



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Murray Cowper MLA
(Member for Murray)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 5 April 2005

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Motion

MR M.J. COWPER (Murray) [3.32 pm]: Madam Deputy Speaker and fellow members of the thirty-seventh Parliament of Western Australia, it is a great honour to stand in this place and speak on behalf of the constituents of the Murray electorate. In doing so I will endeavour to carry on the great tradition of our forebears and exult the great work that they accomplished in bringing greatness to this state of Western Australia. I speak specifically of the involvement of early pioneers of the Murray district and the influence they have perpetuated in opening up vast parts of the state to pastoral leases and my unwitting and coincidental journey that led me to this point in time and place which has given me an insight into the importance of the work I feel I must now continue.

Thomas Peel arrived in the Swan River colony on 15 December 1829, six weeks too late to be eligible for his priority grant on the Swan and Canning Rivers, coincidentally an area that would have included the areas of South Perth where I was to be born 131 years later. Instead, Peel secured 250 000 acres of land based on a ratio of 40 acres per pound invested, which is now known as the Peel region. He bought the land sight unseen and moved 400 settlers from England to the region on board the *Rockingham* via Clarence, which is now known as Woodman Point. In 1830 a settlement was established at Peel Town, including a barracks at Soldiers Cove which now forms the centre of Mandurah. In 1834 the town of Pinjarra was founded and it became pivotal to the opening up of the hinterland to the east of the Darling Range and an important link to the settlements of Leschenault and Vasse opening to the south. Later many of the pastoralists from the Murray districts were responsible for opening cattle stations in the Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley districts, some of whom still have a connection today. I am familiar with this area, having cherished memories of my 27 years' service as a police officer. Today many of the streets and the roads of the Peel region bear the names of those early pioneering families, and their lineage still remains as important and respected members of the community. A number of books exist about the trials and tribulations that these pioneering families endured during those turbulent years, but one common thread that is still evident today is the dogged determination and sense of community that still exists.

The acquaintance of the Murray district to this house was first engaged when Major Frederick Charles Irwin, who, with Governor Stirling and others, was a member of the first Legislative

Council and is depicted in the famous painting that adorns the entry statement of this building. Major Frederick Irwin was accredited with establishing the first garrison in the Murray district and is now commemorated by bearing the name of the largest school in the Peel region. Today we are fortunate to have been paid a visit by 84 year 9 students from the Frederick Irwin Anglican School in Mandurah. Again, coincidentally, included in this visit was my eldest daughter and many young people known to me who are lineal descendants of the people about whom I speak today.

Thomas Peel, by vesture of owning so much land, was the next appointed to the Legislative Council and, after a strained relationship with a fellow magistrate, whom he challenged to a duel, later resigned. Peel was replaced in the Legislative Council by a Francis Corbet Singleton in 1844, a naval officer who had earlier purchased land from Peel for 2s 6d an acre and settled an area around the Dandalup and Murray Rivers. Interestingly enough, Singleton was the fellow magistrate whom Peel had earlier challenged to a duel. Madam Deputy Speaker and members from all sides of the house, be reminded and reassured that factional fighting is nothing new to politics in this state, if not a little more subdued than in Peel's time. Unfortunately, in the same year while on the way to Perth to attend the Legislative Council, Singleton's residence, situated on the Murray River, was totally destroyed by fire. It was valued at £1 200. As a direct result, this gave rise to the Mutual Insurance Company, which was established to protect all colonists from disasters of this kind. This institution was the forerunner of what is now known as the State Government Insurance Office or SGIO. Singleton's three years work in the Legislative Council was accredited to later reforming the Land Act 1850, and it is interesting for members to note that the issue of property rights for landowners in the Murray district remains as strong an issue today as it was 150 years ago.

An uninterrupted succession of representatives to the Legislative Council occurred, which included names of S.R. Hamersley, S. Burt, Captain T. Fawcett and Hobart Tuckey, up until 1890 with the establishment of the Legislative Assembly saw William Paterson become the first member for Murray. Paterson later resigned from Parliament in his second term to become the head of the Agricultural Bank, later selling a portion of Paterson's landholding to Kingsley Fairbridge, who, in 1920, relocated his farm for orphaned children to the site where it is located today. I am proud to say that I am associated with the Fairbridge organisation that continues to provide a home for young people in need. It will be my intention as the local member to foster support for a new fundraising foundation recently launched by the Governor of Western Australia, Lieutenant General John Sanderson, in the name of another great Western Australian, and will be known as the Sir Charles Court Foundation.

