



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Batong Pham MLC
(Member for East Metropolitan)

Legislative Council

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HON BATONG PHAM (East Metropolitan) [7.31 pm]: It is a great privilege to be speaking today and to represent the people of the East Metropolitan Region. I take this opportunity to acknowledge my predecessor, senator-elect Hon Louise Pratt. I know that she will bring her well-known enthusiasm, work ethic and commitment to her new role in Canberra. She will capably and intelligently represent the issues of Western Australia, and I wish her every success in her new endeavour.

My journey to this place has been a remarkable one. In July last year I suffered a brain aneurism. I was taken to Royal Perth Hospital and the medical staff told my friends and family that the situation was grave and that my prospects were poor. While I am still undergoing some physical rehabilitation, the prognosis is excellent. Due to the world-class health care I received in the public health system, I am able to see my young sons Alban and Joseph and to be there for them when they reach their milestones. Every time members hear media stories about our health care system being in crisis, I ask them to remember that my miracle recovery is one of thousands that occur on an almost daily basis. I take this opportunity to thank so many people for their prayers and best wishes during my illness. I also express my gratitude to and admiration for the medical, nursing and physical therapy staff at Royal Perth Hospital. Their hard work and professionalism are world class. It is only fitting to say that the Gallop and Carpenter governments, using the medical expertise they established, have had the vision to invest record amounts of money in capital works. This means building new hospitals to ensure that the future health needs of Western Australians, wherever they live, can be met.

However, my great fortune began many years before that. I was born in Vietnam on 18 June 1967 in a small town called Ba Ria, which is 16 kilometres from Long Tan, where a famous battle was fought and won by Australian troops. Every time I hear a division sound, it brings back memories of my childhood. As a child, when I heard the sound of the siren, I would have to drop everything and bolt home for it was curfew time. In 1978, our family left Vietnam and everything behind. We went on a boat to seek our freedom. We were fortunate to reach the shores of Malaysia, for many others never made it to shore. We sailed on a small, unseaworthy 10-metre long by three-metre wide fishing boat that carried 75 passengers. In our search for freedom, we did not know what we were heading for. This fishing vessel was unfit to sail on the Swan River let alone to prance around on the open sea. On the second night of our escape journey in search of freedom we were hit by a storm. We all thought we were going to die. The Catholics were praying the "Our Father" to Jesus and "Hail Mary" to Mary, Mother of God, while the Buddhists were praying to Buddha seeking divine intervention. This was because we thought we had all reached the end of our journey. Our prayers were answered in a mysterious way when a World Vision ship appeared and rescued us. They

transferred all the boat people onto the bigger ship and looked after us well. At that time, under an international water agreement, the ship could not take us to shore. World Vision then purchased another vessel in Malaysia that was safe enough to take us to shore. The original fishing vessel sunk during that night. We were safely taken to shore on the new vessel. We were taken to the refugee camp on the east coast of Malaysia. It was only then that we realised how people sacrifice their lives in search of freedom and democracy, for many people never made it to shore or to freedom. While we were in the refugee camp we were interviewed by the United Nations and were given a clean bill of health as genuine refugees.

On 14 February 1979, we finally arrived in Australia. It was only when we stood on Australian soil that we realised that we were out of danger. We were driven from the Perth international airport to Graylands hostel, which was a place for newly arrived migrants. We stayed there for approximately five months. A lady by the name of Mary Clarke, who is now deceased, was a community nurse who looked after the newly arrived refugees. Mary approached my parents to find out whether we were keen to move to Midland to settle. She introduced us to the Franciscans, who helped us to stay in the house next to their parish. My family is forever grateful to and appreciative of the Clarke family and the Franciscans who helped us and welcomed us with open arms. They also gave us their support during the difficult moment upon our arrival in Australia. Mrs Clarke and her family would visit us during the week and often used to take our family to their hobby farm at Herne Hill.

Thirty years on, few would dispute that the Vietnamese community in Western Australia has made a huge contribution to the growth and prosperity of this state. As the first person of Vietnamese origin to stand in this place, I am extremely proud of my cultural heritage. I wonder how different things might have been had the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, listened to his cabinet colleague, John Howard, in 1977 when he spoke about accepting Vietnamese refugees into Australia. It was recently reported in *The Australian* newspaper that, according to my notes, he said, "We don't want too many of these people. We're doing this just for show, aren't we?"

