



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Elise Irwin, MLC**  
**(Member for North Metropolitan Region)**

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

*Reprinted from Hansard*



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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

Resumed from an earlier stage of the sitting on the following motion moved by Hon Sally Talbot —

That the following address be presented to Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the commonwealth of Australia —

May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

**HON ELISE IRWIN (North Metropolitan)** [8.45pm]: I thank the President for this opportunity to address the members of this place. It gives me great pleasure to speak with members tonight. I would like to congratulate members opposite on their success in the recent state election. I am sure that they are looking forward to welcoming their colleagues on 22 May, which is also the date that my short tenure will end.

I am very fortunate to be here filling the casual vacancy that was created in the North Metropolitan Region when my Liberal colleague Hon Peter Katsambanis resigned and subsequently won the seat of Hillarys to continue representing the people of Western Australia in the other place. It is a vagary of our political system that affords me this short but very sweet opportunity. I wish Hon Peter Katsambanis all the best and I am sure that he will continue to represent the people of Hillarys in the same manner that he has represented the whole of the North Metropolitan Region, alongside Hon Peter Collier, Hon Michael Mischin and Hon Liz Behjat. Of course, I will not be the only member leaving this place on 21 May. I recognise all members for the contributions they have made during their service to our great state and I wish all members leaving the very best in their next chapters, including yourself Mr President.

Members may know me as a policy adviser for the previous government, a small business owner, a surf lifesaver, a community volunteer and a Liberal Party member, or as a friend, wife and mother. I grew up in a close-knit working class family. Like others in this place, I am a fifth generation Australian. My forebears on both sides immigrated to South Australia from the United Kingdom as free settlers with the first fleets. My parents' background was farming in the mid north of South Australia before migrating to WA in 1956 and farming around the south west. I say migrating because my older sister, who was about eight years old at the time, thought that Western Australians must speak another language, because it seemed so far from where she had spent her early years in the Clare Valley. That is how people in the east think of Western Australians as well—over there in the west.

Dad returned from World War II, having served in Borneo and New Guinea, to his parents' property at Farrell's Flat with his two brothers. After having two sons of his own, he and mum were looking for a new start and had heard of land on offer for returned servicemen in WA, so mum and dad boarded the train in Port Pirie and started the trek to WA with their three young

children and all their belongings strapped onto a 1952 Holden FX coupe ute. They disembarked in Kalgoorlie two days later, just on sunset. My mother's very proper South Australian Methodist upbringing had not prepared her for Kalgoorlie at night in the 1950s. Needless to say, their stay there did not last too long. Dad's experiences serving in the army served him well in this new frontier. He had purchased acreage at Hillman, near Darkan. He and mum and my brothers and sister had the back-breaking job of clearing the farm completely of bush by hand before they could start the real job of farming.

My story starts about 10 years after all that. I was born in Subiaco, after mum and dad decided to leave the farm and come to Perth, in 1966. My three siblings were all in high school or working by that stage and I think it was a bit of a shock to have a baby around the house again.

My memories of my childhood are full of dad working in his shed and turning our entire backyard into a vegie patch. Mum bottled and preserved madly to keep up with produce that just kept coming. You can take the farmer off the land but never take away the will to keep producing. My parents grew up in the Depression era and were ever mindful of wastage, not running up debts and—heaven forbid!—buying anything on credit. However, dad also brought home some demons from the war. He never spoke of his experiences to our mother or us kids but he would never commemorate Anzac Day by going to the march. That was a day he would go to the pub and not come home until we were all in bed. Mum knew better than us what dad was going through and it was a frustration of their marriage that he would not talk about what he had seen or done during that terrible time. I speak of this now because it is topical. We are hearing more in the media about what our veterans suffer and the suicide rates are truly shocking.

I acknowledge my very dear friend Dr Lisa Wood, who is here tonight with her husband and our friend Rod, and her recent work with the federal government on researching the effects of depression on our Defence Force personnel. I hope that the recent funding announcements will go some way to assisting them through their dark days. On that note, I also acknowledge my good friend Wendy Kehoe, who is here tonight, and her willingness to talk of her own and her colleagues' experiences in our modern-day army.

