



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Lisa Baker MLA
(Member for Maylands)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

Inaugural Speech

Ms Lisa Baker MLA

(Member for Maylands)

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [7.34 pm]: I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to their elders. I also formally congratulate the member for Moore on his appointment to the position of Speaker of this house.

Mr Speaker and fellow members, to stand here today as the member for Maylands is an immense honour. Of all the speeches I will make in this place, I do not think I will ever forget how proud and privileged—and nervous—I feel at this moment, giving this, my inaugural speech.

The first thing I must do is thank the people of the Maylands electorate for placing their trust in the Australian Labor Party and in me to represent their interests in state Parliament. It is a responsibility which I take very seriously and a job I promise to undertake with commitment, enthusiasm and integrity. I wish to thank the many volunteers who worked so hard to ensure the success of my campaign; my friends, family and supporters who attended countless campaign meetings, hand-delivered letters and brochures and then, still smiling, turned up on election day to staff polling booths across the electorate. In particular, I would like to thank my campaign manager, Linda Savage, and others who helped. I thank Fiona Sassenfeld, Jessica Shaw, Tessa Hopkins, Jenny Taylor and the many community workers, a number of whom are members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, who helped me through my campaign. Thanks to my brother, James, his wife, Stacey, and little Thomas, the youngest campaigner on my team, who was not quite one at that time. To my sister, Marianne, and Rob; Nic and Kanica, thank you all for your support. My parents are gone now, but I dearly hope that they would also be proud and pleased to see me in this new role. A very, very special thankyou to my partner of 20 years, who has been incredibly supportive and has managed to keep smiling for the duration of all of this—so far!

I must also take this opportunity to thank the previous member for Maylands, Hon Dr Judy Edwards. Judy served in this Parliament for 18 years, including five years as the Minister for the Environment. I imagine that those of you who have had the privilege of knowing and working alongside Judy regard her, as I do, with great respect and warmth. My journey representing Maylands is just beginning, but I look to Judy as a model of leadership, integrity, excellence and tenacity that I really wish to emulate. I thank Judy for leaving the people of Maylands with high expectations of their member and I am certainly going to work hard to ensure that I can fulfil their expectations.

Maylands was first named in 1896. Maylands is one of Western Australia's oldest electorates. The new boundaries include the suburbs of Maylands, Bayswater, Bedford, Embleton, a good proportion of Inglewood and a small sliver of Morley. The electorate is a combination of all that is great in

lifestyle and community in Western Australia. Winding through the electorate we have the amazing Derbal Yerrigan, our Swan River, which is a natural resource and a source of life, history, leisure and tradition. The people in my electorate regard the Derbal Yerrigan with great pride and are committed to protecting it for generations to come.

Maylands represents all the complexities and potential of a diverse city electorate. Traditionally, the electorate has been characterised by blue collar and low-income workers, many of them from non-English speaking backgrounds as well. Today, however, the electorate is home to more white-collar workers and more professionals, although income levels remain surprisingly modest. The medium household income in my electorate is just \$928 a week—not a lot when you place that in the context of today’s cost-of-living pressures. The Maylands electorate has a high proportion of residents who were born overseas; almost 6 000 of them speak a language other than English at home.

In terms of our built and cultural environment, Maylands electorate includes everything from traditional architecture and historic sites like Tranby House and the brickworks on the peninsula, to vibrant cafe and restaurant strips like those on Beaufort Street in Inglewood and Eighth Avenue in Maylands. We also have modern commercial developments like Centro Galleria. It is home to many strong and established community, cultural and ethnic groups. Throughout the electorate young families are moving in, renovating older properties, raising young children and settling into their neighbourhoods and the wider community.

Community is something I personally feel very passionate about and it is a subject I will return to time and again in this place. Community is that sense of involvement and closeness that comes from knowing and trusting people in your neighbourhood. In my view, it is the heart of civil society. It makes and sustains us as human beings; it creates opportunities and helps individuals to realise their potential; and, during times of hardship, it provides a safety net for those less fortunate.

It was not until I started campaigning in Maylands electorate that I realised how much things have changed in recent years. People do not think of us, their local members, as being part of their communities, unless, of course, they have had direct dealings with us on any issues; then it can be a different story. Worse than people not regarding us as part of their communities is the fact that if they do think of us, it is generally in the negative or about how little they trust us. When I spoke to people on their doorsteps, in schools, community organisations, sporting groups, retirement villages and shopping centres, the message was the same: people are disillusioned with politicians, and it does not matter which party we represent. I am sure that, in holding this view, the people who I spoke to are no different from people in other members’ electorates. When I realised the disillusionment held by the community, it became very clear that I have two goals to pursue in my new role. The first is to ensure that I set clear and public standards for my work. My personal values give me the framework for my standards, and these are honesty, integrity and loyalty. Through this public commitment and my subsequent work for the community, I hope that my constituents will find the confidence they need to trust me as their member. My second goal, which I will go on to discuss a bit later, is to know what the key issues and messages are that the people of Maylands want me to take forward as their elected representative.