Before I end this truncated history lesson, it is also important to mention the contribution of the McLarty family to the Murray district and my position here today. Edward McLarty MLC served for 22 years and was regarded as the most outstanding member of that generation. He was a dominating and strong-willed man who on occasions made his opponents quail under his verbal broadsides. It was once reported that he hit a member over the head with a book when that gentleman would not desist from speaking when so ordered. He later took the entire group of members to a hotel and purchased drinks for all and offered the publican a cheque for £1 000 and asked him to take the cost of the refreshments from it. Perplexed for a moment, the publican returned a short time later and presented the member with a cheque for the change. On another occasion, Edward McLarty was fined 17s 10d for "causing to be laid in a public street". I think that means in today's parlance being drunk in a public place. Surprisingly, this fact appeared to escape the local editorials of the day, but I suppose police stations in those days did not have computers that were freely accessible.

Edward McLarty built his historic home of Edenvale in the heart of Pinjarra and raised a brood of seven children, including his youngest son Ross McLarty, who later became Sir Ross McLarty, Murray MLA and the Premier of Western Australia. The McLarty name, like with many of the

earlier pioneers, still resonates in the community, and I would not be here today without the support of these families.

If it had been suggested to me four years ago that I would be standing here today, I would have told such people that they were crazy. I was in charge of a country police station involved in countless community groups, running a successful family business, finishing off some university units, and busily raising my three children with my wife, Kathleen, but a series of events were the catalyst to my reconsidering my position. As I mentioned, I have always been involved in many community groups, including RoadWise, Safer WA, marine rescue, the State Emergency Service, fire brigades and the Lions, and I am also a Rotarian and am on numerous resident committees. A common thread with all these groups is that inevitably we competed with all other organisations for the available funding for the betterment of our community. Bureaucracy and red tape always seemed to keep our long-term objectives just out of reach, and this often occurred in the face of the apparent and blatant waste of taxpayers' dollars that I witnessed from one end of this state to the other.

For interested members, I joined the Police Force in 1978, and I served for three years in Perth before serving the next 24 years as a country police officer in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Dampier, Denmark and Australind. I have watched helplessly as people have drowned; I have removed more dead people from car crashes than I care to remember; I have held the heads of trapped and dying people struggling to breathe; I have attended more domestic violence situations than football matches; I have hunted serial murderers; I have risked my life searching for the missing stockmen Amos and Annetts in the Great Sandy Desert; I have attended coronial inquests and royal commission hearings; I have been accused of murder by star-struck lawyers pursuing a seat on the bench; I have been stabbed five times; I have stood nose to nose with picketers at union picket lines; I have plucked environmentalists out of trees; I have been assaulted more times than I can remember; and I have unsuccessfully conducted cardiopulmonary resuscitation on a fellow police officer after he had been deliberately run down and killed - and I am still standing and going strong. It has been said that what does not kill you makes you stronger, and I subscribe to that view. The moment that persuaded me to embark on this path must be accredited to a former police colleague, the now member for Yokine, and his response to correspondence about the health system in the Peel region. That correspondence pertained to an eight-hour wait I had in an emergency department with my then six-year-old son when he broke his arm one Christmas Eve. Dismayed, I remarked, "Someone needs to do something about this." I then realised that I was that someone.

Members, the state of health, education, law and order and transport in regional Western Australia is a disgrace. Services taken for granted in metropolitan areas are often hours away from country residents. A former police colleague in charge of a country police station, who also happened to be the town ambulance driver as a result of his position in the town, had an occasion to drive his gravely ill child to a regional hospital several hours away, only to have his child die in her mother's arms en route. I find it paradoxical then that the first bill before the thirty-seventh Parliament intends to further diminish the proper and just representation of regional Western Australia. I find it absurd and abhorrent, in light of the example I just gave, as well as countless other untold stories, that metro-centric, opportunistic parliamentarians embark on this path. It begs the question for me about the mindset of those sitting on the government side of the chamber who allegedly represent the best interests of country electorates. I pause to think of my Aboriginal friends in the remote parts of the Kimberley and the Great Sandy Desert. I think of issues that can be addressed only by representation at the grassroots, state level of government, such as sexually transmitted diseases, solvent abuse, health and education. Imagine their feeling of abandonment. I wonder what Ernie Bridge would say about the level of representation to his "Jarru", "Walpri", "Googaja" and "Pintabee" people he used to represent, and represented well. The towns built in the Pilbara during the resources boom in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are in need of renewal as their demographics are changing. I wonder whether our friends in Dampier, Karratha and beyond will be receptive to this

