PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH

Hon Jackie Jarvis, MLC

(Member for South West)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 25 May 2021

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 13 May on the following motion moved by Hon Pierre Yang —

> That the following address be presented to His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia —
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> > May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our most gracious sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

HON JACKIE JARVIS (South West) [8.10 pm]: I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land on which we meet tonight, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. I also acknowledge and recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of Noongar people across my south west electorate. I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

President, I congratulate you on your election as President of the forty-first Parliament.

I am incredibly proud to stand here today representing the communities of the South West Region where I have lived for almost 25 years. It is in this region that I married Matt and where our daughters Caitlin, Madison and Ashlee were born and raised. My journey to this place, however, started in the English town of Bletchley, north west of London, where my parents moved in the late 1960s with the dream of buying their first home. That was a big dream for my father who had grown up in relative poverty on the west coast of Ireland and my English mother raised in war-torn south London. Unfortunately, that dream of home ownership in the United Kingdom was short lived. My father, as an unskilled builder's labourer, was part of a casualised migrant workforce and his ability to support his family was impacted by severe winters, snow and even floods shutting down construction projects in that part of England. By 1969, my parents, facing repossession of their home, sought a better life for their two young children.

My migrant story is similar to many Western Australians, and perhaps similar to some in this place. I arrived in Fremantle in April 1970 as a toddler, with an older brother, my parents and not much more. My parents lived and breathed the idea of Australia as the Lucky Country, and worked hard to make their own luck. Dad spent decades helping to build this state. From grain receival bins across the wheatbelt to mine sites in the goldfields and the north west, there are few places in WA my dad has not worked. While dad was working away for weeks on end, my mum raised two children in suburban Wanneroo, working as a cleaner and a farmhand. My mum and dad both worked in physically demanding jobs into their 60s but I never once remember them complaining about the work they did or the life they had. When they retired to Busselton in their 70s, they had enough money to buy a modest house, a late model car and to take overseas holidays every few years. They considered themselves the luckiest people in the world for being welcomed to Western Australia. This is the sad bit, and then I am going to get better! Sadly, my mum died five years ago. This week is National Palliative Care Week, so it is an apt time to acknowledge the care given to her by the staff and volunteers at Busselton Hospice Care. These days my dad lives with dementia at a Busselton aged-care facility, where he receives support and care from the hardworking and dedicated staff. Although it breaks

my heart that my parents are not here to see me today, I am grateful to have my much-loved big brother, Terence, here. Growing up half a world away from any extended family, he is an important part of who I am. That's it; I am not going to cry after this.

Growing up in 1970s Wanneroo was very much like living in a country town. My mum would do cleaning jobs in the morning and then work on a local vegetable farm in the afternoons. My teenage years saw me working alongside her after school and on weekends, planting cauliflowers, packing celery and harvesting lettuce. The farm was owned by an Italian family who had arrived in WA as postwar migrants and we worked alongside Vietnamese refugees who had been engineers and doctors before fleeing their homeland. Swearing never to work in agriculture again, I started work as a bank trainee when I was 16 and built a career in the finance industry. I met my husband, Matt, along the way, and although we had both grown up in Perth, our banking careers led us to the beautiful south west. After stints in Manjimup, Bunbury, Busselton and then back to Perth, Matt was offered a bank manager job in Margaret River in 1996. Newly engaged, I joined Matt in Margaret River, but the international bank I was then working for in Perth did not have any country branches for me to transfer to. Instead, I took on the contract to be the cleaner of the bank where Matt was working. Twelve years after leaving school, I left a job as a home loan officer to become a cleaner like my mum. It was the first of many casual and seasonal jobs I had in Margaret River, reflecting the difficulty in finding full-time, permanent work in a regional town dominated by seasonal industries such as agriculture and tourism.

In 1997, Matt and I embarked on a crazy plan to plant a vineyard. We sold the home in Perth we had been paying off, substantially increased our mortgage and bought a 50-acre paddock that had been part of a cattle farm just north of Margaret River. Our daughter Caitlin was born in early 1998, and we pushed her along in a pram as we hand planted the first grapevines that spring. By July 1999, Caitlin had been joined by her sister, Madison, and then, in 2004, another sister, Ashlee. While our daughters were young, Matt continued to work full time and establish a commercial-sized vineyard, while I managed the farm administration and bookkeeping. By 2010, Matt was self-employed and I took the opportunity to return to off-farm employment. I went back to banking as a small business adviser. It was a job I came to loathe, as the pushy sales culture, the off-shoring of critical credit assessment jobs and the automatic increasing of overdrafts saw operators of failing businesses encouraged to take on more debt without consideration as to how they would repay it. Of course, it took a banking royal commission many years later to finally shine a light on the practices of Australian banks.

