



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Kevin Michel, MLA

(Member for Pilbara)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

Reprinted from Hansard

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 16 May 2017

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 11 May on the following motion moved by Ms J.J. Shaw —

That the following Address-in-Reply to Her Excellency's speech be agreed to —

To Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson, AC, Governor of the State of Western Australia.

May it please Your Excellency —

We, the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and to thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to address to Parliament.

MR K.J.J. MICHEL (Pilbara) [3.14 pm]: Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your election to the chair. I also congratulate the Premier, Mark McGowan; Deputy Premier and all cabinet ministers on this successful election. My congratulations to the Leader of the Opposition and his deputy and to all elected members of Parliament. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Noongar people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

It is a great honour and privilege to serve the people of Western Australia, in particular the Pilbara region, in the fortieth Parliament. People listening to me today or later reading the *Hansard* record might ask, "What makes this man tick? How did this chap get elected to this place? And what is he on about?" To answer those questions, I want to first tell you a bit about myself, my family and the journey of how I got here.

I was born on 26 March 1961 in India, in a railway colony town called Golden Rock in the state of Tamil Nadu. I am an Indian by birth and my community is Anglo Indian. I am of mixed English, French and Indian heritage and I am very proud to be an Anglo Indian. I come from a family of five; my dad, Joe Michel, worked as a fitter in a railway workshop from the age of 18 and retired at 60. I knew my dad to be very punctual and not take a day off in his life unless he was really sick. My dad loved poultry, and rearing pigeons was his favourite hobby. In fact, we had a small farm at home and never, ever bought poultry for the table. My mum, Lillian, was a loving and kind person; she was a devoted housewife and an excellent cook. She was ever willing to lend a helping hand to anyone. My parents were very devout Roman Catholics and we were brought up with strong Catholic values of faith, hope and charity.

My siblings, Dymphna and Jude, and I had a very simple upbringing but our childhood was filled with a lot of fun times with family as we all lived on the same street. The whole square was owned by my grandfather Gontran Michel. My parents were very loving but strict and they meant the world to me. I miss them dearly and I wish they were here, along with my Aunt Rayonette, to share in this joyous occasion. My sister was a teacher but worked at the ANZ in Australia. She is now retired and lives in Melbourne with her family. My brother was a mechanical engineer with the Ministry of Defence in India. He now works at Yarra Trams and lives in Melbourne with his family. I have over 150 cousins and relatives living in Australia.

I started my studies at the Railway high school in Golden Rock till grade 3 and then moved on to a private school called Campion Anglo Indian High School in Tiruchirappalli, commonly called Trichy. I always loved the great outdoors, especially hunting, fishing and swimming in farm wells. I would jump at any opportunity to go hunting and fishing. This would get me into all sorts of trouble with mum. At school I loved hockey and took part in athletics, cricket and football. I was a very average student and never really took school seriously. After I finished my year 10 at Campion Anglo Indian high school, I went to another city in India called Bangalore, to continue with my education. Bangalore was a beautiful and elegant English colony for retired English officers in the armed forces who wanted to spend the rest of their lives in India. Bangalore was also called the garden city of India and is now the Silicon Valley of India. In Bangalore I went to live with my Aunt Rayonette and her husband Rupert Stephens and started university at St. Aloysius college. My aunt was a very highly qualified teacher and a genius at mathematics. From a young age it was her desire to encourage anyone to have a good education and she spared no money or effort in pursuit of this.

My aunt played a very important role in my life. She took care of me as though I were her own child. She instilled strict values in me and taught me how to look after my finances and live within my means. I miss her down-to-earth approach, practical advice and counsel. I owe her a lot for who I am today. My Uncle Rupert was very fond of me, but was hard on me at times. From a very young age, he taught me how to use my hands to do jobs around the house. I learnt a lot from him and I used to help him with his business. Every morning I would go for a jog and then distribute newspapers for *The Times of India* to earn a few bucks.

I played hockey for my university and also for a local club. Hockey was once the most popular game in India. It was at university that I was introduced to politics. I was part of the Congress youth party. I then joined the Janata youth party until I left India in 1990. After university, I started a diploma course in air conditioning and refrigeration at a private college in Bangalore. I worked at Voltas, India's largest air-conditioning company, premier engineering solutions provider and project specialist. I moved on to Carrier—the pioneers in air conditioning. During my career at these international companies, I won many laurels for design improvements, good work practices and getting projects completed on schedule.

