



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Matthew F. Benson-Lidholm MLC

(Member for South West)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

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Motion

INTRODUCTION

HON MATTHEW BENSON-LIDHOLM (South West) [8.10 pm]: Mr President, I will commence my inaugural speech by congratulating you on being elected to the position of President of this house. That is a great honour for you, as is my opportunity to represent the people of Western Australia, and in particular the south west. Mr President, given your extensive parliamentary service and knowledge of the political process, I know that you will carry out your duties with fairness and distinction, and I look forward to working with you. I also acknowledge at the outset the traditional owners of the land this parliamentary precinct occupies.

The great honour bestowed upon me, and on all members of Parliament sitting in this chamber, is, in turn, matched by the enormous responsibilities that accompany public office. In consideration of the depth and breadth of such responsibilities, new members of Parliament may well be excused for feeling somewhat overawed. Constituents, however, can be assured that I will not disappoint them, particularly if enthusiasm and endeavour are useful indicators.

His Excellency the Governor, Lieutenant General John Sanderson, made reference to the government's legislative program for the thirty-seventh Parliament. In keeping with the program outlined, my focus as a member of the Gallop Labor government will always be to assist in the provision of better services for all, to help facilitate real, sustainable economic growth throughout the regions and to work to enhance the unique lifestyle enjoyed by Western Australians.

SPECIAL THANKS

My presence in this chamber is due principally to the 54 000 or so voters in the south west who supported the Australian Labor Party. Not since 1993 has Labor managed to gain a one-third quota in the South West Region. I thank those voters for their support. In such a dynamic and diverse part of the state, this support bodes well for the government and is indicative of confidence in our policies and members of Parliament. Notwithstanding this level of support, it was very disappointing to lose the highly marginal seat

of Bunbury. I wish Tony Dean the very best for the future and look forward to his continued support in the south west.

In my home town of Albany, it is difficult to imagine Peter Watson working any harder for his constituents and for many other people in the surrounding electorate of Stirling. Albany voters acknowledged Peter's hard work with an improvement in his primary vote of more than 10 per cent. The feeling in the local community was that he deserved another four years. Peter's commitment to his electorate certainly helped improve the ALP's Legislative Council vote. I congratulate Peter on his win and look forward to working closely with him.

On a personal note, I thank my wife, Jan, for her efforts in the Legislative Assembly seat of Stirling. She polled beyond expectations and contributed significantly to the profile of ALP candidates in the south west. Apart from her own candidacy, she has provided unqualified support for me during the last three elections, particularly in 2001 when dealing with a life-threatening illness. I thank her dearly for helping me realise my dream.

I also acknowledge the magnificent local efforts of Guy Wroth, Ian Bishop, Julie Hooper, Pam Stoney, Liz Watson and David Nelson, and the many helpers on election day. Their efforts have been rewarded with Albany being in the unique position of boasting both a locally based MLA and MLC. This is truly a remarkable achievement. As Peter Watson acknowledged in his inaugural speech on Tuesday, 22 May 2001, there is one person without whose tremendous vision and work ethic I would not be here today. I refer, of course, to Hon Bob Thomas. Bob was first elected to the thirty-third Parliament, representing the South West Region, and served three terms from 22 May 1989, retiring on 21 May 2001. Bob Thomas has been a tireless worker for the ALP, particularly in the south west, for many years. His campaigning skills, knowledge of political process, and the respect in which he is held, both in Parliament and the local community, are legendary. His generosity knows no bounds, and his friendship and support of my family are qualities I will always treasure. If I can indulge further, my wife and I regularly enjoy a glass or two of quality red wine with Bob. I am pleased to report that he appears to have given up the idea of selling old pots, comics, cakes and anything else that people donate to bargain bonanzas. Retirement appears to have brought about a level of fundraising sophistication previously unheard of, much to everybody's delight.

POLITICS AND FAMILY HISTORY

My interest in politics and social justice go back a long way. Politics was not something I learnt at university. Rather, the whole family would debate issues at the kitchen table. Dad unsuccessfully contested a senate seat in 1958, and then became heavily involved in sub-branch politics. My mother and father have always been my inspiration in life. I still have their 1951 ALP memberships cards. Sadly, both have passed away, but I know they are here in spirit today. It is, however, with a great sense of pride that I acknowledge the presence in the public gallery of my wife, Jan, my mother-in-law, Ethel, my immediate family and their partners, and some very special friends, some of whom have travelled very long distances to be here tonight.