In 2012, I moved into the not-for-profit sector as the WA state manager of Harvest Trail Services. The service was started in the late 1990s, with the commonwealth government paying job service providers to place unemployed Australians in fruit picking and other seasonal horticultural work. The service was originally introduced around 25 years ago to appease those who declared that "Australians are too lazy to do this type of work" or "would prefer to remain on the dole". The reality is that much of the work on offer is in sparsely populated regional locations, is highly seasonal and can be unpredictable, as the weather dictates employment start dates, hours of work available on any given day and even periods of being stood down without pay at short notice. The widespread use of piece rates adds to the uncertainty for potential employees considering relocating for this type of work. By the time I joined in 2012, the Harvest Trail was being used almost exclusively by backpackers, as young people in Australia on working holiday visas were offered visa extensions to do seasonal farm work. I saw, however, that many agricultural businesses were relying on backpackers to do what should have been full-time, year-round jobs—as the mining boom and low unemployment rates saw farm businesses struggle to find local workers.

Reflecting on my time working alongside Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s, I designed and delivered a regional migrant employment program in 2013 thanks to a $50 000 grant from the WA Office of Multicultural Interests.

The pilot program identified employment opportunities in regional WA and I worked with refugee support organisations to find willing workers. There were a number of short-term and seasonal placements, but some became permanent jobs. When I revisited the farms 18 months later, there were still six young men working in full-time farming jobs across Western Australia. All of these young men had been receiving government benefits prior to joining the pilot program. A $50 000 grant from the WA government in 2013 had saved the commonwealth over $100 000 in welfare payments in the first year alone. As a result of the program, I was honoured to be named as WA's 2014 Rural Woman of the Year and as national runner-up that same year. What a great pilot program. Was it expanded? In a word, no. I simply ran out of available workers. At the time, both major political parties had "Stop the Boats" policies at a federal level—policies that saw many refugees allowed to stay in Australia, but refused the right to work. I remember a visit to a share house of six Afghan men. I found that only one had a work visa. Their individual work rights had been determined by what date they had arrived in Australia and which immigration policy has applied at that time. Although I appreciated and understood the reasoning behind these policy changes, and I reflect on the at-sea tragedies we saw at that time, I was still left dismayed by people wanting to work but unable to. We do, of course, have commonwealth-funded refugee settlement programs that bring new families into Western Australia but in my experience Western Australia's small regional population makes it difficult for smaller rural and regional communities to deliver or access the services needed for successful migration programs.

My parents arrived in Australia in 1970 as unskilled migrants. They made a valuable contribution to Australia, working in critical construction and food production jobs. My brother and I were in full-time work from the age of 16. We, too, have made worthwhile contributions to this country as taxpayers, small business owners, employers, and community members. Our adult children, the first-born Australians in our family, carry on the migrant work ethic of their grandparents, all working in professional careers or trades. Despite this, a family like mine would not have been able to migrate to Australia in later decades. Since the 1980s, Australia's immigration policies have moved towards skilled migration on the basis that this would lead to better labour market outcomes and see new migrants able to gain employment and achieve economic independence sooner. Although all this is true, I am concerned that an increasing focus on skilled migration over many decades has created a two-tiered migration system, with skilled migrants afforded some level of industrial relations protection that comes from being part of a sanctioned migration program, and a more vulnerable cohort of unskilled or low-skilled workers who are in Australia as backpackers or international students.

In theory, all workers in Australia are protected by industrial relations law, but in practice people on working holiday and student visas are often more vulnerable to underpayment or exploitation. Backpackers and international students have become the mainstay of seasonal agricultural, hospitality and tourism jobs in the regions, and of gig economy workers in our cities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the flaw in building an economy that relies too heavily on having a revolving pool of international workers on short-term visas.