proposed legislation. This issue goes to the heart of our great democracy. The forefathers introduced a weighted voting system to allow proper and just representation of regional Western Australia, an area that I need not remind members is responsible for creating the vast majority of this state's and country's wealth. The weighting exists because wise members of this house who went before us recognised its importance. Listening to proponents of the legislation could lead people to believe that hospitals, schools and police stations are bristling on every street corner of a vast network of well-made and maintained roads in our regional areas. That is certainly not the case in reality. Like many country folk, I am deeply concerned about the degradation of society in regional Western Australia. This issue is about protecting our greatest asset; that is, the diversity of individuals, and their ability to express their views and not be relegated to a voice lost in the great expanse of this state. If members have not done so, they should take a back road and talk to people who are the salt of the earth: in other words, walk a mile in another man's shoes.

Lifeline WA is another organisation that I fully support. It is in the business of saving the lives of Western Australians afflicted with suicidal tendencies - an affliction which I remind members is endemic and approaching epidemic proportions in regional areas. My colleague the member for Roe has the unenviable title of coming from, on a per capita basis, the suicide capital of Western Australia. As a former police officer, I am acutely aware of the problem. I take this moment to pause to remember the families left to carry on, some of whom are dear and close friends of mine. Help for the one in five people who suffer from varying degrees of mental illness needs serious redress by the government.

The Murray electorate as it stands today comprises an interesting cross-section of life as it is in Western Australia. It is unique in that it comprises urban living in the west coastal parts of the Mandurah city; semirural acreage blocks, where horse ownership is very large; agriculture in the form of beef-cattle production; a number of small country towns; and a large provincial town that acts as the service point for the agricultural businesses - namely, Pinjarra. Throw into the mix the world's largest alumina production plant at Pinjarra, and a timber mill and tourist town at Dwellingup, and we cover a pretty wide range of diverse people and lifestyles. This makes being the local member an interesting challenge. Given my background as a country cop in rural Western Australia, I believe I have been conditioned, and unwittingly trained, to take on this important job.

I turn now to the issues of particular concern to the electorate.

HEALTH OF THE PEEL WATERWAYS

I refer here to nutrient run-off, acid sulfate soils and the erosion of banks caused by speeding boats. I support the call by the member for Mandurah to establish a base in the Peel region for water police. The Peel region contains in excess of 9 000 registered boats, and many more come into the area during peak holiday times. I further call for a statutory body similar to the Swan River Trust to be established in the Peel region to take ownership of one of the problems afflicting one of the state's majestic waterways. The infill sewerage program needs to be urgently reviewed before the common summer occurrence of algal blooms becomes worse, particularly in the Serpentine and Murray Rivers.

TRANSPORT

The extension of the Kwinana Freeway and the Peel deviation, as it is known, is the singularly most important infrastructure need for the prosperity of this state. The government's commitment to this project is most welcome, but I believe we can and should commence it sooner. In my new role as shadow spokesperson on road safety, I will examine a number of safety issues with the project that need urgent attention in order to avert road deaths. Further, the southern rail link, which was first proposed in this house during the time of the previous Court government, will be vital to the people of the Murray electorate. More work needs to be done locally in connecting bus links in the

provincial areas of the Peel region, and long-term strategic planning is needed to cater for the expected population growth of the area.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

We are not doing enough to provide real jobs for young people in the Peel region. This is evident with the young people in the region in the demographic between 17 and 25 years of age leaving the area to seek education and jobs of substance. Urgent upskilling, particularly in the building industry, is needed. Sixty per cent of all building in the state occurs south of the river. This is a change in convention from years gone by when jobs and the commensurate colleges sprouted in the north. I declare a vested interest and that of my constituents in this issue. The demographic of young people aged between zero and 15 years, particularly those coming from overseas to this great state, is enormous, and forward planning is urgently required to address the job prospects issue. My children and my constituents' children need meaningful long-term jobs.

