



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Ms Carol Martin MLA**

**(Member for Kimberley)**

**in moving the**

**Address-in-Reply Motion**

**Legislative Assembly, Tuesday 1 May 2001**

*Reprinted from Hansard*



# Legislative Assembly

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## Inaugural Speech

### Ms Carol Martin MLA

(Member for Kimberley)

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#### ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

##### *Motion*

**MS MARTIN** (Kimberley) [3.33 pm]: I move -

That the following Address-in-Reply to His Excellency's speech be agreed to -

May it please Your Excellency -

We, the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign, and to thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to address to Parliament.

I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on election to this position. I am lucky to have you as a colleague in not only this Chamber but also the Mining and Pastoral Region. I know your judgments and rulings will reflect the fairness and impartiality that is so important to the spirit of this Chamber and to the orderly conduct of business. I congratulate all my parliamentary colleagues, especially the new ones, and I look forward to working closely with them.

I have the honour of standing before this House today as the elected member for Kimberley. The significance of this moment is not lost on me - I stand here a proud woman. I am proud to have been chosen to represent an incredibly diverse electorate. I am proud that my community found me worthy to take on this task, and I am proud to have the opportunity to ensure that people living in the Kimberley have effective representation in this House. I am proud to be part of Geoff Gallop's Government, because he is a Premier with a vision of working constructively with our community and listening to its needs.

I am more proud than I ever thought possible to be the first Aboriginal woman elected to Parliament in Australia.

[Applause.]

Ms MARTIN: Even as I address the House with emotions swelling inside me, I cannot help but feel a slight touch of disbelief that it has taken so long for a person like me to get here. I have been humbled by my victory and entry into Parliament. I recognise the efforts of the many people who have fought for the rights of Aboriginal people. I stand here because they never gave up their struggle. Just as I have benefited from their fight, our young people will benefit from knowing that if they believe in themselves, their law and their culture, nothing is beyond them. I hope that my election acts as an

example to and provides a role model for our young people. I say to them that regardless of their situation, it is within them to take control of their lives and to achieve their hearts' desire. They are not alone; we are clearing a path for them.

I am given confidence by the fact that through dedication, perseverance and hard work, all Australians, regardless of creed or colour, can move forward together. By acknowledging both the great achievements and great mistakes of the past we can work together to develop a new, shared future for this great nation. Reconciliation is the beginning of that process. It is a process that allows us to view the events of today with the benefit of hindsight. It is not a "black armband view of history", as espoused by those mean-spirited spoilers who cynically aim to divide the community. It is the opposite of that; it is a celebration. To me, reconciliation celebrates the spirit of indigenous Australia, a spirit that, after 200 years of systematic hardship and dispossession, allows us to not only survive, but also be strong and proud.

My introduction to reconciliation was through reading the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and its recommendations, specifically section 339, which reads -

That all political leaders and their parties recognise that reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people are to be avoided. To this end the Commission recommends that political leaders use their best endeavours to ensure bi-partisan public support for the process of reconciliation and that the urgency and necessity of the process be acknowledged.

I became further interested in reconciliation after a discussion with Patrick Dodson about why, after 200 years of dispossession of our people, we should even enter into the reconciliation process. He convinced me that it was in our own best interests to participate in reconciliation, and I have since put my heart and soul into ensuring the reconciliation process moves forward. Reconciliation celebrates the fundamental humanity of Australia as a nation and as a society of individuals. It recognises the ills that have befallen Aboriginal people and it seeks to affirm our great strength and capacity to move forward in spite of great odds and hardships. It also reminds Aboriginal people that we are not alone and that our struggle is a shared one. This was demonstrated last year by the huge marches across Australia, including in Perth. I firmly believe that millions of Australians are offering their support to us in an effort to achieve reconciliation. My election victory and my role as a member of the Gallop Labor Government demonstrate the commitment by the people of the Kimberley to reconciliation.

It is also extremely fitting that we assemble here for the opening of Parliament on this day, 1 May. May Day is a day of great significance for all working Western Australian men and women. It is the date that was chosen over 100 years ago to proclaim the eight-hour working day. It has come to represent all the struggles working men and women endured to deliver the conditions we take for granted. Regardless of what the previous State Government and current Federal Government might believe, the majority of Australian adults are workers. Workers need to feel they have a representative and sympathetic Government, but more importantly, they need a responsible Government. It is my firm belief that if society wants a Government to be responsible, it has to make it responsible. I qualify this by adding that we do not cease to be human when we are elected to government. We want to make informed decisions and we want to be fair and just in our representation as a Government. We must work on what is achievable, realistic and relevant in the short term and, in the long term, legislate to assist in the development of a better society for all, especially our children, who are our future.

