



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



Mr Christopher John Tallentire, MLA
(Member for Thornlie)

Legislative Assembly
Tuesday, 26 November 2024

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VALEDICTORY REMARKS

Member for Thornlie

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Thornlie) [6.10 pm]: In September 2008, when I was first elected, I was struck by the warmth of my acceptance into the state Parliamentary Labor Party. Politics is competitive, but it is also a highly collegiate team game. It is a noble profession, but in 2008 I was part of a team in shock; thrown into opposition, deeply disappointed, yet held together by Eric Ripper's masterful leadership, saving us from any descent into blame, acrimony or division. For me it was all new and I revelled in learning the many facets of the new job. I was imbued with a great sense of pride, a sense of honour, about the opportunity given to me by the people of the Gosnells electorate. Now, 16 years later, my sense of that honour and privilege has not dimmed.

But it could have all gone very differently. I owe my recruitment to Dave Kelly, the member for Bassendean, and "the missos", now known as the United Workers Union. But in May 2008 I was also to be known as one of then Premier Alan Carpenter's "dream team". To my first political faux pas—my preselection had just been confirmed at an evening state executive meeting and I had just been told about a special media event the following morning. Receiving a congratulatory handshake from Premier Carpenter, he firmly said to me, "Chris, see you tomorrow in Kings Park." Fantastic. I was set to be part of a wave of new recruits, my environmental background had been actively sought and here was my chance to walk as one with an exceptionally talented group of future Parliamentarians, including now Premier, Roger Cook, and now Deputy Premier, Rita Saffioti.

We all know the magnificent location, overlooking the Swan River and Perth Water, just below the lemon-scented gums that line Fraser Avenue, our city as the backdrop. The dream team was to walk in formation with Premier Carpenter. I knew that media events like this were carefully planned. My impression was that everyone around the Premier and his ministers knew of the event. It was all very exciting.

Kings Park fitted neatly in my diary with another meeting I had as then director of the Conservation Council. Coming from outside of government, my impression was that the Premier's office and ministers were all in perfect sync and coordination about any activity involving the Premier. So, when I received a call from a senior staffer telling me, rather emphatically, "Chris, today's meeting is off. We'll have it rescheduled", I was disappointed but understood there was clearly a good reason. I focused on preparing for my next meeting of that day, researching a few points to take up with then Minister for Environment David Templeman. The morning was ticking by. Then it dawned on me! It was the Templeman meeting that had been cancelled, not the Premier's Kings Park dream team walk!

How could I have made such a stupid mistake? I leapt for the keys and jumped in my car. I was in West Perth, so not far to travel, but I was already horrendously late. What kind of an impression was I going to make? Slowed to the Kings Park 40 kilometres an hour speed limit, I travelled along Fraser Avenue just in time to see the Premier and his dream team's walk coming to a celebratory conclusion. Media were getting their final candid footage with the talented intake. I decided my best course of action was to keep driving. I had botched my first public outing with the Premier! For years, media would run the footage of WA Labor's 2008 star recruits, of Alan Carpenter's "dream team" but it was always unclear whether I was one of them.

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For eight years we were an extremely effective and disciplined opposition. For the past two parliamentary terms, we have been an extraordinarily good government. It was an honour to serve during the COVID years. Then Premier Mark McGowan and then Minister for Health Roger Cook deserve enormous credit, and so too does this Parliament, for achieving one of the lowest excess death rates in the world. The results for Western Australia were outstanding. Thanks to our rigorous application of a closed borders policy, we were able to preserve our quality of life with minimal lockdowns.

The results were exceptional, but something else happened in those COVID years—something that actually enabled those amazing results to be achieved. In my view, we had a genuine bond between voters and decision-makers, the likes of which we rarely see in western democracies. Rules were made and respected. There was massive support and strong compliance. Opinion poll ratings for the Premier and the government quantified the level of support, as did our 53 of 59 seat win at the 2021 election. People felt connected to the government’s decision-making process. They would watch to the end the daily media briefings, sympathising with the challenging decisions and sharing a degree of exasperation at the sometimes silly and repetitive questions from the media pack. This says to me that when there is a bond between voters and decision-makers, great things, like our incredibly low excess death rate, can be achieved.

