PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH

HON TOM HELM, MLC

(Member for Mining and Pastoral Region)

Legislative Council

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON TOM HELM (Mining and Pastoral) [8.00 pm]: I too find myself here by accident, and I follow on from Hon Murray Nixon and thank him for the work he has done. I begin my contribution by congratulating the Labor Party on its magnificent victory. It is great to be here for this short time on this side of the House and back in government again, albeit at the end of what I can describe as my paid working life, although I hope to continue working in an unpaid capacity. When I first came to this House in 1986 the Labor Party was in government. There is a great difference between being in opposition and being in government. I can be thankful for a number of things, one of which is that I was around to see the Labor Party victorious. I am sorry that I was not working for that victory, and I cannot share in that victory, although I can bask in the knowledge that we do not have conservatives on the government side of the House.

I congratulate all new members on both sides of the House, whether they belong to the conservatives, centralists, right wing, Greens or whatever, on winning their seats. I wish them all the best, with a couple of exceptions. Those people to whom I do not bear any goodwill know who they are. I would be hypocritical if I were to widely congratulate everybody. It will be a long time before I get around to wishing good luck or goodwill to a couple of new members.

Having stated the congratulations I go on to the thankyous. I have many people to thank, but the first group is those people who worked hard during my election campaign. I learnt the hard lessons about being an Independent, and how much one relies on one's family. My two stepsons and their partners, their friend Matt and Katie his partner, worked tirelessly in the campaign to the extent that on election day they drove to the Pilbara and manned the polling booths for me. I really appreciate the work they did. Adam and Lucy went to the Gascoyne, and Liam and Clare and Matt and Katie went to Karratha and worked on the booths there. I thank them very much for the work they did, and enter it into *Hansard*. I thank the people in Kalgoorlie who helped me - Diana Mills and her husband, all the Williamstown mob and people like that. I did not do very well, but I would have done a sight worse except for those people who gave me a hand. I could not afford to pay them; they did what they did through friendship. I really appreciate them and the work they did. Some people who helped me are still members of the Labor Party, so I will not mention their names as I do not want them disfranchised from the Labor Party because of their efforts on my behalf. I also have to thank very much the rank and file of the union movement, particularly in Newman, who collected some money for me and also worked on polling day. They gave me a great deal of assistance and support in various ways.

The person I want to thank most of all is Debbie, my wife. I would not have attempted to do what I did without her full support. It goes to show where I would be without her help. She put the effort in, and there were times when I felt in so much despair that without her support and help I would not have continued. What she was able to do was marvellous. Many people in this Chamber know Debbie and know how vibrant she is. I experienced some dark days last year and at the end of 1999. She was able to pick me up and encourage me to get stuck in again, to give things the best shot and see how they went. I do not regret any of that, even though it cost us a few bob. I would have been lost without the hard work and sweat that she put into it, and I want it recorded in *Hansard* that I appreciate everything she has done for me. I can never repay her but I will certainly try, especially after 22 May, when I can concentrate on other things and have a life. I hope that goes some way towards repaying her for what she has done for me, both before and since we have been married and, most importantly, over the past 18 months. I do not think I have ever been so hurt, and I have been through a few things.

I have done a lot of looking back since the election and thinking about what I have done in the 15 years since I was first elected to this place. I have enjoyed the past 15 years, in spite of the anger and the disagreements that sometimes occurred. I have enjoyed working with most of the people who are in the Chamber now and who have been in the past. I have never had a job that has lasted so long. It has lasted five years longer than any other has. I am not surprised that I stuck at it, but I was surprised that I became a member of Parliament. However, having come into this place, I found that what I was doing was useful and that I enjoyed it. I also found that some Tories are worth talking to; that they are all right. That surprised me. I learned many lessons from the Australian Labor Party, but I learned a few more from my comrades on the other side of the Chamber. I have been back to Liverpool a couple of times since I was elected and my old friends are surprised by the attitude I have adopted. I go back to

the docks and talk to my old shop steward comrades, and they see a different Tom Helm from the one who left in 1980. I am only too happy to explain to them why it is better to adopt what we do in Western Australia than to use the tactics that were employed on the Liverpool docks in the 1960s and 1970s and found wanting. I thank my comrades on the other side of the Chamber for those lessons.

