



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Ms Cassandra Rowe, MLA**

**(Member for Belmont)**

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

*Reprinted from Hansard*



# Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

---

## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

Resumed from 11 May on the following motion moved by Ms J.J. Shaw —

That the following Address-in-Reply to Her Excellency's speech be agreed to —

To Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson, AC, Governor of the State of Western Australia.

May it please Your Excellency —

We, the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and to thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to address to Parliament.

**MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont)** [3.42 pm]: I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today—the Noongar people—I pay my respects to their elders, both past and present, and thank them for their custodianship. I respectfully stand with you on the ongoing journey towards meaningful reconciliation.

I wish to offer my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker, upon your elevation to this important position. I have had the privilege of knowing you over many years, and you have been a strong advocate for regional Western Australia. I have every confidence you will provide excellent stewardship of the Legislative Assembly. May I also extend my congratulations to all members of Parliament upon their election or re-election to this place.

Today is my opportunity to formally acknowledge and thank the people of Belmont who have entrusted me to be their representative. It is an honour and a privilege. I will be a fierce advocate for my electorate. I will work hard to ensure that the trust bestowed in me is not misplaced.

Belmont is a great place to live. My husband, Pat, and I are proud to live in Kewdale with our two girls, and we love being part of such a close-knit community. During the course of the campaign we knocked on over 18 000 doors, and what really shone through was the pride in our area and a desire to preserve our unique sense of community. The electorate of Belmont has a rich diversity, both culturally and geographically. Perth Airport, the Swan River and Perth CBD are right on our doorstep. It takes in South Guildford and Hazelmere, Ascot and Belmont Park Racecourses, all of the City of Belmont and the Burswood peninsula. We are the gateway to WA.

During the campaign one of the issues that came up time and again was the concern about jobs. I spoke with thousands of residents across the electorate who were either unemployed, underemployed or lacked job security. They were deeply concerned about how they were going to make ends meet. I stood in front of both men and women who were reduced to tears. These circumstances are robbing them of hope for their own future and that of their children.

In my previous role as a financial planner with an industry superannuation fund I had firsthand experience of dealing with members in the maritime industry facing the impact of the economic downturn on a daily basis. The maritime industry, like so many others, has seen

increasing casualisation and insecurity of its workforce. I met with members who had lost their jobs, had a dramatic reduction in shifts or had been asked to take significant pay cuts just to keep their jobs. This often led to severe financial hardship, the loss of their family home, relationship breakdowns, stress-related illness and emotional despair.

A government's role must be to plan for the future. That means diversification of the economy and investment in new industries such as renewable energy, technology-based and creative industries, as well as a continued investment in education and training, and the promotion of local jobs to militate against the worst effects of an economic downturn. Governments have a responsibility to ensure the long-term security and prosperity of their constituents. That is why I am so proud to be part of the McGowan Labor government. It is committed to creating more than 10 000 jobs and apprenticeships, it has already frozen TAFE fees, and it is dedicated to promoting industries in sectors important to my constituency like tourism, transport, local manufacturing and the racing industry. Secure, dignified employment is a critical pathway to ensure the future for all Western Australians.

As economic inequality continues to rise, there is an ever-expanding chasm between the haves and have-nots. Australia is a wealthy country; there is no reason anyone should be left behind. Collectively, we must not turn a blind eye to inequality. Currently, the top 20 Australian Securities Exchange chief executive officers earn more than 100 times the average wage; on the other side of the coin, the latest Poverty Report that almost three million Australians live below the poverty line. Shamefully, nearly one in five children lives in poverty.

Some people believe that economic inequality is just part of life. Barry Switzer, a former American football coach, once said —

Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple.

I am not one of those people. No-one should be deprived of the opportunity of a better life for themselves or their children due to their circumstances or postcode. We cannot fail to support the vulnerable in our community; if we do, humanity has failed. We have a duty to find a way to bridge the gulf. It starts by no longer treating those struggling to maintain a household on the minimum wage or experiencing poverty as second-class citizens; instead, we should employ compassion and respect to help them find a secure footing in the hope that they can go on to fulfil their potential in life.

Politicians should be bold in their pursuit of addressing inequality. As Barack Obama attested —

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education.

A principle obligation of government is to provide a first-class education system so that people are furnished with the knowledge they need to ultimately secure decent jobs. Every single child is deserving of a quality education in order to help them reach their full potential, yet we still see clusters of disadvantaged students who are left floundering in underperforming schools. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face chronic educational shortfalls, with those from low socioeconomic backgrounds obtaining lower results than those from high socioeconomic families. Education is critical in shaping every individual's trajectory in life. Improving outcomes for all students, therefore, should be the constant goal of government. Labor is always committed to enhancing education outcomes, which is why we are restoring education assistants to classrooms across the state, and in Belmont we are investing a total of \$7.48 million into state schools.

