



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Dexter Davies, MLC**  
(Member for Agricultural)

**Address-in-Reply**

**Legislative Council**

**Thursday, 13 August 1998**



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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

**HON DEXTER DAVIES** (Agricultural) [12.01 pm]: I support the motion moved by my colleague Hon Simon O'Brien for an Address-in-Reply to the speech by His Excellency the Governor at the opening of the Parliament on Tuesday.

Mr President, I thank you for your welcome to this Chamber after my swearing-in on that day, and the warm welcome extended to me by other members. I also thank the Clerk and his staff for their welcome and willing assistance in my swearing-in. It has been greatly appreciated.

I am honoured to have been elected as a member for the Agricultural Region and look forward to working with my National Party colleagues, including Hon Murray Criddle, the new Minister for Transport and leader of the National Party in this Chamber, and other members of this House to advance the representation and interests of Western Australian regional communities. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to the Cabinet.

I am also proud to represent a region which, for the past 14 years, has had as one of its members Hon Eric Charlton. Hon Eric Charlton made an outstanding contribution to this Parliament, the State, the people of regional Western Australia and the National Party. I place on record my personal recognition of the great courage, conviction and integrity which were the hallmarks of his time in this Parliament.

Government members: Hear, hear!

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: Hon Eric Charlton was fearless in his representation of his constituents, their livelihoods and interests. He is acknowledged throughout Australia as an outstanding Minister for Transport.

In supporting the Address-in-Reply I would like to speak about fairness and equity for regional communities. It was this principle for which Hon Eric Charlton was a robust and forthright advocate. It is a significant issue which has been debated in this Parliament in the past and in my view we must pay new attention to it.

Events of the past few months and the rise of disaffection with established Australian politics have sent a clear message from regional and rural Australia to all people who aspire to government: Listen to us; we are hurting; we need a sympathetic ear; we need sympathetic action to help us over the next fence. Above all, people are saying that they want to be involved in making the decisions to take this country forward.

The rise of isolationist politics is not a potential solution to the country's problems. It is instead an understandable symptom of worry and fear about change, and is not limited to politics. In all aspects of community life our institutions are fragmenting: Traditional church attendance has fallen dramatically; the sense of neighbourhood is under threat; charities are finding it more difficult to raise volunteer funds; and community groups are finding it hard to attract members, to list but a few examples. In short, change is happening all around us and those of us who are elected to govern and to represent the people must ensure that we work hard to make change positive. Like other members I ask myself why these things are happening and why change is so often perceived as a negative and bound up in bureaucracy. It is not easy to arrive at an answer, but part of it is that we need a fresh commitment to clear and forthright, but sympathetic,

representation in all aspects of Australian life. We need a renewed vision for the future development of the country and the role of regional communities in making that vision real. We need a new commitment for the representation that puts in place the social and industry framework that will enable people to achieve their aspirations for themselves and for their children. How long is it since each of us has devised a new plan about what we can do to help regional communities to thrive and prosper? How long is it since we worked hard to ensure that government resources and regulations are used to help people, not hinder them; that our children can get the best education in the local town; that there will be a choice of local jobs; and that there will be a doctor and local hospital; in other words, to create opportunity, not limit it, in this world of change?

There is a great scene in the movie *Primary Colours* in which the US presidential candidate tells a group of worried rural Americans that he cannot save them from the international economic forces changing their traditional livelihoods. However, he says that he has a plan. He will make sure that they have the educational opportunities to come out winners. The candidate believes in his ability to lead. He does not tell the farmers that he can turn the clock back, but he makes a commitment to be on their side. He offers them all the support at his disposal to ensure the survival of their farms and communities. Is that not what people are asking of us, their elected representatives, and is that not what we should be striving to deliver? The great qualities of innovation, adventure and pioneering spirit are in the blood and bones of the people of regional communities. However, people have stalled on politics and with that politics appears to have stalled too.

We need to foster these qualities anew. It is often all too easy to blame "the system" for economic, social and political problems, but maybe we should have a long, hard look at the government system we use in this country. While we must ensure the protection of democracy and the maintenance of the safeguards which keep this country, we should look to ways in which we can develop a more responsive political system. As the Premier has often indicated, perhaps it is time for a truly regional Government in Australia which involves and includes the people whom Governments are supposed to represent.

As an example of the effects of centralised government members should look at the tax system, especially the arrangement surrounding the distribution of revenue from the Commonwealth to the States. In 1997 the Commonwealth raised almost \$131b in tax revenue, which represented about 77 per cent of total revenue raised throughout the country. By comparison the States raised about 19 per cent and local government 4 per cent. The simple facts are that the Commonwealth raises far more revenue than it needs. This leaves the States and local government very dependent on Canberra. It is time this changed.

The first steps to regional and inclusive government can and must be made by the Federal Government in its new tax reform package. The National Party has proposed that, under new tax sharing arrangements which we have put to the Deputy Prime Minister, Western Australia and other States would continue to receive general revenue grants from the Commonwealth. However, the size of these grants would be determined as a pre-specified share of commonwealth revenue. It is simply no longer acceptable to a State of Western Australia's size and complexity to pay \$11.9b a year to Canberra more than it receives in return in the form of commonwealth grants.

Under new tax-sharing arrangements we have proposed that a certain share of revenue to the States should be guaranteed in the Constitution. It would be based on public service and infrastructure costs. It would completely cover annual recurrent expenditure indexed annually against the consumer price index and total population increases so that funding would be maintained pro rata. It would be set for predetermined periods to minimise political

opportunism. It would be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure equity and efficiency and would be linked to the amount of commonwealth revenue raised so that any increase in overall revenue would result in an increase in each State's share and be jointly administered by the commonwealth finance ministry and the state treasuries.