One day, my cousin Gordon Cooper brought home the Australian immigration forms to apply for skilled migration. At first I did not care, but he insisted that I fill out the forms with him. Both of us applied in 1988. My cousin applied under the information technology sector. To my amazement, my application was accepted and sadly my cousin's was rejected. He went on to work for IBM in Hong Kong. I landed in Melbourne on 15 August 1990 and lived with my sister, Dymphna, and her family in Melbourne. After settling in, I set off to find a job. To my frustration, I found that even as a skilled immigrant I could not get a job. This was unbelievable, as I had been told that there was a shortage of air-conditioning and refrigeration technicians in Australia. The shocking part was that wherever I applied for a job as an air-conditioning or refrigeration technician, I was repeatedly asked whether I had Australian experience. After about 15 interviews, I lost the plot and asked the manager who was interviewing me, "How am I going to get Australian experience if you do not give me a go?" This trend continues. Skilled immigrants need to be given opportunities irrespective of their work experience in Australia.

I migrated to Australia when I was halfway through my engineering degree in India, so I enrolled at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology to study a diploma in mechanical engineering, specialising in air conditioning and refrigeration. I got distinctions in two subjects. I continued my education when I moved to Perth and received the prestigious Allan Roberts Award for best performance in mechanical engineering from the South East Metropolitan College of TAFE. I enrolled to complete my associate diploma, but when I moved to Karratha, I found these subjects were not offered anywhere, so I discontinued my studies.

I have worked as an air-conditioning and refrigeration technician across Australia, from Coffs Harbour to Perth. Once I moved to Perth, I fell in love with Western Australia's rugged beauty. I love four-wheel driving and fishing. I love the weather—no more four seasons in a day! Every weekend I would be off fishing and exploring this wonderful land. Having previously travelled to carry out works in Karratha, I decided to move there permanently. I loved the beautiful landscape and I was captivated by the red sand. I joined Haden Engineering and worked at the Woodside gas plant as a site manager maintaining the air-conditioning plants. It was one of the best moves I have made. There was a great community spirit in Karratha, I had great friends and I got involved with local sports. I enjoyed every moment of it. The major points that come to mind whenever anyone asks me why I love Karratha are that I never fall sick or have an attack of hay fever and that I love the heat.

In 2005, I met my wife, Jacqueline James, on a holiday in Bangalore. In 2006, we decided to get married. But, before that, I needed to find out whether she would be happy to settle in Karratha. This was a nerve-racking time in my life—not knowing whether we would stay in Karratha or move to Perth or to Melbourne. When Jacqueline came over for a holiday in 2006, she fell in love with the place, the community and my friends. We decided that Karratha would be the place for us to start our married life. We married at the Dampier Palms and had a small celebration at my friend's house. We bought our house in Karratha in 2006. In January 2007, we went back to India for the big family wedding. We were married at the Sacred Hearts Catholic Church in Bangalore and had nearly 500 family and friends attend. My wife moved to Australia in 2007.

In 2010, we started our own business in partnership with a friend. We had two offices; one was in Karratha and one was in Port Hedland. In a matter of two months, I could not manage the Karratha business, so I took on two technicians. My wife was still working at a real estate company and she would do the company accounts in the evening. We worked very long hours building the business, and we went from strength to strength. In 2012, my wife gave up her job to help run the business. We expanded the business and diversified into electrical work. In 2014, I bought out my business partner and grew my business to 24 staff, including two apprentices. We completed a number of big contracts in Karratha and Port Hedland, including major maintenance contracts for the Department of Housing, Building Management and Works, the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia and Yara Australia fertilisers, to name a few. I have worked in Dampier, Roebourne, Point Samson, Newman, Marble Bar, Jigalong, Jimbelbar, Port Hedland, South Hedland and Roy Hill.

I was forced to invest in properties to house my staff locally, as we were unable to get rentals between 2010 and 2012. Small businesses struggled to get housing in the Pilbara with rents as high as \$3 000 a week. Many small businesses were housing their workers in tents in backyards. In 2015, work started to dry up in Port Hedland. A lot of people lost their jobs and businesses did not have much work. All of a sudden it looked like someone had turned off the light switch. Work became scarce, even in Karratha, after the construction boom. I, along with many contractors and retail outlets, would discuss the sudden downturn, which was a shock to everyone. Everywhere people were complaining of their issues: loss of jobs, loss of contracts, and high rentals and rates. Many of my friends lost their jobs after working for 30 years in Karratha or Port Hedland and they were forced to move back to Perth. A lot of small businesses had taken out three to five-year leases on residences to house staff and offices, which were scarce, because rents were pretty high. This also took a toll on a lot of businesses. We all felt that we had been pushed into a corner with no way out. Many businesses started to cut back on staff and to work on lean margins to keep afloat.

