



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



MR LARRY GRAHAM, MLA
(Member for Pilbara)

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 10 November 2004

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 10 November 2004

RECOGNITION OF RETIRING MEMBERS' SERVICE

Motion

MR L. GRAHAM (Pilbara) [7.04 pm]: I thought, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I was not going to give one of these speeches. I do not often show that I am nervous giving speeches in this place, but it honestly has terrified me since the day I first came in here. I was talked into it by a number of people - not the least of whom are my family, whom I am happy to have here this evening. I guess I could have put in some interest for the Government by saying that I really do not want to give a valedictory speech because I have decided to renominate for the seat of Pilbara, but that is not the case. Like the member for Stirling, I know when my time is up, and when I should go. No-one else knows it, but inside myself I know.

I was first elected to this House in 1989. I was then married with three young children. I came into Parliament with some experience in life, although not as much as I have now. I made a list of the occupations I have pursued, because I keep forgetting them. I have been a soldier and have held a variety of positions in the Army. I have been a milkman, in more ways than one. I have been a labourer, a trades assistant, a barman, a bouncer, a maintenance planner, a salesman, an apprentice, an electrician, a clerk and a union official. I was partly trained as an air traffic controller and, curiously, I am still a qualified weapons instructor to Australian infantry standards. I found this interesting during the gun debate, when the public gallery was full of people who said that politicians did not know anything about guns. I sat back and had a bit of fun with that.

I came into this place following my uncle, the late Herb Graham, who served in this Parliament for 36 years and was deputy leader of the Labor Party and Deputy Premier. My grandfather contested a Senate seat in 1902. In fact there are two history books, one of which says he contested a Senate seat and the other of which says he contested a Legislative Council seat. He was a member of the Labor Party all his life, and at one stage he was defeated as the Chairman of the Narrogin Road Board because of his Labor Party affiliations. He resigned and stood again to test his mandate as a member of the Labor Party, and was again elected as the chairman of the road board. I came into this place as the third generation of Grahams endorsed by the Labor Party. I have scratched my head and tried to find another family in the State with that pedigree, and I cannot find one. It is quite ironic that I am standing here as an Independent. I will touch on that a bit later.

I will never forget the first day I came into this place. Most members will recall that the Liberal Party had just lost the election it could not lose. I was allotted this seat, and I felt this wave of hatred as we entered the Chamber. I have never felt anything like that in my life, except in my Army experiences, like playing football against the Navy. There was a similar sort of feeling, in that I knew as I walked in that things were pretty nasty, but I had to deal with it. Bearing in mind that I came in as a candidate from the bush, some of the Labor Party members' first words to me were to ask which faction I was in and whether I could support them for this or that position, which was a bit disconcerting. Only three people came up to me in this Chamber and actually shook my hand and wished me well from day one. They were Hendy Cowan, the then member for Merredin, Monty House, the member for Stirling, and, curiously, Richard Court, the then member for Nedlands. I walked around the House largely in a daze. I still remember my maiden speech. My mother was in the gallery along with my aunt, the late Herb Graham's widow. I can still remember the enormous tension, and thinking that I just did not belong in this place. I did not then and still do not feel comfortable in this place. I know it is not the impression I give, but if members only knew what I had to do to hide all those things.

It was not long after I came into this place that we had the leadership challenge against Peter Dowding and we removed him as leader of the Labor Party. I look back on that now very sadly. I think that a lot of the problems that are inherent in the Labor Party - I will not bash the Labor Party - stem from that decision to knock off Peter Dowding. Peter was a difficult man to support. I think even his best friends would say that Peter can be a bit abrasive from time to time. However, I look back on it now, and Peter deserves an apology from me. I will send him one, and I will send him a copy of this speech, because I think we knocked off a bloke - some of us did it for all the right reasons - who could have made a huge contribution to this State with his intellect and his vision.