A good Government is one that governs for all people, not just the wealthy few. We have experienced an unprecedented and overt attack on the rights of working people by both state and federal coalition Governments. They have attacked working people and their rights to organise and negotiate evenly and fairly with their employers. There has been no subtlety in their approach to industrial relations. It will be a long time, if ever, before we forget the sight of security guards in balaclavas with huge dogs taking over the workplaces of our waterside workers. I am proud to be part of Labor's team, which will restore

balance and fairness to our industrial relations system. This Government will introduce changes that will dramatically improve the lives of thousands of workers in this State. We will acknowledge with respect and dignity the contributions of Australian working men and women.

May Day is also significant for the 1947 Pilbara strikes, when hundreds of Aboriginal people walked off stations throughout the Pilbara to protest for better conditions and award wages. The significance of this action becomes even more remarkable when one considers the means by which the strike was organised. Those people had no telephones and only minimal contact between locations, yet they managed to mount an effective and well-organised strike.

The first day of May is also significant to another reason. Sadly, for me, Western Australia and the nation, my great friend, mentor and kindred spirit, Rob Riley, took his life on this day five years ago. He once told me, "There are two things you must always remember: You can't be wrong if you're right; and you don't stop fighting for justice simply because those around you don't like it, you just keep on fighting". I think my presence in this place will help achieve his dream and his vision.

It is a privilege to be the member for Kimberley, and before going any further, I thank my many constituents for the faith they have shown in my ability and the trust they have placed in me as their representative. I will do everything in my power to ensure that the electors of Kimberley receive the effective, responsible and diligent representation that each and every one of them deserves.

The Kimberley region is unique in many ways. It covers an area of some 281 000 square kilometres. To provide a sense of perspective, it is larger than the State of Victoria. It is a large place with a small population. The region of Kimberley has many unique needs. Programs designed for one place are not necessarily suited to another. Programs for the Kimberley cannot be based on ideas that work in the city. The region's uniqueness means that services and policies must be tailor-made for its needs.

Tourism is an industry that is continuing to grow in the Kimberley region. I am pleased to note that a thriving cultural and eco-tourism sector is constantly growing. Local communities are realising the potential to introduce tourists to their land and to educate them in its cultural, ecological and spiritual significance. At the same time these tourists are putting much needed resources into the local economy. This model of tourism and industry development can be used for other areas.

Community strategies need to be developed that look at the special social, economic and physical needs of Kimberley communities and residents. These strategies need to ensure that the wealth and growth of the region are evenly distributed, not just centred in one or two towns. Given the high costs of providing services in my region, the best strategy would be the coordination of service providers to work closely with local communities and their aspirations to achieve success. Let us use what we currently have in a smarter way. I see one of my roles as being a facilitator to ensure that people, departments, bureaucrats and communities spend a lot more time talking to each other rather than operating in isolation.

Training and education are essential ingredients in achieving real progress in the Kimberley. We need to ensure that all our children and young people, regardless of where they live, are provided with the skills they need to be our future community and industry leaders. I will make it a priority to ensure that education and training services are relevant to the needs of my electorate, and delivered in an appropriate way. The Kimberley is suffering after eight years of a Liberal Government. The region has experienced real and substantial loss of services and infrastructure. As in the rest of the State, health services are severely lacking in my electorate. It is therefore essential to place more emphasis on community-controlled health services. Until now Governments have tended to deal with the question of funding to remote communities as though the provision of funding was the same as the delivery of a service. Money without coordination, or money for projects that do not reflect the needs of the community, will not deliver the desired outcomes.

I believe that we need to focus our policy on social and community development in this region, and look at funds not just in terms of an administrative issue but as providing real and critical services to the

community. A Gallop Labor Government will put resources and decision making back into the hands of rural communities. This is one of the reasons I consider it an honour to be part of a Government that is prepared to take decision making out of the city and give local communities a real sense of ownership over policy. This is something that will be welcomed right across this State, and which can result only in more appropriate and relevant services for regional areas.

I will now give a very brief outline of my history. At the age of 12 years I was removed from my family and placed in foster care. A care and protection application was issued which legally removed me from my family till the age of 18. All I wanted was to be with my family. I ran away from my foster homes. For me these were three very hard years in the system before I made the decision to run away yet again and move to Broome to be with my mother and siblings - a decision that changed the entire direction of my life.

The woman I have now become has grown from the young girl who was taken in by the community in Broome and protected from the authorities. The Kimberley has been my home ever since, and it was in Derby that I met my husband and that our son and daughter were both born and raised. Working as a social worker in Derby allowed me to take an active role in the local and wider Kimberley community, including at the local government level as a member of the Derby-West Kimberley Shire Council. I was also lucky enough to work with many different groups, organisations and people whose passion and commitment to the Kimberley region and its residents continue to inspire me.

As a social worker I have witnessed first-hand the impact of the removal of Aboriginal children and worked within my role to return these children to their families. In the 1980s a report called "Children in Limbo" was commissioned by the Department for Community Welfare. It identified Aboriginal children missing in the system. We worked tirelessly to return them. I have witnessed members of the stolen generation being returned to families, children discovering they were adopted and being unable to come to terms with that realisation, and women never recovering from relinquishing their children and mourning that loss for the rest of their lives. Also Aboriginal people have come to me to help them find their children after decades. Sometimes I could help, other times my heart went out to them - for many of them their children are still lost.

