horses. He was the first to import dorset horn sheep and was the largest importer in Australia of thoroughbred stock of every description, although he specialised in horses. He owned Burswood Island and Belmont and Goodwood racecourses. In one year alone, he imported 150 racehorses from overseas. It is recorded that altogether he brought more thoroughbreds to Australia than any other individual and claimed they won more races, having been successful in races in every State in the Commonwealth and New Zealand, including the Perth Cup, Sydney cups, Epsom and the Metropolitan Cup. He also had the honour of being the only Australian who ever judged at agricultural shows in every State in Australia, in New Zealand and in the United Kingdom.

His interest was in not only farming and racing, but also mining. It is recorded that he and Mr E.J. Stuart went to England to try to induce some of the capitalists to open up our wonderful north west where enormous wealth in minerals of all sorts lay idle. They took up 100 acres on the only site suitable for a port, and then about one million acres of the finest land in Australia. Unfortunately, this land has eluded our family but we believe it was around Derby and Wyndham. He spent thousands of pounds advertising our State in the UK with a film taken of the north west, which was shown daily for six months in Australia House and attracted visitors from all parts of the world.

He was a great advocate for the removal of septic tanks, which he said polluted our beautiful river, and for the removal of the railway from the centre of the city to give room for expansion. At one stage he sought to possess Hay Street to St Georges Terrace on the west side but, unfortunately for us, he decided the price was too high! His mining interests have been well documented and one of those ventures was Collie Coal, which is now Griffin. Time does not

permit me to go on; however, I acknowledge his daughter Beverley Barratt who is sitting in the gallery.

My grandfather was Claude Cockram who, together with his wife Sarah, owned Clearhills, a merino stud in Gnowangerup. My parents have a farm in Bridgetown, which is where I have mostly lived. My great grandfather was correct when he said, "There is no place like their native land and no land so full of possibilities". All individuals, no matter what their background, have the opportunity to do what they want to do when they become adults. No-one is saying that it can be done straight away; it may take years to achieve a dream but it is up to the individual to achieve it. Some people may have grown up as children in poverty; may have come from abusive backgrounds; may have been dealt some curly ones; and education may not have meant much in childhood and adolescence because of circumstances outside their control. However, as adults, the path that individuals choose can be very different from their childhood. At the end of the day individuals must reach within themselves to get what they want. One can still do that in this country. I would like to recognise the people in society who have a mental or physical disability and who achieve much for themselves in the everyday challenges they face.

I was married at the age of 19, and between the ages of 21 and 26 I had four children. One could say I was a slow learner or that my husband was practising the principle of keeping me bare foot, pregnant and chained to the kitchen sink. I am pleased to inform the House that it was none of those things; life just happens. My husband and children have helped shape what I have become today and I thank them for that.

I kept my sanity by studying for many years while my children were young. I was elected to local government and served two terms as a councillor on the Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes. During those years I became regionally focused on the south west, and I was involved with many committees. The south west is the most diverse regional economy of the State. Extensive mineral wealth has made the region a major world producer of alumina and mineral sands. The economy is based also on strong agricultural, horticultural and emerging aquacultural industries, viticulture, tourism and a once vibrant timber industry. Mr President, I would like it noted that my community is hurting badly from the Labor Party's no-logging policy. It is also one of the most beautiful regions outside Perth with its national parks, forests, beaches, wineries and ecotourism sites. Rural areas need and deserve representation, and our community must strive to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in any one vote, one value system, which is an unnecessary proposition.

My main interests have always been in the social area, and I was a welfare officer in various locations around the south west on and off for about seven years. That was my learning curve about human nature and the very sad lives that some children are born into, no matter what their social strata. That is where I first learnt how fragile a child is, how unprotected, and how, no matter what society does to keep children safe, at the end of the day inevitably the result is a no-win situation when, again, it is usually the child that suffers.

Children are precious and they are the future. We must continue to put in place community structures that support families to raise their children. When interviewing people for the Listening to Families and Children in the New Millennium report, in which I was involved as a member of the state Family and Children's Advisory Council, I found that many parents shared my concerns. Gone are the days of the traditional image of family life, with dad as the sole breadwinner, mum as the full-time caregiver, and support from aunts, uncles and cousins. Many people interviewed spoke about creating a replacement for the traditional image, such as stronger links between families, neighbours and communities; country people have that to a greater degree than city people. Smaller communities sometimes have extended families and those links; however, that is not always the case. City and country people do share some of the same concerns.

