



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Reece Whitby, MLA

(Member for Baldivis)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday, 17 May 2017

Reprinted from Hansard

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 16 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.

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Parliamentary Secretary) [4.33 pm]: Madam Deputy Speaker, congratulations on your new position. I also congratulate the new Speaker on his ascendancy to high office. If experience in disrupting the proceedings of this house are a prerequisite, then I am sure he is very qualified!

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this Parliament meets.

The first thing I would like to do as a new member of this Parliament is to thank the people of Baldivis who put me here. Thank you to the electorate of Baldivis for its faith and trust. It is my job to work as hard as I possibly can to serve their interests. I am thrilled to be part of such a wonderful community and to do my bit to make it an even better place to live. In a moment, I will detail the great qualities, promises and challenges that face this growing electorate, but my journey here has been long—almost nine years and three state elections. However, it goes back further than that, to my earliest memory of politics in the lounge room of my parents' housing commission home in Balga, on a warm December evening in 1972, as I watched Gough Whitlam's election as Prime Minister on a black and white television. Even as an eight-year-old I could tell change was in the air in Wardlow Way that night—change, potential and hope. That awareness of the potential of politics for positive change has stayed with me ever since and it has helped steer me towards this moment, ready to represent one of the fastest growing urban communities in Australia.

I want to thank the many people who contributed so much time, energy and passion to the Baldivis campaign. In particular, I want to thank my campaign director, Paul Papalia, and campaign manager, Karina Graham, who constantly reminded me that it was the candidate's job "to shut up and do as you're told." Thank you, too, to federal member for Brand, Madeleine King; Sonia Morton; Dragana Flynn; Mark Foott; Robert Nikolic; Alannah Wilson; Linda Gordon; Barry Wilders; John and Peggy Cotter; Owen Farmer; and all the members of the Baldivis, Rockingham, Warnbro and Kwinana branches of the Australian Labor Party. I only wish I had the time to name them all.

Thank you, supporters and friends from both sides of politics who worked so generously to help achieve our victory. Thank you, Patrick Gorman, Lenda Oshalem and the hardworking team at party office. To quote one of my far from generous former colleagues of the fifth estate—it was not Geof—I was the two-time loser, third-time lucky; therefore, may I take

a moment to also thank some of those who helped me in earlier campaigns. They are Fred Ward, a life member of the Australian Labor Party; Glen Bennet; Ron Ierace; Charlie McGettigan; Fran Hickling; and all the “Morley Mob”—thank you too. If ever you need reminding of the basic decency at the core of the Australian Labor Party, look no further than these people. They are everyday members and supporters: Western Australians who believe in our state, its people and its future.

I also want to thank my old boss and colleagues at the office of the Leader of the Opposition. I am happy to say they are still my boss and colleagues although with more impressive titles: Mark McGowan, Guy Houston, Jo Gaines, Daniel Patorelli and Jamie McDonald, to name too few of this hard-working and committed bunch.

Thank you, too, to my friends and supporters in the union movement. I joined the union representing my craft at 18 and was a member for more than 30 years. I know the union movement is a force for good in our community, with its key role of making our state and nation a fairer and more compassionate society.

Normally, members acknowledge the contribution of the members they replace, but in my case there is not one. I can, however, thank those members who have ably represented parts of this new electorate. The members for Kwinana, Warnbro and Rockingham did their bit in serving parts of the electorate over the many years and they will be a tough act to follow.

Baldivis is a new seat created by the sheer force of growth; it is an inevitability of democracy. Unlike in the other place, its creation was a response to the requirement for fair and balanced representation. The electorate takes its name from three ships that delivered group settlers from the United Kingdom to the district in the 1920s—the *Balranald*, the *Diogenes* and the *Jervis Bay*—although there is some conjecture among local historians that the second ship may have been the *Bendigo*. Not long ago, Baldivis was little more than small rural holdings and horse properties. Today, our newest state electorate is a thriving string of fresh new suburbs. From Bertram, tucked under Thomas Road in the north, down through the village community of Wellard and south to an ever-expanding and vibrant Baldivis. To the east, there are parts of established Leda; Cooloongup or Woodbridge; and Waikiki.