We have an amazing education system in Western Australia, with pathways to training, trades and tertiary education. I am proud to be part of a re-elected McGowan government that has a jobs plan and a commitment to diversify WA's economy. Local companies and workers will be prioritised when it comes to state government infrastructure and services, and the WA Buy Local policy will prioritise regional businesses like those in my electorate.

One of the things I love most about the south west is the willingness of local businesses to take on young local workers. All of my daughters and most of their friends worked part time while still at school for various cafes and tourism businesses, but to ensure that regional employers can utilise Western Australia's most important resource—our people—we need to break down the conventional wisdom that all roads lead to Perth for country kids. Only around half of the

year 12 students who graduate in Western Australia every year have chosen a university entrance pathway. The other half have completed vocational certificate and general education courses. No matter what pathway these school leavers are on, we need to engage, encourage and provide opportunities for more young people to take up trade apprenticeships, skills-based traineeships and graduate roles in the south west, and, indeed, across all our regions. We need employers to recognise that not all young people want to leave their region. I mean, why would anyone want to leave the south west?

Despite the work ethic of the young people I see every day, I have been told many times over the years that young Australians do not want to work in particular industries. A friend recently told me about her father, an older broadacre farmer who often cited the unwillingness of young Australians to work in agriculture. For many years he would recruit workers from New Zealand for the annual grain harvest, citing their skill and work ethic. When this farmer went on a trip to New Zealand and spoke to local farmers, he was amazed to hear his New Zealand hosts say that they only ever employed Australians for the New Zealand harvest because the local New Zealanders were just too lazy to do farming work! It is all about perspective.

I reflect now on my journey into politics. My parents were Labor voters and members of a union, but not actively involved in these organisations. As a young woman, I greatly admired our local member of Parliament, Jackie Watkins, the member for Joondalup and then Wanneroo. Despite sharing a name and a common background as an English migrant, it never occurred to me that I, too, could be a member of Parliament. My parents had arrived in Australia under an assisted passage scheme, or, to use the common vernacular, as ten-pound Poms. Although my mum was English, my dad was born in Ireland, but before the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, so he was classified as a British subject. As a result, both my parents could vote in Australian elections from the day they arrived. In 1984, the law changed and only Australian citizens could be enrolled to vote, but an exception was made for British subjects already on the electoral roll. I did not turn 18 years of age until 1986, and although we had lived in Australia since 1970, we had not become Australian citizens because my father refused to swear allegiance to an English monarch. Although the Australian and British governments considered my dad a British subject, he certainly did not.

I had been a permanent resident of Australia since I was 18 months old. I was born in England and held a British passport, but I would still need to swear allegiance to the Queen to become an Australian citizen. With mum and dad's blessing, I became an Australian citizen in 1989 and enrolled to vote immediately. In February 1993, I went to a polling booth in Como to vote in the WA state election, only to find that no Labor candidate was running in the South Perth electorate. I was disappointed, after all my efforts to enrol to vote, that in the place where I lived, my Labor vote did not seem to count for anything. Just five weeks later, I was back at that polling booth to vote in the 1993 federal election. This time I had the opportunity to vote for my local Labor member of Parliament, Hon Kim Beazley, member for Swan, a man whom I met for the first time yesterday, now as His Excellency the Governor of Western Australia. That election returned the Keating Labor government, despite polls predicting it would lose. I still vividly remember Keating's "True Believers" speech later that night and was proud to know I had played my part. My parents became Australian citizens in 1994 when the Keating government replaced the oath to the Queen with a pledge of commitment to Australia.

My move to the south west in 1996 meant that I was seemingly destined to vote in safe conservative-held seats at every election. I still cannot remember the exact reason why, but in 2005 I decided to join the local branch of the Labor Party. I had three young children, and I suspect I simply wanted to get out of the house! I was welcomed to the Vasse branch by local Labor stalwarts Ross Bromell and Rod Clark, and South West MLC Hon Adele Farina. There was also an entertaining collective of much older gentlemen who called each other comrade and told wonderful stories from their decades of involvement in the Labor Party. Within weeks,

I was asked to be the vice-president of the branch, and I declined, only to be told that I had to be! The Labor Party had a very clear affirmative action policy that meant, as one of the few female members of the branch, and from memory the only one to attend the annual general meeting, I needed to take on an executive role in the branch. I was certainly capable of taking on the role, but as a mother of three young children and having been out of a professional work environment for a number of years, I doubt that I would have had the confidence to do so unless pushed. At the time, I was unsure how I felt about gender quotas, but as I looked around the Labor caucus room today, I am indeed a true believer in Labor's affirmative action policies.