Growing up in Perth's eastern suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s was a rich and rewarding experience. Having attended school with kids from the local migrant hostel, I soon developed an appreciation of multiculturalism. As kids, we were all sports fanatics. At one stage, the five Benson boys were playing cricket for the Midland-Guildford club, and Dad was the practice captain. The Slaters, Gartrells and Manns, however, still ran the show. My parents had a very special commitment to the quality education of their children. They left no stone unturned in their endeavours to provide the very best for all of us. They sent all six of their children to private schools, on very limited means. My mother would often say "Get yourself a decent education; they can't take that away from you." Later on in life, there could not have been a prouder family when Dad graduated from university with both an honours and a master's degree in

anthropology - not a bad effort from someone who grew up in the Valley of the Giants with no formal schooling. This commitment to education and improving life chances was built in adversity. My mother's family were Irish migrants to Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century, moving to Kalgoorlie and finally Fremantle and Perth in search of work on the railways in the early twentieth century. My father's family were pioneers in the Nornalup-Peaceful Bay area in the early 1900s. Despite the enormous hardships, the family has grown significantly since those days, with extensive interests, particularly in fishing, along the south coast. I count my blessings when thinking of my paternal grandfather, as he was an illegal Swedish immigrant who jumped ship near Bunbury in the 1880s. Despite the best efforts of the police and immigration officials, Grandad managed to avoid being caught. Detection later on became somewhat difficult as Grandad anglicised his name and, mysteriously, the Bunbury Police Station burnt down along with all its records.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Just like my parents, the Gallop Labor government places great emphasis on education and training. It was reassuring to hear His Excellency mention that the centrepiece of the government's second-term agenda is education and training. He added that the government will introduce reforms designed to encourage excellence, raise standards and reward effort. The provision of skilled labour through expanded training programs is also a priority. There is no better way to enable all Western Australians to realise their full potential than by giving them the opportunity through quality education and training. In Western Australia, this takes on added meaning, given the state of our booming export-oriented economy. The need for a highly skilled and versatile work force is recognised by the government. The aim is to create some 4 000 extra training positions with the ultimate goal of forging a \$14 million partnership with industry. This will ensure that some 30 000 Western Australians will be in training by 2009.

As a former teacher-administrator in the state education system, I would like to mention one significant area of concern. The welfare and standing of the teaching profession need urgent attention. There are some outstanding practitioners in our schools, but I will quote Mr Kevin Rudd in his first speech to the House of Representatives on 11 November 1998. He said -

We have a demoralised teaching profession whose energies are now dissipated in school administration rather than in syllabus delivery.

That may well sound alarmist. However, there is quite a deal of truth in what he said.

In this state we have witnessed an absurd situation in relation to the attainment of the level 3 teaching status. In an effort to keep the best teachers in front of our students and to reward them with increased salaries, we have adopted a quota system and applied it to a standards-based format. A person is either good enough to be a level 3 classroom teacher or he is not. How demeaning and demoralising is it to say to professionals, "Yes, you're good enough. You've satisfied all the criteria. You've worked hard. Your application may have taken some six months to write, but you'll have to do it again because we've met our quota"? To add insult to injury, a family member failed in her bid for level 3 status but was subsequently deemed outstanding enough to be offered a district office job professionally developing maths teachers. When we hear that the system cannot afford certain initiatives, I ask: how can we not afford to deliver world's best practice?

My own educational experience has been rich and varied. My various university studies have focused on economics, historical geography, education and natural resource management. In recent years I have been a teacher-administrator at the Mt Barker Senior High School, and prior to that I held teaching, lecturing, course writing and tutoring roles in distance education, TAFE and the conventional school setting.

Potentially, one of the most significant changes I have been associated with is the one college, one community concept for Mt Barker. I look forward to assisting with the implementation of the local area education plan to provide a seamless K-12 and beyond education experience for students in the Mt Barker area. The model being developed has significant implications for education in similar size towns throughout the state.

HEALTH AND POLICE

I would now like to turn my attention to the government's programs for health and police, as outlined by His Excellency. In relation to health, the Labor government will deliver much in the south west. A new hospital for Denmark will be most welcome, replacing a very much outdated facility. I understand that construction will commence early in 2006. First-class services and hospitals will be delivered in Albany, Bunbury, Geraldton, Port Hedland and Broome. With recent statistics pointing to problems associated with life expectancy and the quality of rural health services, the government's program of reform is very good news for people living in non-metropolitan regions.