I remember it used to cost mum \$2 to fill up the EH Holden she drove, and dad sitting out on the veranda in the summer with Johnny Cash playing on the record player. I grew up with a freedom that I think some of our children lack. We rode our bikes to school or walked. We all wore school uniform and if children were naughty, they were dealt with quickly, no questions asked. Our parents always backed up the teacher. We respected our teachers and loved our parents. Summer holidays were spent with friends in the street, under the lawn sprinklers or riding bikes. Dinner was eaten at the dining room table with the family. The television was turned off. We sat together and talked about our day. Invariably, mum would turn the conversation to current affairs. She loved nothing better than a good debate on what was going on in the world. Mum and dad were staunch, dyed-in-the-wool Liberals but one of my brothers leant a little to the left, so some pretty lively discussions would erupt on occasion. Both my parents worked full time. I was expected to be resilient, resourceful and independent. I was the original latchkey kid but, of course, they had not come up with that label in those days. Parents just did what they had to do and we all helped where we could. Growing up in a family where hard work and a can-do attitude was expected and celebrated has had a great influence on how I have conducted my life and how I have raised my children.

When I met my husband, Mark, he introduced me to surf lifesaving. His passion was and still is Scarborough Surf Life Saving Club. I learnt fairly quickly that there was no way to beat it, so I had to join too. Little did I know what a great part the club would play in my life and the life of our family. Some club members are here tonight supporting me and I thank them

for their friendship over many years, especially Nick and Kathy Stewart, who have been with us through the good and the more challenging times. I cannot imagine what not being part of this great organisation would be like. It has taught us all the value of community service. What we have put in has been repaid tenfold in the skills we have learnt, the friendships created and the sense of belonging we all hold dear. It has given our family a core sense of purpose within our community. I was honoured to be president of Scarborough Surf Life Saving Club for four years after holding various committee positions for the previous 10 years. Amongst those positions, I am most proud that I coached junior lifesavers for nine years in their required qualifications. I was also on the Australian Surf Life Saving Championships committee for four years. I liaised with national, state and local bodies and corporations to negotiate the successful staging of the Australian championships at Scarborough in 2007, 2008 and 2009, and again in 2014. This event has more competitors than the Commonwealth Games and it is held annually. The championships will return to Scarborough in 2018 and we are looking forward to showing off a revitalised Scarborough to the rest of Australia.

The Scarborough revitalisation project, initiated by the former Liberal government in association with the City of Stirling, is a massive achievement for both the electorate of Scarborough and the state of Western Australia. I was pleased to play a small part in that and to have been able to represent our club in the negotiations and early planning stages. Scarborough was languishing as a tired and decrepit beachfront precinct. The Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority created a vision for Scarborough that will see the area flourish and become a place of pride for all Western Australians. I will put on record here tonight that I am concerned about one aspect of the project that has since been scrapped by our new Minister for Transport: the extension of the egress points for the area. It is imperative that these road connections be implemented or an alternative be created for visitors and residents to be able to safely leave the area. Presently and for some time, the congestion of egress from the Scarborough foreshore area has been such that it can take over 45 minutes from exiting a car bay to reaching West Coast Highway either at Scarborough Beach Road or Brighton Road—a distance of approximately 200 to 500 metres. This is absurd for the general road user and dangerous for emergency vehicles. A small but vocal group that opposed the road extensions are claiming a victory of sorts at the minister's decision. Let us hope this does not result in an unwarranted fatality due to an ambulance not being able to leave the area with a priority 1 patient who our surf lifesaving volunteers have managed to rescue from drowning.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge Tanya Channell, Rob Mason, Tenneille and Glenn Ross, Dave Thompson, Bob Welch, Rod Dalziel, Tim Schifferli and David Irwin. They are all club members who I relied on for advice and guidance during my term as president of Scarborough surf club. Our children, Jack, Kate and Henry, all participate in surf sports and patrols. They assist with community events in water safety and have taken on leadership roles within the club and their respective schools. They are confident and hardworking peer group leaders. All three of our children have been involved in actively saving lives on our beach and we are very happy to have given them that opportunity. Our eldest son Jack has been recognised at state level for his contribution to youth development, of which we are very proud. The value of surf lifesaving in Western Australia as a community organisation cannot be overplayed. Last summer, 66 lives were saved by volunteer patrolling lifesavers on Scarborough Beach alone and almost 1 000 lives were saved statewide. Imagine if we were talking about 1 000 people drowning at our beaches last summer. Imagine the heartache and loss that would mean, not to mention the economic consequences for those families affected. Volunteers undertake to keep our beaches safe so that we can all enjoy our beautiful Western Australian summers. Surf lifesaving is an amazing organisation and one that I am proud to be associated with.

