



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Ayor Makur Chuot, MLC
(Member for North Metropolitan)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Thursday, 3 June 2021

Reprinted from Hansard

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 2 June 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 AYOR MAKUR CHUOT (North Metropolitan) [12.30 pm]: Thank you, President.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners on the land on which we meet, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, their elders past and present. I am grateful and proud to call Australia my home, having come from another country to establish my life here in 2005. Having been born in Africa, I recognise the impacts of colonisation on people's welfare. I acknowledge all the hard work of the many Aboriginal elders, leaders and activists who have worked for reconciliation in this country and their advocacy to have Aboriginal voices heard, understood, recognised and respected.

I also appreciate living in a country of peace, where the laws, safety and government structure made living in Australia sought after for myself and my family, and a part of Australian history is its diverse migrant and British commonwealth heritage. I want to thank this country for giving me and my family a chance to come here and the honour of me becoming a member of Parliament in Western Australia.

I congratulate you, President, on your appointment. Thank you for the welcome and encouragement you have shown me as a new member of Parliament. It was great to hear in your acceptance speech your intention to make Parliament understandable for the new members. As I am a hard worker and a quick learner, I know that you will assist me in understanding my new role in the Legislative Council, representing the people of the North Metropolitan Region.

The North Metropolitan Region stretches from the electorates of Butler, across to Wanneroo, down to Perth and across to Cottesloe. According to the 2016 census, there are a greater number of overseas born residents in the region, with the dominant migrant group being English born. Impressively, over 70 per cent of the North Metro Region reported performing voluntary work, compared with some 18 per cent over the whole of Perth. This is a connection for me given my volunteer work with young women. I am thankful and I acknowledge the people of North Metro Region for placing their trust in me.

I congratulate all members on your election or re-election to this place. I thank the Leader of the House, Hon Sue Ellery, for her warm welcome and understanding of the challenges that I face in learning this new role, in addition to the other great new job I have as a mum. I look forward to us working together with the President to make positive changes so that I can perform both my roles in this chamber, as a mother, nourishing and caring for my infant son; and as a member of Parliament, fulfilling my promise to the people of Western Australia to serve them well.

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I am very excited to be part of the most successful government in WA history and joining the team of the most popular Premier ever. I am grateful for the support given to me by the entire Labor team.

I considered naming my son after the Premier, but that did not fit with the South Sudanese tradition of giving him his grandad's name. I expect that the newspapers in future years will show that Mark is the most popular boys name of new babies in WA. A hot tip from me is that South Sudanese babies are also often given a Christian name—I was baptised as Sarah—so you never know; it still is possible.

I would like to thank my North Metro Region colleagues Hon Martin Pritchard, Hon Pierre Yang and Hon Dan Caddy, who have all been a great support to me before and since my election. A special thank you goes to Hon Pierre Yang for taking his time to answer my questions and continuing his support after the election. I am settling in well today because of people like brother Pierre. Thank you. Thanks to Hon Alannah MacTiernan, the outgoing MLC for North Metro Region. The people of the south west will be honoured to have her represent them as I know the residents of the North Metro Region were. Alannah is a great role model, is hardworking but still finds time to help people, such as myself. Thanks to the parliamentary staff for being so welcoming, particularly Rebecca Burton in helping me care for my newborn baby and include my family in this historic occasion of being the first woman of African heritage elected to the Legislative Council in WA.

This is a great honour and I thank the South Sudanese community for their support in the lead-up to the election. In particular, Akuot Achiek has been a very special person to me, and it is with pride that I am the first Australian of Southern Sudanese heritage elected in any Parliament in Australia.

Recently, the Leader of the House celebrated 20 years since being elected. That had me thinking: 20 years ago I was 12 years of age and had been living in a refugee camp since 1997. I was born in a refugee camp in Payindo, Ethiopia, but because I was not a citizen of Ethiopia, my refugee papers recorded the birthplace as South Sudan. My parents returned to South Sudan when I was two, but the 22-year conflict for independence saw us flee to Kakuma after my father was killed in the war. The Kakuma refugee camp sits in Kenya. As it was already in a poor area of the country, it was a struggle for survival in the camp, but our basic needs were met through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I believe in the importance of organisations such as the UNHCR in guaranteeing that the human rights of people throughout the world are respected and should be supported by our governments.

