



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson, MLC
(Member for East Metropolitan Region)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Thursday, 23 May 2013

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON AMBER-JADE SANDERSON (East Metropolitan) [2.00 pm]: Thank you, Mr President. Congratulations on your re-election as President of the Legislative Council and thank you for the warm welcome you have extended to all new members over the past few weeks.

I pay my respects to the traditional owners, past and present, of the land on which we meet today, the Noongar people.

ELECTORATE/REGION

First, let me thank the people of the East Metropolitan Region for my election as their representative. I am honoured and excited by the opportunity and am committed to working hard and doing my best for the region. I also pay tribute to the outgoing member for the East Metropolitan Region, Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich, who now has the honour of representing the North Metropolitan Region, and the retiring members for East Metropolitan Region, Hon Linda Savage and Hon Alison Xamon, both of whom have been effective, hard working members and strong advocates for mental health and domestic violence, two issues I feel strongly about. I hope to continue their advocacy of those issues in my time in this place.

I also note that six women were elected in the East Metropolitan Region at the last election. I believe this may be a first for any region in Western Australia. Whether that is the case, it is great to see. It is also good to see the Labor Party preselect three youngish women from diverse backgrounds into winnable positions. If there is a word that sums up the East Metropolitan Region, it is diversity—ranging from the Mt Lawley cafe strip to the idyllic semi-ruralism of Darlington and Kalamunda. The East Metropolitan Region is where sprawling suburbs meet agriculture and industry. For all of its beauty, industry and diversity there are challenges in the region. Some residents I have spoken to say that at times they feel like the poor cousins of those living in the metropolitan region.

The lack of transport infrastructure is felt acutely in the East Metropolitan Region. Those living in Ellenbrook, for example, often have to drive to Bassendean to get on an already packed train and their commute into the city is convoluted and long. Because of this many people continue to use their cars, creating further congestion on our roads. The Liberal government's broken promise on the Ellenbrook train line will have lasting implications for the entire region. As it grows, Ellenbrook could become an increasingly isolated community, with lots of families, including lots of fly in, fly out workers, lacking proper support networks. The likelihood of a range of social repercussions is high. Many of the young children living there now will soon be teenagers. Anyone with kids will tell you that boredom and adolescence is a recipe for disaster. We must work together to connect Ellenbrook with the metropolitan region so people can access educational opportunities and engage with broader communities. The people in the East Metropolitan Region to whom I spoke about Metronet were truly excited by the possibility of actually having a train station in their neighbourhood.

Housing affordability and a lack of public housing is another significant issue. As the recent Anglicare WA report highlighted, low-income families are hardest hit. Rent and house prices in the East Metropolitan Region are on par with the state average. The average rent is now \$609 a week, up eight per cent in 12 months. The Anglicare report sums up the situation and states that private rentals are inaccessible for low-income earners and those on benefits. Anglicare found that access to rentals for a couple on two minimum wages dropped from 6.7 per cent to 2.6 per cent in one year. Overall the situation is very grim. It is becoming harder for people on low incomes to access private rentals, and near record house prices are making home ownership almost impossible for many. Meanwhile, new Homeswest developments stand empty in Maddington for months on end and we find more families living out of their cars in very desperate times.

An issue members will hear me raise again in this chamber is the government's decision to privatise the new Midland Health Campus. During the 2008 election, the Liberals promised a new public hospital to replace Swan District Hospital Campus. As it turns out, the government will not provide a government-owned and run hospital at all. Catholic providers St John of God Health Care will run the new Midland hospital, and it has already stated that it will not provide a full range of services on religious grounds. No terminations, reproductive health advice or contraceptive advice, emergency or otherwise, will be provided. Even victims of sexual assault will not have access to these services at the new Midland hospital. There is strong evidence that women and teenagers at high risk of repeat pregnancies who receive immediate contraceptive advice after giving birth have a significantly reduced risk of falling pregnant again. A number of local doctors have raised concerns that they do not have the facilities to perform often complex procedures, and they need a local public hospital to refer patients to. This is supposed to be a public hospital. It is outrageous that in the twenty-first century an organisation like St John of God can dictate to a woman what is appropriate care in a public hospital.

GROWING INEQUALITY

It is my view that the hallmark of a good society and community is not the wealth it creates for some individuals, opportunities for those who can afford it, or even the success of the market on any given day; it is the opportunity afforded to everyone regardless of their race, economic status, postcode or gender. It is access to quality education and health care; it is secure employment in a safe workplace; and it is the compassion and support we provide to our aged, children, people with disabilities and mental illnesses, and people experiencing hardship and persecution. A line from one of my favourite films *Withnail and I* sums up the way we operate all too often as a society, and it is —

Free to those who can afford it, very expensive for those who can't.