In 2010, an opportunity arose for me to work in a parliamentarian's office. I worked for Hon Liza Harvey, MLA, for seven years, firstly in her electorate office and then in her ministerial office as a policy adviser. I sincerely thank her for the opportunity and support she has given me. I truly believe that if people want to make a worthwhile contribution or be a part of shaping society for future generations, then they simply must become involved. I enjoyed my time in Liza's offices immensely and—wow!—what a learning curve. I had exposure to grassroots, local, state and federal issues. The most important of those was the exposure to a side of life I have never, thankfully, personally experienced. Like most electorate offices, state housing is one of our biggest issues. This can be both extremely frustrating and wonderfully rewarding. We really get criticism from both sides—from home owners who are not happy that their taxes are paying welfare and from tenants who feel they have no avenues to escape the welfare cycle. I saw generational reliance on welfare, which was devastating. These issues need long-term strategies and analysis with a view to reducing the welfare burden on taxpayers while looking after our legitimately disadvantaged and disenfranchised people.

In the ministerial office, I also worked in the portfolio areas of small business, tourism, women's interests and training and workforce development. I acknowledge the wonderful and innovative work done by the departments I had the pleasure of working with, and the directors general and chief executive officers David Eaton, Stephanie Buckland, Jennifer Mathews and Ruth Shean. Being involved in the development of policy across these sectors was very personally fulfilling and worthwhile. Researching and implementing decisive change and influencing the way Western Australians conduct their daily lives was truly enriching and I feel very privileged to have been given that opportunity.

Currently, we are seeing a downturn in the Western Australian economy. This is a blow to our small business owners in particular. Small business owners are expected to be experts in all levels of their business including accounting, economics, law and industrial relations.

This often creates unforeseen costs and stress when they become entangled in the red tape that is associated with statutory bodies, local regulations and tenancy agreements. A small business operator may be forced to seek expensive specialist advice. It takes hard work, persistence, resilience, independence, resourcefulness and courage to stick with it. A small business owner is also at the mercy of outside forces; a government not aligned to small business will be disastrous. Over-regulatory government policy will spell the end for many small business owners. Payroll tax is a burden that prevents growth of business and promotes disincentive for employment. Every day we hear how small business operators are struggling with these issues. It may be with the Australian Taxation Office, creditors or landlords. With the introduction by the previous Liberal government, of the Small Business Commissioner, small business has a voice and a real avenue to seek help with legal issues. Small business now has a mechanism to effectively seek low-cost mediation through the Small Business Development Corporation, and I congratulate our former state Liberal government for assessing and meeting this need; however, this agency needs greater funding and acknowledgement of the important part it plays in this vital sector of our economy.

Tourism continues to be a vibrant component of the economy of Western Australia. It will continue to provide employment for our jobseekers, and enriching experiences for our visitors. It is a large and encompassing sector, with new and innovative businesses consistently coming online. It is an exciting area to be a part of.

