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[Wednesday, 11 September 1991.]

## APPROPRIATION (CONSOLIDATED REVENUE FUND) BILL

### *Second Reading - Budget Debate*

**DR CONSTABLE** (Floreat) [11.18 am]: It is my privilege to follow the late Andrew Mensaros as the member for Floreat. I knew and respected him, as did many in this place, for his intellect and integrity and quiet and calm manner. Andrew Mensaros has set a high standard for me to follow. In the electorate he worked unceasingly for his constituents. In the Parliament his work demonstrated his dedication to Western Australia, free enterprise, democratic principles, and a preservation of the powers of the Parliament. I hope that I will be regarded in the electorate and in this Parliament as he was - a person of substance, of principle, of excellent judgment and of compassion.

I want to record my thanks to the several hundred people who helped and supported me during the recent by-election. I had spontaneous and genuine support from so many people, many of whom had never participated in an election campaign before, and it was a most humbling experience for me. Most of all I thank the electors of the seat of Floreat, citizens from parts of City Beach, Floreat, Wembley, Wembley Downs, Scarborough, Innaloo, Churchlands, Doubleview and Woodlands, who have placed their trust in me as the first person to be elected to this Parliament who is both a woman and an Independent. Personally, I regard this as a great honour and responsibility and I wish to reflect on this for a moment today.

In the 100 year history of responsible Government in this State, 485 people have been elected to the Legislative Assembly, 15 of whom have been women. Two hundred and sixty-nine people have been elected to the Legislative Council, of whom only eight have been women. That is only 23 out of 754 in 100 years, or three per cent. It is encouraging that in the present Parliament, of the 91 members 15 are women, which is just over 16 per cent, slightly higher than the average for Australian Parliaments. I am of the same view as Lady Astor, who many people here would know was the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons, in 1919, and who made some comments regarding the composition of Governments. Nearly 70 years ago she said that Government should be controlled by neither men nor women but that the best Government would be one balanced in that regard. I am sure she would be disappointed that her wish had not yet been fulfilled. Nevertheless, I look forward to the day, in the not too distant future, when Western Australia has a balanced Parliament with regard to gender. I hope it does not take another 70 years.

On the other hand, prior to my election 30 people, or just four per cent, have entered this Parliament as Independents. There have been 23 in the Legislative Assembly and seven in the Legislative Council. One other, Claude Barker, was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1939 but was never sworn in. I suspect he decided he could best serve his country by joining the armed forces rather than by entering Parliament. Two of the 30 Independents elected served in both Houses of Parliament and six went on to become Ministers. A further 16 members have been Independents at some time during their parliamentary careers, two in the Legislative Council and 14 in the Legislative Assembly. The average period in office for those serving in the Legislative Council is 18.8 years, with three serving more than 30 years. Sir John Kirwan was an Independent member of the Council for 38 years, between 1908 and 1946, serving 20 of those years as President. The average period in office for members first elected to the Legislative Assembly as Independents is just under nine years. Therefore, members can see that the chances of someone who is both a woman and an Independent being elected are very slight.

While Independents have been and still are few in number, the current role played by Independents and balance of power members of Parliament around Australia is of significance. No upper House in any Australian Parliament is controlled by the Government of the day. The Governments of New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania rely on Independents or balance of power members of Parliament in both Houses to pass legislation; so the role of Independents and the responsibility they carry at present in Australia should not be underestimated.

I mentioned earlier that my predecessor, Andrew Mensaros, had an abiding commitment to democratic Government and the preservation of the powers of Parliament, and this is a view that I share. Only a few weeks before his resignation from this Parliament, he was quoted in an article in the Sunday Times as saying that, "Times had changed quickly in his 25 years of politics. The public had more faith in earlier Governments and these days many developments were taking place without the consultation of Parliament." One of the messages I bring to this House from my electorate is that of loss of confidence in Government. While I have no desire today to comment on the events of the 1980s that have led to this loss of confidence I stress that we must make sure we restore the public's confidence in the Parliament and not allow the excesses of the 1980s to occur again.

This brings me to an issue I wish to address briefly today; that is, a matter related to open and accountable Government. I believe there is an urgent need for freedom of information legislation in this State.

Mr MacKinnon: Hear, hear!

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Dr CONSTABLE: Freedom of information legislation recognises the individual citizen's right to access to Government documents, subject of course to certain possibilities of claims for exemption. It gives the individual the opportunity to have incorrect or misleading information corrected. It should require all Government departments and agencies to publish details of their operations and the processes they use in making decisions. By granting citizens access to Government documents, freedom of information legislation aims to increase the citizens' powers over the power of the State and it lessens the State's claim to secrecy. As such, it is one of the instruments of accountability.

