



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**  
**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Helen Bullock MLC**  
(Member for Mining & Pastoral)

**Budget Debate**

**Legislative Council**

**Wednesday, 3 June 2009**



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### ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

#### *Consideration of Tabled Papers*

**HON HELEN BULLOCK (Mining and Pastoral)** [8.00 pm]: Mr President, surely no new member of this house could rise to speak for the first time without being struck by the enormous privilege that the people of the regions have bestowed upon us to be of service to them, to this state and to our Queen. It is a double honour for me, not only to be afforded the opportunity to represent the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region, but also to be, I believe, the first person born in communist China to be democratically elected to a seat in an Australian Parliament. Mr President, that, of itself, makes my story a somewhat unusual one and, given that my background must bear upon my consideration of the issues which come before us, I seek to place that unusual story before the honourable members of this house free of the charge of self-indulgence which might otherwise be laid against one who sought to make their own experience the centrepiece of a maiden speech.

Mr President, I have lived two lives: the first in China, the second in Australia.

My life in China began during the Cultural Revolution. A great many Chinese, my parents among them, were victims of the Cultural Revolution, condemned to periods of deprivation and jailed from time to time by a totalitarian regime determined to set its people spying against each other and declaring them guilty by gossip without the benefit of a system of justice based on innocence until proven guilty.

In these trying circumstances, I was often, as a child, despatched to live with my grandparents and my extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins in the countryside. While born out of the hardship suffered by my parents, these were among the happiest days of my childhood—safe in the arms of my extended family.

It was while I was growing up that I began to escape into the wonderful world of western literature. Such classics as “A Story of Two Towns” and “Goodbye to Weapons” may have lost a little in translation but they were still a window into a world removed from the daily hardship of life in China. I read voraciously, I loved the Brontes, and while I may have tended to be something of an Anglophile, I nevertheless devoured French and Russian novels in translation.

It was through the eyes of the novelist that I began to appreciate the world outside China—a world of freedom and opportunity which other countries appeared to take for granted, to take as of right, but which for me was a world of wonder.

I determined that I must experience this new world. I determined to do everything necessary to earn that opportunity. I studied hard. I gained a professional qualification in accountancy. I learnt

English to the extent available in China, and in 1991, aged 25, armed only with a suitcase and a Chinese-English dictionary, I arrived in Perth on Australia Day to start my second life.

I recall that I was surprised to find that Perth was closed for the public holiday. I now understand that the regulation of retail trading hours is a perfectly natural and proper state of affairs, which is just part of what gives Perth a great lifestyle!

The first thing I learned in Australia was that my hard-earned Chinese qualifications counted for nothing. Rather than building upon my initial education, I needed first to requalify. To earn a living, I needed to work, and to work, I needed to gain employment on the bottom rungs of the labour market. For my first three years, I worked in restaurants, as a cleaner and as a factory hand. These are the jobs available to new migrants. Australia can be a country of hard work and low pay, while migrants come to terms with the customs and culture of their new country; but it is also a country of boundless opportunity, and one in which superficial barriers in the path of a new arrival can be readily overcome if one is possessed of the determination to do so.

I had little support in my new country, aside from a handful of friends in the Chinese community. My factory work introduced me to an unexpected source of support—the trade union movement, and through it, the Australian Labor Party. I joined the Food Preservers' Union and saw firsthand the benefits which a migrant workforce could gain through solidarity and collective negotiation. I met the union secretary, and he saw in me some potential overlooked by management—we married! Thereafter, I devoted myself to full-time study for a period. I obtained a TAFE diploma and then enrolled in a commerce course at Curtin University, graduating with distinction, having joined the vice-chancellor's list for the top one per cent of students. Following my graduation, I enrolled in a master's course, completing so much of it as to earn a postgraduate diploma, while also qualifying as a certified practising accountant.

As a CPA, the world of professional employment was open to me. The factory hand had once again become an accountant. This experience demonstrated to me again—although such further proof was not needed—that the road to personal and professional advancement lies through education. While this is true for migrants, it is no less true for working people generally. If, in a competitive world, better quality employment opportunities await those whose skills are improved through education, then we need to make the very best educational opportunities freely available to our people. Western Australia can make no better investment in the future of our people, of our industries and of our state, than in the ready availability of a world-class education system.

By this time, I had exhausted my enthusiasm for study, and was working full time as an accountant in public practice. I enjoyed public practice, and it gave me in return a close understanding of a wide range of Western Australian businesses; of those business characteristics which tend towards success, and those which tend towards failure; and of the sound business practice on which can be based a successful enterprise—or, perhaps, a successful state.