Putting our achievement into a national and international context, Western Australia had the lowest COVID death rate of any state or territory at 0.34 official COVID deaths per 100 000 people. In comparison, Victoria’s rate was 25.48 deaths per 100 000 people. Compare this with the United Kingdom, which had a COVID death rate of 183.5 deaths per 100 000 people and the USA, which had a rate of 155.6 deaths per 100 000 people. There is no doubt our results were “best in world”. Of course, a range of factors helped our success. For example, our isolation was an enormous advantage. But I maintain the bond between decision-makers and the community was the most important factor.

While I accept that in a functioning democracy, some degree of scepticism is healthy, the default position of immediate cynicism is corrosive. This is a point explored in the 2022 *Quarterly Essay*, “Uncivil Wars: How contempt is corroding democracy”, by Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens. I have just returned from COP 29, the United Nations Climate Change Convention meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan.

It was interesting seeing some of the reporting, which seems to take a default negative position as soon as the initials “UN” are used. This was the “finance COP”, where the priority was finding the funding mechanism to pay the calculated \$US1.3 trillion needed to compensate the developing world for the climate damage caused by the developed world so that developing countries can invest in renewable energy systems and pay for the inevitable adaptation required under a 1.5 degree or more temperature increase scenario. The international perspective is that climate finance is not charity. There are even signs of acceptance of this from nations that have benefited the most from fossil fuel production, like the OPEC—Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries—nations. The attitude is, “You broke it; you do what’s possible to fix it.” That is the emerging consensus.

We can all be proud of the work done at COP 29 by Australia through federal Minister for Climate Change and Energy, Chris Bowen, co-chairing the NCQG—a very COP acronym, which stands for the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance. It was designed to raise the \$US1.3 trillion. At COP 29, a \$US300 billion a year amount was agreed to.

Now, being a local member in the party of government is like an aligning of the stars. Major projects suddenly become possible. It was during the dark days of opposition when the then shadow minister Ken Travers first developed the Metronet plan. From the moment of my election in 2008, I began campaigning for the Thornlie line to be extended to the Mandurah line with a station at Nicholson Road. No doubt, this is the single-biggest piece of infrastructure that

I have been able to gain for the people of the Gosnells and now Thornlie electorate. I am delighted that Minister Saffioti has planned, guided and overseen this project to its expected completion mid-2025.

From my time as shadow Minister for Environment, I am very proud of a number of initiatives. Our container deposit scheme and the huge expansion of the protected area network in the Kimberley are two examples. As a local member you soon learn that supporting local initiatives can make a real difference to people's day-to-day lives. Such initiatives include the commencement of the Gosnells Community Men's Shed, the local park run at Homestead Park, congratulating people who have gone to the trouble of creating a beautiful garden through my top garden program and rewarding students who walk, wheel or ride to school, instilling a lifelong fondness for healthy active travel. These are examples of the community engagement with my electorate that I have found especially rewarding.

On the last point about active travel, I want to say how much I have enjoyed chairing the Bike Riding Reference Group, under the charge of Minister Saffioti. I am very proud to be part of a government that has invested \$600 million in cycling and active travel infrastructure. Colleagues know that I am pretty obsessive about riding to and from Parliament. For me, it is the best way to commute for the time efficiency and especially for the health benefits. There is also the joy of weekend social rides and the nuanced coffee chats and insights from fellow middle-aged men in lycra!

I want to highlight the particular brand of multiculturalism that has developed in the suburbs of Gosnells, Thornlie and Maddington. Once the area was predominantly white Anglo; now we are a cohesive community with people from many cultural and religious backgrounds. This transition has gone on apace in the past 16 years. The success of our multiculturalism comes from the hardworking nature of those newly arrived Australians. They work hard and have the full respect of their neighbours. Helping people have some understanding of other cultures through community events like the Australian Arab Association's Eid Carnivals has been hugely successful. Parliament Iftar Dinners, organised with the assistance of the Intercultural Harmony Society, and Iftar dinners in the community, including at the fabulous Gosnells Football Club, expand knowledge and generate respect for other faiths and traditions.

I have also been thrilled to represent the government at numerous French community events, especially the 250th anniversary of the 1772 claiming of New Holland, now Western Australia. The fact is that Versailles decided not to pursue the claim, and the possibility remains that this was in response to reports from the 1772 mission that this land was occupied. We all know that Australia is a richer country from the contributions of our migrants in so many ways. To me, the greatest migrant gift is helping us understand the world beyond Australia's shores, beyond the anglosphere. It is a mighty contribution, and one that we greatly need.