That is one achievement. Another is that I put up a plaque in the Tom Price Police Station. I am proud of that. Generally speaking, my association with police stations is not about putting up plaques. My comrades in the United Kingdom will be pleased about that. That is something tangible. When I take people to Tom Price, we always visit the police station. It is a historic place in Tom Price. I do not know how long the town will last, but the plaque is still there. My other achievements are intangible, such as the work I have done on committees and the things we have achieved. My work outside the Parliament has also been very rewarding, such as the time I spent on the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, of which I was an inaugural member. It was a strange situation for me to be in as I was only vaguely aware of the inquiry into black deaths in custody and the 300-odd recommendations that came out of it. However, I saw the work the watch committee was doing in trying to educate people, not only about the need to abide by the recommendations but also to take on board the thrust of the recommendations and to try to correct in a non-confrontationist way some of the wrongs that have been inflicted on our indigenous people over the years. The committee has had some measure of success, but only one arm - a very worthwhile arm - of the Australian culture has changed to accept the role that indigenous people play and have played in the past and the role that we, or the non-indigenous people, have played in the stolen generation and in other areas to which I have been exposed, having spent many years in the Kimberley and the Pilbara. That was a good experience.

I was very proud of the role that I played in the abortion debate and in the decriminalisation of homosexuality debate. That was a good experience also, and I enjoyed doing those things. For the benefit of Hon Murray Nixon, the reason I did not feel any shame is that, as I think members have heard me say on a number of occasions, I believe we as a Parliament have a lot that we can teach people. Indeed, even the British Parliament has learnt from this House and its committee system and has adopted some of our standing orders. I am proud of this Parliament and will defend it to the death. However, I believe that the debate on the second wave of industrial relations legislation was a demonstration of how the power of the Parliament was abused, in that we used that power to discriminate strongly against a section of the community that felt powerless. That is why I say it is so important to defend what we have and ensure it is safe, and to take into account and try to accommodate the needs of all people, regardless of whether they be right wing, left wing or whatever, because if we do not do that, people will feel frustrated and will want to take the law into their own hands. We can show the world that there is no future in that. Sure, the union movement took over the Chamber, and sure, the Parliament was largely unable to operate, but somehow the business was done and we found a way around that. We could not have done that - Hon Tom Stephens was the Leader of the Opposition then - without cooperating with each other, as reluctant as that cooperation might have been. Therefore, I do not apologise for that.

Another thing that I regard as an achievement, and of which I am proud, is my connection with the union movement, in the sense that the union put me where I am. I guess it did it by accident more than anything else. It certainly was not a union position that I took on. When I took over from Hon Peter Dowding in what was then North Province – which covered the Kimberley and the Pilbara - it was regarded as being not even a left faction position, and the only role that the union played was within the state executive of the Labor Party, and even that was done without adopting any sort of factional stance. Nonetheless, I was proud to be able to pursue my trade union ideals fully and completely; and I still do, but with somewhat less vigour than I did up to 18 months ago. What happened to me in December 1999 was something that I joined the union movement to prevent; namely, unfair dismissal. The union to which I belonged at that time, the Australian Workers Union, would never allow a person to be dismissed without notice and without recourse to an appeals procedure, and it would always allow the person to argue a case. However, none of those rules for which the union to which I belonged fought, and for which it fights to this day, applied to me when that happened to me. That was very traumatic for me, and it is taking me a long time to get over it; whether I will ever get over it, I do not know.