Notwithstanding my fondness for public practice, I sought to broaden my horizons through experience in the corporate world. Western Australia is a mining state, so I sought employment in the mining industry. By 2007 I was working as an accountant on a fly in, fly out basis on the Nifty copper mine in the state's north west. I enjoyed the work, the camaraderie of the mess and the sense of being part of an enterprise struggling against physically oppressive conditions to build the future of the state. I would be there still, save for two things. Firstly, my husband suffered a severe heart attack on 5 September last year, and I flew to Perth that day to nurse him back to health. Secondly, on 6 September, the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region decided that I was going to have a career change in any event. Since then I have continued to work in the mining industry, but in a Perth-based position rather than on-site.

On the home front, things developed unexpectedly. Both my husband and I are committed family people, but we were not destined to have a family of our own. Nevertheless, the Bullock household is a home to a changing guard of relatives across three generations. There is a lot of love in the Bullock home. The principal beneficiary is one little five-year-old boy, my nephew Ethan, who himself has reserves of affection for everyone which seem to be boundless, and who shares the joy that he finds in life with all of us. With a large family at home, life is not always going to go smoothly. Nevertheless, it is my experience, both as a child and now, that nothing is as precious as family.

Mr President, here is a migrant's story. It is a story of a girl born in circumstances of political oppression who developed a determination to experience a new life and new opportunities in a new country and who has, so far, pursued that ambition so as to find herself here among those privileged to govern this great state. It is an honour which is scarcely comprehensible to me.

It is also a life's experience which has led me towards an interest in a number of policy areas. For the remainder of my time today, I wish to touch briefly on six of them—the mining industry, trade and China, education, multiculturalism, the trade union movement and the family.

### **THE MINING INDUSTRY**

Having worked in the mining industry, I understand that it forms the basis of the prosperity of this state. It provides well-paid employment to workers. It provides revenue to the government to fund the provision of services. It is a major consumer of the products and services fuelling the economy of the state. I would like to be remembered at the end of my time here as a great supporter of the industry and supporter of its development. On behalf of the people of Western Australia, we need to maximise this development and to ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, the wealth generated by the mining industry is turned to the benefit of the people of the state. Those who would oppose the development of the mining industry bear a heavy onus. They need to demonstrate that the failure to develop a particular resource stands to offer a greater benefit to the people than its development. In most cases it is difficult to imagine.

I can see a great and prosperous future for the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region. Those people, who work hard in an overwhelmingly harsh environment, deserve their fair share of the prosperity generated through mining—as do all Western Australians. The government of this state needs to work effectively to keep those benefits here to deploy the fruits of nature's bounty wisely.

### **TRADE AND CHINA**

The twenty-first century has been widely heralded as the Asian century. Western Australia is well positioned to take full advantage of the prosperity attainable through strong trade links with Asia. Within Asia, it is China which has attracted the attention of the world in terms of its vigorous capacity for growth. Without in any way diminishing the importance of Japan as an Australian trading partner, it is the rise of China which has the capacity to drive enormous expansion within the Mining and Pastoral Region in the decades to come.

As a member of Parliament of Chinese origin, I believe that I am uniquely placed to assist in the development of Western Australia's relationship with this key trading partner. With a solid background in business in the mining industry and with my Chinese heritage, I believe that I can add real value to Western Australia's business relationship with China, while being cautious as to the nature of Chinese investment in this country, which is qualitatively different from the investment of other overseas businesses or sovereign wealth funds. While feeding the world's demand for resources should secure a firm foundation for the Western Australian economy for decades to come, the wealth generated by the mining industry needs to be turned to greater effect than making Western Australia a hole in the ground. Western Australia needs a broader plan to guarantee its future prosperity. We need to be encouraging downstream processing and developing

our manufacturing industries. This cannot include, in the long term, those industries in which the low labour costs of populous nations, such as China and India, give them a competitive advantage which can only be countered through the protective mechanisms of trade barriers. Rather, we need to invest in capital-intensive, high-skill, high-wage industries of the future, as well as in those industries, the maintenance of which are determined as being critical to the national interest. Success in these fields will demand a highly skilled workforce and a dramatically increased emphasis on education. Aspiring to prosperity through the development of skill-based industries is clearly doomed to failure without a full commitment by government to build a workforce which values, which is keen to acquire and which acquires those skills. A government that talks a big game in terms of high-skilled industries but does not back it up with world-class training is not only deluding itself, but, worse, deluding its people.

