



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



HON CHRISTINE SHARP, MLC
(Member for South West Region)

Legislative Council

Thursday, 19 May 2005

Legislative Council

Thursday, 19 May 2005

CLOSE OF SESSION

Valedictory Remarks

HON CHRISTINE SHARP (South West) [12.28 pm]: As members would realise, running for Parliament for the Greens (WA) is a risky business. When I decided in 1996 to go for preselection, I was by no means certain that I would end up with a job. However, not only did I end up with a job, but also very significant changes took place in the Legislative Council in the new Parliament in 1997 and, in particular, the two smaller parties, the Democrats and the Greens, which included my colleagues Jim Scott, Giz Watson and me, had the balance of power. That was quite a shock. Members know that it takes a little while to get used to being in Parliament. It is quite a challenge not only getting used to Parliament but also finding ourselves in the hot seat, as it were. Ever since then, life has been tumultuous, and the pressure has been continuous; however, the achievements have been significant.

I want to begin by mentioning the great privilege I have had in chairing two standing committees of the Legislative Council, the Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development, and the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. I believe to my best knowledge that I am the first woman in the Western Australian Parliament to have chaired any standing committee, so that has been a great honour. Those two standing committees have been dedicated primarily to environmental issues. That in itself is indicative of the changes that have taken place since the Greens (WA) have grown in influence in this state Parliament. However, the proposal that there should be a dedicated environment committee came, if I recollect correctly, from outside the Parliament. It was actually activated and facilitated by the Wilderness Society in Western Australia, and I am grateful to the Wilderness Society for that move that it had made before I even arrived in this place. I have found my committee work a wonderful opportunity to do politics the way I like to do politics; that is, with cooperation across the parties, and by being solution-focused. I particularly want to thank those members who worked with me in the recent term of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs for their cooperation and the massive amount of work that we managed to get through together. For example, last year the committee considered 56 petitions and tabled reports on five inquiries. Our inquiry into the Gene Technology Bill and the Gene Technology Amendment Bill was, I am sure, extremely influential, particularly because it proposed significant amendments that were later adopted in the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act, which paved the way for the Minister for Agriculture and Forestry to declare the state of Western Australia GM free. That is a status that the Greens and many members of this place have worked towards, and it is an achievement for us all. I commend the minister for taking that step and providing that statutory protection to this state. Also this year the committee tabled the report on a significant three-year inquiry into the Alcoa Wagerup refinery. That was only one of five inquiries that the committee conducted last year. In the first term of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs we also conducted a considerable number of inquiries, although not quite as many as the committee has been conducting in this term, because that committee did not have the added workload of considering petitions that have been tabled in this place.

The most significant focus of the Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development was the issue that became at the subsequent state election the prime political issue of the time; namely, the long-term management of our state forests. In fact, as chair of the ESD committee, I held three different inquiries into forest management. The first was into the Regional Forest Agreement, and the second was into the sustainability of current logging practices. The third inquiry was when the committee looked at the amendment bill that proposed to change the Conservation and Land Management Act in order to separate the forestry and conservation practices. I guess - I do not guess; I am sure - that the contribution that I will be remembered for primarily will be the massive change that has occurred in the management of our state forest. It was a great privilege for me to be in this place in December to see the completion of our goal of protecting old-growth forests by the addition of 853 000 hectares to the forest reserve. That is a significant milestone in the protection of Western Australia's biodiversity. I first became involved in that campaign in 1975, and my journey in that campaign has been very much linked with that of my partner, Andrew Thamo, who has at many times since 1975 shared that journey with me. It has been a great honour for me to have been involved in that campaign, and I am sure that my contribution to the issue of forest management will continue when I leave this place.

I have also had the privilege of introducing five private members' bills - or at least that is what I thought it was when I did a quick tally this morning. The first two of those bills were on the decriminalisation of marijuana and the legalisation of hemp. The third, and most important, was the High Conservation Value Forest Protection Bill 1999, which went through this house but was rejected at the second reading stage in the Legislative Assembly, to scenes of

great political drama but was, I think, quite influential in the reversal of the Regional Forest Agreement very soon after that. In the more recent term of this government, I introduced a private member's bill to implement a system for regulating land clearing, and within months the government had implemented its own system. I also introduced a private member's bill to amend the Wildlife Conservation Act to provide for better fauna protection in areas of state forest that are open for logging. Again, that private member's bill helped to emphasise the need to better protect threatened species. As we all know, many of the smaller mammals and many of the bird species in this state are threatened species. It is critical that a massive effort is made to bring those species back from the brink and assist them to become more plentiful. I have also moved amendments to a heap of bills; I have no idea how many.