One of the simple things - it is complex, but it is nonetheless a simple matter - was his addressing of employment and training and skills shortages. If the Dowding vision for Western Australia had been implemented in full and carried through over the past 15 years, we would not be confronted with the skills shortage in this State. Fifteen years ago nobody talked about it. Peter Dowding not only spoke about it but also understood it. He had looked at the world and put in place a model that would have served us well. As I said, I do apologise to Peter. It was one of the great

mistakes - I have made plenty - in my political career. Even though I was new, those members of the Labor Party who are here will remember that there was a great division in the left, and had I changed my mind, probably four or five others would have changed their minds, and he would have retained his position as Premier. I have great regrets about that. I do not think those people who benefited from the dumping of either the three ministers or Peter Dowding have made any sort of contribution that he could not have done better, quite frankly. However, he was nonetheless a difficult person.

The trip and the journey through the Parliament have been interesting. I am one of the few people in a Westminster Parliament who has ever moved a vote of no-confidence in a Speaker. I do not think it is any secret that a previous Speaker, Jim Clarko, and I were not close personal friends. I used to use the old adage that he ran around the State telling lies about me, and I ran around the State telling the truth about him, and he always came out worse than I did. Nonetheless, he was an interesting character whom I personally did not like and who I did not think was up to the Speaker's job. I took a bit of a fancy on one of the Commission on Government matters and moved a vote of no-confidence in the Speaker, knowing full well that if I went to Caucus, I would get rolled because people do not like doing those things. Therefore, I just stood and did it. It was interesting how people fell into line behind it. There is a message there somewhere.

I want to get some of these things out of the way before I go on to some of the lighter sides. There have been a couple of other controversies. One was that I was actually thrown out of the Parliament for telling the truth. I think that might be a bit of a first in the Westminster system. I actually accused a minister of telling lies, and he vehemently denied it, which was ironic, because I was standing with a letter from the Insurance Council of Australia Ltd containing the facts that demonstrated he was telling the Parliament lies. When I tried to quote it, I was kicked out because a member is not allowed to say that a minister is telling lies. Therefore, I was ejected for telling the truth. I did my two days. Of course, being somewhat stubborn and hot-tempered, I walked right back in, only to get booted out again for another three days for having a go at the Speaker.

Mr P.G. Pental interjected.

Mr L. GRAHAM: I know it would come as a great shock to the member for South Perth.

One of the other controversies - I will deal with these - was, as some will recall, that our then Governor, Michael Jeffery, gave a speech about single parenthood. My wife had died shortly before that, and I know that my children, who saw the speech delivered on television, found it offensive and hurtful, as did I. Therefore, I did what I thought was a reasonable thing, and I took it up in an Address-in-Reply speech. I think I said that, at best, the Governor was ill-informed and, at worst, he was a bigot. That attracted the media's headlines. It was again a bit of a first because members of Parliament did not hook into Governors in those days. Now that he is Governor-General of Australia he has launched into the abortion debate in a partisan way. I have personally reconciled with the Governor-General. We have had some fun. He had dinner in Port Hedland during the town's centenary. He invited about a dozen people to a private dinner. We had a lovely chat with him and his wife and made our peace. He said at the end of it, "Well, Graham, I'm going down now to let the fireworks off. Would you like to accompany me?" Being the cheeky bugger that I am I said, "Look, sir, I ain't going anywhere near anything explosive 'til I see which way you're pointing it!" He went to the Slim Dusty concert and we had a ton of fun. However, I must say that if I had my time over again and those circumstances again arose, I would take the same approach. I think the Governor was out of line. I think he is out of line now on the abortion debate. I wish the bloke would learn that the office that he holds gained the respect that it has because his predecessors did not involve themselves in partisan political debate, and that is how it should be.

The second controversy was a relatively recent one; it was when I used parliamentary privilege to raise Peter Natrass's family affairs. I found the response to that interesting. Curiously enough, in the 80 contacts that I had from members of the public, the feedback went 78 in favour of what I had done and two violently opposed to what I had done. Having said that, I count that as a major mistake. Given all those circumstances again, I would not do that again. I thought the public had a right to know. It probably did, but all in all I would rather someone else had done that. I count that as a mistake. I wish that I had not done it. Notwithstanding that I got a lot of public support - there were media shows and so on - the reason that I wish I had not done it is that the five or six very important people on whose opinions I base my standing of myself all thought worse of me for having done it. That is an important consideration as a member of Parliament. I deeply regret having done that.

