



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Col Holt MLC

(Member for South West)

Budget Debate

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 17 June 2009

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ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

Consideration of Tabled Papers

HON COL HOLT (South West) [7.57 pm]: Before I start I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet.

It is a great honour for me to stand in this house to give my inaugural speech. Some very good colleagues of mine have always said that all we have done in our past is in preparation for what we are about to take on or our next challenge. With this in mind, I would like to relay to the house and guests in the gallery a little bit about myself, to paint a picture about what I have been through in preparation for my time in this house.

One of my distant cousins, Janice Young, wrote a book about the origins of our family. She traced the history of our arrival in Australia in 1842. The book is entitled *In search of Elizabeth*. I have it here for show-and-tell! My family was, let me say, very prolific. I would not be surprised if other members or people in the gallery were related to us somehow from the past! When Janice Young released the book, she was asked by a journalist, “So who are you descended from?” She replied, “An English farm labourer, a Welsh convict and the Romani.” He replied, “But haven’t you found someone important in your family?” Janice said, “Yes; an English farm labourer, a Welsh convict and the Romani.”

I feel a little the same way. I come from humble beginnings, of which I am truly proud. My father was a Telecom linesman for 35 years. My mother was a dedicated mother-of-six, of whom I am the youngest. We lived in a little fibro house in Goomalling. Although it may not seem too exciting, I was part of a loving and very caring family. I think it is a credit to our parliamentary system that someone who feels they come from humble beginnings can participate in our Parliament. Mum and dad were committed totally to their family values and they worked hard to ensure their family had a roof over their heads and food on the table. They often went without so that we, their children, had our needs met. I would like to acknowledge my mum, who is in the gallery tonight. She is an incredible woman with amazing strength and fortitude who would crawl over burning coals for her family. I would also like to acknowledge my dad, who passed away two years ago and so has missed this chapter in my life. However, I can imagine what he would say of this latest adventure. It would be along the lines of what he said when I left my very secure job after 14 years, when at that time I had four young dependent children, a mortgage, all the normal expenses of family life, absolutely no client base and no job. My first job after I left my secure government job—I had set out to be a community development consultant—was drenching sheep on a mate’s farm. What do you expect, really! My dad grew up in the Depression years and so had a very conservative outlook on life and was very risk averse. He said to me about leaving my job—I beg forgiveness of the

house—“What the bloody hell do you want to do that for?” I think he would probably say the same thing now! However, I am sure he would be proud of his youngest son.

I would also like to acknowledge my three brothers, Lester, Frank and Jeff, and my two sisters, Anne and Jen, who are always there to help when you need them most. I must add that they keep me totally grounded in what I do. They keep me totally aware of all the issues that most Western Australians face, and there is no way that I will be able to get away with anything with them. I am sure they will keep me on track.

I would also like to recognise my beautiful, enigmatic wife, Floss. She made me put those words in here! She is the perfect foil for me. She is very gregarious in nature, and has a fantastic ability to gather friends around her. I would also like to acknowledge my children, Ebony, Zeke, Denzel and Frazer, who undoubtedly have helped make me the person I am today. I thank them publicly here now for their love and support, and for their blind faith in me. It was interesting on induction to this house, I received some forms from the Legislative Council office. One of the questions was: do you have any significant relatives? “Of course”, I wrote down, “Yes, all of them!” For me, they are all significant, especially my wife and children.

Back to my story and where I come from. In Goomalling Primary School I was part of a classroom that had 14 students. I was faced with the prospect of going away to school to further my education. My folks asked me when I was 14 whether I would like to travel by bus to Northam every day so I could be home at night, or board in Perth away from home. For some reason, I jumped at the opportunity to test myself in a new school and a living-away-from-home environment. I guess I wanted the opportunity to test my social and leadership skills. I think it was an indicator of my developing attitude to life: let’s give it a go and we will work out details a little later on! That kind of attitude has followed me through life.

That decision at that time was a good one. I formed many great friendships—friendships that are still relevant today. Those friendships are nearly 30 years old and I thank all those friends for their support and belief in me. I would like to name them all, but, in fear of missing someone, I will not do it. It would also sound like a metrosexual zoo! However, there is one group of people I would like to mention, and that is the Spinifex, who are lifelong friends and will continue to be till the day I leave this earth. After school I stayed in Perth and completed a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Western Australia, orienting myself around the footy team, which was full of country boys just like me.