One set of amendments that stands out in my recollection was made in the former Parliament during the term of the former coalition government, when three women in this place - Hon Helen Hodgson from the Democrats, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich from the Labor Party and I - put together as a cooperative team more than 200 amendments to the School Education Act, many of which were accepted by the then Minister for Education, Hon Colin Barnett. That was a remarkable example of all the parties in this house of review working effectively for the long-term good of the state. I am particularly proud of the social justice amendments that were inserted into the School Education Act, at my behest. Those amendments, which are found at sections 26 and 92 of the act, ensure that no child at a state school in Western Australia will be disadvantaged by any economic, social, linguistic or geographic difficulty, or any special learning difficulty, that might affect that child's attendance and performance at school.

I also want to touch on the more recent work that I have had great fun in being involved with over the past 18 months, along with other members of the Greens, in particular Hon Dee Margetts. That involved the compilation of a discussion paper on economics for the Greens. I will read a few words from the foreword I wrote to our economic discussion paper, which is called "From global to local, the new wave forming". In August 2004, I said in the foreword -

Greens talking economics?

Some might say that Greens talking economics is a contradiction in terms. Our stance on the environment has led some people to think the Greens are 'anti-jobs' and 'anti-development' because the Greens are opposed to certain types of economic development. This simplification of Green politics misses the real point of our position. We stand for models of economic development that put people and the environment first, rather than maximum profits. Yet maximising profits is the driver of investment in our present system. So, without carefully crafted government instruments through taxes and regulations, we get developments which are short term, environmentally destructive and provide few jobs and regional benefits for the volume of resources used. It is this skewing of real priorities which the Greens fundamentally oppose.

This discussion paper puts up some ideas on economic development which are jobs-rich, environmentally benign and distribute the benefits fairly. Surely they are 'different' from much current practice. In that sense, then, they are radical. We believe that without a profound change in how we make our living on this earth, we will unleash a global environmental upheaval many times more 'radical' than the sensible path proposed here.

The paper then lists some of the main ideas as follows -

Economic development based on improving everyone's quality of life rather than just expanding the quantity of money and possessions.

We advocate the use of indicators of a much broader nature, such as general progress indicators rather than the commonly used GDP. They continue -

Governments that lead the community in developing and implementing sustainable development strategies . . . and supporting communities to respond to the reducing availability of cheap oil, especially for transport.

An Industry Policy to facilitate the localisation in production of many goods and services reducing unnecessary freight.

Rejection of the Australia/US Free Trade Agreement.

Increased spending on services such as health and education rather than tax cuts.

Restructured government finances and taxation in Australia to reduce the role of the Commonwealth in taxation collection in favour of the states and an enhanced role for local government.

A fair redistribution of wealth that doesn't put the tax burden on those who can least afford it and reverses the growing scope for transnational companies to avoid tax . . .

Adoption of a comprehensive suite of eco-taxes to embed environmental and employment incentives across our tax system.

An overhaul of the welfare and taxation system so that income gained from working is not lost on reduced welfare benefits . . .

The Goods and Services Tax being dismantled and state payroll taxes reduced.

Responsible government investment on services and infrastructure being increased.

Abolition of the National Competition Council.

Energy efficiency and renewable power generation . . . with a mandate of 20% of renewable energy for future generation capacity.

Mineral and mining strategies based on the economic implications of the long-term decline in ore grades.

Adoption of policy mechanisms, incentives and regulations that drive the move towards sustainable agriculture and supporting industries in revitalised rural communities.

I deliberately read those points because I want to bring home to people that some of the bases of the Greens' ideas on economics were considered to be mainstream in many economies only a generation ago. Perhaps until the mid 1970s, it was considered quite normal for our economy to be regulated to ensure that the benefits were fairly distributed and that the disbenefits were prevented. It is only in very recent years that the idea that we use our economic instruments for better social and environmental outcomes has been considered anathema and that the market has come to drive it all.