My memory of the camp was as a home, but it was basic. We had all the things to survive, and we appreciated our safety the most. It was not until I came to Australia, arriving at Perth Airport sharing a carry-on bag with my sister holding all our belongings, that we could see the difficulties and hardship that we had at the camp. My early life before Australia was precious due to our rich culture and the sense of belonging to the community and surrounding families. I think most of my humble beginnings started from the community that I was born in, and considering all the challenges we faced, everyone had a smile on their faces.

As the eldest girl in my family, my responsibility was to stay home and look after my siblings. My older brothers were sent to boarding school. My mother had a small business, a restaurant, so the responsibility for cooking, caring and helping in the restaurant fell to me. My mum's business meant that we had some independence from UNHCR food rationing. As a South Sudanese girl there was an expectation that I was born to marry and have children, so I had very little education. I am grateful to my mother for her commitment of bringing me to Australia where I could get an education, establish my life and thrive to make choices about how I want to live. I understand that access to education is a powerful pathway for a successful and fulfilling life and I am proud that the WA Labor government is committed to quality public education.

Living in the camp the only way for us to come to Australia was to have a sponsor for our visas. Thankfully, our uncle John Mayor Machar started the process and filled in the forms. Then, through another contact in WA, uncle Eli Magok Manyol supported us to finalise our visa, then connected us with another contact who gave us a no-interest loan to pay for the travel expenses to Australia. I would also like thank aunty Aki Noyoo who worked for the Catholic Migrant and Centrecare, who assisted my mother to understand and settle down in Perth in 2005.

I want to note and thank many people who helped me come to Australia and settle in here. I thank Uncle John Mayor Machar, Eli Mango, Brother Geoff, Pastor Rex, Pastor Paul and Lindsay Bunn. Special thanks to Edmund Rice Centre and Christina Ward—Mamma Chris, my Australian mum—who always looked out for us, for me and my family, always wanted the best for us and ensured that we had as much opportunity as possible to succeed in our new country.

When I came to Perth, I did not speak much English. My brothers were speaking for us initially. My first impression when I landed in Australia was that these people did not speak through their mouths but their nose, so this funny English was going to be more difficult than I thought! Another cultural shock was the relationship with our neighbours. In Africa, when you move into a new neighbourhood, the neighbours will immediately come and greet you and make you feel welcome. So, when we moved to our first home in Alexander Heights, we felt like the neighbours mistrusted us because they did not greet us in an African way. Now I know that it is a cultural thing and in Australia people do not intrude on others' privacy; they wait until people have settled in before introducing themselves. I also felt that other kids, Australian kids, were reluctant to talk to us and did not include us in their activities. It felt odd, and at first we thought their actions were because we were African and based on their assumptions, but as time went on, I realised that there is a lack of cultural awareness.

I now have many friends from all different backgrounds and know that acceptance of cultural difference recognises that we all want to succeed and live a happy and healthy life. I know from my sister who lives in Melbourne, many people exploit fear to gain popularity, and she experienced unkindness. Once she was refused service in a restaurant because of her South Sudanese heritage. My sister is an amazing AFL woman footballer. She is a role model for many in our community and works in leadership programs with young people. The negative comments that are made about South Sudanese people are unfair. Many of the Australians from South Sudan have proved our worth through our work, studies and businesses.

Here in Western Australia, the work of the WA police with the African community has been very important and good relationships have been set up with the leaders and youth. Pretty much at most African community events we will see Inspector Don Emanuel-Smith and other WA Police Force members such as Umile Gwakuba. They are making the WA police accessible and their knowledge is helpful in assisting our community to thrive. Unfortunately, this cultural awareness is not across all areas of policing. However, I believe that the Western Australian government and Minister for Police, Hon Paul Papalia, are committed to increasing diversity and the training that will give our community further confidence in our police. Although I champion the strength of the South Sudanese community, it is not without knowing that we could do better to develop our young people, encourage and give respect to our women.