### **EDUCATION**

Education is the means by which working people and their children may improve their material lot. The provision of quality, free education to the people of the state is one of the most important duties of the state government, and one on which it should be judged. In that regard, there needs to be an emphasis on the quality of outcomes. A government that provides the mere opportunity of time served in an inadequate education system is not nearly good enough. Western Australian children need to be schooled in the basics of literacy and numeracy, and have a thorough understanding of the history of western civilisation and their place in it, as well as the philosophical foundations upon which that civilisation is built. Vocational education needs to rigorously prepare people for the world of work and provide them with the tools, both practical and theoretical, to not merely take their place in the workforce but to make Australian industry internationally competitive. These objectives are only achievable through the setting of high standards, and transparent and objective assessments.

Beyond those educational services provided by the government, Western Australians deserve choice. A vibrant private education sector can provide benchmarks against which the success of public education can be assessed. Private education can provide a further educational dimension that would be inappropriate within a secular system. There is a real and growing demand for this further dimension within the Western Australian community. This is particularly, but not exclusively, true of parents who seek an overtly Christian education for their children. Parents deserve this right and this choice. Government funding of private education is a recognition of the right of the child to enjoy state educational support. The state also benefits through a lower cost to the government, rather than education in the public education system, given the voluntary additional costs borne directly by parents.

The government can also support parental choice in another important way free of cost; that is, by ensuring that the law in no way impairs the right of private educational institutions to hire only those people who promote and embody the standards promoted by the institution. If parents are attracted to an institution by virtue of the principles it espouses, then such an institution needs to be free to hire staff who live up to those principles. As long as the principles themselves are not unlawful, there should be no impediment to the institution requiring adherence to them by staff. To the extent that the application of such criteria requires discrimination, such discrimination shall not be unlawful. This principle is relevant to education, but also relevant to the private health services and to other services in which dedicated people, acting in accordance with sincerely held beliefs, are called to offer services to the public.

### **MULTICULTURALISM**

Leaving aside our Indigenous population, Australia is a nation of migrants. For most of the last 221 years, these migrants came principally from the United Kingdom, and, in doing so, established Australia's character; its Constitution and laws; its parliamentary democracy; its freedom of speech

and religion; and its tolerance and equality. In short, they established the dominant Australian culture.

I did not leave China in order to embrace my Chineseness; I left China to embrace Australia, to embrace its culture and values, and to become an Australian citizen. I am proud to have done so. I am even more proud of the fact that Australians have embraced me back and delivered me to this place just 18 years after my arrival.

That said, I view the Australian culture as dynamic and evolving, not forever frozen in the image of a poem by Banjo Patterson or Henry Lawson. That Australian culture stands to be further enriched by absorbing into itself the best of what our new Australians bring with them offers us only a better future, and in no way detracts from the worth of the values upon which our nation was founded. These benefits are merely those that flow from integration, and it is integration that must form the basis of any meaningful multiculturalism—a multiculturalism which enriches rather than challenges the dominant culture.

In his thought-provoking book, *Beyond Right and Left*, lapsed communist David McKnight, postulated two models of multiculturalism—a hybridising model, and a mosaic model. The mosaic model, he argued, represents a celebration of separation which rejects shared values and encourages seeing individuals as being representatives of a group. This is a fertile ground for racism. Hybridisation celebrates the mixing of cultures from which new syntheses emerge. Mr McKnight argued that politically exploiting ethnic groupings has inherent attractions for political parties. My experience as a migrant leads me to promote, both to our state and to our migrant population, a vision of multiculturalism of value to both, and which has as its foundation the concept of integration. Australia will benefit most from its migrant population, and our migrants will benefit most from their new country, if each embraces the other. A multiculturalism which sets itself against social cohesion deserves to fail, but a multiculturalism which has as its objective social cohesion can only succeed.

As the first Chinese-born member of this house, I understand the opportunity which I have and the obligation which I have to be a role model for integration. By my example, I can demonstrate to those who are among the newest and most obviously different of our migrant population just how open and accepting Australian society is to new arrivals who make a strong commitment to their new country. I will do my best to reach out to our growing communities of Asian origin to encourage their involvement in every aspect of our society. Western Australia can only benefit from that involvement.

### **THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT**

On arriving in Western Australia, I worked long hours for low wages in an un-unionised segment of the hospitality industry. It was only when I moved to work with hundreds of other mainly migrant workers in the poultry industry that I first came into contact with the work of the trade union movement. At Steggles, we enjoyed among the highest base rates in the poultry industry in Australia. There was an emphasis on health and safety, regular meal and rest breaks, overtime pay for work outside ordinary working hours, superannuation and the usual wide array of working conditions which workers in unionised places, and through them most workers, take for granted.