The people of the Baldivis electorate are hardworking and aspirational. They are not afraid of having a go to get ahead. Many have come from around the world—from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, India, South Africa, the Philippines and dozens of other countries. They bring with them a rich diversity of culture and experience. The electorate of Baldivis is also home to many defence personnel and their families who serve at HMAS *Stirling* or on ships home ported there. It is not for nothing that Baldivis is referred to as “Nappy Valley”, with a large proportion of young families with young kids. The people of Baldivis value education and the role it plays in securing a future for their children. The provision of schools and the maintenance of a quality education is a key issue for our community.

Quality infrastructure, including public transport and roads, is also crucial. Sitting for hours in traffic each week has a major impact on quality of life. I am grateful to see that this issue is being addressed by the new McGowan Labor government. I look forward to seeing the completion of the \$49 million widening of Kwinana Freeway northbound lanes between Russell Road and Roe Highway.

There are other infrastructure concerns. In 2017, mobile phone coverage and the internet are as necessary a utility as power and water, yet parts of the Baldivis electorate suffer mobile and internet connections worse than some Third World nations. This has a huge impact on local businesses and families. Although it is a federal issue, it is a local priority, and this must be fixed.

Like communities across our state, the Baldivis electorate is not immune to other challenges. Unemployment has many families struggling to cope, and we have a higher-than-average rate of mortgage repossession. The curse of meth addiction is not unknown to us, nor is the often-linked issue of mental health. These are challenges that touch every corner of our state. I know our new government is committed to tackling them. But the future for Baldivis is one of hope and opportunity. We have so much—aspirational families, bright young kids, professionals and business owners prepared to have a go, hardworking families and community-minded residents. Baldivis can and should play its part in the creation of a more diverse Western Australian economy with new jobs close to where people live. This involves development and growth, balanced with the conservation of a rich natural environment of native bushland and open spaces.

A new suburb with challenges and opportunities is something I grew up with. I was raised in Balga in the early seventies at the very edge of Perth. I know about the challenges of transport, schools, hospitals, health care, sporting and community facilities, and social connection and engagement. I went to school at North Balga Primary and Greenwood Senior High School. I know the importance of a good education, no matter where you live or which school you go to. I know that a decent education can help a boy from Balga achieve his ambition of becoming a journalist with a career that began at the *South Western Times* in Bunbury, to the ABC, Channel Nine and finally, a 20-year stint in the newsroom at Channel Seven—a great place, with great people and a great culture.

My parents, Ray and Lyn Whitby, had a wholesale and retail business, and, at one stage, even a Fremantle pub. I know the challenges facing the self-employed and small business owners who work hard, employ staff and take on risk for reward. I got my political education around the kitchen table of my grandparents' East Victoria Park home. My grandfather Bill Whitby was old-school working class. His Labor represented the sensible centre of fair pay, fair conditions, fair go—and opportunity for all. If you need a hand, you should get it. If you work hard and succeed, good on you! These are my core beliefs today.

Social demographics have shifted since my grandfather's day. The nature of work is changing. Blue collar jobs are giving way to white, service industries are expanding, more workers are self-employed or contractors, and fewer Western Australians belong to a union. The challenge for our party today is to keep pursuing progress, especially for those who need it most, while holding the middle ground. This is not a repudiation of where we have come from; it is the reality of where we are. A fair go for all has lifted many sons and daughters of the working class into the middle class and professionalism. We should embrace this constituency because with their support we are better able to assist those on low incomes who face the greatest personal and financial challenges. I believe in the common decency of Western Australians who genuinely want to see battlers get ahead. I believe the last thing Western Australia wants to see is the American disease of a shrinking middle class and a growing army of working poor. Postwar prosperity was fuelled by a growing middle class, not a shrinking one.