Around the same time a glut of housing was released by LandCorp, but it was a little too late. By now, Woodside, Rio Tinto and BHP were cutting back on staff and contractors, and there was a flood of vacant properties in the Pilbara. This continued, and owners were unable to repay their extremely high mortgages. Many workers who had invested in property in the Pilbara were forced to hand back the keys to their properties.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr K.J.J. MICHEL: I heard of people begging the banks to give them time, but the banks would not hear of it. It was heartbreaking to hear these stories. Property values dropped by more than 60 per cent. I was told that nearly 2 500 properties were repossessed by the banks and sold for a song. At the same time, I was told that the number of local contractors and local people used on local projects, especially in Karratha, was under 10 per cent.

In 2014, the Pilbara underground power project was rolled out in Karratha by the local council. Horizon Power made a mess of the first stage in Bulgarra and it blew its budget. The next stage of the project came at a time when businesses and property owners were really hurting. This caused a huge uproar in the community as it affected all businesses and people, including me. Business owners were still struggling with huge mortgages and high rates, and now with the extra burden of the underground power project. If royalties for regions contributed 75 per cent of the project's cost, why were property owners charged around \$3 000 per residential property and up to \$100 000 for commercial properties? The residents of Karratha did not want underground power. We went through numerous cyclones and never had drastic issues with our power. Once again, the local council was doing exactly what it wanted, irrespective of the opinions of ratepayers and residents. Local Pilbara people formed the view that the then member for Pilbara did not address any of these issues and did not think of them as a concern. Along with the local council and LandCorp, they continued to build the Pelago Apartments, Osprey Village and The Quarter, all of which lie partly vacant. Despite the drastic loss in property values, local councils continued to keep rates at the same level. Property owners struggled to repay their mortgages as rents had dropped drastically and many houses were left vacant.

It was these issues that totally frustrated me as a small business man. My wife and I spoke to Stephen Dawson, MLC, about issues with the underground power. This was also brought to his attention by a number of residents and he initiated an inquiry. Between 2014 and 2016, I met Hon Stephen Dawson on a number of occasions. Hon Mark McGowan, the then opposition leader, along with Hon Stephen Dawson met with local business owners in the Pilbara to learn about the issues we faced in the region. I have always believed in fighting for my rights from a very young age, in school and in university. Being involved with the unions when working in India and Australia also shaped my views on equal rights, believing in a fair go and looking out for my colleagues and workers. With my experience as a small business man, I have come to realise that I will always be a part of the Labor movement as I stand up for my rights and those of others and believe in fighting for a cause. The Labor Party is broad based and proudly capable of serving the needs of all Western Australians, working men and women, including those who work in their own business.

In 2016 at a Labor Party meeting, Hon Stephen Dawson casually mentioned that since I was so passionate about the region, I should put in my nomination. With the support of Hon Stephen Dawson, Port Hedland Labor Party president John Peters and his wife, Charlene, and my wife, Jacqueline, I put in my nomination. In October 2016, I was nominated as the candidate for the seat of Pilbara and the rest is history.

[Applause.]

Mr K.J.J. MICHEL: Minister Dawson was nominated the campaign director. The contest for this seat was going to be hard and much more difficult than originally thought. I was made aware by the Labor Party that, in its view, I did not have a chance of winning, but, as I said before, I am a fighter and I wanted to prove people wrong. I believed in the people's movement and we had a great people's movement going on in the Pilbara. The other parties were so sure of themselves that they did not think they needed to interact with the local community and listen to its problems. Against all advice, I started to doorknock in Karratha, some days with my wife and volunteers, but most days alone. The first few weeks were hard but, as weeks went by, I began to realise I had a very strong chance in this campaign. People were frustrated with the local councils and the member of Parliament because of their lack of understanding and empathy for what was happening in their region. I listened to people, sometimes talking with just one person for more than an hour. They were happy that I was willing to listen and slowly word spread. More people contacted me about their business issues and the problems they faced. My messages were simple: "A local voice in the Pilbara", "Local jobs for locals" and "Local content in government projects". We doorknocked in the rain and the heat and I had heat stroke, but continued after a day's break.

The *Thelma and Louise* trip with Minister Alannah MacTiernan was amazing and I enjoyed every moment of my interaction with her. I was amazed at her political prowess and no-nonsense approach to tackling any situation head on. I also thank her for her personal contribution to my campaign, numerous phone calls and encouraging words of support. I hope she will continue to mentor me during my political career. Minister Bill Johnston also visited the Pilbara to support my campaign and help with a fundraising event. His enthusiastic approach and his knowledge of the mining, oil and gas, and energy sectors helped me to gain a lot of insight into these industries. I give him my thanks and appreciation for his support and help with the fundraising.