I will also spend a little time describing one of the important essays in this discussion paper. It describes the notion of our ecological footprint and reads -

The world average ecological footprint is about 2.2 ha per person, which exceeds the sustainable bio-capacity of the earth, which was estimated at 1.9 ha per person . . .

The global average ecological footprint per person is rising as developing countries industrialise. Also, population growth will put pressure on this and the available productive areas per person could be reduced to 1.2 ha by 2050.

The earth may be able to afford 1.2 ha. It continues -

The ecological footprint of an average Australian is approximately 9.4 ha which is very high by world standards.

. . .

Preliminary analysis by Curtin University has found that Western Australia's ecological footprint is between 17 and 31 hectares per person. This is more than double the national average, and at least 8 times greater than the world average. This very high ecological footprint reflects the highly resource-intensive nature of our economy. Vast amounts of energy, water and other resources are used in our primary industries. By global standards, the people of Western Australia are also big resource consumers and produce high levels of waste.

The Greens' aim to reduce our footprint may seem insurmountable. The main reason for such a high footprint is that Australia (Western Australia in particular) is predominantly a high volume primary producer of mineral and agricultural exports, against a background of a very low population density.

In the longer term the Greens would seek to make the ultimate user, rather than the producer of those resources, more accountable, whether at home or overseas. This is the main cause of the present distortion in this measure.

So we can see from those comments what a vast gap there is between a really sustainable future for Western Australia and the kind of sustainability agenda that, at present, is bandied about in the government as commonplace. Although the Gallop government has made progress in a few areas, there has been no new state-of-environment reporting. A version has emerged of a sustainability agenda that is more like "icon politics", rather than something that deals with the deeper challenges we all face. That is true, particularly in the context of energy consumption in Western Australia over the Kyoto period of reporting. Rather than our special allowance of an eight per cent increase in energy over the 1990 period, our state's energy consumption will increase by at least 70 per cent. These figures are astounding, yet we seem to spend so little of our time in this place considering them or actually coming to terms with the massive change in our technologies and lifestyle that must take place. We need to have a massive refit of all our technologies so that they take into account the urgent need for energy conservation and the need for renewable energy.

I will also mention other issues I have been involved with. I have been involved with the implementation of a clearing permit system with those Environmental Protection Act amendments. I remember many amendments in the name of the Greens and being very frustrated by that system. Here is a government that likes to boast about sustainability, yet it exempted its own government land clearing activities from being regulated. Its land clearing for urban development through the Town Planning and Development Act will be exempt, as will that of Main Roads and a lot of other

government instrumentalities. It is a very frustrating position. I was very pleased that some months after the legislation had been passed I was able to assist the Minister for Environment in the drafting of the final regulations for the package of the clearing permit system by helping the stakeholders of the WA Conservation Council, WA Farmers Federation and the Pastoralists and Graziers Association to reach agreement on that package. That was very helpful at that time for the government. Generally speaking, the government totally ignored the position and the input of the Greens on that whole issue. Now I hear much to my concern of an application being received in the Shire of Donnybrook only a matter of a month or so ago for 28 hectares of jarrah forest to be cleared in that shire. Apparently, the reason was to establish a few fruit trees, a home and a farm in an area of high clearance of native forest. The matter has not yet been determined. The response I received from the Minister for the Environment on decisions she will make on that application was the most inscrutable letter I have received from a minister so far, and I fear the worst expression of political will to implement the system. What is the good of us spending days, weeks and months here doing our best to review legislation in order to get the best possible outcome if the government simply does not ensure that it is properly implemented? We have a very poor history. I do not believe that in all the past 10 years a single kilometre or even 100 metres of illegal drainage has resulted in a prosecution, yet it is well understood that those drains are in breach of the Soil and Land Conservation Act.