I guess we then come to what I call my three Ds, which were the really difficult periods that I have had to deal with in my life. The first was obviously the death of my wife. People who know me closely know that shortly after that event my attitude to things changed significantly. If I could pass on anything to people from that terrible event, it is that it focuses your mind on what is really important. Once you start to focus on the things that are really important in your life and other people's lives, a lot of the crap that we go through in this place is just that; it is frustrating, annoying and petty. I do not think that I have tried to hide that I find a lot of it frustrating, annoying and petty. People sometimes take that as being partisan, but that is quite wrong.

I then had quite a long period of raising my children on my own. They are here tonight. I am very proud of my children. They have been dealt a lot of life's difficulties, not one of the smallest difficulties being their father.

Reprinted from Hansard

Mr P.G. Pandal: I have been admiring them. Their mother must have been a lovely looking woman!

Mr L. GRAHAM: She was. They grew up in a small country town with a dad who was a prominent job, then a prominent sportsman, then a prominent union official and then a prominent member of Parliament. That brings with it some difficulties in a little country town. I think that they have all handled that moderately well. They then had to deal with the death of their mother. I think that they have all dealt with that moderately well. They then had to get over being raised by their father. I think that they are all trying to work their way through that now. They are fantastic kids and I am very proud of the three of them. My little grandson, Brayden - g'day, mate - is the absolute apple of my eye.

The second D, as I call it, was my divorce. That was hurtful. I will not say any more about that. Divorces are always hurtful. The bright side of the divorce is that I have come across an old friend of mine again, Christine. We are now in a deep and serious relationship.

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: Not so old!

Mr L. GRAHAM: She is an old friend; she is not old. Come on, Cheryl, give me a break! She is fantastic and I am very happy.

The third D was my dumping by the Labor Party. I have laughed and joked with people about whether I should tip a bucket on Jock Ferguson. I am not going to, because, quite frankly, I do not care. I am bitterly disappointed that when the party was confronted with either a personal axe to grind or supporting someone who had been electorally successful and loyal to the Labor Party, it chose the former. That is hurtful. I am constantly amazed at how political parties think they can treat people in that way and then continue to demand loyalty. It is a two-way street. I am over that, believe it or not. I have no axe to grind. In a lot of ways, being dumped from the Labor Party is the best thing to have happened in my political career. I said during my contribution to the Address-in-Reply that I was not going to contest the 1993 election because I did not like this place, I did not want to come back and I did not want to be involved in the anger that followed the Peter Dowding situation. I wanted to finish my career then and I was going away. My late wife talked me back into it. By God, if I had known in 1993 what it was like to be an Independent I would have become one in 1992!

All members of political parties should do themselves a favour - I am not anti political parties; I understand they are necessary in our system - and take their hats and blinkers off and start to get their heads around why the political parties' votes are plummeting in this country. Members should think about that and start to apply some logic. They should think about why they all sound like Bill and Ben the flowerpot men whenever they speak. It is because they are conditioned by the organisation. I apply for an extension of time.

[Leave granted for the member's time to be extended.]

Mr L. GRAHAM: Becoming an Independent frees up a member in ways that he cannot even begin to imagine. I had 40 per cent more time when I was not in the ALP. I did not have to sit in meetings talking to people who knew nothing about the issues in my electorate but had a view and had the numbers so I had to talk to them. It is fantastic. I can now go and talk to people in my constituency and make a decision; that is what I do. It is that simple. I represent the people in my electorate. I am sure the other Independents agree with me. One's standing in public is so different as an Independent. It is quite amazing. I was enthralled by it.

I have lived and worked in Port Hedland for a quarter of a century, and I was amazed when I met people. I would say, "Gee, how long have you been in town?" They would say, "Fifty years." I would say, "I have never come across you before." They would say, "No, you're in the Labor Party; I wouldn't come near you." It is amazing. Members should try it.

I do have to make one point about the wisdom of the party. That decision to dump me cost the Labor Party its safest seat, which is still at risk - more than the party realises. It cost the party an upper House seat. Those people who pushed that case have twice put forward a Labor Party candidate and it has twice cost them the federal seat of Kalgoorlie. They might like to think about that. The group that the Speaker and I were associated with had a bit of influence in the north west. We held every seat - the federal seat and the upper House seat - and we had a majority on every shire council in the north west. There is nothing of that left. One day the Labor Party might like to consider that, as a party that was actually born in the bush by working people. It is losing its representation and direction.

