

[Tuesday, 17 May 1988.]

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

MR RIPPER (Ascot) [4.22 pm]: I move -

That the following Address-in-Reply to His Excellency's Speech be agreed to -

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.

It is with great pride that I join the parliamentary representatives of a party which has produced the talented Governments which have governed Western Australia and the nation in the last five years. A distinguishing feature of these Labor Governments has been the vigour and intelligence with which they have confronted the real problems facing the State and the nation. These Governments have been prepared to cast aside ideological blinkers to arrive at solutions to problems. They have managed a great deal of change which has been forced on us by economic and technological circumstances, and managed this change so as to protect the interests of ordinary people.

Many other aspects of success in Government depend upon mastery of national and regional economies and sensible management of the public sector. These matters are particularly important in the electorate of Ascot which I am privileged to represent here. The 1986 census revealed, for example, that the level of unemployment in Ascot was 12 per cent at a time when the State-wide unemployment rate was 7.6 per cent. For the people of Ascot, job creation must remain a very high priority for the Government. Many other social problems with which we must deal are ameliorated if we can provide employment to people.

The State Government has achieved outstanding success in managing the effects on employment, both of the recession bequeathed to us by John Howard and the collapse in prices for our major exports. Since 1983, 120 000 new jobs have been created in Western Australia. This represents a rate of growth in jobs of 21.4 per cent - more than four percentage points ahead of the national rate.

As promised in 1983 the housing sector has played an important part in this employment growth. New housing constructions have totalled more than 17 000 per year. Representing as I do an electorate with a substantial demand for public housing - a demand which is reflected in representations to my office every day - it is pleasing to see that public housing construction has played such an important part in this growth. By the end of its second term the State Government will have constructed more than 6 000 units of public housing in each of its terms, virtually doubling the rate of public housing construction established by the previous Government.

Ascot is an area where almost one third of the families reported a family income of less than \$15 000 in 1986, when average weekly earnings at the time equated to a yearly income of about \$23 000. Clearly, increases in State taxes and charges are of particular importance to the living standards of the people of Ascot. There have been increases of course, but it is significant that increases in principal rates and charges have been held below the inflation rate. In fact, under this Government these charges have risen by one third less than the growth in average earnings. The Government will maintain this restraint in 1988, despite continued Federal stringency flowing from the necessity to manage the effects of our overseas trading problems.

Helping in this process will be the income received from the involvement of Government instrumentalities in business activities. These activities have been the subject of some criticism recently, but the bottom line is this: Without the income received from these activities - and they are generating income - the burden of taxes and charges would have been higher or the level of Government service to the community lower.

Despite the necessity for tight management of the Government resources, money has been found to provide additional support to disadvantaged persons and families. I am proud to support a Government which has virtually doubled to \$93 million the amount spent on concessional and discretionary financial support to disadvantaged and low income families and individuals.

Our progress in economic management and job creation would not have been possible without the remarkable cooperation extended by the trade union movement. Working people and the trade union movement have accepted very considerable wage restraint over the last five years - a degree of restraint recognised even by a former Liberal spokesman on industrial relations, Ian McPhee. Of the increases which have been awarded, some have been taken in conjunction with such progressive measures as the extension of superannuation to the 60 per

cent of the work force previously not covered or in accord with the restructuring and efficiency aspects of the two-tier wage system.

I cannot praise too highly the quality of the leadership which the ACTU has offered working people in recent times. The ACTU has acted in the enlightened self interest of trade union members certainly, but also in the long term interests of the whole community. It is a tragedy that the labour movement, far from receiving the credit which is due to it for these intelligent policies, has come under increased attack from conservative political forces.

We have seen more and more extreme calls for the undermining of working conditions. We have seen calls for the deregulation of the labour market - a harmless sounding phrase for a process which would deprive workers of the protection both of their unions and of the industrial commissions and leave them at the mercy of powerful and extreme employers like Robe River. We have seen opposition to every suggested wage increase, despite the considerable restraint which has been exercised.

As a result of our overseas trading difficulties and as a result of rapid technological change, Australia, including Western Australia, will experience, whether we welcome it or not, considerable economic and social change. In these circumstances conservatives may calculate that their short term political interests lie in polarising the community through attacks on the very existence of the trade union movement, but the long term economic and social health of the community demands a different response.