In addition, I have been involved in many issues in the south west, helping to resolve the problem of the waste water treatment plant at Gnarabup. I am pleased to say that I believe that the problem will be resolved in the very near future and it will be turned into a pumping station for waste to be treated at the main Margaret River plant. I have an ongoing passion about seeing the revival of the south west railway line. I was very interested to have pointed out to me the editorial in today's *The West Australian*, because things are going backwards at the moment. Anyone who has driven down the South Western Highway during the past couple of months will have seen it resemble a continuous road train. The extent of the heavy freight that is being carried on that highway at the moment is scary and dangerous. A fatal accident involving three multi-combination vehicles occurred only a week ago. Thank goodness a school bus or a similar vehicle was not involved. When that accident happened, the highway was blocked for some time with road trains backed up in either direction. I have photographs of them. They were backed up as far as the eye could see. Right next to that highway is a railway line. I acknowledge that the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure is supporting the construction of an intermodal link at North Greenbushes, but in the meantime I say that the rail should still be used. It should not be seen as something for the blue gum industry in particular. We need a massive transfer of all the heavy freight of a suitable bulk commodity nature back onto the railway. It is absolutely critical. I know that the minister has made real efforts, but her achievements are far less than her efforts. The only blue gum company that is operating under the Albany Hardwood Plantation Agreement Act was linked to the port of Albany by rail under the coalition government. Under the current minister, all we have seen is the blue gum industry putting more and more road trains onto our road system.

Hon Paddy Embry: I agree with what you are saying, but, to be fair, the industry has cranked up. The amount of chips being handled is far greater.

Hon CHRISTINE SHARP: I was not intending to present any critique of the plantation sector; I have done that many times in this place. It is a relatively low value commodity with quite limited regional benefits. Most of the ownership is by people in Perth who have a tax problem. Most real farmers do not have a tax problem. Any plantation industry that is driven by a taxation policy is bound to create the kind of regrettable skewing that occurs in the current plantation sector. This has been a source of great frustration to me. I come to this place as a farm forester. Farm forestry is one of the real good news stories for agriculture, because it is a way for farmers to stabilise their land, prevent salinity, prevent soil erosion, assist in their crop production and also invest in a long-term, sustainable saw log industry. However, we have seen almost nothing of that occur. Instead, we have seen an industry driven by tax enhancement to the benefit of those outside the region and without any serious plans of value adding to the residue product, the woodchip, in a pulp mill in the south west region - not a pulp mill but several. There are enough resources for at least three environmentally friendly "CTMP" pulp mills. Part of what the economic discussion paper is about is that globalisation is not of benefit to the region that I represent in the south west.

We have also had heartbreaks at Mandurah. We had the heartbreak of seeing the development of the largest portion of the Creery Wetlands. The President mentioned that campaign just a little while ago. It is a heartbreak indeed. Many people have still not forgotten it. Every time I drive over the bridge at Mandurah I think about what a tragedy it is that we have replaced significant habitat for international migratory birds with canal development. However, I wish to thank the government for its protection of the old coastal wetlands not far away, with some assistance from me, and particularly to thank it for agreeing to name the wetland after that Peel great Len Howard, with whom I had the opportunity to work for several years, which was great fun. I know that Len would be really pleased to know that we have achieved a little bit of the huge agenda that he set for the Peel region.

If the balance of power has given one a lot of opportunities, it has also provided many challenges. Having the balance of power means essentially that one is in a reactive mode in that one is dealing with the government's agenda. Indeed, one has a huge workload, which is to scrutinise what the government wants as its priorities.

Sitting suspended from 1.00 pm to 2.00 pm

Reprinted from Hansard

Hon CHRISTINE SHARP: Before the suspension for lunch, I was told that I had a strict time limit on how long I had left to speak today. That means many things will be left unsaid in summing up the contribution I have made to this Parliament and indeed my contribution - as it may have been - to the protection of the environment of Western Australia. Due to those restrictions I will not touch again on the difficult and divisive issue of electoral reform and the approach I have taken; nor will I speak in any detail about the problems the Greens (WA) have experienced because of the government's decision - despite entreaties to the Premier since March 2001 - to not provide the Greens (WA) with the party status the Greens need to properly perform its role of holding the balance of power.

I live in the country, and it has been particularly difficult for me to juggle the responsibilities of farming, raising a family, servicing an office that is located 300 kilometres away, chairing a committee and holding the balance of power in this place. It has required an enormous effort to bring all that together and to try to work cooperatively with all members and, above all else, my colleagues to approach each issue with integrity. All members - particularly me - have had a workload from hell.

The limited time given to me to speak today as I conclude my term encapsulates some of the frustration that I have experienced while representing the Greens in this place. During all the years I have been a member the Greens have not been provided with administrative assistance, legal advisers or staff, despite our responsibilities. The responsibilities of holding the balance of power could fall on any party. The Greens have held the balance of power recently but perhaps in the next Parliament Hon Murray Criddle could hold the balance of power. If an inadequate number of National Party members were elected to the Legislative Assembly to enable the National Party to qualify for party status, another member could fall due to the enormous responsibilities and challenges of holding the balance of power, which the Greens and I have faced.