On the other hand, as good as it feels to be on this side of the Chamber at the end of my working life, it is also good to be part of a dispute in the Pilbara - the BHP dispute with the unions - that the unions will win. When the dispute first started, it had all the hallmarks of another glorious failure. I said, "Here we go again, but I will be in it; do not worry about that. If the leadership decides we will do this, we will do it." However, I must tell members: I was wrong, and this dispute will be won by the unions. BHP, despite its best efforts, has been unable to convince over half of its work force that it would be better off on workplace agreements. Members have probably read about it in the newspaper. I have been to Newman. One of my offices is located there - I suppose it could be called my home town - and I have seen the videos and the letters that have been sent out. I have been told of the stop-work meetings called by foremen, supervisors and anybody else to discuss the finer details of the workplace agreements. Out of the 507 people that BHP wants to sign contracts, only 15 have signed. Some of those are train drivers who have been promised fly-in, fly-out incentives and various other things. Many incentives have been offered. At one of the meetings in Newman, I was asked to give a prize to an electrician who was offered $56 000, which was the

balance of his accumulated sick leave that he did not take. He was also offered a pay rise of $20 000 per annum to sign a contract, which he refused to do. That is at the high end of the scale - he got a prize for that - and an example of the incentives that people have been offered to sign contracts. Harassment is going on and a number of people are getting upset. If the union were to harass people and try to entice them to join the union as this company is trying to entice workers onto workplace agreements, there would be a huge uproar and it would be considered a disgrace. However, the company is exercising its ability to use television advertisements and is giving each employee the videotape. It is also writing to them and talking to their partners by way of a doorknock when they are at work. When will the companies learn that the people whom they are trying to entice on to workplace agreements will not sign them?

That is the victory I am describing. The dispute is about those people who are left who do not want to sign a contract and who still feel they want to be represented by unions. The latest position is that the contracts have been accepted by the work force as long as they contain a provision for a modified type of union recognition. The company falls down on that provision and says that will not happen and, yet, it argues that its position is not anti-union. The union has said that the contracts offered are acceptable to the union and the work force but they must include some provision for an independent arbiter who will determine whether people are entitled to various bonuses and the level of their work skills so that fair pay levels can be assessed. The unions will win; there is no doubt about that. At the end of my working life it is a great feeling to say that I have been a part of a dispute in which the worker was a clear winner. I have been involved in a lot of disputes, as members can imagine, although I have probably lost more than I have won. However, this will be a good victory.

One thing that I would describe as an achievement was to follow Hon Fred McKenzie as Opposition Whip. I enjoyed those days. In the four years that I was Whip, I felt that I was making some sort of contribution constantly. I always felt I had a role to play in the Parliament and I played it. However, I also felt that my best work was done in the constituency, in the bush, the mines or on the stations. I do not like Perth or the Parliament very much, but I suppose I have been lucky through my working life to have had very few jobs that I did not like. In this job, coming to Parliament was the worst part, except when I was Opposition Whip. I was lucky to follow Fred McKenzie who, through his activities, gained a lot of respect from both sides of politics. Working with Hon Muriel Patterson made my job as Whip so much easier. We had to trust each other and I do not think we made many slip-ups. We got on with the job, and that was good, too.

It was also good to have leaders like Hon Kim Chance and Hon John Halden. I do not want to do in Hon Kim Chance's pocket what I should not do, but when I look back on Hon Kim Chance's time as leader, he was a leader with a vision. He shared that vision and took all of us with him. I was like the sheepdog. I always thought that I was a good backroom boy, and that was the role I was given. Hon John Halden and Hon Kim Chance were great people with whom to work. One could get a handle on what was going on and feel part of it, which was good.

I must tell the story about the most significant thing during my time as Whip. When I was Whip, it was hard to get three people to understand that we were a team. We were not like a team of stars, but I reckon we were a star team. I had a problem with three people. They were Hon Mark Nevill, Hon Alannah MacTiernan and Hon Tom Stephens.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: Fancy that!

Hon TOM HELM: Yes. Hon Alannah MacTiernan just could not understand that when I said she was on her feet in five minutes, I did not mean 15 minutes. If she were a man, I would have punched her more times than enough because she was so frustrating. She knew that I was frustrated, because I think for at least three years at Christmas time she gave me a bottle of champagne to apologise for the trouble she caused me. However, at the end of the three years she understood.

Hon Tom Stephens was another one who did not understand that the role the team played was dictated by the leader through me. He went off on his own. However, after three years or so Hon Tom Stephens also understood the way the game was played and that I was not the captain, just the enforcer.