On that first goal, the question I ask is: how can we endeavour to restore in people a confidence and a trust in their elected members of Parliament, and indeed in our democratic processes? I believe that for this to happen, we, as members of Parliament, must be seen to contribute directly to our communities and to ensure that their interests are always our priorities. We must be involved and engaged, and hold high standards for our own personal behaviour.

A fundamental objective of any modern, effective government must be to find new ways to engage people so that they feel motivated to become more involved in their community and more a part of the democratic process. The constituents of Maylands have made it clear to me that my work must include increasing both the government’s and the opposition’s focus on building trust, as well as

encouraging more active citizenship. People want to live in a society that puts equal value on social, environmental and economic progress. They want to live in a community that values the work of voluntary organisations and provides opportunities for people to act together, and where civil values and skills are developed, where there is space for argument and deliberation in which people can express different points of view and negotiate a sense of common interest. I will be aiming to provide that space for Maylands residents so that whether they are in their families, their schools or their workplaces, they can talk, think and deliberate on what good society or good community means for them, and how social, economic and political progress might be defined.

The community is sick and tired of being consulted. By “consulted” I mean having strangers turn up in their neighbourhood, ask them questions and write down their answers, all the time knowing that nothing is going to change, let alone improve. Aboriginal people in our communities only have to be asked about how consultation has impacted them to understand what I mean. To quote Hon Fred Chaney —

...radical change is needed to...giving communities real decision-making power.

That does not mean, as so often has happened in the past, flying in to communities to tell them what is going to happen to them.

I believe that to build trust and faith in the community our first step should be to work with individuals and communities, not by consulting them and then doing things for them, but by doing things with them. People must feel empowered to participate in building their own futures.

My second goal is to deliver the key issues and messages that my constituents want me to take forward as their member of Parliament. The first significant issue they have raised with me is their concern for the environment. To quote 1998 Economics Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen —

Development cannot be divorced from ecological and environmental concerns. Indeed, important components of human freedoms—and crucial ingredients of our quality of life—are thoroughly dependent on the integrity of the environment.

The environment is already a key platform for the Australian Labor Party. The federal government and the Western Australian Labor Party have put forward significant policies and programs on climate change and to protect our own local environment. Indeed, our WA Labor government was the first government in Australia to develop a state sustainability strategy to guide work on this important agenda. In Maylands, the Swan River and its foreshore are precious to our community, especially some of the more natural and untouched aspects of the river. In particular, I will be focusing on protecting the unique birdlife, maintaining and preserving the valuable wetlands, preventing pollution in the river and its networks, and balancing the demand for housing and the river’s protection. I believe that the ALP policies are premised on achieving the right balance between environmental protection and meeting social and economic demands.

Related to their concerns for the environment, many people in my electorate have spoken to me about their concerns for transport, particularly public transport. Our Maylands electorate is home to many Perth-based workers, but is also a major thoroughfare for people living further afield in the eastern and northern eastern suburbs who must traverse our electorate to get to their jobs in the city. The Midland-Perth railway winds through the heart of Maylands electorate and carries thousands of these workers every day. Maylands residents recognise the need to promote good public transport and are environmentally conscious enough to want to do their bit in terms of lowering carbon emissions; they are committed to minimising their impact, or footprint, on the environment. The transport issues that they have raised with me include things like the inadequacy of the existing train service to meet the increasing demand from commuters; the need to improve the safety of train travel, particularly for the frail or aged and those travelling outside the busy times of day; the need to increase the number of car parking bays for park-and-ride patrons and local residents; the need to expand and improve the local bicycle path, as an increasing number of people are cycling as a key

means of transport, which should be encouraged; and investigating the possibility of introducing bus services to transport people across the electorate to the railway line.

The need to improve our public transport system is a subject members are sure to hear more about from me over the next four years. The Maylands electorate has great diversity in culture, heritage and economic circumstances. This creates a unique set of challenges. The people I have met over the past few months in shopping centres, on train stations, in parks and in their homes have reinforced my need to be responsive to this diversity. Before the election I spoke to a homeless man at Maylands shopping centre and I asked him where he finds help, whether for medical treatment, a bed for the night or a meal. He told me that most nights he sleeps in vacant doorways or under benches as there are simply no beds available for people like him. This man's experiences are repeated far too often in our community. His comments reaffirmed to me that poverty is not only alive and well; it is growing. To borrow some words from the International Labour Organization, "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere". Poverty is complex, not least because people who find themselves impoverished often suffer from more than one problem. Mental health problems may be combined with drug addiction, unemployment with alcohol dependency or domestic violence with homelessness. It is a complex mix. The solutions we need are more complicated now than ever before, and it is my belief that the first step is to focus on the way that poverty interacts with other forms of disadvantage to produce deep and persistent social exclusion, sometimes over generations. It is also my firm belief that governments working in isolation are incapable of solving these complex problems. Governments need to work with business and, more importantly, the community sector to find solutions and mobilise resources, and this is where community organisations offer great support, particularly those organisations that assist vulnerable people in our neighbourhoods. Often locally based, these organisations are doing it tough and are unable to keep up with the number of people who need support. Many of them are struggling to recruit and retain staff to deliver services. In many communities this means that safety nets are no longer in place, or are collapsing, leaving people in crisis with nowhere to go to get help. One of my key goals as the member for Maylands therefore is to work with community organisations in my electorate to ensure their viability.