In representing the East Metropolitan Region, I bring to this place my experience as a successful market gardener and small businessman, as a research officer and in community activism. I am extremely proud to be a member of the Labor Party team in this place. I joined the ALP in 1996. My dear friend Ted Cunningham asked me to join. I pay tribute to Ted Cunningham, who was my mentor and a great friend. I would not be in this place today delivering this speech if it had not been for him. I wish that he could be here with me tonight, but I know for certain that he is with me in spirit.

I first met Ted in 1995 at his office in Girrawheen. My family had some neighbourhood issues and, acting on their behalf, I approached the local member of Parliament, Ted Cunningham, for assistance. He welcomed me into his office and said, "Come in good person; come in." Through his warm and friendly manner we became good friends and it was Ted who introduced me to the Labor Party. I had an interest in politics and he became my mentor. It is because of his help and dedication that I am here today. Ted was a true politician. He was honest, approachable and a people person. People could find Ted anywhere between the tavern and the racecourse and even at the local TAB. He also attended school functions and participated in events such as mouse racing. He certainly loved his chocolate wheel. There is no doubt that Ted could be described as the "politician for all seasons". Through Ted's mentoring and advice I was able to gain a deep knowledge of politics. I will certainly carry out his wishes; that is, to be a hardworking member of Parliament who will always place people's concerns first. I will always be indebted to Ted for his knowledge, which he shared with me, and the courage that he gave me.

Over the years I have made many friends in the Australian Labor Party. I have assisted the party's elected members in helping many community members on a range of issues. I look forward to working closely with my colleagues in this place and thank them for their warm welcome.

Mr President, all that remains for me to do is to thank my many friends and colleagues who have helped and supported me and acted as my mentors over the years. Although the list is vast, there are some people who need special mention. First, I refer to Hon Michelle Roberts. I am very privileged to know Michelle and her family. She has been a great adviser, supporter and good friend. Michelle is a strong-minded person who has always been there for me when I have needed her help. Michelle and Greg, together with their family, are great people to have as friends and I will always value their friendship. Secondly, I refer to the federal member for Perth, Stephen Smith. Stephen is a great tactician. I greatly appreciate his friendship and support over the years. I am looking forward to working with him on state and federal issues. Thirdly, I refer to John D’Orazio, the member for Ballajura. It was a great privilege to be part of his staff as a research officer and also a friend. John, together with Ailsa, are the nicest people that I or anybody could meet. John always means what he says and says what he means. I will continue to value his and Ailsa’s friendship and support. Fourthly, I refer to Margaret Quirk. I had the privilege of working for Margaret Quirk as a research officer for almost six years. There is no doubt that I gained enormous experience from Margaret when I was employed by her. She inherited the seat of Girrawheen from Ted Cunningham. She has done an exceptional job and built a strong foundation that one could call “The Great Wall of Girrawheen”, and it cannot be conquered by invaders.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank my wife, Thuy; my mother, Maria; my father, Paul; my brothers David, Trung, Hau and Francis; and my sisters Trang and Hien. I would not be here today without the help of my parents. They made sacrifices to give their children the opportunity of a better life. I thank them for the way they brought up my brothers, sisters and me. They taught us to be respectful, helpful, honest and hardworking people.

I also thank my friends Bobby Tanasoski, Zoran Coseski, Nathan Hondros, Damian Kamolich, Marino Salinas and Jonathan Melanie. The sacrifices they have made for me, the hard work they have done for me and the love they have given me are very precious to me. I look forward to sharing the next exciting phase of my life with them.

Mr President, I will strive towards improving the many issues that arise in my region. The two main issues of concern that have been raised with me by my constituents are public transport and the high cost of housing. The Morley contract area was the worst-performing contract area in terms of overall customer satisfaction. I am also concerned at the low level of housing affordability in both the rental and home ownership markets and the increase in homelessness in our society. I believe that this government has the responsibility to take a proactive approach in developing strategies to increase home affordability and, in that respect, needs to be applauded for the shared equity loan scheme that was recently expanded to help first home buyers. However, we cannot sit back on our laurels; we must continue to find new and innovative ways to assist the community on the issue of housing.

In concluding and having much to be grateful for, I am reminded of the observation of former United States President John F. Kennedy, who once said —

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.

Mr President, in my work in this place I trust that my actions and words will reflect that sentiment.

[Applause.]
