

[Tuesday, 29 June 1993.]

HON B.M. SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [7.57 pm]: It gives me great pleasure to speak in this place for the first time tonight. I consider it a great privilege to be elected to this House, and I look forward to representing the people of Western Australia with honesty, dignity and integrity and to servicing their needs with the responsibility that they deserve. I take the opportunity afforded to me by the debate on the Address-in-Reply, which was so ably moved by Hon Bruce Donaldson, to congratulate you, Mr President, on your re-election as President of this House. The diligence and commitment displayed in your role as President is testimony to the fact that this Chamber has a capable President, determined to uphold the traditions of the Westminster system. I was privileged also to be on the same ticket as you, Mr President, and I record my thanks to you for your encouragement and support and for the wealth of experience which you brought to our campaign in the South Metropolitan Region.

I congratulate members who, like me, are in this House for the first time. My best wishes go also to those people who have retired since the last session of Parliament and to my predecessor, Phillip Pental, who has moved to the Legislative Assembly. Phillip Pental held the Legislative Council seat for the South Metropolitan Region for 13 years from 1980 to 1993. To work as I did with Phillip as a member of the South Metropolitan Region was rewarding. I am indebted to his generosity of spirit and to his continued encouragement and help in familiarising me with the electorate. I thank also the other members of the South Metropolitan Region team - Mr Simon O'Brien and Mrs Lesley Van Stan - for the work they did during our election campaign.

May I also take this opportunity to express my thanks to the parliamentary staff, and to those members of the House who have given me a great deal of assistance since I was elected to this Parliament. My thanks also go to my own family, my husband Michael, my four children, and my larger extended family; their strong support in all my endeavours is very much appreciated. To my many close friends, and to my friends in the Liberal Party who have supported me in many ways I would like to say thank you.

Like other colleagues in this House I feel it is relevant to share with members some of my background and origins which I hope will serve to give them a better understanding of my perspective of my role in this Parliament. I grew up on a wheat and sheep property in a small wheatbelt town known as Walgoolan; indeed not far from Hon Kim Chance and Hon Jim Scott, at Doodlakine. My hard working parents, Eileen and Leslie Barnett, instilled in all their children the traits of honesty, integrity, and that serving and being part of the community was an expectation. Their fondness for children and a belief in good education for all their children were two of the driving forces of their lives. Indeed I am indebted to them for the many sacrifices which they made to give me a good education. As a family we had a fun-filled and wonderful childhood in a very safe and caring yet disciplined environment. Those fortunate enough to have had a country upbringing know that self-reliance, responsibility and community service are part of the rural ethos. This training stood me in good stead when I returned to teach in a small country community after completing my training in Perth. Fortunately for young people then there was not the fear of whether one would get a job after training, rather what job would one like and where would one like to work. So, as a young single teacher, I found myself in a small country town with only two teachers, and our social life - as in most rural communities - centred around sport and the junior farmers movement. This organisation was a vibrant, challenging one which provided many opportunities for young people to come together. We took part in public speaking, debating, and were drilled in meeting procedures. We competed in many other practical ways by demonstrating skills in homemaking and farming techniques. The junior farmer movement or the rural youth movement as it is now known, played a significant role in shaping young rural Western Australians.

A two year stint overseas, part of it teaching in very poor suburbs of London, forced me to reflect on the nature of our very young nation and the opportunities afforded to young people and their families. After a successful professional career teaching in Western Australia and overseas I married Michael Scott and together we have raised four children. During that time we have been closely involved also in several family business ventures. At the same time I took an active role in a variety of community work, much of which centred around children. My long involvement with early education began with being president of the local kindergarten. That led me to founding the Community Kindergartens Association which is now a Statewide parent organisation. It also led to a close association with the Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation. At Meerilinga we have brought together 32 organisations, all voluntary, to deal with young children and their families. I was one of the three women who founded the Meerilinga Council and established the Meerilinga concept. At the same time we worked to regain community control of the historical Meerilinga building in Hay Street. Some 12 years on, Meerilinga is a unique concept in children's organisations and it has become a centre for research and resource for young children and their families. More recently, one of my community involvements has been as a member of the Aquinas College board. With my interest in education and the youth of this State this appointment has been a challenging and interesting commitment.

Tonight I wish to address the issue of building a better community for Western Australians. Inherent in my background and experience is a commitment to children and families; so I would like to focus on those two

aspects and the role the Government has in building better communities for young children and their families. Generally speaking, the role of Government must be one that empowers its people to act for themselves within the laws it creates, ensuring and enabling individuals to take responsibility for their actions. In other words, society should create government rather than Government creating society. Therefore, in looking at communities let us look, firstly, at the basic unit of society - the family, which is the cornerstone of any society. The nineteenth century French social analyst, Frederick de Playe wrote: "Tell me what kind of family you have and I will tell you what kind of society you have." Family structures encompass many variables. For some it is the nuclear family; for others it is a one parent family. For some, the loss of both parents means the reliance on an extended family. For some, it is a husband, wife and children, and an elderly relative. Whatever the structure, family experiences are fundamental to shaping our character, our basic values, our attitudes to authority and our sense of identity, and, to a degree our level of competence or incompetence. The family mediates between self and society; it civilises children. If it is weak, society will be unstable. The role then of Government should be to help build strong family units by supporting both functional families and dysfunctional families, and building support systems which break the ever increasing cycle of dysfunctional families.