As a member of Parliament, I am focused on providing children with a quality education. I also want to ensure that schools are a safe environment for children. Research shows that

one in every four students in Australian schools are affected by bullying and that children who are bullied are three times more likely to develop depression. Academic achievement and emotional wellbeing should go hand in hand in our education system.

As a mother with two young daughters, I want them to get the best education possible but I also want them to grow up afforded every opportunity in a society that is free from gender discrimination and inequality. In 2017 we should not need to be talking about gender inequality. However, the facts are that the gender pay gap has remained firmly fixed for the past 20 years. Here in WA the pay gap is the highest in the nation at nearly 24 per cent. Statistics point to the fact that there is a gender pay gap favouring full-time working men over full-time working women across a multitude of occupational categories and industries. As a financial planner, I have seen the financial impacts that this inequality creates. Women's superannuation payouts at retirement, on average, are over 40 per cent less than those of men. Therefore, women are more likely to experience poverty in retirement and be far more reliant on the age pension. If we do not commit ourselves to addressing the pay gap, we risk continuing to set up women for precarious financial futures.

A recent report by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner revealed widespread discrimination directed at pregnant women or women returning to work post-parental leave, with one in two women experiencing discrimination, and one in five made redundant, restructured or dismissed during the pregnancy and return-to-work process. The results also showed that no industry or sector was exempt. Additionally, an earlier report by the commissioner showed that a quarter of women experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. As someone who has personally experienced sexual harassment in the workforce, I can speak to the crippling effect such humiliation has on one's confidence. As a young woman working in the financial services industry, I learnt that, even with the protection of the law, if there is a culture that is sympathetic to discrimination and harassment, people in positions of power will, and often do, turn a blind eye. Governments need to lead the way to change this culture.

The issue that has the most catastrophic impact on women is domestic violence. When we continue to see one woman die every single week at the hands of an intimate partner, governments at every level are compelled to act. Research shows that domestic and family violence is the leading preventable cause of death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 years. The royal commission into domestic violence in Victoria stipulated in its report —

The causes of family violence are complex and include gender inequality and community attitudes towards women.

Allowing violence against women to continue at such horrific rates sets the national tone on the topic of equality. Legislative and policy measures are required to address this national crisis, otherwise nothing will change. As a country, we should be done with defining the problem, we understand it and now we need action, funding and substantive political will. We need to start showing that, as a society, we value women.

One of the great movements in Australian history—one that has had a profound effect on addressing economic inequality—is the Australian union movement. It is responsible for so many things that we all take for granted now: a fair day's pay for a fair day's work; sick leave; penalty rates; holiday pay; and, with the Hawke–Keating Labor governments, unions helped bring in superannuation. We must remember that these reforms were not borne out of the business lobby or simply due to market forces; these were hard fought for by the union movement, often against extreme pressure and opposition.

During the campaign I was often asked why I wanted to go into politics. For me the answer was easy: because I want to be an advocate for working people. As Labor members of Parliament, I believe we need to be vigilant in our continued pursuit of the protection of

workers' rights and their safety. It is simply unacceptable that in 2017, on average, we see a construction worker die every 10 days or that we still see workers across agriculture, transport, mining and manufacturing regularly injured or killed at work. I am proud of the Labor Party's history and connection to the union movement. Fighting to protect workers is important and noble work. I stand here today and say thank you to the union movement.

I ran for the seat of Belmont in 2013 and narrowly lost. One of the positives to flow out of that experience was meeting so many locals. After the election loss, I continued to receive calls from locals wanting my assistance with their issues. They were not concerned by the fact that I was not a member of Parliament; all they wanted was action and advocacy. This led me to establish the Belmont Community Group with some good friends and a number of local residents. We set about running grassroots campaigns on local issues. We opposed the forced council amalgamations, we fought for more police resourcing in our area, we pushed for a farmers' market and we worked with residents to oppose high-rise developments. This was inspiring work, and I met thousands of locals during these campaigns. It showed me that people power really can work. As a member of Parliament, I will always act to amplify the voices of local community groups in my electorate, ensuring they are heard.

As well as advocacy and community activism, another passion of mine is the arts. I served as a board member and chair of the Film and Television Institute of WA for nearly 10 years. I believe in the production, promotion and protection of local art forms and culture. It is critical to continue to see local content on our local screens. Art is part of our collective narrative, our identity and our story. Peter Bazalgette, the former Arts Council England chief, eloquently articulates the importance of the arts in our culture when he said —

Take the collective memory from our museums; remove the bands from our schools and choirs from our communities; lose the empathetic plays and dance from our theatres or the books from our libraries; expunge our festivals, literature and painting, and you're left with a society bereft of a national conversation ... about its identity or anything else.

And I agree.

