



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Alison Xamon MLC
(Member for East Metropolitan)

Loan Bill 2009

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 24 June 2009

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Second Reading

HON ALISON XAMON (East Metropolitan) [7.58 pm]: Thank you, Mr President, and congratulations on your election as President of the Legislative Council.

I wish to acknowledge that we are meeting on Nyoongah land, and that it has always been and always will be Nyoongah land. I also wish to convey my respects to the traditional elders of this land. These are elders who all too frequently are not afforded the respect they deserve, but today I honour them.

I stand here this evening humbled and honoured to be the first Greens (WA) member ever elected to represent the East Metropolitan Region in this state Parliament. Whilst the Greens over our history have at one time or another had representation in the other five regions, it is the East Metropolitan Region that, until last year's state election, had remained out of our reach. Obviously, I am pleased and somewhat relieved that this is no longer the case. I also know that this is shared by a great many others, some of whom are in the gallery tonight. The east metro region I know has been needing a Greens' voice to represent it, to give voice to the unique social and environmental challenges that confront it, but to also provide a different set of solutions to deal with the challenges that confront this region. Personally, I feel an affinity with the east metro region and a sense of place like nowhere else.

I was born in Mundaring, in the hills, where my father was the minister for the Mundaring Methodist parish. Being a child of a minister my family moved frequently, and subsequently I grew up mainly in the flatlands of east metro, where my father preached in the parishes of Belmont, Gosnells and Forrestfield. For some kids, their happiest memories are of weekends spent at the beach, but for me my most precious memories are of the hills: the weekends in John Forrest National Park, swimming in the Bickley Dam—and pulling the leeches off afterwards—driving through the hills of Armadale or Roleystone, or swimming in the absolutely freezing cold Lake Leschenaultia. My parents loved the hills and it did not take much for me to love the hills in the same way. Of course, this was all some time ago, when the Perth hills were still allowed to be bush, before multiple developments were able to grab hold and turn our hills into something different, something unsustainable. But this is something I will speak more of later.

I did not grow up with money. In those days ministers and their families relied heavily on the goodwill of their parishioners, and we lived in areas where the parishioners did not have a lot more than we did anyway. I understand it is different now for those who work in the church, but in those days it was unusual for me to have new clothes or new toys or new anything. I never knew

expensive holidays. We never really had much. It meant that from a very early age I developed a first-hand understanding of what it felt like to go without. Looking back, I know I was actually one of the lucky ones. We always had food, and, in my early life, at least, a stable home life. Even then, as a child, I was aware that for some of the kids in my street, our house, which was the manse, was the safe house. I have a vivid memory of one of the kids from our street cowering in our house too terrified to go home, so even at a young age, I was aware that for many of the families—in even my little street, in my suburb—life was a struggle and violence and alcoholism were a part of that life.

Some of these suburbs are becoming gentrified now. They certainly were not then. But I am disappointed to say that even now so many decades later, some of the suburbs I roamed as a child are as economically repressed as they were back then. It seems that significant parts of east metro have been left behind, despite being part of a state and part of a capital city that has experienced so much prosperity over the years. When one has grown up with not much, one does not forget how that felt. I know that for me that has culminated not only in a determination never to feel that way again, but also to help others by ensuring that the root causes and the debilitating effects of poverty are addressed. I am not proud that in many respects east metro can claim to contain the bulk of the poverty belt of Perth, and I am always mindful that simply living in the metropolitan area does not of itself guarantee fair access to essential services for everyone.

Despite my family's lack of wealth when I was growing up, I had one unique and special advantage over many others; that is, I had educated parents who instilled in me the enormous value of an education. My mum had been a high school teacher, and even now is finishing her doctorate in psychology. My dad was the first person in his family ever to go to university. It is well documented that access to a quality education is one of the primary solutions to addressing the cycle of poverty. We simply have to do more to improve the status and funding to our public education. It is unacceptable that in 2009 we still have high schools in the East Metropolitan Region that do not cater for students beyond year 10. It is unacceptable that this occurs in our regional areas, but it is also happening here in Perth. What sort of message does this send to the young people in these areas? It is simply not good enough. Our teachers are exhausted and demoralised. After years working for the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia, I witnessed this firsthand. Parents are making the expensive decision to send their children to private schools, not necessarily, as some would simplistically suggest, to reinforce existing class privilege, but often because they feel that they have been left with no choice, with our public schools allowed to deteriorate to unacceptable levels, starved of essential funds for programs and basic maintenance. We need to do better.

