



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Peter Foster, MLC**  
**(Member for Mining and Pastoral)**

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday, 26 May 2021

*Reprinted from Hansard*

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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

Resumed from 25 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 —

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 PETER FOSTER (Mining and Pastoral)** [3.10 pm]: Thank you, President. Let me first offer my congratulations on your election as President of this place. I thank you for your warm welcome, support and encouragement and I very much look forward to working with and learning from you as I settle into this place.

Could I also congratulate the Chair of Committees, Hon Martin Aldridge, on his election; I look forward to working with him in my capacity as a deputy chair.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which we stand today, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge First Nation people's continuing connection to land, sea and community. I stand before you all extremely humbled and somewhat nervous, for it is indeed a great honour and a privilege to have been elected as a member to this place, as part of the re-elected McGowan Labor government, to represent the Mining and Pastoral Region, a place I have called home for the past 13 years. Western Australia is a great state and I am immensely proud and very lucky to call it my home. It is home to ancient culture, dramatic landscapes, burgeoning industries and many great communities. And, as the world is still in the grips of the global pandemic, it is also one of the safest places to be, thanks to the leadership of the McGowan government.

I was born six days before Christmas in the very late 1970s in a town called Kurri Kurri in New South Wales. Kurri Kurri is situated in the Hunter Valley, in the coalfields, and was founded to support the nearby collieries. The first miners to the region lived in makeshift accommodation near the collieries and were often away from their families for extended periods. The miners' unions, through local delegates, flagged a need for a town to reunite the families. Their campaign was successful and, soon after, the town was surveyed and formally gazetted in October 1902. The name of the town, Kurri Kurri, comes from the local Wanaruah people, the traditional owners of the area, and means "the very first" or "the beginning". Kurri Kurri was a planned town and some believe it to be one of the first planned towns in New South Wales. I note this fact because where I live now, Tom Price, in the Pilbara, is also a planned town, established by Hamersley Iron in agreement with the state government in the late 1960s to house miners, and their families, who were working nearby at the Mount Tom Price mine site.

Some of my great-great-grandparents were early settlers in the town of Kurri Kurri. Like many of their generation, they boarded ships and embarked on a journey of a lifetime from the United Kingdom to find better-paying jobs and pursue the promise of a healthier and prosperous

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new future in another part of the Commonwealth. Not all my ancestors were migrants from the United Kingdom. I also have migrant connections to Germany and France through my great-grandparents. One of my ancestors, Richard Foster, was born in Manchester in 1789 and, as a convict, was transported on the ship *Coromandel* in 1819 to Australia.

I was born in Kurri Kurri Hospital, another legacy of the miners' unions. Delegates from nearby collieries had got together to discuss the urgent need for a hospital in town due to accidents that regularly occurred at nearby pits and the difficulty of moving those patients for treatment. It was decided that a building fund levy be imposed and, a few years later, with a government grant, Kurri Kurri Hospital was built. It opened in 1910 and still stands to this very day. The hospital has a special place in the hearts of Kurri Kurri locals, myself included, and it was because of this hospital that I got my first experience in activism. In the early 1990s, the Greiner government was trying to close our hospital and I joined with hundreds of protesters in July 1991 to march down Lang Street. Brandishing placards and chanting, we made our way to Rotary Park for the rally, where inspiring speeches were shared. I was only 11 years of age at the time. Due to the town's efforts, our hospital was saved. Hospitals are important to regional communities, and I want to acknowledge the work of the McGowan government in supporting our regional hospitals, especially during the global pandemic, right across the Mining and Pastoral Region. Construction of the nearby Newman Hospital continues. Planning is underway for a new hospital in Tom Price and a new health service in Meekatharra. The government is also investing in country paramedics, rolling out the COVID vaccine, and supporting jobs, health delivery and opportunity in our regions.