Better policing services can also be expected under a Gallop Labor government. The Frontline First strategy will see more than 500 extra police on the front line. They will come from an additional 350 police officers and 160 civilian officers. To support the service, police will have access to state-of-the-art technology. Twenty-three new police stations will also be built, with a number to be located in regional Western Australia. In my home town of Albany, the new police complex is well and truly back on track following the collapse of Devaugh Construction. Albany MLA Peter Watson is to be congratulated for the time and effort he put into keeping the project going. It was rather surprising, if not disturbing, that in the lead-up to the February poll it appeared as though some lower house candidates actually wished the rescue package would fail so that they could gain some electoral advantage out of people losing either their jobs and/or a lot of money.

THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY

Western Australia continues to outperform the rest of the country, with growth rates of around five per cent plus, and they have been even higher. This growth performance has occurred despite the interference of the federal government in state decision making, threatening to withhold goods and services tax finance and potentially jeopardising major investment decisions. Fiscal responsibility has been the key ingredient in the maintenance of the state's AAA credit rating with the government having delivered four balanced budgets in a privatisation-free atmosphere. Spending on essential services has increased while a record capital works program has been occurring since 2001. Of particular note for rural communities is the establishment of the \$75 million regional investment fund. Another \$80 million has been committed with the aim of investing in regional communities and infrastructure projects. As one vitally concerned with economics and small business viability, it is significant to note the flow-on/multiplier effects of the Gallop government's record levels of economic growth. The creation of at least 80 000 new jobs over the past four years, the reduction in unemployment to historically low levels and record business investment levels are testimony to the government's ability to deliver sound, responsible economic management and a better future for all Western Australians.

ELECTORAL REFORM

One of the biggest issues to have come before the Western Australian Parliament in recent history must surely be electoral reform. In view of the Australian Labor Party's ideals of a fairer distribution of political and economic power and greater equality in the distribution of income, wealth and opportunity, it is only logical that a Labor government would seek to address a situation whereby the gross malapportionment of voting power was considered by certain stakeholders to be an example of representative democracy. At

the state election earlier this year, about 25 per cent of the voters in non-metropolitan regions elected 17 members to the Legislative Council. In metropolitan electorates, the remaining 75 per cent of the population also elected 17 members. A vote in non-metropolitan seats for the upper house is worth nearly three times as much as a vote in the metropolitan area of the upper house. The same pattern of malapportionment exists in the Legislative Assembly. The only fairness in the old system is that one vote, one value applies within the country and within the metropolitan area, but not for the entire state.

It is common knowledge that most states eliminated vote weighting years ago. It is considered to be undemocratic because it gives some voters a significantly greater say in which party forms government. This has been the case in Western Australia since 1894 and I am proud to be part of a political party that has had the opportunity and the intestinal fortitude to bring about fairness and equality to our electoral system. A matter that disturbs me greatly as a former educator is the callers on talkback radio I have heard who claim they will be disfranchised by the ALP, the Greens (WA) and others who have tried to achieve electoral fairness. Disfranchisement is something about which the ALP knows only too well. Having been subjected to a conservative upper house gerrymander since 1894 is my idea of the deprivation of the rights of citizens.

Members of Parliament are here to serve the voting public, not hectares, trees or livestock. A significant proportion of the state's wealth is generated in rural Western Australia. However, politics is about power. Our responsibility as parliamentarians is to fairly manage the use of such power for the betterment of all. A system of government that benefits a relative few at the expense of the remainder is something I do not accept. I understand the difficulties rural people face in their day-to-day working and family lives, but for democracy to be truly representative, gross voting inequalities must be removed. I do not wish to elaborate now about how I propose to address the concerns so often expressed; suffice to say that technology and the increasing mobility of constituents and MPs will help facilitate the changed process. As a new member of Parliament, this is a challenge I am ready and willing to take up.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

As a former member of the State School Teachers' Union of WA, I have a very keen interest in labour relations, be it at the state or federal level. In modern western market economies, the significance of the union movement working closely with the government of the day and the business sector is of paramount importance. Cooperation and consensus affect productivity gains resulting in higher wages, increased employment levels, more funding for research and development and improved profitability and, ultimately, a reduction in our woeful current account deficit. Industrial relations systems that are significantly skewed in favour of either employers or employees are a recipe for failure. Why then does the Howard government want to impose the federal system on Western Australia and the other states and territories? The very meaning of federalism is in jeopardy with this and other centralist grabs by the Howard government.