The vital role of the trade union movement was understood by the Australian people when they totally rejected the WorkChoices system of individual contracts of employment and recognised the inherent unfairness of a system which leaves the individual worker alone and unassisted to deal with an employer offering employment on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Australians just know that this is unfair. By rejecting this system, and the government and the Prime Minister who proposed it, Australians demonstrated their heartfelt belief in the value of collective negotiations.

It is the trade union movement that provides workers with the means of a collective approach to industrial negotiations. The trade union movement is the manifestation of Australians' commitment to a fair go. It is also the bedrock of democracy among Australian institutions. The work of trade unions continues to be relevant to the day-to-day lives of working Australians and their families and, through their democratic structures, provides the means for working people to play an active role in the governance of an institution established for the sole purpose of being of service to them.

Coming from China, my observation of the work of the trade union movement has been a real eye-opener. There is no free trade union movement in China. To me, a free trade union movement is a hallmark of democracy. It is a litmus of a free society—a symbol of liberty and justice. We should be proud of the Australian trade union movement. We should not be apathetic to its future. We should act to safeguard and positively promote it. We should ensure that workers are genuinely free to join and be active in their unions, and provide unions with organising rights, rights of entry, rights of inspection and access to conciliation and arbitration to assist in the resolution of industrial disputes. Trade unions are not just a part of Australia's proud history; they are a vital part of our future, and part of our commitment to freedom, democracy and justice.

### **FAMILY**

Nothing is more precious to the Chinese than family. We understand the nuclear family; we understand the extended family. We understand that family matters most. It is in the family that the next generation is born and nurtured. It is the family which inculcates values and produces quality citizens. Problems in society—problems with which governments strive to deal but often fail to resolve—are symptoms of problems within families. Building strong families results in building a better society. To do so we need to get the basics right. Respect for families means respect for life. Respect for families means respect for marriage. The concepts associated with family life do not come much more fundamental than that, yet we live in a society in which the family is so threatened that even these fundamental concepts are not universally agreed. The family may be a resilient institution, but it is not indestructible. It is under threat from the cult of the individual from selfishness, greed and materialism replacing compassion, generosity and service. The family will always find a defender in me. As we review the social impact of legislation that comes before us, I will always be arguing for those measures that improve the role and lot of families and against those who would weaken them.

In closing, Mr President, there are a number of people to whom I need to express my gratitude for the support which they have offered to me during my campaign for Labor preselection and subsequently. I have enjoyed the benefit of the support of a number of significant trade unions. In particular, I wish to thank Jim McGivern from the powerful Transport Workers Union and Tim Daly and Stephen Price from the Australian Workers' Union. They supported my candidacy from the outset, and their support was unwavering. Kevin Reynolds from the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union waxed and waned in his support but came good when it counted. I also wish to thank former Premier Alan Carpenter and Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union secretary, Dave Kelly. It is true that they were initially ambivalent with respect to my candidacy, but, once convinced, they never looked back. Knowing that I had won their support was of great encouragement to me.

Among the members of Parliament, Hon Kate Doust and Hon Ed Dermer have been solid supporters and good friends. In the lower house, the then party secretary, Bill Johnston, and "Mr Mindarie", John Quigley, have been of constant assistance to me. Since my election, MLAs from the Mining and Pastoral Region, Tom Stephens and Vince Catania, have been not only welcoming, but also have offered me every assistance in coming to terms with my new responsibilities in the region. In addition, I was buoyed by the charm and encouragement of former

Fremantle MLA and Labor leader Jim McGinty, who went out of his way to make me feel comfortable.

Finally, I need to thank my husband of 15 years, Joe Bullock. He was vehemently opposed to my desire to enter Parliament and tried his best to dissuade me. When I convinced him that this was something that I really wanted to do, he put his full support behind me. No-one could ask for a better advocate than Joe Bullock. He just never stops and never gives in. Shop assistants have enjoyed the benefit of his work on their behalf for over 30 years—80 hours a week, 51 weeks a year. Union members may not realise what a treasure they have in Joe but I do. While I am proud of what I have been able to make of the opportunities afforded to me by my new country, I could not have done it without him.

Mr President, that is my maiden speech. It is something that I have been dreading for eight months. Now that it is done, I am ready to get on with my new job of representing the interests of the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region.

[Applause.]

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