I am the eldest of six, with three brothers and two sisters. I feel very lucky to have grown up in such a big and busy household, juggling responsibilities and schooling. Being the eldest, I was expected to step up and I had my fair share of chores around the home. Dad worked five and a half days a week as a tyre fitter and later as an assistant manager to support us all. Mum stayed at home with us children, organising the household and volunteering at school at times in the canteen. Money was tight but we never went without, and I enjoyed our family holidays to Port Macquarie and Sunshine with my grandma and grandad. We were happy and healthy, and we had each other. I am proud to be the son of a working-class family. Both my parents come from large families as well, and so I was incredibly lucky, as a child, to visit great-grandparents, grandparents, uncles and aunties, and many cousins. There was always a christening or a party being held, and us cousins would spend hours chasing and teasing one another. There was always a backyard cricket match, which I, not the very sporty type, would always try to avoid.

Family is very important to me. It is through family that we learn our values, how to treat others and how to view ourselves and those around us, and discover our purpose in life. I acknowledge my mum and my dad, who are here today. I also acknowledge Grandma Foster and Nana and Pop Marion, all who could unfortunately not be here due to ill health, but all of whom I love very much and from whom I learnt my values and get my strength. My parents tell me that, as a child, I was not shy; I was noisy, loud and always competed with others to be the centre of attention at parties, including at my mother's twenty-first birthday party, where I attempted to steal the show.

Growing up with my mother taught me that we should treat each other with respect and that everyone should be treated both equally and fairly. This was reinforced during the marriage equality debate. As someone who has happily been in a same-sex relationship for 18 years, the debate and subsequent plebiscite was of great importance to me. Listening to political commentators and leaders talk down my relationship as simply a lifestyle choice and saying that marriage equality contrasted deeply with their personal religious views, or worse comments, took its emotional toll on me at times. So, as children do, I would call my mother to vent. My mother would remind me that it does not matter who you love, she loves all her children equally and their choice of partners equally, and that everyone should always treat everyone equally, including in marriage and in law.

Equality and fairness are, and will be, a priority for me in this place. Growing up with my father taught me that we should always stop and help others and that we should always look out for each other, because one day we may very well need someone to stop and help us when in need. Often, when we were kids, dad would stop and help a fellow driver who had broken down on the side of the road, sometimes to change a tyre, sometimes to look under the hood or sometimes to give friendly advice. I have strong memories of dad always being busy volunteering for sporting groups or helping family and neighbours in need, in addition to working long hours at the tyre shop. Once as a teenager, when I was driving home from a night out on the town with friends, my car broke down. I was in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, with no mobile phone reception; I was stuck. Fortunately, after a short period of time, a vehicle stopped and the driver offered me a lift home. Someone had stopped to help me. This episode reinforced to me my dad's words, and it is fair to say that my father's examples have also shaped me into the person that I have become. We have an obligation to each other, especially family. We are all in this together and we should never leave anyone behind. I believe this is why the core values of the Labor Party have always resonated with me: the light on the hill. As Chifley said of Labor in 1949 —

... a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people. We have a great objective—the light on the hill—which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. If it were not for that, the Labor movement would not be worth fighting for.

This is why I would later join the union and the Labor Party. My strong Labor values of working together, helping others and leaving no-one behind were passed on to me by family and also my hometown. As a child I attended Kurri Kurri Public School—dare I add, another legacy of the miners' unions—and later Kurri Kurri High School where I was awarded dux. My schooling years were fascinating yet challenging. I was a bright child; however, I was bullied. My voice sounded different. I liked to study and I preferred to have my head in a book rather than kicking a ball around in the playground. This made me a target amongst my peers. Most of my schooling days were spent looking over my shoulder, forever vigilant. Due to this, I developed anxiety, which I have learnt to live with daily ever since. At school, I would spend lunch times hiding in the library and I would change the route I walked home from school each day to avoid the bullies. I share this with members not to elicit sympathy, but to highlight that programs that support safer schools and inclusive education are so important to children who are different.

I know that I will speak out in this place to support our children to be safe, especially those who question their identity. I acknowledge our brave colleagues in both this place and in the other place who have spoken up about their personal mental health journeys. Everyone's journey is different and we should always check in with each other, ask if they are okay and lend a listening ear. I join with my colleagues in acknowledging the investments made by the McGowan government into mental health initiatives across our regions, including the recent announcement of an additional \$14.5 million in funding agreements and contract extensions to over 150 eligible community and mental health services.