Typical of the support system in my own community was the East Fremantle one parent centre which gave great support to dysfunctional families. The centre was, unfortunately, closed by the previous Government. This was a centre which I personally supported because of the valuable work it was doing with parents in helping them to rebuild their lives. Society has a stake in encouraging strong family units. Research would suggest that the effects of family instability reverberate right throughout society. The task of education is made more difficult; crime and delinquency increase; the welfare bill goes up. In the past decade, Western Australia has experienced a rapid rise in the crime rate, if the figures on reported crime are any guide. I do not think any of us need to have the figures to know that that is a fact. Since the early 1980s reports of serious assault, motor vehicle theft and breaking and entering, have tripled and reported sexual assault has increased eightfold. Much of the crime upsurge is juvenile crime, and the Government has the responsibility not only to address this appalling situation but also to look at the causes, the effects, and what action it can take to halt the trend. We need to know not only the causes but also we need to look at the resolutions and the answers.

An obvious starting point is the family and its relevance as a focal point in the community. There have been striking changes in Australian family life in the past two decades. These changes are due to changing values and patterns, including the increase in economic pressures, which has contributed to the need for dual family incomes to maintain a reasonable standard of living; easy access to technological innovations, which has contributed, sadly, to the breakdown of communication within the family unit; and ironically enough, as a result of increased levels of education, more women seeking to use their training and applying for jobs outside the home.

All of those and other factors have added enormous pressures on family life. The question arises: Are these factors a contributing cause of the crime wave or are poverty and unemployment the cause? We need to know the answers. Unfortunately, very little Australian research has been conducted on families and whether malfunctioning families can be linked to delinquency, crime and other problems. The year 1994 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of the Family. We need to undertake research into Western Australian families to determine whether there is a link, and to work on the outcomes of the research and its relationship to our society, and not rely on overseas studies based on parochial evidence and experience, which may be relevant only in general terms. I make reference here to the type of useful research which can be conducted, but must not take the place of, our own research.

A substantial English research project was presented at the British Criminology Conference in 1989. It was carried out by David Farrington for the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. That was a longitudinal study into delinquent development where 411 London males had been followed up from the age of eight right through until the age of 32. Offending was only one element of a general syndrome of behaviour which showed significant continuity from childhood to adulthood. It was concluded that the most hopeful method of preventing offending were behavioural parent training and preschool intellectual enrichment projects. Western Australian research may come to similar conclusions, but until thorough work is done we can only guess. We need to know the answers. The resources devoted to research on offending are grossly inadequate and negligible in comparison with spending on criminal justice agencies such as police, courts and prisons. In contrast, the field of public health devotes substantial resources to large scale longitudinal surveys, often including experimental intervention designed to investigate the cause and prevention of illnesses. In public health it has been realised long ago that prevention is better than treatment. We need to look now at our families and seek the answers.

If the Government has a role in supporting families, what is that role? We first need to find the answers. I would suggest that the Government's role in supporting families is in providing support systems within the community which will enable young people to reach their full potential. One of those support systems, of which I have some knowledge, is early care and education of young children. The early care and education of children is critical to later outcomes and competencies. Government has a role in providing intellectually enriched

programs for young children. These programs should support and complement the role of the family in its task of child rearing, not overtake it. Early childhood programs should be developmentally appropriate and should be child centred. Buildings need to be planned properly to allow sufficient space for play activities. Unfortunately, it is no longer safe for young children to play in parks and gardens unattended, so the opportunity for play has been diminished. Play is an important part of the developing child; indeed, it has been said of young children that play is their work and they work very hard at it. Early childhood facilities should provide safe and nurturing environments where children can develop intellectually, emotionally and fully under the guidance of appropriately trained professionals working with parents as partners. Parents need to be encouraged to take part in all early childhood programs where possible. This will ensure that parents and professionals develop a trusting relationship which leads to a better understanding of home and family situations of the child and gives the professional the opportunity to support the parents.

My personal commitment to achieving appropriate preschool programs for young children in Western Australia has been driven in the main by my belief that the early childhood years are the most crucial to the development of the child and that it is imperative that children enter school with positive feelings of self-worth that ensure they succeed. One of the key criteria to sound early childhood programs is the provision for early assessment and intervention. It is vital that young children who have been the victims of emotional trauma or have suffered from physical disabilities such as poor hearing, sight or late development are properly assessed. In addition to the assessment skills of appropriately trained early childhood staff, early assessment requires back up support from other professionals such as health professionals.