The person who never changed was Hon Mark Nevill - he could not. There was nothing disagreeable about what he did. I used to look him in the eyes and say that we had to be at a certain place at a certain time or that there was a meeting at a certain time, or I would ask him to make a speech on a particular matter. He would look at me, and either it did or did not happen. There was always that uncertainty.

I remember on one occasion that Hon Alannah MacTiernan had to speak on the Stamp Act. She had not had a briefing, and it was to come on as the next matter of business. She asked me whether I could speak on the Stamp Act. I did not have a clue about the Stamp Act. All I knew was that a stamp cost 45c! She explained the matter to me, and members will remember that I made a 20-minute speech on the Stamp Act. It had something to do with not paying stamp duty on properties that were passed between members of a family. Hon Alannah MacTiernan received a briefing and then she gave a proper speech on the matter. When that sort of thing happens, one feels alive and vibrant and that one is making a contribution.

I guess that being the Whip was the pinnacle of my parliamentary work. The ordinary slug was the committee work. I was very proud to serve on the Standing Committee on Constitutional Affairs with Hon Murray Nixon. We understood that we left our political caps outside the door when we went into committee. We looked at and discussed the merits of each matter presented to us. We tried to do the best we could in the interests of those people whom we either discussed of our own volition or whose cases were brought to us by way of a petition. There is no doubt that I love the committee work.

I also enjoyed my work on the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. I was lucky to be on the inaugural committee, with Bob Hetherington as chairman. With the help of the clerk, it was interesting to find our way through the aspects of the job we were required to undertake. I enjoyed being deputy chairman of that committee, as well as being chairman for four years. Some of the matters contained in those reports will be remembered for a while.

I ask myself what I have done in 15 years and what it all means. If a person is a rigger, he can say that he has built this or knocked that down. One therefore analyses the situation.

Perhaps another important aspect is that when collectively and individually we speak up on various issues, that can prevent bad things happening. Sometimes our role lies in the fact that we are made aware of a particular situation about to occur and so we are able to speak out, and prevent that situation from coming about. How we can sheet home things like that to ourselves is unclear, but we just have to take other people's word for it, which is another way of judging our achievements.

The worst change that I have seen in 15 years is the advent of fly-in fly-out work forces. I am a very proud Labor person, but why we ever brought in the fringe benefits tax is a mystery to me. Fringe benefits tax destroyed us, and we are paying for it now. I do not know how we will ever get out of it. There are vast tracts of land in the Pilbara and the Kimberley, and large resources, but fewer and fewer people. I understand there are 300 empty houses in Newman, Tom Price and Paraburdoo. Pannawonica might close down as a town soon, because Rio Tinto has indicated it may put the whole Pannawonica work force on fly-in fly-out. It is madness, particularly since the federal Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Phillip Ruddock, says that we cannot take any more refugees. I hope that my sons never see this, but I am afraid some future generations are going to see an invasion of the north of our country. There is no space left in Indonesia or South East Asia. We have the resources in that area, and we have the water. There are second and third generation non-Aboriginal people in that area, but there is no incentive. In fact the incentive is the other way now - to take people out, and use the fly-in fly-out method. I hope that one day we are able to do something about that.