I am supportive of initiatives to establish a university in Midland or Armadale, although clearly it would need to be accessible to those without money. I applaud the establishment of the university campuses near areas such as Rockingham and Mandurah, and now it is east metro's turn. A university in these areas would both practically allow eastern suburbs residents to more readily access a tertiary education, but it also sends an important message of aspiration to the youth of these areas who are currently well under the average in terms of accessing a tertiary education.

We also need to be serious about training and about our apprenticeship regimes. This time last year we were bemoaning the lack of qualified tradespeople. I sincerely hope that the inevitable bust which follows the boom is not allowed to be the excuse to deprioritise funding for training opportunities. As I see it, an increase in the unemployment levels makes it all the more important to invest in training up our Australian workforce now. For the same reasons, I remain an ardent advocate for ensuring that apprentice wages are liveable wages. Many apprentices are adults and have families to support. Let us invest in training and apprenticeship options. Let us invest in our future now.

In speaking about preparing for the future, I of course need to speak about the biggest crisis that is facing our future. Clearly, I am talking about climate change. I am not going to use this speech to present the case for climate change. It is here. It is real. It is the scientific consensus. I was one of the people who was talking about this 20 years ago, when it was known as global warming. It was real then, too. Although it is a great shame that successive governments did not use those 20 years to begin the transition to a low carbon future, we know now that public sentiment is well and truly calling for urgent action to be taken, and taken now. There is a clear mandate and an expectation that we will work on the solutions. What a great opportunity—because the solutions to climate change are actually really exciting. The transition to sustainable cities and towns gives us the opportunity to move into a cleaner, post-peak oil future that creates real jobs and ultimately more affordable and liveable transport, housing and communities.

Now is the time to invest in renewable energy—not as a side option, but to make the move to renewable-powered baseload. We can most certainly do it. I would suggest that any nay-sayers make a point of sitting down with the renewable industries and getting informed. Let us work with those innovative companies that are screaming out for investment and infrastructure support of the kind far too often extended to our outdated coal and petroleum industries. Let us make the orderly transition to renewable energy now, create the jobs now, and retrain those workers dependent on coal and polluting industries now. Any delay only carries with it a human and environmental cost that is unforgivable. We can do better, and we should do better. Coal has no future.

To be clear, there is no room for nuclear power anywhere within a post-carbon future either. Apart from being a dangerous industry, with a mind-boggling legacy of nuclear waste that is with us for thousands of years and countless generations, it is, frankly, a complete crock to suggest that it is a carbon-free technology. Roxby Downs uranium mine will use one million litres of diesel a day just to create the open cut to get into the ore body. Once we calculate the nuclear cycle from mining through to decommissioning of a nuclear power plant, any suggestion that it is carbon-low or even carbon-neutral technology becomes exposed as the farce that it is. It is not a solution to climate change or our energy needs, and we need to get past it. Although I understand that the nuclear industry is an experienced advocate for itself, loose with the truth and seductive in its promises of easy, albeit very short-term money, this is not an industry we want to sleep with.

Sustainable cities mean the exciting prospect of sustainable housing—housing that makes full use of both passive and active solar design, and that uses a variety of renewable energy options. We can even get discreet wind turbines on domestic housing these days. We need houses that conserve water and catch the little water that we have. We need a gross feed-in tariff. Those individuals who take it upon themselves to invest in renewable energy within their own homes, to relieve the state of the need to invest in broader power infrastructure, should be rewarded and encouraged. We want this renewable energy infrastructure on every roof. The truly exciting thing about housing that has been sustainably designed is that it is ultimately cheaper to live in. As our electricity prices inevitably begin to soar, the importance of this for our most disadvantaged becomes all the more urgent.