In the fortieth Parliament, I had the privilege to serve as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Forestry. During my time in the portfolio, I was fascinated by our sandalwood industry, especially the economic development opportunity the industry could give people living in remote Aboriginal communities. In an economy so dominated by commodity products such as iron ore, LNG, gold and others in which we are price takers, it is exciting to see our First Nations people leading the way into luxury products—in this case, the perfume industry. Luxury perfumes have tended to use celebrity endorsements for their marketing, but increasingly the luxury perfume industry has wanted to tell the story of where their fragrances have come from. Having Australian sandalwood oil as a component in an expensive perfume gives it a unique scent, often described as a special warmth. Through the marketing process and the story of the Indigenous custodians of the sandalwood, the lucky wearer of the fragrance can feel a connection to the oldest continuous living civilisation on earth, regardless of where they live on the planet. At the \$75 billion perfume industry's annual global get-together in the south of France, Clinton Farmer,

a proud Martu custodian and traditional owner, is as highly sought after as any Hollywood celebrity. Consumers of luxury products are prepared to pay a premium when they understand and like the story of its origins.

One extraordinary experience was an overnight stay at Kutkabubba, a small Aboriginal community located 40 kilometres north of Wiluna. Coinciding with the visit by then minister Dave Kelly and I was the visit of some of Estée Lauder's New York-based executives. Estée Lauder had hired a film crew that was equipped with monster camera lenses, clapperboards and the latest drone technology. The crew were all dressed in black skivvies, diligently filming every aspect of Kutkabubba life. As delightful as the executives were, the filming added to the idea that this was *The Devil Wears Prada* comes to the Australian outback. As night fell, the Martu people, the New Yorkers and the Perthites slept in swags, three very different worlds united under the star-studded Wiluna night sky, with licks of warmth reaching us from the central camp fire.

The vastness of our state is one of its defining features, so creating ways for people to experience and absorb it so that we are connected to it to the point that it is part of our identity is essential. I applaud the development of nature-based and adventure tourism. From sleeping in a swag and enjoying the stars to walking the Cape to Cape or Bibbulmun Track or riding sections of the Munda Biddi Trail and, soon, riding the extended Wadandi Track, getting people out of the suburbs and into the real nature of Australia is essential to our identity.

Early this year, I was thrilled to share my passion for riding the Munda Biddi with the Premier. We rode through the magnificent Valley of the Giants and on the stunning south coast. It says a lot about the emphasis that Western Australian society places on health and wellbeing that even with the pressures of high office—and not far short of his sixtieth birthday!—we have a leader whose fitness levels surpass those of his security detail. Although much younger, they were left huffing and puffing in his wake! The Premier's example is a great one. To take a narrow monetary view of it, good cardio workouts, combined with healthy eating and good rest, lead to enormous health budget savings.

One of the things I will not miss about political life is the need to engage in self-promotion. This perhaps reveals something of a certain personality type. I know why we have to do it; it is essential that we talk to voters by doorknocking, making Facebook posts and sending newsletters. We need to tell voters about our achievements. We need to let them know how active we are and, of course, how accessible we are. But I think we always have to be wary of going too far. One remedy—WA Labor does this in spades—is to back up the talk with substance. On the whole, Australian parliamentarians are excellent for being affable, approachable, available and able—the four As. It would be nice if we could ensure that parliamentarians are serious, engaged in the detail of policy and not prone to the superficial or gimmicky.

Inevitably, a 16-year political career will have its disappointments. There are the big things over which this Parliament has had no control. I refer, for example, to the Trump election win, which is far worse for what it says about American democracy than the Trump win in 2016. There are matters closer to home, such as the failure of the Voice referendum, the November 2009 debacle that resulted in the defeat of the Rudd government's cap-and-trade emissions trading scheme, when the Greens voted with the extreme elements of the Liberal–National coalition, and the defeat of the mineral resource rent tax. Personal to me, was the giant Brexit con perpetrated on the country of my birth. There is a common factor in each of these disappointments; namely, the role of conservative politicians and the right-wing media in using lazy populist arguments to defeat good policy.

I turn to local issues and concerns of mine. I wish I could have seen in my time the redevelopment of Thornlie Senior High School. Thornlie kids deserve fabulously designed facilities. They have wonderful teachers, but they deserve modern facilities, not just dark rooms from the early 1970s. I am hoping my successor will be able to remedy this situation.