At the end of high school, I came out to my friends, then to my mum and my dad and then to my extended family. I was one of the lucky ones, with lots of love and support to guide me forward on every adventure. Following high school, I attended the University of Newcastle, where I obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in classics and politics. I really enjoyed my time at university. It encouraged me to develop independent thoughts, expand my horizons and encourage debate, and it challenged me to look at the world differently. Whilst studying, I worked a range of retail jobs on a casual basis, including in the areas of fast food, shoes and menswear. I was not in a retail union at the time, but looking back perhaps I should have been. Inconsistent hours, varying conditions and underpayments were commonplace. Management

would always remind us: “You’re lucky to have a job, so don’t complain and don’t ask questions.” Studying full-time and working part-time I relied on the income of these part-time jobs to get by, especially the penalty rates, and whilst I was grateful to be employed and be paid, I knew nothing about my rights at work or even what award I was paid under. This contributed to an already heightened level of stress whilst studying. I want to acknowledge the work of our Australian union movement in highlighting the importance of and fighting to protect penalty rates. This makes a huge difference to the take-home pay of the lowest paid workers in Australia, who are largely made up of women and younger workers.

Following university, my first full-time job was working in a call centre for Qantas. Thankfully, the pay was much better. After this I joined the public service, which is where I have continued to work for almost twenty years before my election to this place. I am and will always be proud to be a public servant. My first role was with Centrelink taking calls in a call centre before I pursued an opportunity to work in Maroubra. Working for Centrelink was intense work most days but also extremely rewarding. My role was to interview new claimants and assess their claims. I was dealing with people who were often at their lowest moment in life and struggling to make ends meet for a variety of reasons, including job loss, addiction or fleeing family violence. I took pride in my work and often worked back late. I believe that this is where my passion for serving the community grew as I could see myself trying to make a difference. I ended up working for Centrelink for five years and held a variety of roles. This was when I joined my first union: the Community and Public Sector Union. I want to acknowledge its work in standing up to the staffing cuts of successive coalition governments. Following my time at Centrelink, I worked for the Child Support Agency as a financial investigator and then for Medicare as a branch manager.

After working in Sydney for a few years, I met my partner, Sam, and followed him to Wollongong. After moving in together, we purchased our first home. We were paying off the mortgage and credit cards and with endless cost-of-living pressures, money was tight. Like my ancestors before me, and with the encouragement from family, we packed up our possessions and travelled west to find a better life. When we first arrived in the west, my first memory was of the Pilbara heat, which I would later learn to love. I remember stepping off the plane at Paraburdoo and thinking that I had inadvertently stepped into a blast furnace; it was very warm 45 degrees! As we drove into Tom Price, I was taken aback by the beauty of the place. It is truly an oasis in the desert.

North west mining towns are transient and many people are reluctant to get involved in the community. Many come with five-year plans to maybe start a family, pick up a few skills, make some money and then leave again. At first we were no different, but as the months passed and after many conversations with locals, my love for the Tom Price community grew and so did my desire to make the town much better. Working in customer service for the Department of Transport, I had daily conversations with clients about local issues—concerns about the availability of childcare, the unsealed road to Karratha, the ageing hospital and outdated sporting and community facilities that were no longer fit for purpose.

Growing increasingly frustrated with the shire, I decided to challenge myself by running for council in 2009. On the first occasion I was unsuccessful. Undeterred and knowing that I could make the community better, I became more involved. I joined the Tom Price Youth Support Association, Tom Price Tidy Towns and the Nameless Jarndunmunha Festival committee. I volunteered much of my spare time each week. Volunteers are so important in our regional towns and the Mining and Pastoral Region is no different. Volunteers run our sporting and community groups and countless fundraisers, giving many hours of personal time. Through volunteering, I learnt much about myself and made many new friends, which helped me to combat my anxiety. National Volunteer Week was celebrated recently. It is important for all of us to recognise and thank volunteers for the vital role they play in our communities, such as

those volunteers in the State Emergency Service and St John Ambulance who put in long hours, working under often exceedingly difficult circumstances to save lives. I want make special mention of the Tom Price State Emergency Service, Tom Price St John Ambulance and the Tom Price Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, which do an amazing job across inland Pilbara from gorge rescues to land searches to responding to car crashes and fighting the many bushfires caused by lightning strikes during the wet season.