Traditionally only Sweden and the United States have expressly affirmed the citizen's right to know. The Swedish Constitution enshrines the general principle that citizens should have access to official documents. In Sweden the only exceptions are those of national security, diplomatic activities and police matters involving crime. In the United States freedom of information laws require agencies to publish information about their organisation and activities. In the United States nondisclosure applies to foreign policy and national defence, trade secrets and aspects of law enforcement. It is only in the past 10 years or so that other democratic countries such as our own have begun to address this issue. On reflection, it is quite an extraordinary fact that in democratic countries such as our own for so long Governments have been able to keep information secret from citizens and have, until quite recently, resisted citizens' access to Government information.

In Australia the first freedom of information legislation was passed by the Fraser Government in 1982, and in Victoria in the same year. Similar legislation was passed in New South Wales in 1989 and I understand that is being amended at the moment, or is about to be amended. In South Australia freedom of information legislation was passed this year, and I understand that such legislation is before the Tasmanian Parliament at the moment. I do not believe this is the occasion to detail what should be in such legislation, but one important condition is that any fees associated with it should not be so high as to be exclusive. Also, I believe the Ombudsman should be involved in all reviews of decisions which involve refusal to disclose documents. Freedom of information legislation is an effective tool to overcome a Government's reluctance to disclose information. The question of public access, and therefore media access, to Government documents goes to the heart of the process of democratic Government. In Western Australia we have been promised freedom of information legislation since 1983, and as recently as March this year the Premier announced that freedom of information legislation would be introduced during this session of Parliament. It is encouraging that this legislation is part of the platforms of both the Labor Party and the Liberal Party, and I understand that Bill Hassell, the previous member for Cottesloe, introduced a private member's Bill a couple of years ago in this regard. The introduction of such legislation in this State would not only bring us in line with other States and the Commonwealth, but also would go a long way towards restoring the public's confidence in this Parliament and ensuring accountability in Government.

I turn now to two issues related to education which are of particular interest to me. The first concerns the provision of adequate support services in schools. It goes without saying that during the past eight years in this State there has been a major overhaul of education at all levels. We began with a major rethink of education with the Beazley inquiry and as a result we have had a reorganisation of the curriculum, particularly at the upper secondary level. This was the first major introduction of change in years 11 and 12, and it was followed fairly quickly by the introduction of the unit curriculum in the lower secondary years. There is much that is commendable about these developments, particularly at the upper secondary level, where we have seen an improvement in the curriculum offerings and in the structure and methods of assessment. I refer particularly to school based assessment, which I think has been an enormous improvement on what we had before. Other developments have seen the availability of a preprimary year for all five year olds. Consequently, enrolments have increased from over 15 000 enrolled in the preprimary year in 1982 to over 25 000 in 1989.

At the other end of the school age range we have seen a dramatic improvement in the school retention rates beyond year 10. This improvement reflects Government campaigns to encourage young people to stay at school beyond year 10, but I think it also reflects to a large degree the high levels of youth unemployment. According to information published by the Secondary Education Authority, the retention rates have increased from 34 per cent in 1980 to 58.5 per cent in 1990 which is an enormous change and one with which we should be pleased. It is anticipated that by the year 2001, 95 per cent of students will complete year 12. Traditionally the upper school curriculum has been geared to the needs of students who aspire to further study at the tertiary level. The increase in the retention rate has led to the need to differentiate the curriculum to suit the needs of all students. The pilot program for years 11 and 12 which was announced at the weekend by the Premier, in response to the Finn report, is both an important and timely development.

Another major step forward in education in the past few years has been the move towards main-streaming of handicapped children, which has been particularly welcomed by parents of these children. It also reflects important changes in attitudes of educators and the community. All these changes and developments in a relatively short time have placed increased burdens and pressure on teachers and other school staff, and it is

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because of this that I have a major reservation about all these changes and developments happening so quickly. My major reservation relates to the provision of adequate levels of support services in schools. By the term "support services" I refer to professional services provided by school nurses, psychologists, social workers, remedial teachers, and youth education officers. I should make it clear that I am not commenting on the quality of the service provided, only on the number of support staff. It has been my experience over many years that the quality of support staff in schools is second to none.

I will illustrate my concern with the example of school psychologists. School psychologists provide support to students, parents and teachers in areas of assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities, the early detection of learning disabilities, behavioural management problems, educational and personal counselling, subject and careers counselling, stress management, parent education, and so on. In 1986 the ratio was one school psychologist to every 1 143 students in schools. In 1989 the ratio had changed to one psychologist to 1 251 students - which means that the number of students went up slightly and the number of psychologists at schools went down slightly. I have not been able to find details of staffing levels of psychologists for 1990-91 but having been involved in the training of school psychologists during the past few years at the University of Western Australia and having followed the employment of those students, I have no reason to believe there has been an increase in the number of psychologists employed. It would not be unreasonable to expect that every large senior high school should have at least one full time psychologist. Unfortunately many of our larger senior high schools do not have this level of support.