Growing up in a political household, robust debates and philosophical discussions were part of our daily routine around the dinner table. Politics was part of the fabric of our family life. My parents became activists during Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. My dad, Barry, was a member of Parliament and minister in Victoria for many years. Whilst my mum, Helen, pursued her own successful career, she was always right by dad's side.

Robert F. Kennedy once said —

The purpose of life is to contribute in some way to making things better.

This quote resonates with me, because this was the underlying message from my parents throughout my upbringing. There was always an unspoken rule in our household: that you had a moral obligation to work towards helping others, not just yourself—that we should never turn a blind eye towards injustice. Activism was always encouraged and we were taught never to accept the status quo.

And so, arriving at this very important place has not been a solitary passage. It has been a journey assisted by my family, friends, supporters, unions and volunteers, over many, many years. I would like to take the opportunity to thank some of those people personally.

[Member's time extended.]

**Ms C.M. ROWE:** To my mum and dad, you have been truly instrumental in helping me achieve my dream. You have supported and inspired me always, and I am truly grateful. You have been my greatest supporters and always had faith in me. I am blessed to have your love

and support and I hope you both know how much I love you. Peter, Lee and Michael Gardner and Jai Stevens, my most beautiful in-laws, without your support on the home front, I do not know where I would be. Thank you for your support. Tom Hodgkins, my brother in law, you have always been like a brother to me and you are hands down one of the kindest and most generous spirited individuals I know; thank you for your constant support. Hon Samantha Rowe, my sister, the MLC for the East Metropolitan Region, you have always been my role model, my best friend and a truly superb campaign director. As a sister, I do not think it is possible to be more loved than I am by you. I love you dearly and thank you for all you do. My husband, Patrick, you have been by my side over the last ten years and your love and support never wavers for a second. Your endless love, intelligent guidance, constant support, quick wit and great cooking are so deeply appreciated. I love you and I thank you from the very bottom of my heart. Bobby and Rory, my two girls, my love for you is boundless. I hope that I can set an example for you both, that you can set goals, have dreams, chase those dreams and one day achieve them, through hard work and perseverance. Dare to dream and dare to chase that dream fiercely. To my many friends across the country who have been part of the journey and cheered me on endlessly over many years, I thank you. To my very dear friend and mentor, Stephen Price, thank you for your guidance, friendship and faith in me. And to Matt Dixon, you have been there, as a true friend, through thick and thin, thank you.

This truly was a team effort, in every regard. To my campaign team, Merrilyn Ercegovich; Lauren Cayoun, my field coordinator; Claire Comrie, my tireless campaign manager and dearest friend; and Sam Rowe, my campaign director, I am truly indebted to you all. Thank you for giving it your all over a very long time. To WA Labor federal MPs, Senator Glenn Sterle, Senator Sue Lines, Senator Louise Pratt, Matt Keogh and Tim Hammond, I sincerely thank each of you for your ongoing support and assistance. I would like to thank the Labor Party and its members. I have been a member of the party since I was 16, and as a former assistant state secretary to the party I know that it exists primarily due to the commitment and passion of our members. Our members are dedicated to seeing a fairer and more progressive society, and they are the ones who roll up their sleeves to make it happen. I wish to acknowledge and thank Patrick Gorman, the secretary; and Lenda Oshalem, the assistant secretary of WA Labor for your support and friendship. To the former Labor Member for Belmont, Eric Ripper, you have been a wonderful supporter and mentor. You should be proud of all you achieved during your career. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Mal Bryce, the former Labor member for the seat of Ascot. To the many volunteers, it was entirely humbling to have people dedicate so much of their personal time to help my campaign. I simply could not have done it without you guys. To the many people who donated to my campaign; to the branch members; the supporters who had a yard sign; those of you who came out doorknocking on very, very hot days, made countless phone calls, letterboxed and helped out on polling day; and to those who flew across the country from Queensland, Victoria and Canberra, to help my campaign —what can I say? Wow! Thank you to each and every one of you. You know who you are and I am ever so grateful. To the unions who have supported me, thank you. I would like to especially thank Mike Zoetbrood and the Australian Workers' Union team, Peter O'Keeffe and the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association, Tim Dawson and the Transport Workers' Union of Australia, Christy Caine and the Maritime Union of Australia, and Mick Buchan and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. Again, the work you do is invaluable.

Finally, as members of Parliament we are provided with a unique opportunity to positively influence public debate and shape the future of our state. A good government's role is to ultimately protect and invest in the welfare and aspirations of the people it represents. I am

committed to pursuing an agenda of equality and being a tireless advocate for my community in Belmont. In finishing, I believe each of us has the capacity, and indeed the obligation, to contribute to and improve our society. As my political hero, Robert F. Kennedy, once said —

Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one person can do against the enormous array of the world's ills, misery, ignorance, and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. And in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation.

[Applause.]

---