But the disappointment I feel most keenly, because it is the one I feel I should have had the most influence on, has been environmental decline. Unfortunately, there is a cabal of lobbyists, spruikers and industry peak body leaders who are primed to attack any measures designed to protect biodiversity. By nearly all measures, we continue to lose nature, yet we see absurd campaigns, especially by Seven West Media and certain interest groups, to weaken environmental laws. There is never any acknowledgement of the gravity of the problem, nor a presentation of an alternative solution. One minute it is calls for greater streamlining—invariably a euphemism for weakening—of state laws, the next it is attacks on proposed federal laws. Indeed, a recent article in *The West Australian* said of minister Tanya Plibersek’s proposed nature positive reforms that “now the government must put a bullet in its brain...”.

The Australia State of the Environment 2021 report makes the situation plain. Here are a few findings from the report —

Our biodiversity is declining, and the number of threatened species is increasing

...

Climate change, habitat loss and degradation, and invasive species are the key threats to Australia’s biodiversity

...

Many of the pressures on biodiversity in Australia have increased in intensity in the past 5 years.

We have had “No Net Loss” commitments in place for years, coming from the 1992 Rio Convention. These are enshrined in Australian law, but we have still been losing nature, hence the need for Minister Plibersek’s reforms.

Although it will never be an easy pill for government to swallow, a WA state of the environment report is urgently needed. Sadly, it will quantify how much we have lost since the last report in 2007, but that is useful information for countering the wilful ignorance that abounds amongst interest groups, who get a disproportionately large hearing in our media. The constant attacks on necessary environmental regulation as “green tape” or safety regulations as “red tape” and claims of “lawfare” are all designed to suggest that we are losing our competitive edge, stymying investment and preventing good projects proceeding. There is a suggestion business could go elsewhere. The truth is that our strong regulatory systems are at the heart of why we are a good place to develop projects and do business. For those who do venture elsewhere, there are enormous risks. Take the recent case of Resolute Mining. The CEO and two employees of Resolute Mining were held by the Mali government for more than a week and only released when \$242 million was paid to the Mali government, according to ABC reports, to help resolve a tax dispute. We have every right to impose tough regulations on industry. That is how we do things, and it is what our community expects.

To the future of the Thornlie electorate, I am encouraged to see good candidates putting their names forward, but my support is fully with Daniel Morrison-Bird, the WA Labor candidate. Daniel’s professional life and Aboriginal heritage make him uniquely placed to make further inroads into some difficult social issues.

To my colleagues in this Parliament and previous Parliaments, thank you for all your support and friendship. Fellow Labor members, you all deserve re-election. To the fabulous WA Labor team and to my mentors Ken Travers and Sharryn Jackson, thank you. Thank you to the exceptional people who have worked in my office, including Phoebe Cianfrini, Paul Winter and my dear friend who is no longer with us, Salim Youssef. I especially want to highlight two people, both known to many colleagues around this chamber. The first is Nigel Dickinson. His compassionate nature and commitment to improving the lives of our constituents rests as an example to me.

His clear thinking and clear writing were a huge boost to my campaigns until he made a sensible decision to join the member for Kalamunda and contribute to the success of his two terms. The second person I want to highlight is Diane Meakins. Di has a steel-trap mind that can instantly spot an inconsistency in a story or a piece of bureaucratic nonsense. She knows the Gosnells, Thornlie and Maddington communities and cares deeply about them. She knows her way around government and is a key member of our tremendous electorate officer network. Di is a great friend and colleague, and it has been a privilege to work with her and get inside knowledge on the fortunes of the Fremantle Dockers. Thank you to the wonderful people of the Thornlie electorate, who have given me the honour to represent them.

Finally, thanks to my family for their support: my parents, Peter, and especially my Mum, Wilda, who died recently. Before the onset of dementia, she was a dedicated observer of Western Australian politics. I am glad we were able to share much of the journey.

Now, I am handing my bike locker key back to Parliamentary Services. I hope the forty-second Parliament sees an increase in the number of members who look after their health, avoid private vehicles and commute using active travel, especially by bike, enjoying our fabulous active travel infrastructure.

I leave this Parliament a wiser person. I have an enormous sense of gratitude for being given the opportunity to serve the people of Western Australian and for being part of this parliamentary institution.

Thank you, everyone.

[Applause.]