INDUSTRIAL LAND

The Murray electorate is strategically positioned between the ports of Fremantle and the soon-to-be redeveloped Bunbury port, offering a unique opportunity for export and import businesses to thrive. Industrial land is available in the Murray electorate and must be opened up. The rail link is proximate, and access to cheap power will be provided under the construction of the Alinta cogeneration plant at Pinjarra. A delegation of Murray businessmen will depart next week to attend a series of trade shows in Dalian and other parts of China. We need to get on board and take full advantage of the opportunities that are present in not only China, but also India, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

TOURISM

Tourism is the largest single employer of people in Australia. The Peel region has for too long been overlooked as a tourist destination. The house already knows my position on protecting the Peel waterways, because it is probably our greatest asset. Add to that mix the wonderment and mystique of a Hotham Valley train that chugs its way from the historic town of Pinjarra to the picturesque town of Dwellingup - that is a great place to market from a tourism perspective.

LAW AND ORDER

Members know that that area was my bread and butter. I have researched and written papers on the topic and it has been much of my life for many years. The challenge to all in this house is to come to terms with the changing environment of contemporary, modern-day policing. The days of strategic quick-shift with a size 13 have gone. What remains, however, is the importance of family and the responsibility of parents to ensure that their issue understand the acceptable levels of behaviour in our community. It is not the role of police, schools or the government to teach our children - it is the role of parents. Sure, governments, schools and the police play an important role in assisting parents. However, the touchy-feely, well-intended social workers have diminished the important role that parents play - and must play. Firm and fair parameters must be set and abided by. Consequence for action must become a reality. The old adage "the penalty must fit the crime" still rings true today. Parents have been hoodwinked. Provisions of section 257 of the Criminal Code provide for lawful chastisement under appropriate circumstances. I can hear the howl of the so-called experts already. However, people should not confuse lawful chastisement with child abuse. I have seen child abuse and it sickens me. Our children must be loved, cherished and guided and they must be taught respect for other people and their property. This is not the sole dominion of governments; it is a simple approach of tough love. Age and alcohol and drug use are no excuse for bad behaviour. We must empower our police, teachers and medical practitioners, for they are the glue that holds our society together. Defend them or defend yourselves. It is my firm belief that we are collectively the product of our environment. We have arrived simultaneously at this place and are influenced by our respective life experiences, which, in turn, influence our beliefs and morals.

It is like a blacksmith forging steel, who uses a number of basic alloys that are malleable and that are strengthened with heat and tempered with cooling; so it is that the human condition makes a robust individual who can withstand the rigours of this chamber.

The basic ingredient I attribute to my being comprises a number of people. I mention first my immediate family, which includes my father, Denis, and my mother, Betty. They are both products of the Depression and extreme hardship. They worked several jobs to raise five children. Second, I mention my extended family and friends, who are too numerous to mention; in danger of missing one, I refrain from listing them all. However, to them I say thank you. Third, I mention my campaign team, support base and well-wishers who charted a way forward through often turbulent seas during the past 18 months. None of them had any previous campaigning experience which, in retrospect, became a strength. I also thank an old football coach, Ken Armstrong, for instilling in me discipline, a work ethic, a dogmatic determination and a never-say-die attitude, which builds character. His inspirational words, based on the teachings of Vince Lombardi, still ring in my ears. He once said that “Winning is not everything, but wanting to is.”

I also thank my former colleagues of 27 years in the Western Australia Police Force. The experience gained during those years holds me in good stead for the future. I too can say that there is nothing of the human condition that I have not seen. To my parliamentary colleagues I say unto them: thank you. I look forward to working with them over the next four years. I publicly acknowledge to the people of Western Australia the great honour and responsibility I accept by stepping into this chamber today. Last, but certainly not least, I thank Kathleen, my wife of 21 years this coming Thursday, and my three children, Kelly, Kimberley and Thomas, who have, importantly, been with me for the past two years. I bid the members of the thirty-seventh Parliament good health and sound judgment over the next four years and beyond.