The Howard government's proposed changes will reduce workers' rights, particularly in the areas of occupational safety and health, redundancy entitlements for small business employees, and award stripping. The fact of the matter is that approximately 60 per cent of the Western Australian work force is in the state system and many employers of all sizes are happy to be covered by the simple, efficient and user-friendly state system with its common rule awards. This is in stark contrast with the complex, overly prescriptive and dispute-prone federal system. An interesting statistic is that in 2004, 70 per cent of the industrial disputes in Western Australia that were reported in the media were in the federal jurisdiction whereas only 40 per cent of workers are in the federal system. The proposed centrepiece of the federal system is Australian workplace agreements. These have already led to reduced pay and employment conditions very much contrary to the best stated intentions of the government. A particularly disturbing aspect of the proposed industrial relations changes focuses on the issue of states' rights and the tying of federal funding to

the states on signing the National Building Code. This will in turn impact on infrastructure projects, TAFE colleges, university funding, water funding, and more. This surely is not the intent of federalism. It is, quite simply put, a continuation of the Howard government's attempts to frustrate the legitimate work of unions in providing the best for their members. It is worth reminding this house that both the federal Constitution and the Western Australian industrial relations system have been in existence for more than 100 years. The state system has been modified over that period to take account of the changing economic and social conditions and was further amended by the 2002 Labour Relations Reform Act to restore fairness and promote productivity within our industrial relations system. Contrary to the claims of the doomsayers in 2001, this has not led to increased unemployment, increased conflict or reduced productivity. To the contrary, in 2004 there was record low unemployment, with seven consecutive months below five per cent unemployment, and at the same time economic growth reached seven per cent. Western Australia continues to deliver the highest productivity of any state.

Western Australia is the nation's economic powerhouse. Our simple, efficient and user-friendly industrial relations system complements the investment climate in this state. A change to an inferior system is not in anyone's best interests. This Parliament and the people of Western Australia must send the strongest possible message to John Howard. I strongly support minister Kobelke's proposed challenge in the High Court. The Prime Minister needs to give all the states details of his plans and be prepared to sit down and talk. The current lack of information about the federal government's intentions is creating uncertainty at all levels. It is interesting to note that Mr Howard is unable to guarantee that no-one will be worse off under the proposed changes. Therefore, one can only surmise that his proposal amounts to ideological opportunism that he believes is legitimised by his impending control of the Senate.

MY VISION

I would like to conclude my inaugural speech with some observations and hopes for the future of the South West Region of Western Australia. The south west is a unique and most vibrant part of our state. An indicator of the popularity of this region is the recent substantial population growth. Centres such as Mandurah, Albany, Bunbury, Busselton and Margaret River are attracting more and more tourists, retirees, young families and university students. The right investment climate is resulting in significant business opportunities across the region. Young people are staying put in the area and gaining employment or traineeships and apprenticeships. This is great news, particularly for families. In high growth areas such as the South West Region, there can be significant delays in society's attempts to address concerns relating to the social and natural environments. The Gallop Labor Government, however, cannot be accused of any such inaction or delay. The regions, including the south west, will continue to prosper, with investments in transport, new police stations and safer community projects, better health services like the \$8.7 million increase for the Bunbury Regional Hospital's acute psychiatric ward, big funding increases in education, and the creation of new national parks and nature reserves. Bringing all of this together is the plan to continue regional access to government, with more regional cabinet meetings planned.

I see huge potential in the south west and as a member of the Legislative Council I want to help effect the best possible outcomes, be they social, environmental or economic, for all constituents. Developing industries like viticulture, horticulture, aquaculture and ecotourism are set to propel the region into the future. I have a particular interest in viticulture, in which I believe we need to assist the growers and investors in the areas of marketing and promotion. The quality of our product is world class; we must let people know how good our wine is. Australian wine legend James Halliday has gone so far as to say that the Frankland River area has the potential to be one of the world's great wine centres!

I am proud to be a Western Australian representing the South West Region. If I can assist the government in delivering on its promises and improving the lifestyles and life chances of all people in this great multicultural state, I believe I will have satisfied the social democrat in me. Thank you.

[Applause.]