In 2010, I was the Labor candidate for the federal seat of Forrest. I was never expected to win, but remembering the 1993 state election in which there was no Labor candidate, I was determined to work hard for local voters. Hon Adele Farina was my equally hardworking campaign manager and WA Labor's then assistant state secretary, Cassie Roe, now member for Belmont, made regular trips south to assist. Adele and Cassie taught me different but equally valuable lessons in political campaigning.

My children were still in primary school at the time, and I remember telling them that although I did not win the election, I did come second. I decided that although I enjoyed input into public policy formation, I was not destined to be a politician. I was a Labor Party supporter but not interested in leaving the Margaret River region and, clearly, the state electorates of Warren–Blackwood and Vasse could never be winnable seats for Labor! Instead, I got a career in public policy. I joined the public sector and even had a stint in a minister's office. I made lifelong friends who taught me what it means to be a public policy professional and who gave me a small insight into how this place works.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan also taught me much, and although I doubt that I will ever be able to match her intelligence or her intensity, I am so proud to have her as a colleague in this place. I am also thrilled to be joining her and Hon Dr Sally Talbot in representing the south west. To have not one but two experienced and dedicated members by my side is more than I could have hoped for.

I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge retiring MLC Hon Adele Farina, who served the South West Region for over 20 years. Her recent valedictory speech outlined a fraction of the things that she achieved in the region, and I want to thank her for her service.

Over the last couple of years, I returned to grassroots policy work, first, as the CEO of WA's Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Network and then back to the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. When the opportunity arose late last year to be a candidate in the 2021 election, I did not expect to be elected. But, again, I made a commitment to work hard and give the voters of the South West Region a viable alternative to the status quo. All candidates in the South West Region worked incredibly hard, but I had agreed that I would focus on the electorates of Vasse and Warren–Blackwood. For the record, I live in the electorate of Vasse but within about two kilometres of the electorate of Warren–Blackwood. I am pretty well smack bang in the middle of them.

I could not be prouder of the campaign that we ran in those electorates. Chris Hossen was an outstanding candidate for Vasse. He ran an intense campaign, putting his life and career on hold to contest the seat. Chris, together with his parents, Steve and Barb Hossen, were able to rally dozens of volunteers. That is no easy task in an electorate that has never been held by the Labor Party—and when I say "never", I mean since WA's first election in 1890. Their hard work ensured early polling centres in Busselton and Dunsborough had Labor representatives present every day for the two and a half weeks of pre-polling for not only local voters, but also the many absentee voters holidaying down south. Although a swing of 10 per cent would have seen a Labor victory in many seats, it was not enough to get Chris over the line. I want to thank and acknowledge him and the team of volunteers in Vasse for this amazing effort.

Then there is the seat of Warren–Blackwood. Jane Kelsbie proved to be another outstanding candidate. We had a two-term strategy and never in our wildest dreams did we think WA Labor would win in 2021. Jane's hard work and natural affinity for grassroots campaigning paid off, resulting in her being just 22 votes behind the sitting member after counting of first preference votes and then winning the seat by 637 votes after the distribution of preferences. I echo Jane's words in her recent first speech in acknowledging and thanking the hardworking volunteers across the Warren–Blackwood electorate.

Thank you to Ellie Whiteaker from the WA Labor Party office and the campaign team at WA Labor for their support and guidance. Special thanks to WA Labor Party state president, Carolyn Smith, for her faith in me.

I will end tonight with the most important acknowledgements. My husband, Matt, worked hard to build a vision of the future he wanted for our family. He worked hard to become a successful farmer and the winemaker he is today. I am grateful to have been part of building that vision. We shared parenting duties equally over the years, swapping primary carer roles as we needed to. I am grateful to be able to share my career successes with him. Our three daughters are, of course, our greatest achievement—Caitlin, Madison and Ashlee. Thank you for your help on polling day, for not being too embarrassed by me and for just being wonderful human beings.

I close tonight by thanking all of you, my new colleagues—some are old friends and some are new friends. I also want to acknowledge the newly elected members of the south west who have come from a very diverse background. I look forward to working with you all.

President, thank you.

[Applause.]