In early 2011, I joined with Councillor Cecilia Fernandez to run a petition to bring attention to sealing the remainder of the road between Tom Price and Karratha. This was a priority for us locals, many of whom travel to Karratha regularly to access medical services, play sporting games or go shopping. At the time, it was not a priority of the local and state governments and we strongly believed it needed to be. In just two short days, we had gathered almost 1 000 signatures, which we gave to former member for Pilbara Tom Stephens to lodge on our behalf in state Parliament. I was determined to champion change in our town.

In late 2011, I ran for council for the second time and this time I was successful, securing more than 50 per cent of the primary vote amongst three candidates. I had the privilege of serving as an elected member with the Shire of Ashburton for nine and a half years, being re-elected twice, in 2015 and 2019. As a councillor with the Shire of Ashburton, I chaired various committees, including the audit and risk committee, and I represented the region on the Pilbara Regional Council, the Western Australian Local Government Association state council and numerous regional and intrastate forums. I am incredibly grateful for the experience of serving within local government. It gave me a platform to expand my public speaking, negotiating and debating skills, and I met and engaged with many stakeholders. I enjoyed presiding over the many Australian citizenship ceremonies and welcoming new residents to town.

We must have strong local governments to ensure the success and longevity of our regional towns. Local governments do so much more than rates, rubbish and roads; they work to fill the gaps by providing essential services including health, early years and education, environmental, and welfare to name a few. I want to acknowledge the work done by the previous Minister for Local Government, David Templeman, in strengthening the sector and the measures he took to reform the Local Government Act 1995. I look forward to working with the new Minister for Local Government, John Carey, to share my experiences to help strengthen the sector further.

Recently in an interview I was asked what was my biggest achievement on council. I said that it was staying true to my commitment of being the community's strong voice; always listening and responding to concerns; encouraging council to invest in community facilities, including the new Tom Price childcare centre, which will bring relief for families; and championing major projects to the state government, such as the Manuwarra Red Dog Highway and the Tom Price Hospital redevelopment. I would like to thank and acknowledge the McGowan government and Rita Saffioti, the Minister for Transport, for their work on the further sealing of the Manuwarra Red Dog Highway. This project means so much to both the Shire of Ashburton and the City of Karratha, supporting local jobs, helping grow tourism and businesses and improving accessibility to inland Pilbara towns.

I also served on two independent school boards as chair and can attest that we have some great schools in inland Pilbara, with committed principals and teaching and support staff, as well as an engaged school community supported by local government and the resources industry.

I was sad to resign from local government earlier this year, but I know that I will continue to listen and be a strong voice for the Ashburton community in this place.

Earlier this year I also resigned from my job as a child protection case support officer with the Department of Communities, a role I held for three years. Working with families and supporting case managers was extremely rewarding and I want to acknowledge my former colleagues across the Pilbara district, who often work in challenging circumstances to keep

children safe. To strengthen families and protect children, we need a robust child protection system that supports both families and carers, including our valued grandparents, as well as the staff who administer the system. I look forward to working with the Department of Communities and Minister Simone McGurk to also share my experiences to help strengthen the sector.

The Mining and Pastoral Region is vast, stretching over 2 201 000 square kilometres. It extends from the goldfields and Kalgoorlie in the south to the Murchison, the Gascoyne and Carnarvon in the west, and to the north to the Pilbara, Broome and Derby, and Kununurra in the Kimberley, and more than 150 000 people call it home. There are 27 local government areas within the electorate, including the Shire of East Pilbara, which is the largest local government area in Australia. I look forward to engaging with every local government and understanding their aspirations and concerns.

The Mining and Pastoral Region is home to robust resource industries, which drive the economy of our state, including oil, gas, iron ore and gold. With over 19 000 local people employed in the mining industry, it is our region's largest employer. Jobs are important to our region with many others employed in construction, tourism and accommodation services, manufacturing, transport and farming. Jobs have been a focus of the McGowan government. As part of WA Labor's re-election campaign, the Premier made WA jobs a key priority. This resonated strongly in my region, with a commitment to work with resource companies to reduce the reliance on interstate fly-in fly-out workers, build infrastructure using local workers and local content, freeze TAFE fees to upskill WA workers, and invest in manufacturing.