Sustainable cities also mean real investment in our public transport options. When it comes to public transport, I am a strong believer in the adage: if we create it, they will come. We have seen this with the Mandurah line, and we have seen this with our CAT buses in the city. If we invest in light rail options, buses of all sizes that are appropriate for the area and usage, and bicycle paths, just to name a few, the experience from cities around the world is that people will use them. The key to a successful public transport system is frequency and reliability. The last thing we should be doing at this point is anything that would suggest pulling back on the meagre services that already exist. Such moves would hit east metro particularly hard. Within the metropolitan area, east metro has the largest number of people who would be the most adversely affected by increasing oil prices. Helping

people out of their car dependency by providing viable alternatives is one of the keys to addressing climate change. On a side note, I look forward to the day when the railway stations on the eastern line start to look as flash as those on the other lines.

As well as reducing our carbon emissions, let us also look to preserve those carbon sinks that still remain. In east metro in particular this would be our precious Darling Scarp. As I mentioned at the beginning, I love the hills and so do the residents who live there and the multiple flat-landers who want to recreate there. But our hills are currently subject to planning regimes that were created at a time when their value as bushland and water catchments and, simply, the rich biodiversity of the area clearly were not fully appreciated. The hills are not ecologically designed to carry dense developments. The irony of current plans to create dense development enclaves in the hills is that the Perth inner suburbs are simultaneously being denied essential infrastructure on the basis that the density there is simply too low. It is a lose-lose situation. Let us stop planning dense developments in the middle of nowhere without considering access to services and the protection of precious ecosystems. Perth is drying and we need to preserve what water catchments remain, and we need to become sensible about our water usage—both how we use it and how we reuse it. Adding more and more desalination plants is not the answer—certainly not for as long as they are driven by baseload energy powered by coal. The short-term solution is to cut down on the enormous water wastage currently occurring and provide incentives for all water users to embrace world's best practice water efficiency. Then, if we need to look at desalination options, let us look at some of the emerging technologies.

But back to the hills. We need to remember that much of the hills contain Indigenous sacred sites and that when we develop, quarry and pollute, we are desecrating Indigenous history and their religious sites as surely as though our own churches were being destroyed. The suffering that our Indigenous people have experienced and continue to experience is a source of great shame. We all know the shameful statistics around life expectancy, health and education, imprisonment and, of course, deaths in custody. The injustices simply have to stop. As we know, the injustices confronting our Indigenous peoples is a statewide issue with serious issues, particularly in the regions. Even in east metro we have our own history of injustice against the Swan Valley Nyungah community. The members of this community have been robbed of their lands and had their families separated and made homeless. They deserve a better deal. They deserve justice. Sorry was a start, but it is so far away from where we need to end up to truly become an inclusive and reconciled community.

East metro is a diverse community and is the most heavily populated of all the six upper house regions. I love this diversity. I love that there is so much difference to celebrate. East metro has large numbers of migrant communities from many religions and backgrounds from all over the world. I welcome those migrants who have chosen to make Perth home, as I also welcome those refugees who have made their way here, escaping terror and persecution, even if by means that, although legal under international law, are unfairly labelled as illegal here.

I remain a strong ally to the many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer-identifying members of our community. I have long campaigned to uphold the human rights of the LGBTI community, and my commitment to this now that I am in Parliament is stronger than ever. Homophobia is abhorrent to me and utterly contrary to the Christian values of love, compassion and acceptance with which I was raised. I am a huge supporter of families—nuclear families, blended families, extended families, families with two mums, families with two dads, families run by grandparents or aunts and uncles, foster families, and sole-parent families. There is no one family form that is more important than another. Families come in all different ways, sometimes by choice and sometimes not, but all are worthy of our respect. In particular I will pay tribute to those parents who are doing it alone. Today I am a married mother of three, but this was not always the way.

Thirteen years ago I was a sole parent, and I was even on the pension. As far as I was concerned my daughter was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me, so it was baffling and insulting that some within our community sought to treat me and my little family as though we were substandard or inferior as a family. It was a ridiculous and offensive prejudice, but very real. In contrast to those people, I salute those parents who undertake the hardest job in the world all by themselves. For as long as I am in Parliament, they will have an advocate who will support them and recognise the valuable contributions they are making.

