



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**VALEDICTORY SPEECH**



**HON HENDY COWAN, MLA**

**(Member for Merredin)**

**Legislative Assembly**

**PERSONAL EXPLANATION — RETIREMENT**

**Tuesday, 16 October 2001**



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## MEMBER FOR MERREDIN, PERSONAL EXPLANATION

### *Retirement*

**MR COWAN** (Merredin) [3.25 pm]: In August at the National Party convention, I announced my intention to retire from the Legislative Assembly seat of Merredin and to contest a seat in the Senate for Western Australia. After more than 27 years in the Western Australian Parliament, 23 as the Leader of the National Party and eight as Deputy Premier, it is time to pursue new challenges that will come from engaging a different sphere of politics.

My decision to retire is not one that has been made lightly. It is recognised that it will cause some inconvenience and the added cost of a by-election in the seat of Merredin, but that is inevitable. It is also by no means certain that the National Party will regain a seat in the Senate. The last time this was achieved for the party was by the late Sir Thomas Drake-Brockman at a double dissolution of the Federal Parliament in 1975. Few people, if any, have had the range of experiences that I have had as a member of the Western Australian Parliament.

I began in 1974 as a new member on the parliamentary back bench supporting a coalition Government led by Sir Charles Court. At the election, the Country Party membership had been reduced from 14 to nine and the relevance of the junior coalition partner was being seriously questioned both inside and outside the party. For a person who had developed an interest in politics while attending boarding school not far from this place, but who had given no real thought to pursuing a career in the Parliament until challenged by the Country Party executive to contest the seat of Merredin-Yilgarn in 1974, it is an understatement to say that I was ill-prepared for the job.

Prior to my endorsement in late 1973, I had never visited the Parliament and had not been active in the party outside the local branch structure. The machinations of the coalition and party politics were as far removed from the vagaries of farming as any profession could be. Not surprisingly, after four turbulent formative years, in 1978 I found myself pushed out of the Country Party, establishing the breakaway National Party and sitting on the crossbenches of the Parliament. Believe me, Mr Speaker, that is a lonely place.

It took seven long years to bring the two country parties back together again, but it was accomplished in 1985. One of the most satisfactory times of my parliamentary career was when the rewards were given to the amalgamated party by electors in the 1986 state general election. Our success in that election laid the foundation for the National Party of Australia here in Western Australia. Although the party remained on the crossbenches, with nine members it was no longer such a lonely existence, and with an end to internal divisions, the party was at last able to concentrate on winning government. It took a further seven years before we could achieve that objective. In 1992 we were able to negotiate the establishment of the coalition with the Liberal Party. We then went on to win government as a coalition in 1993.

The coalition negotiations were not easy. I make no apologies to my colleagues or to the Liberal Party for that. Under my leadership, I wanted to ensure that government policy and direction had significant input from the National Party. After several weeks of tough negotiations, that objective was achieved at the cost, I might say, of considerable popularity within the coalition. Although we spent eight years in coalition, and in my opinion delivered good government to the electors of Western Australia, I doubt that the popularity of the National Party within the coalition was ever recaptured - perhaps it never existed in the first instance. I think I can say, however, that the National Party ministers in the coalition Government earned the respect of many people because of what was delivered to regional Western Australia. In these times of political inertia and greater disregard for regional Western Australians, what was delivered by the coalition is only now being appreciated by those who choose to live and work in the bush.

My purpose in giving that very brief history is not to indulge in political point scoring, but to indicate that I have been privileged to serve in this Parliament, firstly, as a government backbencher, then on the crossbenches, in opposition, and finally as a senior government minister. This range of experiences has given me a slightly different perspective of politics in this State. From those experiences I would like to make some observations. Politics is adversarial by nature. Governments are elected to implement change, but the vehicle through which change must be made - the Parliament - has well developed standing orders and procedures that seek to preserve the status quo. Change can be effected only after a long, exhaustive parliamentary process in which the minority has the most to say, but in the end, the will of the majority prevails. It is in this contradictory and often uncertain environment that a number of principles remain constant. These include loyalty, trust and goodwill. We do not demand them, but those who have been here long enough know that they are earned.