As many members will appreciate, people can suffer disadvantage regardless of health, wealth, family or position. Issues such as domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse or child abuse are not confined to one level of our society; they are found in the wealthiest of homes and in the poorest of families. I will raise these issues with our state government, always with a focus on looking for solutions. As the representative of the people of Maylands in this Parliament, I will be guided by the principles of social inclusion and economic justice. The recent boom has been of great benefit to those fortunate enough to profit directly from growth in the mining sector and its allied industries. However, there has been another side—a darker side. A greater number of people are experiencing unprecedented levels of poverty in Western Australia. Between 2006 and 2008, household costs increased by a staggering \$132 a week; that is an increase of 23 per cent in basic living expenses. During the same period, average weekly wages in Western Australia increased by \$61, or 10.7 per cent. Increases such as these put pressure on individuals, families and some small businesses not directly associated with the benefits of the boom. Is it any wonder that almost 10 000 Western Australians were turned away by community service organisations in 2006-07? Community organisations reported that although 81 per cent of the people seeking help were eligible—meaning that their need was real—the organisations simply did not have the resources to help. Add to this the fact that rental prices have gone through the roof in our state over the past few years, and the picture becomes very dark. I ask members to consider this: in June 2005, the median rent was \$189 a week. In June 2008, the median rent was \$330 a week, which is an increase of almost 60 per cent. I wonder how many members have experienced these pressures.

Creating opportunity for all lies at the heart of social and economic justice; indeed, my work in Australia and overseas developing policies to support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses, and setting up programs that make these policies real for people, taught me the value of creating opportunities for all, especially people who are marginalised from the mainstream of their communities. My work has taught me that to improve their lives, people need the opportunities provided by education, training, jobs or self-employment; but to take advantage of these opportunities, the first thing people need is hope. People need hope to be able to see the way forward, to get out of poverty, or to become resilient and strong enough to battle the demons they are facing. Hope is the strength that enables people to help themselves.

During the past six years, as the Executive Director of Western Australian Council of Social Service—the peak body representing community sector agencies in WA—I have advocated on behalf of vulnerable Western Australians and the agencies that work for them. They work in our neighbourhoods, supporting people in crisis and bringing hope and opportunities to families who are doing it tough. Although I have come to politics from a career that was heavily focused on economic and social development, personal experience has been equally valuable in shaping my values and aspirations. I think hope is realistic and I think it is a great driver. It is the wave of energy that mobilises people to act and to build a better future. To appreciate what hope is about, one has only to look at the millions of Americans who turned out last week to elect the first ever African-American President. I believe in hope because of the positives I see every day.

I have a friend who is a great example of what I am talking about. Statistically, my friend Jim should be dead. He is a 54-year-old Nyoongah man. His paid work is in policy development, but outside his working life he deals nearly every day with life-and-death matters involving his family and friends. He has told me that over the past year he could have been at a family member or friend's funeral every week of the year. He takes late night calls to talk friends out of suicide and makes trips to police stations to help young family members who have fallen foul of the law. His volunteer work with his community is in itself a second full-time job, and in his spare time he has successfully raised three wonderful boys. He is tireless and selfless in his commitment to his family and his community. My friend Jim gives me hope.

My role in this place will be to influence our state's policies and programs so that they deliver both hope and opportunity to the people of Maylands and all Western Australians. We are living and working in strange and uncertain times. Western Australia's economic boom cycle is faltering as the fragility of the global market economy is exposed. Words I used to understand and relate to, words such as "social" and "human", are now coupled with words such as "capital". Politicians now talk about "social capital" and "human capital". The world is struggling to shoulder the burden of America's financial collapse and to manage debts so great that the numbers are almost meaningless. What is a one with twelve zeroes behind it? Much of this seems to me to be unethical, immoral and just plain wrong. We must now ask ourselves whether we wish to continue along this path, or if it is time to reassess and create a future based on principles of economic, social and environmental inclusion.

I look forward to working with Eric Ripper's team to provide a strong and credible alternative government in Western Australia. My contribution to this work will be to keep the focus on community—that sense of trust, support and connectedness that comes from strong relationships between peoples and groups and forms the bedrock of civil society. It makes and sustains us as human beings, creating opportunity, helping individuals to realise their potential and, during times of hardship, providing a safety net for those less fortunate.

[Applause.]