I realise that one of my roles will be to bring a greater understanding of inclusion into Parliament and government. Understanding the importance of diversity in our community is important so that we can enjoy the strength that each cultural heritage offers for a thriving future. I can do this as best I can, knowing and respecting who I am as not only a role model, but also somebody who is thoughtful and values inclusion in how we meet these challenges. Although I came to Australia as a refugee, I am now a citizen and I define myself as an Australian with a refugee background. Although it is significant, a refugee past does not define who we are as Australians; we work to thrive and contribute like so many Australians—those born here and those who came here from other countries and now call Australia their home.

I acknowledge the WA government for its vision for a society —

... where everyone has a strong sense of belonging, can participate fully and can achieve their goals

My focus over the next four years will include upholding the government's commitment to the multicultural framework and this vision. As an accountant, I am used to clear guidelines and task-oriented goals. The *WA multicultural policy framework* sets out actions that should be taken and sets out a specific implementation path for the WA public sector to assist agencies to develop their own multicultural plans to improve cultural diversity in the workforce and decision-making bodies. I have been committed to encouraging diversity throughout my working life.

At 17 years of age, I left Aranmore Catholic College. My challenges were to raise my son and establish my future. While studying at TAFE, I was approached by an agency who wanted me to become a model. At first I said no, but my mum encouraged me to take the challenge. I ended up modelling internationally; I did New York Fashion Week and I worked in London, South Africa and New Zealand, and all around Australia. Working in the fashion industry broadened my understanding of so many things in my life, but I was disappointed by an industry that did not embrace the diverse range of modelling talent available, preferring to have only one African model on their books.

It was that lack of opportunity for other young women in the community that made me set up Face of South Sudan. I used my skills in modelling and mentored young women to gain confidence and self-belief. Growing up, we girls were often hidden from society and it was not culturally accepted to make eye contact when we talked to someone. Modelling gave me a sense of confidence. In addition to Face of South Sudan, I wanted to create more prospects for young women to get paid for modelling jobs. I established an agency using my profile to actively sponsor them.

Coming as a migrant to Australia, there are many issues with getting skills and experience and establishing a career. People in a refugee camp do not get the opportunity to become equipped for the Australian workforce, and this has been a great challenge for me and many who come here as refugees.

I want to use my career success to make sure that the government focuses on jobs that assist refugees and migrants to gain important experience and contacts that will result in meaningful employment. That is a priority for me. I am not asking that we create this from nothing. Many successful programs are running in Victoria and New South Wales to enable new migrants and those disadvantaged in the workforce to participate in traineeships and work experience programs. For example, the Opening Doors program with the Australian Taxation Office is a 12-month paid and supported employment program for refugee and humanitarian job-seekers in Melbourne and Sydney. This program is run through Jesuit Social Services, which also partners with the National Australia Bank on its award-winning African inclusion program. It has other exciting hands-on paid learning experiences with the local water authority. I feel there is a great exciting opportunity for us to pursue something similar with our own public practice.

I had firsthand experience of how hard it is to get experience. Around 2013, I commenced studying my degree to become an accountant, after I had completed my diploma in business management. During this time, I started a small business, a South Sudanese restaurant, as I love cooking and wanted to share my love for food so that the western community could have a great taste of South Sudanese food. It was really hard to juggle family, work and studies, but the hardest thing was to find a job as an accountant. How do we get experience? Without a job, we cannot get experience.

Thankfully, Edith Cowan University gave me a finance officer job and from there I went into working at Emmanuel Christian Community School with responsibility for the accounts and, most importantly, its payroll. I want to acknowledge Tony Wilson and Edwin Reyes for the

opportunity they gave me. Anyone in business or a government department will tell us that paying correctly is vital to the happiness of employees. My commitment to my career saw me recently enrol to become a certified practising accountant. Obviously, now I have put that on hold, but I think this shows my interest in finance.