I then joined the Department of Agriculture and worked there for 14 years. I was a little young and naive when I first joined the department. One of the executives asked me what I would like to do. I said that I hoped I would go a long way. They immediately sent me to Derby in the Kimberley! However, I saw this as another opportunity to expand my horizons and my experience and another chance to put up my hand to see what would happen. Fortunately for me, that is where I met my wife. Again, I thank her for being here and sticking by me. While working in the Department of Agriculture, I lived and worked in almost every region of Western Australia, including Bruce Rock, Halls Creek and Carnarvon, Narrogin for almost seven years, and Australind. It seemed that we had a new child in almost every new town that we lived in, keeping the maternity ward busy in those country hospitals. I had many roles, including border quarantine. I was involved in donkey control. I was a coordinator for the feral goat eradication campaign. I was a LandCare officer. Eventually I moved into a training role, which sparked my deep interest in helping others to gain skills and knowledge and to reach their potential.

I have lived in many places and participated in many different types of communities and met a lot of regional Western Australians. I have learnt that although Western Australia is geographically large, the WA regional community is really quite small. We just never know where we will run into people. Almost every day I run into someone whom I know from school or from sport or whom I

worked or socialised with, and I never know where they might turn up. From all those years in regional WA I have gained a wealth of experience that I believe will help me greatly to work as an elected member.

I would like to tell of a little experience I had when we were camping in the heart of the Murchison one day. A group of us were there talking about feral goat eradication. We were standing around a camp fire. A Vietnam veteran was there, who was obviously a very proud Australian. He was the president of the Returned Services League in Carnarvon at the time, he truly lived for Anzac Day and he ensured that he marched every year. There was also a Canadian-born Australian, who emigrated to Australia when he was about 20 years old. Anyway, the discussion turned to who was truly Australian. The Vietnam vet of course stood up and said, "I am truly Australian because I fought for this country under that flag." The Canadian stood up and said, "Well, you are just lucky you were born here, mate. I chose to be Australian, so I am Australian." As they shaped up to each other around the fire to settle the argument with fisticuffs, I was struck by the passion they both showed. Of course, they were both right; they both had a claim to be truly Australian and, just as importantly, they had the right and permission to express their views.

I think I learnt a valuable lesson from that observation. Just because I was fortunate enough to be born in the greatest state in the greatest country does not make me a greater Australian than anyone who has chosen to make Australia home. I welcome any new Australian to add culture to our country. We have already heard in a number of maiden speeches here of the origins of some of the members. I would like to acknowledge them and any other members who have chosen Australia as their home and have chosen to contribute to our state through parliamentary service. I also note here that it is national Refugee Week. I urge our immigration authorities to act with passion and empathy for all those looking to make Australia their home.

As I have said, I left the Department of Agriculture seven years ago and began a consultancy in community development and sheep handling. At the time I did not know I was doing community development work; in fact, often we do not. I just had a desire to work and learn with communities in a new way. I wanted to make a difference to people's lives. One of the early projects I was involved with was the Western Australian Community Leadership program. My colleagues and I—some of them are present in the gallery—visited 27 communities, from Wyndham to Esperance, asking those communities to identify two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous leaders from each community to participate in a program on their behalf. We worked with existing and emerging leaders from all over Western Australia. These were regional people who were developing their leadership skills to be an asset to their families, communities, region and state. This was real work that engaged people in a very personal and community interface, and it gave me a much greater understanding of all people and of Indigenous communities.

Everyone who came into contact with that program was in awe of the calibre of people we have in regional WA. I note that a graduate of the program is present in the gallery, a woman who joined the program as a young Indigenous radio announcer from Kununurra, and after completing the program she put up her hand and said, "I want to be involved with the Kununurra Chamber of Commerce and Industry." She now works for Argyle Diamond Mine as a training officer. These are the sort of people we worked with, who gained the knowledge and confidence to go where they wanted to go. I am in awe of all these people and eternally grateful to them for generously sharing their experience.

Unfortunately, the government of the day discontinued the program, and all the momentum and experience provided by the WA Community Leadership program was in danger of being lost. However, the coordinators of the program decided to form a new community development company. I joined six like-minded colleagues to continue to work with communities the length and breadth of Western Australia, and this work has continued for the past six years. I am passionate

about this type of work and I am passionate about the people of this state who want to make a difference, on whatever level they choose, be it at family level, at community level as a volunteer, in leadership roles within their community or region, standing up for state politics or industry or, if they choose, to take on leadership roles at national level.

The company that we helped form held the belief that everyone can be like a pebble in a pond; everyone can make an impact beyond their own presence. In communities, small things matter and can make a huge difference. People just have to be willing to make a wave. I believe everyone deserves to have the opportunity to learn and develop the skills to make a difference in their community.