As the construction phase of the mining sector has wound down, tourism and other areas of our economy such as agriculture will have an opportunity for growth. With guidance and support I believe these sectors will shine and offer our economy resilience into the future. Alongside these opportunities for sectors, we must also consider how some of our more

marginalised participants will be able to take advantage of opportunities going forward. Research demonstrates that better business and community service outcomes can be achieved with a diverse workforce and a diverse leadership group. Unconscious bias has a devastating effect on career opportunities for women, people aged over 55, people with disability and jobseekers with English as a second language. An area I have worked in over the last four years has been women's interests, and, undoubtedly, supporting women's economic independence will not only improve choices for women, but also contribute to their financial security in later life. The gender pay gap in Western Australia is around 25 per cent. The World Economic Forum predicts it will take until 2133 to achieve global gender parity. I am not sure about my female colleagues, but I am not prepared to wait that long; I certainly do not think my daughter, Kate, should have to wait that long either.

Various factors contribute to the gap, including workforce segregation; women taking time out of work to attend to caring responsibilities; higher numbers of men than women in senior positions across almost all occupations; and gender-based discrimination, including unconscious bias in recruitment practices. Females have represented around 60 per cent of Australian university graduates for at least two decades, but make up about only three per cent of chief executive officer positions. Leaders across government, academia and industry have identified unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion processes as one of the factors that can affect women's engagement in the workforce. Inclusive organisational policies and practices are needed to facilitate positive changes in attitude and behaviour towards women's return to, and retention in, the workforce. Superannuation is the key to security in retirement. Recent research shows a woman's average balance of \$68 600 is just over 60 per cent of the average balance for men. Lower average salaries, taking time out of work for caring duties or working part time are some of the contributing factors to women having less superannuation than men. Consider that in the context of a single woman who has not earned enough money over her lifetime to pay off a mortgage but wishes to retire. What will her options be in retirement? Will she need to go on a five-year waiting list with the Department of Housing to be placed in an area not of her choosing? How will she support herself while on that waiting list, and where will she live? Economic security is the benchmark to personal security, as well as an enabler to improve circumstances. Retirement options improve, health care improves, workforce participation choices improve, participation in society improves, as well as the ability to leave a bad relationship or living situation.

The former Liberal-led state government sponsored the Filling the Pool research project, which championed more women in leadership roles. Working with leading Western Australian employers, organisations and renowned academics, the Committee for Perth identified ways to address the gender imbalance at senior levels in Western Australian organisations. Lack of childcare options and gender bias were both identified as disablers to women seeking to improve their career options. Access to child care is fundamental to women's increased workforce participation and attainment of leadership roles. Quality child care also impacts positively on children's early development. For some parents, child care located close to work best suits their needs. For other parents, child care close to home or transport links works best. To better meet these needs, opportunities to locate more childcare centres along our rail and road corridors is imperative. Readily accessible information about childcare locations, availability and quality still remains a challenge for many parents. More work will be required to market options to parents and to stay abreast of changing requirements as well as eliminating red tape where possible.

Finally, I would like to touch on training and workforce development simply to say that if the vocational education and training area does not continue to develop as it has, we are doing our community a disservice, especially our school leavers and those who may seek an

alternative to university entrance. I know from personal experience with my own children that an academic career does not suit everyone, and the options a vocational education offers some in our community can instil a passion for learning that no schoolroom ever will. My son Henry is testament to that. The smile on his face when he gets home from work every day is in stark contrast to the moody and tired teenager he was after a school day.

In conclusion, Mr President, I thank all the members and parliamentary staff, especially yourself; our Whip, Hon Alyssa Hayden; and Hon Liz Behjat. You have all made me feel very welcome for my short but sweet stay here in this place and I wish you all well. I understand the importance of our system of government that has afforded me this privilege and I hope to continue serving the community of the North Metropolitan Region in some other capacity when my tenure is complete. I thank my parents Maxine and Don I'Anson, who unfortunately are no longer with us but whom I think of often, as well as my sister, Leonie, and brothers, Chris and Steven, and all our extended family of in-laws and outlaws. I especially thank my husband Mark and children, Jack, Kate and Henry—without your support and love I would not be here today.

[Applause.]

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