I worked in Paraburdoo for a year when I first came to Australia. I visit there now and it resembles some of the bombed areas in Liverpool after the war. I am old enough to remember that it took a long time to repair the war damage. The whole morale of the town is affected. Having people live and work in the area where the resources exist is something we really need to look at, and it hurts me to see those communities being diminished. I was the last person to ring the bell at the Goldsworthy club, on the Sunday before they had to knock down the club. There were only about six people in there, so I rang the bell. They knocked down Goldsworthy, and about a year later they knocked down Shay Gap. We were travelling from Port Hedland to Shay Gap to do the closing ceremony, and on board the bus was the man who had been the mine manager at Goldsworthy for 14 years. We stopped the bus where Goldsworthy use to be, and the former mine manager was asked where his house used to be. He could not find it. The area had been rehabilitated so well that all of the non-native trees had been taken away. It had cost a fortune. Those towns were really nice towns; they were nice to look at and nice places to live in. They were situated, unlike Port Hedland, which is on a flat plain, in areas surrounded by hills, and they were well built and well looked after, but we bulldozed them. A couple of ideas were floated, but nothing of any substance, and the money was spent to destroy those towns. I think the whole structure of the north west will be destroyed if we do not find some way of putting a stop to fly-in fly-out. As a result, there are fewer services in those towns. The guidelines for the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme are rigorously imposed and it is very difficult for people to access the scheme. I hope that the new Labor Government is able to look at those sorts of things. It is now costing a heap of money. I can remember the time when PATS was being used for its original purpose, which was to help people to see specialists in either Perth or Port Hedland. The Labor Government and the coalition Government stated that they would try to get more specialists in Newman. That is not the case, and people who want to travel by public transport from Newman to Port Hedland experience difficulties because of the bus service schedule. Most people need to see specialists on a Tuesday or Wednesday but the bus arrives on Thursday and does not leave until the following Thursday. People who attend specialists for a half-hour consultation end up staying a week. That means people lose a week's work. Mothers may be away from their children for a week. It is a crazy situation. That problem needs to be fixed. They are the changes I have seen that make me sad.

Like Hon Murray Nixon, I feel that I may have had a role to play, particularly now that the Labor Government is in office, if only for a short time, in helping to restore some of the services that used to exist in the Kimberley and the Pilbara. The Pilbara ward of the Country Shire Councils Association had a clear position that fly-in fly-out

arrangements should stop and that there should be more people in those towns providing a revenue base. The association has since changed its mind and is now talking about obtaining more royalties. Asking for more money is a pointless exercise. Why do we need better swimming pools, libraries or anything a shire council provides if there are no people? What is the point? I would like to have argued the point with them. It is a continuing problem that needs further attention.

The thing I regret most is that I was unable to work for the Labor Party in the latest election. I feel some responsibility for Labor not regaining the seats of Pilbara and Ningaloo, and not retaining Megan Anwyl in Kalgoorlie. I believed that I had a role to play; but it was not to be. The party decided on the direction it wanted to take. I regret that I was not part of the team, as I believe Megan Anwyl did a good job. She was finding her feet and she would have continued to do a good job as the local member. People such as Graeme Campbell and others who were supposed to be Labor Party people - but whose names I will not mention - just wanted to work against her and they decided that she did not fit into the Kalgoorlie mafia. They preferred to see the seat go to a conservative. Megan and I were very disappointed.

There was a good turnout for the Labor Party at Newman and I never made any bones about the fact that if people elected me as an Independent, I would support the Labor Party. People asked me what would be the point as they might as well vote for the Labor Party as for an Independent. That was their position and that is cool, but it was not cool at the time! It was a real lesson. I hope the lesson learnt is that the Mining and Pastoral Region needs more attention paid to it rather than lip service. I do not agree with the argument that there should be the same number of members of Parliament from the bush as we have now. The quality of the members has always been more important than the quantity. The quality of the members can be enhanced by providing more resources. I am not saying which party they should belong to. I am sure Hon Norman Moore would agree that the Mining and Pastoral Region requires more than one office if the area is to be properly represented. At the very least, a full-time research officer is needed rather than a 0.4 position.

I hope that the Labor Party takes on board the fact that I was dumped because I showed disdain for Perth issues. Whenever I was in Kalgoorlie or the Mining and Pastoral Region, I did what I needed to do and enjoyed it, and I did not pay attention to what was going on with the factions in Perth. I hope the actions of the Labor Party and the unions will not discourage others from standing for election to Parliament. It will be hard to attract quality members to represent rural areas, as they must keep an eye on what is going on within their own group, whether it be a conservative or Labor party. That is the problem. More resources are needed, both in the lower House and in this Chamber, particularly for members from the Mining and Pastoral Region and maybe the Agricultural Region. I cannot speak about that. I only know what I went through. It is difficult to get a handle on what is going on when staff numbers are limited. We started out with nothing and we made some great gains. The major parties must look at the Mining and Pastoral Region because the margins will be slimmer at the next election, and slimmer again at the next, until the Mining and Pastoral Region will be an important electoral area for those who want to gain government.