Before I move on, I would like also to touch on the social isolation that faces many people in regional Western Australia. I am especially concerned about the social isolation of young people in the regions. I remember being told a story by a person from Hyden who had organised two busloads of young ladies to travel from Perth to Hyden for a get-together and cabaret at the Hyden town hall. She told me how the young men of that community did not have too many social skills; they spend their lives on the farm, seeing maybe their mum and their sister and working with their dad all day long. They go to footy training and play for the local footy team, but they do not have very much social interaction with girls in the community. It struck me that this could potentially become an issue if we do not do something about it. Social isolation is an issue. If members looked at the suicide statistics for young people, especially young men, in regional Western Australia, they would be appalled.

I would like to make special mention of a very dear mentor of mine, Leigh Hardingham, who started me on my journey to this house. I remember sitting with her at the back of Dumas House when we were involved with the WA Community Leadership program. She asked me what my leadership aspirations were. I said, "I'm thinking about joining the local shire." She looked over here to Parliament House and she said, "Have you thought about that house over there?", which of course I had not, but immediately I did. As goes with my attitude to life, I thought I will put up my hand and give it a go. I ran in the south west as second on the ticket in 2005, and I was unsuccessful. I ran not really knowing what I was getting into, but with the faith and the confidence that I would be able to work it out when I got there. Thank you, Leigh, for those many, many hours of mentoring conversation. You truly have given me the confidence that I can stand here tonight—even though I am a little nervous—and address my peers and the people in the gallery.

At this point I would like to acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues from the National Party who have helped me to start this latest chapter in my life. I would especially like to acknowledge those who masterminded the royalties for regions policy for the brilliant campaign that they ran at the last election. It goes without saying that all the hard work from those dedicated party members—an army of rank and file members—and from the range of volunteers who helped me, and the faith shown in the royalties for regions policy by the people in regional Western Australia, in particular the south west, is why I am in this house now. Thank you, guys.

The royalties for regions campaign was built on a simple but effective message that captured the imagination of the people the Nationals represent. They dared to imagine their region having services and infrastructure that would meet their needs. They dared to imagine their region having effective health services and more education resources, including vocational education. They dared to imagine their region having adequate policing. They dared to imagine their region having funds to invest in assets that the community believes are important. They dared to imagine their region having improved housing for essential workers such as police officers, nurses and teachers. They dared to imagine their region having increased assistance through the patient assisted travel scheme and the country age pension fuel card. They dared to imagine the Royal Flying Doctor Service having five new planes. They dared to imagine having new funds for local governments to spend on

community projects that would make a real difference to their lives. The royalties for regions policy is not just about increased services and infrastructure. It sends a clear message to the people who live in the regions—who have felt ignored for far too long—that they do matter, that they are an integral part of this state, and that they and their families and their communities are worth investing in. I am sure that any members who travelled around the regions after the election would not have gone far without noticing the difference in the attitude of the people in the regions because of the royalties for regions policy. I share the belief that royalties for regions will make a great contribution to the lives of people in the regions.

I intend to spend my time in this house representing the people of the south west by building on and delivering the royalties for regions policy, and to complement the delivery of services and infrastructure in the regions. I intend to spend my time in this house investing in the social and human capacity of the people in the south west and throughout the regions. I intend to spend my time helping the people in the regions to help themselves by gaining the skills and experience that will allow them to become leaders and advocates for their communities and their regions. I am passionate about the regions of Western Australia and the people who choose to live, work and raise their families in the regions. I intend to work towards the development of regional programs and services that will give people in the regions the educational and experiential mechanisms that they need to build their skills and self-confidence so that they can make the most of the opportunities that royalties for regions presents for them. I am passionate about helping those who will put up their hand and take on a role. If someone is willing to have a go, I want to help that person to have a go.

I cannot finish without a quick mention of the balance of power. The Nationals hold the balance of power in both houses of this Parliament. That is a great responsibility. It is a responsibility to provide good government to the whole of Western Australia. It is also a responsibility to the people the Nationals represent—the people of regional Western Australia—to ensure that we deliver for them.

In closing, I would like to thank the house and guests for their indulgence. I also, once again, want to thank my wife and family, and my friends.

When I embarked upon the process of preparing my maiden speech, I was given about 100 different pieces of advice. One piece of advice was: do not be too idealistic. That was from Dan Hatch from “Inside Cover”. Another piece of advice was: do not bring out too many quotes, because everyone does that. However, I will bring out one quote from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who once said —

We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done.

That says to me that we should not be faineant or idle while in this house, but that we should grab the opportunity that has been afforded each and every one of us not only to represent the people of Western Australia, but also to make the most of every opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of the people of Western Australia, because in the end each of us in this place will judge our own performance by ourselves. We must, in other words, “go large”. Thank you, Mr President.

[Applause.]