A funny thing happened to me at about the time of the preselection when I was walking down the street in Marble Bar, Australia's hottest town. There is a character in that town by the name of Smokey Gannon who writes to every newspaper in Australia. Smokey has been a Labor man for about 100 years, or for the first third of his life. At that time Fran Logan was involved in a controversy in Cockburn and there was the Darryl Wookey and John D'Orazio run-in in Perth. There were about a dozen people around and Smokey pulled me up in the main street and said, "Shit, Lazza, what are those whackers up to down there?" I said, "What do you mean, Smokey; what are you talking about?" He said, "Well, firstly, mate, they bloody dump you and, if that's not bad enough, I have just found out that bloody Fran is a bloke and Darryl is a sheila. What's going on in the Labor Party?"

I talk about preselection because people ask me about it. If I could turn back the clock, I would not change too much. I could have been preselected. I knew that. However, to be preselected I had to go and kiss the bums of some people whose bums I would rather kick. That is the real reason I was booted out of the party, and I would not change that tomorrow. I was brought up never to take a backward step from the school bully, and I do not think I ever have in my life. I could have had an easier life, but what would have happened if I had done that? I would probably be a cabinet minister by now, but I can tell members in all honesty that I would not swap the position of the having won the seat of Pilbara as an Independent with an absolute majority to be the Premier. It is an enormous feeling that a person cannot translate to other people. That campaign was fantastic. In all the campaigns and all the things that I have been involved with during my life, I have never been in a position where at the end of it I was knocking back money and campaign donations; the donations were unfettered. We had in excess of 300 campaign workers; people who would literally do anything we asked of them. One bloke did about a 3 000-kilometre round trip out of his own pocket into the desert to man a polling booth for us. I have never been confronted with that. The support that was put forward across the north west is truly one of the most humbling things that has ever happened to me in my life. I cannot explain it to people. Winning elections is good, but winning elections with an absolute majority as an Independent in the biggest electorate in this State is almost unbeatable, and I thank every one of those people. With regard to their contribution to my life and the people of Port Hedland, I said in my column in a newspaper up there that I do not owe them much; I only owe them everything. I drove up there with my wife nearly 30 years ago with all that I owned in the boot of a car. It is funny because I do not even own a car now, so I do not know that I have progressed that much - I have put in an order on one. However, everything that I have got over the past 30 years has basically come from the people of Port Hedland and the north west, and I have been elected to every position that I have held for the past 25 years.

I want to pay my respects to my long-time electorate officer, Lauri Glocke, and her husband, Roger, and their family. I love the way people talk about their electorate officers, but a person could not ask for better staff than I have had in Lauri. I do not know if any members have been on the receiving end of it, but I tend to be a bit of an erratic sleeper -

Mr P.G. Pandal interjected.

Mr L. GRAHAM: No, that was only "sleeper". I tend to spend a lot of time behind the wheel of a car thinking, so when I get near a phone wherever I happen to be I tend to ring people, and that might happen at three or four o'clock in the morning. Lauri has had to put up with that for 10 years. She has twice resigned but she has never once complained; she has been fantastic, and so has the whole family.

My office in Port Hedland has been a constant point of reference for everybody; High Court judges have used it, native title tribunals have worked in it and Liberal Party and Labor Party meetings have been held there. I have truly run it as a constituency office, and I am going to miss that; it has been fantastic.

Just on Port Hedland, I remember when the member for Kingsley, as the Minister for the Environment, visited. Some lunatic in the Environmental Protection Authority had decided that a bloke could not grow pearls on one of the islands in the port area. There are great big limestone cliffs there and the bloke from the EPA thought that the turtles could climb up the cliff and lay their eggs there or something, rather than use the beaches around the place. We had this problem, so I brought in Cheryl Edwardes as the minister to show her. It was also the Black Rock Stakes Day at which the big charity wheelbarrow race is run. Howard Sattler was the guest master of ceremonies on the day, and of course the minister was running late, so I was also running late. I was supposed to be back presenting bloody trophies at the Black Rock Stakes Day. I wondered what I was going to do. I jumped on the phone and rang Sattler and I said to him, "Howard, look mate, I am caught up with Cheryl Edwardes. We are out at Downes Island blah, blah, blah. I will be back but can you give my apologies to everyone." Howard, as only Howard Sattler can, and given that half of Port Hedland was at those presentations, jumped on the microphone, did his stuff and then said, "Look, I would like to give apologies. Your local member, Larry Graham, is in the sand hills with Cheryl Edwardes." I will tell the member for Kingsley about the rumours in town after that!