I will not speak any more about why I have had to stand down or about the unfinished business of protecting the environment of Western Australia because, in more ways than one, I have run out of time. I will not speak about my future plans, although I assure members that I have lots of them. I live in a beautiful place with a great community and we will continue to work together for a long time to create many beautiful and important projects in the south west.

I will not be discourteous to other members and take up the time of the house any longer. I will finish by thanking some people. I thank the President, who I think has done a great job. I particularly applaud the way in which he has helped celebrate this Parliament and the 100th birthday of the building. He has done that with unparalleled flair. I thank also the Deputy President (Hon George Cash). I appreciate the way in which he has chaired the house.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon George Cash): Chrissy, you will also be entitled to an extension. I have told the member that and I do not want her to cut her comments short. She should take it easy and continue. So now everyone knows the secret!

Hon Giz Watson: Just keep talking about George!

Hon CHRISTINE SHARP: I will keep talking. I seriously mean what I said. Although we just had a little tiff, I have great respect for you. I thank also Hon Kim Chance, who has always been helpful and friendly. He has looked after us and shown true compassion; he has never deviated from that. I thank him for making the house a warm and friendly place. I thank also Hon Norman Moore. I have always loved to hate the Leader of the Opposition in a sense that I do not hate him at all. Norman is a great member of this Parliament and it always fascinates me - I guess he touched on this himself - that we take such divergent positions on issues, yet I know that I am dealing with someone who is thoroughly decent and committed to good process and to the work of this Parliament. It has been a real pleasure working with him.

I cannot finish without thanking the Clerk. We all have our own relationship with Laurie. He has been a source of extraordinary advice and impartiality, and I guess he, more than anyone, stands for the principles of the Parliament itself and the right of all members to be effective in their role. He has been extraordinary and I count him as one of my close friends.

I would like to thank everybody. With the limited time available, members will be greatly relieved to hear that I will not name any more members in particular, but I feel a friendship with almost every one of them and have really enjoyed working with them. I must also acknowledge the thousands of people in the south west with whom I have worked. Many of them came to Balingup on Saturday night when we had a humdinger of a party, but those 200 people were only a small proportion of the thousands of people I have worked with over these eight years. I thank them for all the information and inspiration that they have provided to me which has enabled me to have the privilege of representing them.

I also thank all the staff in this Parliament. I do not know who picks them, but whoever it is has the special knack of finding some of the most helpful, decent and smartest people in the whole of Perth. The quality of the staff makes our work as parliamentarians just that much easier, because we know that we can absolutely rely on their goodwill and helpfulness on all occasions, even if it is in the middle of the night. That goes for all the staff in the restaurants, the dining room and so on. I thank them very much.

I especially want to thank some of the people in the gallery and in my Balingup office, including Nick Dodson, Wendy Wilkins and Margie Miskimmin. They have been just amazing. From a distance of 300 kilometres, they have managed to support me in the work that I have done in this place. Whilst under a huge workload, they have also borne the brunt of this difficulty of the lack of -

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

Hon CHRISTINE SHARP: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I will try to speed up, but I want to say that I have worked with a great team. Wendy Wilkins and Margie Miskimmin, in particular, have been with me for eight years. We three women together have somehow pulled together and done extraordinary things - it has been a remarkable effort on behalf of the goddess or whoever - which we know will make us soul mates forever. I thank my dear mum, who has been in hospital several times during the last four years. She has been right at the edge and we have been greatly worried about her, yet she has pulled back from the brink. I am so pleased to see her looking so strong and sitting in the gallery today, and I really look forward to the times we will have in the future, because we will have more time now. I also thank Eleanor Gifford for being such a carer for her.

Lastly, I thank my partner Andrew Thamo. Andrew and I have been together now for 26 years. We have quite a remarkable and creative relationship which has not only created two fantastic children, Lara and Tosh, but also has been very creative in terms of green politics. Andrew, as much as I am, is an absolute icon of the green movement. It has been marvellous to have him at home not only keeping the fires burning, but also with the best political advice in the state. I have been really lucky. I also salute all the tree work that he has done in so many different directions through our work together at the Small Tree Farm. I thank everybody very much for the privilege of doing my work.

[Applause.]