I have been able to cope with all of this because I have had the most wonderful role models surrounding me. I am here not only because of what I have achieved by winning an election, but because of the battles that have been fought and won by our old people. I am the beneficiary of their struggle to retain their land, their stories, their law and their culture.

People such as Mr John Watson and Mr Ivan McPhee trained me to work effectively in the best interests of my community, with their vision for a fair and just society for all Kimberley children. The support and strength of our Kimberley elders is represented by the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, and they were always willing to advise and direct. There were other very important people in my life who shaped my view of the world, all of whom left us too early. Mrs Glynnis Sibasado AO dedicated her life to working for the Aboriginal community. Her tireless work in Aboriginal justice at both state and national level were honoured last September by the award of Officer of the Order of Australia. This was in recognition of her services to indigenous affairs in justice, health, education and housing. She is one of our greatest heroines, who went so recently. Mr Mowaljarli once said to me that "your family are in your heart, but we are your people."

I do not feel comfortable speaking about myself, but by sharing my story with members I hope to gently remind all those here today of the incredibly diverse group of people that make up this State. I remind us all of our responsibility as legislators to reflect that diversity with sensitivity and understanding. It was the frustration that my fellow Kimberley residents have felt in making their voices heard by those making laws down south that compelled me to represent my community. It is frustration at not having a voice in Government, and feeling so distant and isolated from Parliament. I want an opportunity to be a

facilitator between people in the Kimberley and this Government, because we are so far removed. I want to assist my community to be involved in decision making and the development of legislation.

Like all who are lucky enough to be chosen to be representatives to this Parliament, I bring with me my personal beliefs and philosophies. I was elected to represent the people of the electorate of Kimberley and consider this to be my most important and fundamental responsibility. In every aspect of my life I bring with me the perspective and experiences of an Aboriginal woman who has been part of the Kimberley community for more than 20 years. Given my beliefs and aspirations for my community, it is fitting that I am part of a team led by a Premier who has a vision for all Western Australians. This is a Government that is willing to listen to the views of all sectors of the community. We recognise the diverse nature of our society and the rich multicultural tapestry that makes up this State. A Gallop Labor Government values this diversity and will work to ensure that our community is a place where all are made to feel welcome.

Since my election I have been overwhelmed by the importance that some people place on my achievement, and humbled by the excitement and depth of feeling that my election has produced in people. I received a letter from Jennie Bain in Kendall, New South Wales, who stated -

Please feel assured that many Australians feel elated with you and share the joys of your victory.

We trust your parliamentary experience will be rewarding and positive for the Indigenous people of WA.

Perhaps the most touching line for me was in a letter from David Hyde of Manjimup, who said that I carried the hopes of many with me. The number of letters I have received from people from all over Australia reinforces this sentiment.

I stand here before members because so many good people and groups have supported my campaign and me. I am profoundly grateful to Emily's List - the organisation involving amazing women by whom I have been fortunate enough to have been embraced and supported during the process of becoming a member of Parliament. The generous help given to me by those women was so important that its value is impossible to measure, but I thank them.

To the local members of the Australian Labor Party who are spread throughout the Kimberley and who supported me every step of the way, thank you for having the courage of your convictions to include the often unheard voice of Aboriginal Australians. To the many people who worked long and hard on my campaign, your spirit, enthusiasm and optimism kept alive the dream of today being possible. Thank you. To those special people who made the trek to Broome from the eastern seaboard and overseas, I am humbled by your commitment to ensure my election. To Shelley Eaton, whose tolerance and goodwill shone through in our darkest hours, thank you for being my friend. To Jo Boots, who provided us with steady support, thank you, and you have gratitude, respect and a place with us always. To Jennifer Beacham, former state secretary of the ALP in Victoria, who travelled to Broome at her own expense, who provided us all with an insight into true strength and determination, and whose faith in me and the Kimberley community, in the face of insurmountable odds, never wavered, thank you for your many gifts to us all, and your faith. To the members of the Maritime Union of Australia, thank you for the way you stood by me and supported the campaign. In the dark times, Dean Summers and Wally Pritchard would provide me with inspiration and energy to continue the work we needed to do. Special thanks to Graham Giffard, who has taken it upon himself to stand by me and who has helped me make sense of the strange new world in which I find myself.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my family. My family means everything to me. I cannot imagine how I would survive on a daily, if not hourly, basis without their love, support and strength - except when they leave me and go fishing! To the Nyoongah elders and the many representatives of my father's family, to my mother and her family, and my brothers and sister, thank you for travelling from all over the

nation to be here with me today. It would be remiss of me not to mention the previous member for Kimberley, Hon Ernie Bridge, who, as the first Aboriginal man elected to this Parliament, carved a path that I now follow. To my husband Brian, you are my best mate, and I am glad you are beside me. To my strong daughter Margaret Anne, and my male child William, I want you to soak up this moment, because, Bill, it is history. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

[Applause.]

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