I do not believe there is a better place on earth than Western Australia, both for what we are and for what we can be. I believe Western Australia's future is playing a greater role in the life of our nation. I reject notions of secession. I am a republican and believe in gentle evolutionary transition, rather than jarring revolutionary change. I see an Australian republic as inevitable for a modern, advanced, progressive state and nation. I respect and admire the Queen. I think the latest generation of royals are doing a fine job. But I hope there will come a day in my lifetime when Western Australia will proudly become part of the republic of Australia with our very own Australian head of state—perhaps even a Western Australian.

I was there on a wintry night at the Hellenic Club in Northbridge 25 years ago this month when the Malcolm Turnbull–chaired Australian Republican Movement held its first meeting in WA. Let us continue the conversation. To like-minded members across the aisle, I look forward to an opportunity for bipartisanship. Jobs, the economy, education, health, transport and community safety should always take priority, but it is possible to walk and chew gum at the same time, and the symbols and potential of our state and nation are important, both to us, and the rest of the world.

Finally, I want to thank those closest to me who are crowding the gallery today. Just over a year ago, I considered walking away from politics. My youngest daughter, Hope, was diagnosed with an extremely rare autoimmune condition called juvenile dermatomyositis. It affects just a couple of children per million each year. Most doctors will never see a case in their entire career. Starting with a sore knee, Hope could not lift her legs when she was diagnosed by the incredible doctors at Princess Margaret Hospital for Children. No-one knows what causes juvenile dermatomyositis. We do know it results in severe and widespread muscle weakness that leaves children unable to walk or move. Feeding, swallowing and even breathing can be affected. Thankfully, symptoms can be treated with modern medications and the impact on Hope has been mild and limited. But at that moment when you are told your child is facing a disease like that, nothing else matters. I decided nothing else did matter. Hope's health was our family's only priority and I would resign as a candidate and devote myself to Hope and our family. However, my wife convinced me to continue. Together, we would share the burden. Together, we would find the strength and our family would make it through. Hope is now nine years old and nothing slows her down. She takes her tablets every morning and gets regular checks at Princess Margaret Hospital for Children. She plays basketball and hockey and can boot a footy further than most boys her age! Natalie and I will forever be grateful to the amazing, world-best doctors and medical staff at PMH. They serve only to remind us of the vital importance of a strong public health system.

I would like to mention my parents, Ray and Lyn Whitby, who taught me the importance of hard work and having a go. Dad left Kent Street High School at 15 years of age and joined the Navy. In 1958, he was one of the first to return to the Montebello Islands after the atomic tests and today he is active in the Australian Ex-Services Atomic Survivors Association. My parents started with nothing and built a family business on decades of hard toil. Their values passed on to their three kids.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: My brother, Regan, also served in the Navy and my sister, Gemma, runs her own small business. My wife's parents, Terry and Diane Jones, have been there too, helping our family through defeat to triumph. I also thank my grandparents, Bill and Nellie Whitby and Austin and Rene Hughes, for the values they passed on. Incidentally, my maternal grandmother, Rene Hughes, came to Western Australia as a young girl with her family in the group settlement scheme in the 1920s. My last surviving grandparent, Nellie Whitby, passed away last year, just weeks short of her 103rd birthday. She would have liked to be here today.

My wife, Natalie, is my equal partner in every way—except much better looking and much smarter than I am. Natalie has withstood the stresses, anxieties and disappointments that confront all political partners. Her insight and counsel are invaluable. I am so proud that she has her own life and successful career, as well as the formidable job of being mum to four school-age children. I thank our children, Faith, Sam, Luke and Hope, for putting up with a dad running for politics for what seems most of your lives. You have grown up around branch fundraisers, letter drops, mobile offices and polling days. I am so proud of you all.

Finally, it has been a long journey since 1972. And, I still have hope. Thank you again to the people of Baldivis for your faith and trust and giving me this opportunity to serve you. If I have to explain why I am here, it is pretty simple; it is because I believe in hope and opportunity. It is what got me here. I believe government should be about making sure that hope and opportunity exist, not just for some Western Australians, but for all of us. I look forward to working with all members of this chamber. Thank you.

[Applause.]