The increase in preprimary enrolments means that increased psychological services are required in the early detection of learning disabilities. It is well recognised that the early detection and remediation of learning difficulties is both educationally sound and cost effective. The system we have requires that during year 10 students must make subject and careers choices. My experience of counselling hundreds of students over the past few years is that very few 14 or 15 year olds have sufficient life experiences and knowledge of careers and the world of work to be making these decisions. I estimate that no more than 20 per cent of year 12 students are certain of their career path at the beginning of year 12. All this points to the need for all students to receive professional careers counselling, which is a time consuming exercise.

One of the major challenges facing the Government currently is to find short and long term solutions to the high level of juvenile crime. The \$20 million allocation in the Budget indicates the beginning of a concerted effort in this area. It is well known that many juvenile offenders are youngsters who have experienced school failure, often because of learning difficulties. Well resourced support services, including psychological and remedial teaching staff, would clearly be a cost effective long term strategy in the prevention of juvenile delinquency. I am concerned that successive Education budgets have not adequately addressed this growing need for support services. A weakness in educational budgeting and planning is that support services have not kept pace with all the commendable changes.

I now wish to comment briefly on another important issue related to education, and that concerns the Prime Minister's often quoted notion of Australia becoming the clever country. I believe that this idea accepts the importance of a first rate education system designed to equip our young people with the knowledge and skills to solve the problems they will face in the future. If we are to become more competitive as a nation it is obvious that the education we provide in our schools must be of a consistently high standard. We must equip our young people with skills, enthusiasm and a competitive edge if this country is to compete on a world scale. Education is a key factor.

In this country we are quick to recognise talent and excellence in achievements in many fields - in sport particularly, but also in the visual and performing arts. We tend to accept this recognition without hesitation. Given this readiness to spend resources to develop an elite in sport, for instance, with the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra and with our own Western Australian Institute of Sport, I have been concerned for some time that we do not also regard as a priority adequate provision for our most intellectually able students. While I would be the first to recognise that attempts have been made in the past 10 or 12 years to provide some special programming for intellectually very able students, I believe that much more could have been done. The history of the education of gifted children indicates that provision for these students waxes and wanes according to economic conditions. In economically buoyant times programs for the intellectually able usually come back into vogue; in tough times they tend to slip away from us. Educational research has clearly demonstrated that the notion that intellectually able students succeed anyway is a myth. Many intellectually able students do not realise their potential because they are bored with inappropriate curriculums or because they find they can coast along with their studies anyway. Because we do not always value intellectual achievements, adolescents often develop strategies to cover up their abilities and achievements. This has often been the case with intellectually able girls and it was pleasing to see a program introduced to encourage girls into the areas of mathematics and science.

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The Premier's announcement last weekend regarding the pilot program at year 11 and 12 levels recognises the importance of differentiating the curriculum for students who are not bound for tertiary institutions. I believe that further differentiation of the curriculum is required at all levels to provide for the special needs of intellectually able students.

Another serious impediment to becoming a clever country is the deteriorating outlook for graduates of tertiary institutions. We are well aware of the problems of high unemployment in the 15 to 19 age group, but we have also a growing unemployment level of new graduates from tertiary institutions. It is conservatively estimated that overall somewhere between one in six and one in five graduates will not get jobs next year. In some areas, such as architecture, the situation is very grim indeed. According to the State branch of the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisors there will not be any improvement next year and the situation will probably deteriorate further over the next couple of years.

Solutions must be found in the short term to provide these bright, young Western Australians with the opportunity to develop their professional skills. Job sharing and work experience schemes for graduates would go a long way towards assisting these young people to prepare for full time employment when the economy improves. If we do not assist these bright, young people to take the step beyond their studies at university, the clever country may not be so clever after all and is at risk of becoming the disillusioned country.

To mark its fiftieth anniversary the Australian Institute of Management invited 40 prominent Australians to write about what they think will happen in the next 50 years in Australia. In that book, titled Furious Agreement, Professor David Pennington of Melbourne University wrote -

Education represents our commitment to the future. It must provide leadership, be a powerhouse of knowledge and train people who will change the face of society - a radical departure for a country renowned for its cavalier attitude towards academia, knowledge and intellectual endeavour. We must change from a society whose heroes are primarily sports and pop music idols and paper entrepreneurs, and learn as a society to value the achievements of those whose world is the application of knowledge to solve society's problems.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I thank the officers and staff of Parliament House for the assistance they have given me during the past few weeks in settling into my new role.

[Applause.]