I am grateful to have joined the WA Labor team, who understand the importance of good financial management. The first four years of the WA Labor government saw it deliver on its promise to the WA people to bring the budget back into surplus. It is impressive that such excellent budget management could arise while it has been battling a global pandemic and keeping us healthy and safe. I look forward to a further four years of stable economic management. I believe that my life experience of seeing a failing health system in South Sudan allows me to praise our excellent quality health system. I acknowledge the work of health minister Roger Cook. I am proud that this government accepts the responsibility of looking after its citizens and is committed to continually improving a health system that is focused on patient health and wellbeing.

In closing, I want to thank the WA Labor Party, particularly secretary Tim Picton and assistant secretary Ellie Whiteaker, for having faith in me to represent the people of Western Australia and the North Metropolitan Region. Although I have been a member of the Labor Party for many years and active in campaigns, my work had been in the community. To have been recognised for that work and to be endorsed to run for a winnable seat has been rewarding, and I am thankful for that.

Many people have welcomed me and set me on a path to what I hope will be a long career in politics. I have mentioned many people throughout my speech, but I thank in particular the Premier and his staff, including Mark Reed and Alyesha Anderson. I would also like to thank Hon Stephen Dawson; Dr Anne Aly, federal member for Cowan; Terry Healy, member for Southern River; and Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson for their kindness and guidance.

To my North Metropolitan Region Legislative Assembly colleagues, you are great. Thanks especially to Margaret Quirk, the member for Landsdale, for your advice; the member for Wanneroo, Sabine Winton; the member for Kingsley, Jessica Stojkovski; the member for Hillarys, Caitlin Collins; the member for Joondalup, Emily Hamilton; the member for Scarborough, Stuart Aubrey; and the member for Churchlands, Christine Tonkin. It was great campaigning and winning with you all—thank you.

To my staff Alan, Nyat, Belinda and Linda, thank you for all you do and I look forward to a bright future. Special thanks to Jann McFarlane, former federal member for Stirling; and to my Mirrabooka mates Meredith Hammat, Sue, Donata and Hiba.

I would also like to give special thanks to my dearest friend Ms Janine Freeman. Her trust in me got me here today and I cannot find the words to describe my gratitude. I wish Janine many more blessings and a career beyond politics. I look forward to her guidance and wisdom.

One of my past jobs was as a patient care assistant at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, where I joined the union that was known as the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union. The support shown to me then and now by that union—now proudly called United Voice—is greatly appreciated, especially from Carolyn Smith and Dom Rose.

To all my friends around the world, my community and all African communities, including past and present leaders such as Joe Tuazama and Casta Tungaraza, thank you. To Martha Adau, Carol Davis, Mathew Mading, Majok, Anju, Maria Pia, Tom and Thembi, Joe Moniodis, Busi Oyewopo, Yar Matur, Saada, Ayen Nyariel, Ajang Alaak, Eva Mwakichako, Nyibol Maker, Dylan Teng, Laurice and Dave Jallah—special thanks for allowing me the grace to speak to people about my aspiration to become a member of Parliament.

Big thanks to my family here and back home. I can only mention a few of the many who have contributed a lot to my life: Uncle Ciengkueu Mading, Uncle Chep Chuot, Nyanawut Azuma,

Ambrose Nhial, my mother-in-law Amuor Manyok, Ajak Makuie, Ayen Chuot, Alom Chuot, Nyakuta Marin, Yom Chuot, Puor Makur Chuot, my two grandmothers Ajak Mading and Jockdit Bouth, my grandfather Chierac Ayol, Auntie Achol Aguek and Uncle Taban Aguek.

I have spoken often about my mum today and in the media. My mum Helena Yar Enock inspired me to be who I am today. She also gave me the love of family. I would like to give a very special thanks to the best humans in my life, my brothers and sisters for always having my back: Mangar, Chep, Matur, Akech, Sabur, Bush and Areji. Thank you my siblings for all your support.

In my immediate family, God has blessed me with my two lovely sons, Thokbeny and Achol, and, of course, the man of the house, Deng Achol, whose love and support I really value. Thank you Wun Achol for all you do for our family.

To anyone I have forgotten to mention, thank you. I am a new mum and, after all, forgetful—and I am tired!

Finally, I want to thank God for giving me the opportunity to be in this beautiful land. Thank you.

[Applause.]