Being a long-time resident of the Pilbara, I have seen the ups and the greatest downturn in the history of Western Australia. I feel that, by and large, we have enough economic infrastructure but we lack good health services and we have to pay inflated airfares to Perth. We need to stop depending on the mining and oil and gas sectors and expand industry into agriculture, tourism, aquaculture and renewable energy. We need to make the north west regional area a place where we can encourage people to come and live. It has a strong, growing local population and not one where industry relies on fly in, fly out workers. For the Pilbara region to survive and sustain itself we have to make sure that local and state governments award contracts to local contractors in the region. My perception of a local business is a company that has its main office in the Pilbara region. We are happy to engage with Western Australian contractors but we need to ensure that they use local people and local contractors. I see a wasted opportunity in regional areas such as the north west as we cannot get Australian professionals such as doctors, surgeons, radiologists and other skilled professionals to come and live there. The state government needs to take a stand to ensure that specialists come and live there for a minimum of a year after they finish their studies and degrees.

I give my appreciation and thanks to Hon Stephen Dawson for his continued advice, help, support, fundraising and mentoring during my campaign. Despite his busy schedule all across the Pilbara and Kimberley, he found time to talk to me and support me during my campaign. I look forward to working closely with him, especially with issues we face in the Pilbara, and receiving his advice and support.

I give my thanks to John and Charlene Peters and Kerry Robinson, the three major campaign loyalists in Port Hedland who helped with fundraising, and for their very aggressive campaigning in Hedland and Newman. I also thank John and Charlene for taking care of me whenever I visited Port Hedland. I am grateful for their generosity and donation

to the campaign. Tracey Heimberger played an instrumental role in introducing me to the Aboriginal community in Roebourne and other remote areas, and she taught me the value of community spirit. I am very appreciative of Tracey's enormous support and encouragement during the campaign. I thank her for all the awesome photographs and Facebook posts. Kyle McGinn, a newly elected member of the Legislative Council, was an enormous support to me during the campaign and I cannot find words to thank him enough. I thank the Maritime Union of Australia and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union for their generous contributions to the campaign. Kyle and his team did an excellent job in setting up the polling booths late at night and manning them through the night. I thank Neal Guilmartin for his words of wisdom, help, advice and donation to the campaign. Randy and Anita Surrao were very dedicated supporters and I thank them for their donation, support and help during the campaign.

I give my thanks and appreciation also to Kate and Garry Wilson for their video recordings and photos. Others who put a lot of effort into my campaign include Paul Ferreira, David Fox, Tam Stubbs, Hakim Khan, Vicky, Libby Gaunt, John Gaunt, Ray Ward, Wouter Botes, Marcel Sladen, Aneesha, Samara and little Tia D'souza, Alex Coutinho, Becky Sullivan, Father Brian Ahearn, Father Bernard Balaraj, Joseph Almento, Nina, Fay, Fabio, and the Filipino and Indian communities. I also thank Morag Lowe, Arnold Carter, Jim Henneberry, Tony McCrae, Gail Victor, Jessie, Kelly Howlett, Pierre, Anitha, Frank, Gerry, Evelyn, Kylie Rogerson and Peter Foster. My oldest supporter in Karratha is the evergreen Mr Jack Renault, who, at 100 years old, is very astute and a great mentor to me. I thank Tricia Hebbard and Hannah Cartwright for their help and support after work and on the weekends. They worked tirelessly, and I will always be grateful for their help. We were joined by numerous volunteers on polling day, and I thank each and every one of them. To those who I missed out, please be assured you have my thanks and appreciation for your help in the campaign. Thanks also to all my supporters on Facebook.

I thank my sister and brother-in-law, brother and sister-in-law, niece and nephews for their contribution to my campaign. My brother-in-law, Des Hickman, is a very strong Labor supporter who encouraged me every step of the way. I thank my sister, brother and brother-in-law for taking the time to come from Melbourne for this occasion. I also thank my cousins Honey and Victor for their help and support through the years.

I thank the people of the Pilbara in Karratha, Hedland, Dampier, Roebourne, Wickham, Newman, Marble Bar, Warralong, Yandeyarra, Jigalong, Parnngurr, Punmu and the rest of the Pilbara for their support. I will be your champion in Parliament for the next four years. Thank you for placing your trust in me; I will not let you down.

Last but not least is my darling wife. Words cannot express my thanks for the hard work you put into the campaign, the long days, the sleepless nights, walking the streets with and without me, and always there to help me along the way. There were many times I did not thank you or show my appreciation as I became caught up with the campaign; that is no excuse. As the saying goes, behind every successful man is a woman. That is definitely the case for me.

I am honoured and privileged to be given this opportunity to represent the Pilbara community. I promise I will strive to achieve the best for my region and the great state of Western Australia. I also thank God and Infant Jesus for giving me this opportunity to serve the Pilbara people. Thank you.

[Applause.]