I am pleased to note that a bill to incorporate breastfeeding into the Equal Opportunity Act has been introduced into the Assembly. I look forward to the opportunity to debate this long-overdue amendment in the Council. It is extraordinary that in this day and age women are still being discriminated against for feeding their children, and I wonder at the perversity of the mind that equates breastfeeding with a sexual act. I would have introduced the bill myself but the long lag between being elected and taking up my seat meant that I was beaten to the punch. On that note, I also look forward to debating the legislation for the long-overdue introduction of fixed-term elections.

The Equal Opportunity Act, with the protections it affords us, is an absolute necessity. Although I understand that some members of the Council question the need for such an act, I can assure them that, unfortunately, the sorts of protections the act affords are all too necessary. I certainly hope that one day this act will become redundant. I am eagerly awaiting the day when discrimination becomes a thing of the past.

I have already mentioned that I used to work for a union. Actually, I used to work for a number of unions, both white and blue-collar, and was in the union movement right up until I started my term here. In my time I have been an organiser, an industrial officer and recently a union lawyer. Members might think it is strange that a Greens (WA) member has such a long union background. They should not. Many people in the Greens and who vote for the Greens are very involved in the union movement. The Greens are wholly supportive of collective action and support the right of workers to collectively bargain through their unions for a better deal. Quite often the better deal that unions want for their members also translates to a better deal for the community. As a case in point, the current campaign by the Australian Services Union for a better deal for workers in community services, if successful—I certainly hope it will be—will not only ensure a better deal for those amazing workers who hold together our community services sector, but also translate to a better service for their clients, who are often our most marginalised citizens. That means a better deal for the community as a whole. It is a win-win situation.

The unions have been responsible for leading the charge on workplace safety. If there is one thing all workers have the fundamental right to expect, it is that they will return home alive and intact at the end of the day. Unions should have the right to ensure that work sites are safe. There needs to be stronger and more serious penalties for those employers who are blasé, indifferent or even downright negligent about the safety of their employees. Although in many ways working for unions can be a thankless task, I always felt when I went home every day that I had been a part of something important. Upholding the human rights of workers, helping those in crisis and defending workers from unfair discriminatory practices felt like worthwhile work to me. Over the years I have accumulated many horror stories about the treatment of individual workers. In particular, I am struck by the sheer level of discrimination experienced by so many working mothers and pregnant women. It is hard to believe, but we really have not come very far.

Unfortunately, my father, whom I have already mentioned, is not here tonight. He died many years ago. The circumstances of his death have had a permanent effect on me, and after years of personal reconciliation, I bring this personal experience to my public life. I am talking about the debilitating effects of mental illness and the devastating effects of suicide. The most recent research on the rates

of mental illness indicates that mental illness will strike not just one in five Australians, as previously suggested, which in itself is an incredibly high number of people, but one in five Australians within any 12-month period. That is an enormous number of people who are suffering at any given time, and reason enough to be prioritising strategies to prevent mental illness, as well as ensuring that those who find themselves in its grip receive appropriate and urgent attention. More than the sheer numbers involved, the seriousness of the potential effects of mental illness means that we should be paying far closer attention to addressing it. For those who are suffering from mental illness—I am acutely aware that we could be talking about the various levels of depression to the most serious forms of mental illness—it is to be stuck in a life half lived. Please remember, whether due to life circumstance, chemistry, injury or something else, mental illness has the potential to strike anyone at any point in their life. I am heartened at the prospect that the important issue of suicide prevention may be starting to get the attention it deserves. It is about not only saving the lives of those who would otherwise die, but also saving the lives of those who are left behind. Be under no illusion, suicide destroys families, and children do not bounce back; they just delay the effects of the trauma.

In my early 20s I became a trained playleader and worked with children, many of whom came from stable homes and many of whose families were in crisis and had been referred by the equivalent of the Department for Child Protection. I understand the critical importance of the need to fund early intervention for those children and families who have experienced trauma. Money spent on early intervention is money saved in the long term. Many of the people we see today who are self-medicating with drugs or alcohol are exactly the people who should have been given help in the first place. For these people jail is not the solution, but programs to assist with the underlying causes of the distress and trauma are. To treat all those with substance abuse problems as though they are criminals is to abdicate our humanity.