Significantly, for local communities, we have also proposed that each State's share would include a component for local government recurrent expenditure. The tax-sharing arrangements applying at a commonwealth-state level would also extend to arrangements between the State and local government, so that local communities would have guaranteed access to sufficient, pre-specified funding.

In response to the community's current disaffection with politics, change such as this is a strong and clear way of putting the people back in charge of government. I do not believe that opposing change is an option, not when it is happening throughout the world, faster than ever before, and when we are so dependent on the trade economy. We have to adapt, and I argue that the arrangements I have outlined are a robust first step. As a Parliament, our willingness to adapt will require us to work hard to understand why change is happening, to hear the community's response to change, to really understand what people are saying, and to help the community to recognise the reasons for change not just by words but with action. Only then will politics be in a position to grapple with the problems and to help the community to exploit the benefits which change throws up.

The lack of inclusion of the community in the day-to-day operation of the Government and the lack of information provided by the Government only contribute to a sense of division and frustration now being experienced by many people in communities large and small. The Parliament and the Government must acknowledge that people are hurting. The Parliament and the Government must acknowledge that there is a real problem that requires positive and inclusive solutions. The Parliament and the Government must reflect the trust of the people who elect politicians, and must carry the confidence of the people at all times, not just at election time. Determining the answer is difficult, but what should be clear to all Governments is that a large part of the solution may come from this approach.

People are making a genuine effort to let Governments know that they, like us, wish to be included in the policy process, not to be told what is good for them. Parliaments and Governments must become the key components in a responsive system which -

- listens to regional communities;
- works with them to create local opportunities;
- works with them so they achieve their aspirations;
- works with them to solve local problems;
- works with them to make sure their interests are represented in a robust and forthright way; and
- works with them to ensure that the decisions made here benefit or affect all people fairly and equally, irrespective of where they live.

As it stands, regional communities face a number of significant social and economic challenges. These include -

- unacceptably high unemployment levels;
- a perceived decline in the provision of government social services;
- disenchantment with future economic prospects among the silent majority; and
- the alienation of young people and regional people from the political process.

These have directly encouraged the rise of social disharmony in Australia. This, in turn, has lent credence to the rise of radical populist movements. This relatively new event in the Australian political landscape has many implications. One is the public perception surrounding the validity of democratic representation in Australia and the need to examine the pressures on the existing electoral system. At both commonwealth and state levels, it is rare for a single party to receive a majority of the popular vote. Nonetheless, under the plural system operating at present, Governments can attain large majorities in the lower House on percentages of the popular vote in the low forties. The same point can be made of individual seats. Some commentators raise these issues to question the links between a parliamentary majority and the mandate of the people to undertake new government initiatives.

Another issue is geographical unfairness. The nation's current preferential one-vote-one-value system is geographically and demographically unfair because it tends largely to favour urban voters. In my view, the fairest electoral systems allow for weighted voting in order to protect specific interest groups, such as regional electors, and to provide the Parliament with a better form of representation, both in terms of communities of interest, and issues. There is widespread acceptance of the need for fairness and equity in any democratic electoral system, in the true sense of the term; that is, the representation of communities of interest, not just representation based on the number of people in those communities.

There is also a legal precedent, determined by the High Court, following its rejection of the implied rights principle in relation to the state electoral system. There is almost universal acceptance that the basic rule by which democratic electoral systems are judged is and should continue to be fairness and equity. When some people consider what this term means, the natural response is to assume that fairness and uniformity are the same thing, but this is not always the case. I think it depends on to whom or what one is trying to be fair.

In any assessment of electoral systems, fairness can mean many things, and equity does not always match "equalness". To use a basic example, we should ask whether an electoral system needs to be fair to individuals, to parties, to minorities, to natural communities, or to regions. Should it be fair to all of these? Naturally, any system's complexity will increase proportionally to an increase in the number of special interest groups to which the system has to be fair. When looked at this way, the definition of fairness could be expanded to include many other considerations. Some of the more obvious and accepted of these include -

- the accurate reflection of all public opinion, including minority opinions;

- the representation of major groups, backgrounds or opinions in society;

- fairness between regions, where the interests and issues facing particular regions are vastly different from those faced by other regions. These interests and issues are given weight and credit by the Parliament of the day because of the certain representation such regions possess through the current weighted voting system in Western Australia;

- the extent to which the electoral system enables and encourages all citizens to play a full and active role in politics as voters or candidates, regardless of their geographical or demographic location; and

- allowing for effective government, particularly in a State like Western Australia, which contains a wide variety of populations, issues and requirements for public representation.

All of these ideas can and are often included in the concept of electoral fairness.

The High Court in 1996 clearly found the Australian Constitution did not contain any requirement for state electorates of equal voter numbers. This decision suggests that there is no constitutional requirement or guarantee for the introduction of a one-vote-one-value electoral

system in Western Australia. The arguments in favour of weighted voting in the Australian electoral system depend on two issues -

First, the Australian Constitution does not require equal electoral size in voter numbers and makes no constitutional guarantee of one vote, one value; and

second, given that fact, it is a requirement of the electoral system to provide equity and fairness to all electors, including regional electorates and interest groups, to ensure across the board representation of all the issues and opinions affecting Western Australian and the rest of the nation.

By expanding this definition, this State's current system achieves the ultimate goal of democracy: Rule by the majority, while maintaining a guaranteed right for minorities to be adequately heard and represented.

One of my ambitions in this Parliament will be to ensure that Western Australia's regional communities are heard and are more than adequately represented by ensuring that the system of weighted voting remains the right of regional people.

I support the motion.

[Applause.]

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