For the past nine years I have gained great satisfaction working for United Voice, most recently as Assistant Secretary. United Voice is one of the state's largest unions, representing some of our lowest paid workers. United Voice members look after our aged and care for our children and people with disabilities. They are nurses and patient care assistants and they clean our hospitals. While our children are at school, United Voice members are supporting their education and ensuring they have a clean and safe environment to learn and play in. I believe they are the unsung heroes of the health and education systems. Without United Voice support workers, hospitals and schools simply would not function. They exemplify many of the important qualities that are good and valuable in our community. They do not do these jobs to get rich; they do them because they are important. It is important that we look after our elderly, children and vulnerable. It is important that people are cared for in a clean hospital and that our kids get a good education in clean, safe schools.

What does it say about us as a society when we are prepared to pay people who do these incredibly important and often difficult jobs barely a living wage, and in many cases not a living wage at all? Most United Voice members are women on low pay, under \$40 000 a year, in highly casualised industries, with little to no job security, and often no minimum hours to rely on. To survive on these low wages they have to make difficult choices every day.

A cleaner at Mount Lawley Senior High School once told me that he often has to choose between his medication and putting petrol in the car so that he can get to work. For an aged-care worker, it is the choice between paying for her son's football coaching or putting food on the table one week. For a cleaner working for a contractor in the CBD, her wage of \$18.58 an hour means that at 62 years old she has to continue to work two jobs and does not get to spend time with her grandchildren. As individuals, these workers have little power to change things. However, they do not accept what is dished out to them. They could be regarded as having some of the least political power of any group. They exercise their collective power through their union and I have enjoyed immensely working with union members over the years to give them a political voice. They are willing to organise and work together and improve things for not only themselves, but everyone. They know that the value we put on an aged-care worker or an early childhood educator has a direct link to the quality of care they provide.

Market forces driving wage inequality is self-defeating to the economy in the long run. The broader social and economic effects of long-term, low-income households are far-reaching and costly. In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development released a report acknowledging that growing inequality was undermining economic growth. The report, "Divided We Stand", found a growing number of low-paid, part-time, less-regulated jobs in 17 of the 22 countries studied. The report warned that the rise in inequality, if unchecked, "will affect economic performance as a whole". Low-income households suffer housing stress, energy poverty and poorer health and education outcomes. Social inclusion and relationships are also impacted.

It is also no coincidence that these low-paid industries are highly feminised. No matter how far we have come with gender equality, the service industry and care work is simply seen as "women's work" and therefore entirely undervalued in monetary terms. The award rate for an early childhood educator who has completed a certificate III qualification is \$18.58 an hour. They look after our babies, our most precious things. The equivalent qualification under the metal trades awards—a predominantly male sector—attracts an average \$26 an hour. The question is not why metal trade workers get paid so much. They deserve to be paid well. The question is: why do our early childhood educators—a critical role in early years development and our economy—get paid so little?

Quality child care is essential to increasing the participation of women in the workforce. Ironically, under the current system, women are re-entering the workforce, mostly unwittingly, on the backs of low-paid women. What does this have to do with Parliament and government? To the federal government's credit, it has acknowledged that it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that organisations that receive government funding pay fair and reasonable wages to their workers. It will provide a much-needed boost to wages for workers in the childcare sector. This will go a long way to ensuring that good people who love working with children can afford to stay. Similarly, the federal government will inject \$1.2 billion into the aged-care sector, specifically for wages. For many people, this will be a life-changing amount of money. It means being able to buy a house and plan for their future. I congratulate the federal Labor government and United Voice members for their unwavering campaigns.

In 2008, United Voice reached an agreement with the previous state Labor government. The agreement would result in contract cleaners who clean government buildings, such as ministerial

offices and train stations, being paid the same as in-house government cleaners. Their pay would go from \$14.71 an hour to \$19.50 an hour through their contractors. It would be a truly meaningful pay increase. For the CBD cleaner I mentioned earlier—her name is Lesley Flowers—it would have meant that she could give up her second job to spend time with her grandchildren, which she was looking forward to. Sadly, one of the first things the Barnett government did when it took office in 2008 was to cancel that pay increase. It was a heartless and punitive decision aimed at those who can least afford it. I genuinely believe that until we seriously address the low pay in these sorts of industries we will not come close to closing the gender pay gap. Western Australia currently has the biggest gender pay gap in the country, by a long shot. Not only that, but the gap is widening. I note that Hon Sue Ellery spoke about this in her inaugural speech in 2001. I add my voice to Sue's in this place and hope to be part of a solution to this growing inequality. The market is not motivated to address this; it is up to government.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I spent the first part of my childhood growing up in Bayswater, where my parents bought their first house. Like many people, my parents separated when I was very young—around five years old. In 1986, we moved to London and lived in the UK almost consistently for the next 14 years. Landing in Thatcher's London in the mid-1980s was a culture shock to say the least, but I am grateful for the experiences it has provided me. I am lucky to have been able to live in both countries. I am a product of the public school system and was fortunate to be in the final year of a fully UK government-funded tertiary education—sadly, now a relic of the past. This allowed thousands of people access to degrees and higher earnings, regardless of their family income or social status.