I have consistently urged Governments to conduct health screening in all children's services so that children can be screened by the age of four. Intervention programs can then follow the assessment. Part of the early intervention program in early childhood programs is the immunisation program. Western Australian health authorities are currently concerned about an outbreak of whooping cough and measles caused by a lack of immunisation. These common early childhood diseases are easily controlled by vaccinations. Diseases such as whooping cough, measles, diphtheria and polio not only contribute to high infant mortality, but also for those who may survive these diseases natural development is often impeded. The HIB or haemophilus influenza type B virus which has come under media scrutiny of late is the biggest killer of children under five in Australia. Among other things, it causes meningitis and choking, but this also can be controlled by vaccination. However, this is a costly exercise for parents at approximately \$40 a shot. The Government is providing this immunisation free to babies under two months, and I applaud this initiative which is unique to Western Australia. However, I urge that this program be extended to include all children under five years of age certainly at minimum cost to parents, if not free. I would commend any initiatives of the Health Department which encourage parents to have their children immunised. One of these programs is to send birthday cards to children of the age of four and five to remind parents of immunisations that are due.

Early learning difficulties occur from a number of causes and it is only fair that all preschool programs provide the opportunity for children to enter the school system with an equal chance to succeed. Parents must be encouraged to be partners in the good growth and development of their children, and Government has a role to provide adequate health services. One of the initiatives of this Government which I will be promoting is the establishment of a research foundation into specific learning difficulties which will make Western Australia the leading authority in the early detection and treatment of specific learning disabilities. Specific learning disabilities have a debilitating effect on about 10 per cent of all children and a further 30 per cent suffer from minor dysfunctions which can retard their learning. In this State, 10 per cent represents approximately 30 000 children and 30 per cent represents approximately 90 000 children. This foundation, to be called "The Kids Foundation", should be linked to a university. I suggest it be located at a university in the South Metropolitan Region, near Curtin or Murdoch Universities. The outcomes of that research foundation could be the type of thing that happened in America last year when the whole of America's children were assessed and a document was produced, giving some insight into the state of America's children. In fine print it says, "Let us leave no child behind."

The PRESIDENT: Order! Would the member read the cover because the Hansard reporter cannot record what she is waving around in the air.

Hon B.M. SCOTT: The document to which I refer in relation to the American research is titled "The State of America's Children 1992". My current role, as chairman of a task force into the implementation of full day schooling for fives, has given us the opportunity to focus on early education in a way which has not been done before in Western Australia. It is an important and exciting proposition that services to young children have come under the microscope and that the Government has given the task force the opportunity of taking a good look at the services provided and to consider how best they can be administered. Within the current debate of looking at the appropriate entry age into school of young Western Australians and whether there should be some consistency across the States, we have the opportunity to look closely at all early childhood programs and to question whether they are in the best interests of the children whom they were designed to serve. Western Australia has a long history of providing world class preschool programs.

There is a body of knowledge in this State which must be preserved and protected. In the restructuring processes of recent years the early childhood branch of the Ministry of Education was dismantled. There is an urgent need to bring together the expertise of early childhood educators and to ensure that, by giving someone the opportunity of building on the knowledge, this knowledge is not dissipated. In the process of bringing down a report to Government, wide consultation in the community, in particular of parents, will take place. An issues paper will be produced to encourage informed comment. In giving the parents the opportunity of commenting, I am reminded of a quote by President Roosevelt when planning for young Americans when he said, "What a good and wise parent wants for his child, so should a nation want for its children." I believe that as legislators and leaders, we have an obligation to hear the voice of parents and to act upon it. Our children are our future and we have a responsibility to build a secure future for them. Their education and their prospects for employment are vital. I will continue to speak for children in this community.

I now take a broader look at families in our society and the role of Government. Economic factors such as employment, interest rates, inflation and taxation have a significant effect on the ability of families to look after themselves and to function well. Therefore, Government has a role to address these issues. In addition, there are some specific areas where Government can help to build stable families; they are, counselling for marriage preparation; counselling in parenting; family impact assessment of all Government action; support services for young people, especially in sport and recreation; support for the care of the aged; and support for those who are less fortunate. Perhaps the pre-eminent role of this Government for our future generations is to ensure that every person has the opportunity of getting a job. The high unemployment levels, especially among the young, are totally unacceptable. The restoration of the economy of Western Australia should be the priority of Government; the creation of jobs will follow.

Finally, I believe that part of the role of Government in building better communities is the provision of good government. Individual politicians should be role models for the community and young people. They need to show the qualities of leadership, honesty and integrity and to display self-sacrifice in expending their duties to the communities they serve. Our community of Western Australia is demanding good Government. I believe the people deserve it. We must provide the answers. We, as politicians, have an obligation to serve with humility and to the very best of our ability. I see this as my ultimate responsibility to my electorate in the South Metropolitan Region and to all Western Australians. To succeed in this challenge will be an investment in our children, their future and our State. I support the motion.