Of course not all trade union members or officials have reacted as positively as the ACTU leadership to the need for change. As an official of the State School Teachers Union for four years I was in a privileged position to observe the implementation of the Government's reform program in education and some of the reactions to it. As with any process of change the road has not been entirely smooth. There is always the danger, when attempting to bring about reform, that a small minority of people who feel they will be disadvantaged will speak up much more loudly than the majority who will benefit. There is always the danger that critics will concentrate on the imperfections of the new system or the imperfections of its implementation rather than consider what might have been the consequence of maintaining the old.

Such has been the case with much of the recent debate about changes to the education system in Western Australia. Take for example the implementation of the unit curriculum in secondary schools. What has to be said is that the achievement certificate system which preceded it in secondary schools had been discredited and had lost community, student and teacher support. Students were assessed not solely on their personal mastery of course objectives but in comparison to State wide performance norms. All students, regardless of their achievements, automatically progressed to the next year level. The rigidities of the system prevented students from selecting a balance of studies according to their individual needs and prevented them from transferring to higher or lower levels in particular subjects. Schools were discouraged from altering their curriculums to meet the requirements of the local community and their own students. Perhaps most damaging of all is that there was a very detrimental effect on the less academically able student arising from the labelling of students as advanced, intermediate and basic.

There is no doubt that teachers, for example, have had to bear a heavy load in preparing for the introduction of the unit curriculum system. But the consequences for them and for their students of continuing to teach to a curriculum perceived to be irrelevant and unsatisfactory, although perhaps less concentrated in their impact, would be considerably more deleterious in the long term.

The Better Schools Program has also attracted far more than its fair share of criticism. Such criticism may have obscured some very worthy outcomes of that program. In the first place, a much simpler and more rational management structure has been established in the Ministry of Education. More important in the long term is the proposed devolution of a measure of power and responsibility from centralised bureaucrats to teachers, administrators and parents in school communities. I applaud this philosophy and the benefits of greater local accountability and educational relevance which should flow from its implementation.

We will all benefit from the improved educational outcomes possible when there is a partnership between a school and the community. For teachers the Better Schools Program means more control over their working arrangements and more influence on the nature of the education service offered in their schools. Implementation of that program will bring them enhanced professional status and the rewards which will eventually flow from it.

In all the discussions related to education reform one significant change has received insufficient attention - promotion on merit in our State school system. By 1990 all promotions in State schools will be awarded on merit after a process of formal evaluation. It has taken this Labor Government to ensure that our schools are led by people who have been assessed on merit rather than by people who have risen on seniority alone. This is an important change as quality of educational leadership is a major determinant of the quality of education offered

in a school. These institutional changes have helped to meet the community need for relevant, high quality education in the same way as has the provision of 2 600 computers to schools in recent years.

It has been disappointing that our overseas trading problems have required such tight control of Government spending, including spending on education. Part of the solution to our economic problems lies in developing the skills of our population. A well resourced and high quality education system will be to our long term economic advantage. While for short term economic reasons the extra resources which can be devoted to education remain scarce, we strive to obtain value for our education dollar.

Educational professionals are inclined to be sceptical about expressions of a need for resource efficiency in the education system. They incline to the view that efforts to achieve more efficient use of the substantial resources devoted to schooling are inherently anti-educational.

Gone are the days when substantial additional resources for education could easily be found, yet community demands continue for students to not only be educated for longer in a more extensive range of matters but also more intensively in the basics. It is not good financial or educational management for each of these demands to be met by the addition of a new unit at head office, or a new program of grants to schools, if these changes occur without sufficient consideration to altering ongoing patterns of behaviour within the system.

By giving school communities some control over their priorities and resources the Better Schools Program has offered a way out of these dilemmas. The Government has been courageous enough to tackle educational reform in a time of economic stringency. To do so has inevitably involved difficulties as the expectations of educational interest groups have been that improvements to schooling must necessarily involve increased resourcing. Not to have done so would have been to short change the community to the detriment of our long term economic prospects and quality of life.

In education as in other areas the Government has come to grips with the need to make well overdue changes in our long term interests, despite the medium term resource difficulties and the dangers that initiating processes of change pose for any Government.

It is a source of pride to have been elected to support a Government which is so well suited to dealing with the challenges of the time. I am privileged to represent the people of Ascot in this Chamber and to have been endorsed by Labor to contest the new seat of Belmont. I thank the electors of Ascot for the confidence they have shown in me and the hundreds of Labor Party members and supporters who made our Ascot by-election campaign a success. In particular, I thank the former member for Ascot, Malcolm Bryce, for his support, encouragement and advice. I thank my family, especially my wife Pat, who have supported my long-term involvement in political activities.

Mr Speaker, I support the motion.

[Applause.]