I am fortunate that although I did not have an extended family while growing up, I had a neighbourhood and community network. I live one street away from where I grew up and some of the same people still live in that street. I am fortunate to have had a sense of belonging, which was brought home to me a few weeks ago when the local publican, Tom Scott - whose father was a former WA Senator - asked me to do him the honour of opening his hotel extensions. I was delighted, and in his speech he said that it did not matter which side of politics I was on, it was the fact that I was a local girl who had become a member of Parliament. I do not think I agree with him; I like being on this side of the Chamber. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have that sense of belonging. In our changing environment we must try to create communities that will give us positive energy.

Time and again in the family survey it was found that the people of Western Australia are concerned about work, finance, education, safety, alcohol and drug abuse, relationship breakdown and health. From my own observations and those documented, it was obvious that families are striving to maintain relationships under pressure - financial pressure, time pressure and pressure of work or unemployment. They are concerned about their own children's education, health and safety, youth depression and suicide and the prevalence of drug abuse among the young. They are also concerned about boys having no role models, and the erosion of Christian principles. There was much discussion about different family structures.

I have a strong belief in Christian principles and family values. However, I also see that society is changing. We are now seeing pressure being applied to legalise marijuana and perhaps to allow heroin injecting rooms. I wonder whether society has changed that much. I cannot believe that it has. If we allow this to happen, we are condoning this behaviour. I would rather see money spent to help addicts to come off drugs, using the naltrexone program or something similar, and building more detox centres where these people can get professional help. I have been involved with local drug action groups and with juvenile justice on a state level; so I know the drug issue is of great importance. I would hate to see Western Australia go down the path of condoning the use of mind-altering chemical substances. Some statements stood out in the Families in the Millennium interviews, including that parenting is one of the toughest jobs that any individual is likely to encounter. I would argue how much harder it would be for parents to stop their children using a drug if the State said it was okay to grow it in the backyard. Parenting is tough enough without this added pressure.

When asked what matters in a family, a Busselton Senior High School student responded that people need commitment, a family pet, laughter, fun, to watch a sunrise together, to have morals and rules to obey - but not too strict - to be able to gossip with one's parents and teach them modern day stuff, and we need to know that we are loved in our family. Reference was made to reconnecting the aged with younger people and using the wisdom of our growing aged population.

Our Anzac Day tradition reconnects young and old in the true spirit of what it is to be Australian. Please let there be no more discussion about combining our national pride with something else. Leave it alone; this day is so special it should stand alone. My brother, Colonel David Cockram, a Vietnam veteran and army chaplain, would agree with my sentiments.

Our Australian flag means much on Anzac Day and many other days of the year. The poem I will now read expresses what I and many others believe in. I read it in memory of Mr Harold Rowan Robinson, OAM and war veteran, who was laid to rest this afternoon in Bridgetown. He was a great community worker and a great Australian. The poem is as follows -

Our Flag bears the stars that blaze at night,
In our southern skies of blue,
And a little old flag in the corner
That's part of our heritage too.

It's for the English, the Scots and the Irish,
Who were sent to the ends of the earth,
The rogues and schemers, the doers and dreamers,
Who gave modern Australia birth,

And you who are shouting to change it -
Don't seem to understand,
It's the flag of our law and our language,
Not the flag of a faraway land.

There are plenty of people to tell you ,
How, when Europe was plunged into night,
That little old flag in the corner
Was their symbol of freedom and light.

It doesn't mean we owe allegiance
To a forgotten imperial dream,
We've got the stars to show where we're going -
And the old flag to show where we've been.

I found it very moving to watch all the Australians who took part in the Anzac march and the services around Western Australia. This is what it is all about: community, belonging and being proud of who and what we are, no matter what our background. We all need to move forward together under one Australian law. However, within that law we must have flexibility. That flexibility need not go so far as to condone violence. If we say that domestic violence is a crime in Australia, no matter who one is, we must also accept any violence inflicted upon one human being by another is against the law. We must be very careful and proceed along the lines of flexibility, and not have a line drawn in the sand that leads to division.

It is a great honour to stand here today. I feel privileged to be given the honour of serving the people of the south west and all Western Australians. I am sure that Albert Edmund would be proud to know that his native-born Western Australian great grand-daughter is now a member of Parliament. I also thank my family and friends.

[Applause.]