The Mining and Pastoral Region is home to much beauty and tradition including Kalbarri National Park, Karijini National Park, Murujuga National Park and the Dampier Peninsula to name a few.

The Mining and Pastoral Region has its fair share of challenges: attracting workers for agriculture, construction and tourism, land availability to address housing and business demands, and tackling antisocial behaviour and family violence in our communities.

Our First Nations people have been living in the Mining and Pastoral Region for many thousands of years and we must respect their continuing connection to country and the cultural significance of country and take the time to listen to their stories, their wisdom and their aspirations. First Nations should always be consulted on what happens on country and this I wholeheartedly support.

I want to acknowledge and thank the voters of the Mining and Pastoral Region for the opportunity to serve in this place and be their representative, including those who told me at the polling place that they were voting Labor for the first time. Thank you to the leadership of the McGowan government of the fortieth Parliament for keeping our state safe during the pandemic, with a strong focus on WA jobs.

Thank you to the WA Labor Party, in particular its state secretary, Tim Picton, and assistant state secretary, Ellie Whiteaker, for running our strong campaign. Thank you to the Carnarvon, Karratha, Newman, South Hedland, and Broome Labor branches that supported my nomination and volunteered in our campaigns. Thank you also to Rainbow Labor for your encouragement and support over the years. As one of only a few LGBTQI parliamentarians, I know that this brings additional responsibilities and I hope to do you proud.

Thank you to the Australian metal workers' union, which welcomed me some years ago with a shared vision of creating good paying jobs and opportunity for all. Manufacturing jobs are vitally important for our state's future and supporting Australian made. Thank you to state secretary, Steve McCartney, and organisers Alex Cassie and Renee Portland for your wise words and counsel.

I thank members of this place for their support, encouragement and guidance, including Hon Stephen Dawson and Hon Kyle McGinn, who I will have the privilege of working with in representing the Mining and Pastoral Region, along with Hon Rosie Sahanna. Thank you to our

lower house candidates—Divina D’Anna, the member for Kimberley; Kevin Michel, the member for Pilbara; Cherie Sibosado, our candidate in North West Central; and Ali Kent, the member for Kalgoorlie—for your strong and outstanding campaigns. I had the privilege of working closely with both Cherie Sibosado and the member for Pilbara during their campaigns and I thank them both for the opportunity to be involved, including making phone calls and doorknocking to listen to and understand some of the major challenges faced in our region.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the people in the towns of Tom Price, Paraburdoo, Pannawonica and Onslow, who also supported me on council and in our campaigns. I would like to thank my dear friends Torin Peel, Michelle Lewis, Kirra and Chris Hannon, Deb and Nudge Walker, Audra and Jason Smith, Mel Farmer, Amanda Yeomans, and Jarred and Kiri Nicholson for everything that they did to support the campaigns, as well as the personal encouragements that they gave me every single day. Thank you to my mum and my dad for their love, wise words and encouragement, for being positive role models, and for travelling from Sydney to Perth—their first ever plane flight—to support me here this week. I love you both.

Lastly, and certainly not least, to our son, Roman, and my partner, Sam, for putting up with my endless conversations about politics, for supporting me when I was away on the road campaigning or down here in Perth, helping me on polling places, helping me letterbox streets, and helping me put up corflutes, but, most importantly, for being there for me when I needed you. Sam, thank you for always believing in me.

The McGowan government has a strong mandate, following the convincing state election result, to govern Western Australia, and I am enormously proud to be a part of it, to represent the Mining and Pastoral Region, and to be a voice for the inland Pilbara, which I proudly call home. I am looking forward to the work ahead over the next four years, working towards fairness and equality, and advocating to make our regional communities even stronger, whether it be building tourism or industry, supporting job creation, or improving community amenity. I will always stay true to my Labor values. Thank you.

[Applause.]