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: It improved my reputation no end!

Mr L. GRAHAM: I do not know whether the member for Kingsley's stocks went up or mine did!

Mr P.G. Pandal: Is that the year your majority increased?

Mr L. GRAHAM: Something did!

It has been an interesting political life. I have done a bit while I have been in this place. It escapes people's notice, but sometimes we as members of Parliament actually do things. I say that with my tongue firmly in my mouth.

There is one thing of which I am most proud. Believe it or not, I am reticent about mentioning this, as I do not want to appear like old Rumpole of the Bailey in the Penge Bungalow murders as if it was the only thing I ever did. Back in the early 1990s I chaired a study called the Pilbara 21 study. If members went through the mining companies' current submissions on their extension programs, they would find that each one has used the Pilbara 21 study as a reference document. I am very proud of that study. The recommendations from that study resulted in a change to the State's energy policy - I have listened with great interest to the current energy debates - and the State's tourism and regional development policies. It was a very good report.

Another initiative that I am particularly proud of is the select committee inquiry into Wittenoom. I note that the Government has again opened that can of worms; it will live to regret it. That can was screwed down, locked down and going nowhere, but the Government has let all the worms back out again. I believe the Government does not fully understand what it has done. The only reason it might get away with it is that Lang Hancock is dead. I tell the Government that the whole of the Wittenoom issue took on a life of its own when Lang Hancock was still around.

Flowing on from that inquiry, I was able to get a private member's Bill through the Parliament, which 40 years on has finally given some justice to mesothelioma and asbestosis victims. I am very proud of that. I am disappointed that emergency management legislation has not come into the Parliament, but I hope it will. A lot of the work I and the member for Avon did on the Public Accounts Committee was at the time the best in the world. I mean "the world", because there had been a big debate with the former British Commonwealth about the role of Public Accounts Committees. We were the pre-eminent Public Accounts Committee that set the standard for a long time. We conducted inquiries into financial assistance to industry; telehealth; telemedicine; heritage payments made by the now Attorney General, which would be a good one to revisit if he wants a fight; and Global Dance Foundation, before which the then Premier appeared. All those inquiries were conducted properly and professionally.

Mr M.W. Trenorden: You should be very proud of your contribution to the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr L. GRAHAM: I thank the Leader of the National Party. Another thing I did, which went relatively unnoticed, was change the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act so that parents could call their children whichever name they liked. I do not know whether members noticed that innocuous little piece of legislation going through this place. Prior to that legislation, bureaucrats in the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages could dictate to people what form their children's names would take, which was an absurd hangover from the sixteenth century. We changed that.

There is no doubt that a group of us from the north west involved in the agreement Acts debate raised the question of royalties to such a standard that whoever is in government in coming years will deal with it. I do not think the Treasurer can ignore it any longer. Try as he may, he will deal with it.

I have listened with interest to much of what people have said about country members. About three o'clock one morning, while I was driving in my first electorate from Port Hedland and Tom Price, I formed a view about city members. At that time a river flooded, as they do, that I had to drive across. I staked two tyres on the way up the other side of the river and nearly lost my car. There I was from three o'clock to six o'clock in the morning, changing tyres and all of that stuff so that I could drive to a meeting at nine o'clock in the morning, and I thought what a luxury it was to be a city member of Parliament. I tried to ring a few city members when I got to Tom Price but I could not get through. I will finish with a big thanks to those people around this place who have forgiven me my bad temper. I particularly thank the staff of Parliament House. Those with whom I do not get along know who they are; indeed, with me people never die not knowing. The staff of this place are fantastic people who work to help and service us. To some of the newer members in this place I make this point: the staff are not servants and they are not here to be treated like servants. They are good people who have good jobs and they do them fantastically well. I thank every one of them.

[Applause.]