For all my time in the UK I maintained strong links to Perth, feeling a pull to return home. In 2001, I bought a one-way ticket to Perth, packed up my job in London and said goodbye to my family and long-term friends. I have never looked back. Thankfully, my parents and siblings followed a couple of years later. Both my parents are ten-pound Poms, immigrating to Perth as teenagers in the 1970s. My grandparents were raising four children in a two-bedroom flat in Hackney. They both had jobs, but life was tough. Australia was an opportunity to improve their quality of life and open up opportunities for their children. What an audacious decision to pack up one's life and head to the other side of the world without ever having laid eyes on one's destination. It was a massive leap of faith, but one that paid off.

As a first-generation Australian, I am one of those examples of the opportunities in this country. I have always been passionate about labour politics, but if I had pursued this path in the UK, would I be a Member of Parliament by now? I doubt it. The rigid social structures across all parts of British society would have made it almost impossible. I do not have any great connections to important people or patrons. However, in Western Australia I was able to turn up with lots of enthusiasm, hard work and commitment. I am immensely proud and honoured to be elected as a Labor representative to this Parliament. Labor is the party that articulates a fairer, more compassionate and inclusive vision of society. It is our oldest political party, started by working people with the aim of improving the lives of many, not a few. Labor is also the party with a commitment to promoting women.

I have been lucky to work with some inspirational women in the movement; Carmen Lawrence gave me my first job here. Helen Creed, Louise Tarrant, Sue Lines, Carolyn Smith and Kelly Shay are women not willing to accept the status quo, but who work hard within the system to make it more inclusive and accessible. To Carolyn, Kelly and Pat, the leadership of United Voice, thank you for your support. This responsibility I do not take lightly. Mark Reed and Dominic Rose, working with true believers and great young activists has made some hard campaigns a lot of fun. I have also learnt a huge amount working with Dave Kelly over the past

10 years. It is hard to think of another person in recent history who has done more to promote women into leadership positions in the labour movement in WA. I have learnt from Dave to think big, have all my arguments covered and never give up. I look forward to continuing our working relationship in Parliament.

Becoming a Labor Member of Parliament is the second greatest thing to come from my involvement in the Labor Party. The first is meeting my husband, Steed. In Steed, I have a lot to be thankful for. He introduced me to so many of the people whom I have worked with and who have since supported me. But more importantly, he is my best friend and greatest supporter. Being the partner of a senior union official is not easy and it takes a special kind of person to put up with the ups and downs, the late nights and weekends of work. When I first floated the idea of running for a seat in the upper house at the last election, despite our busy family life and already hectic work schedules, he did not hesitate; he just said "Go for it. We're right behind you!" One of the many good things to come out of sharing my life with Steed has been sharing our lives with his children, Michael and Sophie. It is a pleasure watching you both grow into the young adults you are turning into. You both are the best brother and sister to our daughter, Chloe, that I could ever have asked for.

My daughter, Chloe: I thank you for bringing the sunshine into my life, for making us laugh, bringing us together and always reminding me of what is important. People are motivated by different things. My daughter is my greatest motivation, and I hope that what I achieve in this role will have a positive influence on her life.

One of the biggest challenges I have faced is pursuing a job and a career that I love while being a mum. Doing what I love makes me happy and a better parent. I do not subscribe to this idea that somehow women cannot do both; that they have to make the hard choices, whereas our male counterparts do not. I will never say that it is easy. It is not, and it is not for everyone. But with the right support, it can be done. And for that I have a few important people to thank. I thank my parents, Kate and Julian, for their unwavering support and practical help. I thank you, Julian, for always treating me as your own, for challenging me and helping me to believe in myself. It is not easy being a step-parent but you have given me the best example to follow. My mum, Kate, is always a source of comfort and good advice. From her I received my education in feminism and sense of social justice. Regardless of how her life has changed, this has never left her. I thank my in-laws, Corrine and Glynn, whose constant and steady support of us has been absolutely invaluable.

Finally, as a new Member of Parliament, I take this responsibility seriously and look forward to working with all members to achieve the best outcomes for all Western Australians.

[Applause.]