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It is widely known that if members of Parliament work their electorates hard to build trust and generate goodwill the outcome will be loyalty from electors. When we go to the polls it is likely that as a consequence of that hard work - and unless there is a major swing - we will be returned. It goes without saying that all members of Parliament have as their first priority, retention of their seat. Loyalty, trust and goodwill are equally important to a party leader, to the Government or to the Opposition; lose any one of them and the consequences are inevitable. One may survive in the short term, but eventually one is found out and is sent packing. In government the demand for tough decisions is required across such a broad spectrum that it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain trust and goodwill. It becomes impossible not to alienate different sections of the community to the extent that loyalty wanes and there is political change.

Although I have been around too long to expect any positive response to my comments, it is a matter of regret that the effort individual MPs put into building trust and goodwill in their electorates is not brought into the Parliament. I am sure that although the adversarial nature of this place will remain, a greater degree of trust and goodwill would create a more positive environment in which things could be more readily achieved for this State. Though it may be a forlorn hope that the attitude of MPs in the Parliament will change, one area in which the unnecessary erosion of trust and goodwill can be restored is in the public sector. Governments will always seek to impose their own party political agenda and will invariably use the public service to implement those plans that are necessary to meet their objectives. That is why we seek to win government. Whenever there is a change of government - this observation is levelled at all Governments and not merely the incumbent - much of the goodwill public servants might have for the new Government is eroded by the actions of ministers or their advisers in seeking to cleanse the department of good public servants who may be branded as being politically untrustworthy. In my experience, I have found that all but a few public servants are committed to the delivery of efficient government services and are capable of working with any Government - irrespective of its politics. Sadly, the insecurity of tenure afforded senior public servants generated by present government policy has accelerated the departure of many good-quality people. Their replacement with other less experienced officers, and a significant restructuring within government departments, has meant that much of the trust and goodwill within the public service that could have been tapped by the Government has evaporated. Consequently, the contribution to good government that impartial, highly professional public servants may make, is considerably lessened.

I also mentioned loyalty. I have not forgotten the loyalty that has been shown to me by many people during my 27 years in Parliament. It ranges from the constituents of the electorate of Merredin who, in nine elections, returned me with an absolute majority in every election but my first, to the National Party branch members who ensured all polling booths were attended. It includes those officers who have worked in my Merredin electorate office over the years, especially the current electorate officer, Thelma Motzel, who, until the by-election returns a new member for Merredin, will have to assume the added responsibility of de facto MP. Members of the office of Leader of the National Party and the office of the Deputy Premier - some of whom are in the public gallery today - also deserve special mention for their dedication and unswerving loyalty.

Having commented at some length on public servants, I would also like to thank many of the government officers, from government drivers to CEOs, with whom I have had the privilege of working over the years. I especially thank those who were required regularly to make the trip to the Deputy Premier's office for ministerial briefings. They soon learned that only one rule applied: they were required to tell their minister what he should hear, not what he would like to hear. Under that rule I took great pride in the fact that the departments for which I had responsibility really did make a difference in the delivery of government services.

Finally, I turn to my colleagues in the National Party. I owe a debt of gratitude to all my fellow National Party MPs, none more so than Hon Matt Stephens, who retired in 1989, Hon Eric Charlton - also now retired - and my good friend and present member for Stirling, Hon Monty House; others like Tom McNeil and the late Tom Perry also come to mind. To my colleagues: I wish you well in the future. Your opponents have been predicting your demise for the past 40 years. It has been your loyalty to regional Western Australia that has ensured those predictions have been wrong.

It would also be appropriate to convey my thanks to those officers of the Western Australian Parliament who have assisted me over the years. That applies equally to all Parliament House staff, who have invariably performed their duties efficiently and courteously. I look forward to the new challenges that contesting a senate seat will bring. I can assure all members and staff that I will not forget the invaluable experiences and friendships generated by 27 years in the Western Australian Parliament.

[Applause.]