I mentioned the time I was Opposition Whip when Hon John Halden and Hon Kim Chance were Leaders of the Opposition in this House and I will dwell on it a bit longer. I cannot say too much about that time because it was really good. The question now is where my future lies. It is a good feeling to leave my working life on the winning side. I am not a member of the political party that is in power; nonetheless, members on this side know where their feelings lie. I know how good it is to be on this side of the Chamber, rather than on the other side.

Hon Ken Travers: Where your mates are!

Hon TOM HELM: Yes, my mates! Yes, it is good. It is also good to look back and think that after 40-odd years I will go out with a group of comrades who will win an 18-month-old dispute, which has been run with discipline and precision. Those people have stayed together despite the length of time that it has taken and the amount of brains that BHP could buy, and has employed, in trying to win the dispute. Their partners are also organised. Funds are available to cover solicitors and other costs. The union side will be victorious. I will be there for the victory parade, no matter what happens. That is good.

I have a bit of time so I will tell the House a story about one of the things that softened the blow of the defeat - the destruction - at the election. My wife Debbie arranged a surprise cruise for my sixtieth birthday. I paid for it myself, not from my imprest account. I was not around when the -

Hon Ken Travers: I hope you are not going to tell the whole story.

Hon TOM HELM: Yes, the whole story. I was in Kalgoorlie the Saturday before my birthday and flew back to Perth that night. My son and his wife, my stepson and his partner, and Debbie met me at the airport. I thought it was great that they had come to meet me at 8.00 pm on a Saturday. It was wonderful. We went and had a drink and then the children and their partners left. I told Deb that it was getting late and that I wanted to go home because I was tired. However, she said I could not go home because I was flying to Sydney at 12.45 am. No-one goes to

Sydney at any time unless they have to, but especially not at 12.45 am on a Sunday! However, Debbie told me I was going to Sydney. I asked her whether I had to attend a meeting or whether it was a birthday surprise and that she was going to buy something in Sydney. I told her that I would not go, but that she could go to Sydney if she wanted. I started walking out of the terminal and asked Ansett staff whether they would go to Sydney at that time of the morning. I told them that I would have gone if my birthday had not been on Thursday and this was only Saturday. The Ansett staff would not say anything because they knew about the surprise. I was about to catch a taxi home, and was planning to divorce my wife, when she pulled out two tickets to go on the *Pacific Sky* cruise boat. I could have crawled under a bus ticket with a top hat on. I felt very small. In any event, we flew to Sydney. I was not concerned about the cruise itself, but I had worked on cruise ships during my stint at sea. I worked for 14 months on a 22 000-tonne cruise ship called the *Corinthia*, which sailed from Liverpool to Montreal. I also worked on the *Queen Mary* for six trips from South Hampton to New York. It was natural for some of the crew while working on those ships to observe the wealthy people wearing fur coats and smoking cigars. However, we were not envious because we never expected to be in their shoes. When Debbie told me that I was going on a cruise, I thought it was marvellous. We sailed into a force 11 cyclone while on the way to Vanuatu and Noumea. Our cabin was 10 decks high and the waves were breaking over our deck. It was great to be back in that situation. It was the best birthday present I could have had. That was the beginning of my retirement, although I am officially a member of Parliament until 22 May.

I have not yet come to terms with the future being a blank canvas. I once spent 14 months unemployed, which was probably the worst time of my life. Although I will be unemployed very soon, I am not concerned; I have good feelings about my retirement. I have opted to take a pension that will keep me comfortable until I pop my clogs and I can do what I want, with whom I want, when I want.

Hon Ken Travers: Not with Debbie as your wife you can't!

Hon TOM HELM: That is true. I will be circumspect about that. I should say that with her agreement I can do what I want, and I do not need to be paid for it. I thank everyone in this House for their friendship and for allowing me to learn a great deal from many experiences. I thank the Labor Party and the union movement for allowing me to do this job for as long as I have done it. I am grateful to have visited many places and to have met many people. In spite of the pain I felt initially about not being selected for another term - a pain that has all but gone - I know I am a very lucky person and I thank everyone in this House.

[Applause.]