It is true that I am a person who cares about a great many things. Members should count themselves lucky; if I wanted to be super indulgent I would regale them with my views on the travesty of mandatory sentencing, homelessness, the amazing work of our community legal sector and why it deserves to get better funding, protection of our south west forests, aged care, pay equity, the Burrup, our rivers and government accountability and transparency, and the list goes on. Hopefully, I will get the opportunity to regale members with my views sometime in the next four years. I make no apologies; I am not a single issue person, anymore than the Greens (WA) has ever been a single issue party.

For the last five minutes of my contribution, I will focus on that all important part where I get to thank a whole lot of people who most members do not know, but I do. These people have believed in me personally and in what the Greens are trying to do. I should warn my lovely friends, and they know who they are, that they may not get a mention, and I am sorry about that.

My first thanks will go to my parents. My father, who in the too short a time I had him in my life, instilled in me love, compassion and genuine acceptance of others and that the need to do good works is the purpose for which we exist. I thank my mother—my strong, intelligent mother—for being there, even though she is not here tonight, and for teaching me that a woman's place is wherever she feels she can make the most positive difference. Sometimes that has been with my babies, but right now it is in this Parliament.

I also wish to pay tribute to former Senator Jo Vallentine, who first inspired me to become politically active over two decades ago when I was just a teenager. It is to her and her good works that I was inspired to join the Greens in the first place, almost 20 years ago. I am humbled to now call her my friend and mentor, and I thank her for being the brave and inspiring woman that she is.

Ultimately, I am here because of an election. Obviously, I thank all those grassroots Greens members who supported me in preselection, as I thank those who encouraged me to put my hand up in the first place. I thank wholeheartedly those many people who got involved in the east metro campaign. Those people who were at those meetings know that there were too many people involved for me to mention today. Obviously throughout the duration of the campaign there were hundreds of people who leafleted, campaigned and handed out how-to-vote pamphlets in east metro alone. I will specifically thank those brave souls who put up their hand to be candidates to the east metro campaign. Thanks go to Chris Dickinson, Hsien Harper, Sally Palmer, Michael Boswell, Jenni Bowman, Toni Warden, Denise Hardie, Owen Davies, Caroline Wielinga, Luke Edmonds, Jennie Carter, Caz Bowman, Louise Judge, Glen George, Damian Douglas-Meyer and, finally, Steve Wolff, who could take over from me should I be hit by the proverbial bus at any time in the next four years.

For going over and above in hours of unpaid work, thanks and love must go to Sandra Wright, Téa Brennan, Kayt Davies, Margo Beilby, Dominique Lieb, Gemma Carter and Giorgia Johnson. I thank my mother-in-law, Sue Edmonds, for hours of babysitting at terribly short notice. For those who I have not mentioned, particularly those who ran the central campaign, I apologise, but this was a campaign of so many that I am sure they will understand I simply cannot mention everyone.

Finally, there is my little family to whom I owe the greatest debt of all. To my three children, Miette, Jackson and Blake, I thank them for their understanding that mummy is going to yet another meeting. I thank them for being so well behaved in the meetings that I brought them along to. I hope that one day they will understand, as I know Miette is starting to, that I am trying to create a better world and future for them.

My greatest thanks, of course, is to my amazing husband, Luke Edmonds. I think in a world which often does not value women's public contribution and which too frequently ridicules or demeans men who take on the primary role as carer for their children, it takes a man of strong character to take on that role willingly. He is that man. I thank him for doing this. I thank him for supporting me and I thank him for loving me. I thank him for his sharp intellect, for the vigorous debates and for his commitment to the Greens' vision, which is as strong as mine. I would not want to do this if he was not there.

I look forward to working with the rest of my Green parliamentary team—Senators Scott Ludlam and Rachel Siewert and, of course, my colleagues Lynn MacLaren, Robin Chapple, Adele Carles and, in particular, our elder stateswoman Hon Giz Watson, who I thank for her ongoing support and guidance.

I also look forward to working with the rest of the members in this Council. I hope that we can do good things for this state and its people. I hope that together with the rest of my east metro councillors we can achieve good things for our wonderful region. I thank all those people in the gallery for coming out on this cold and dark night. Really, this is just the beginning. Thank you.

[Applause.]
