



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Louise Pratt, MLC
(East Metropolitan Region)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council, Wednesday 23 May 2001

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Motion

HON LOUISE PRATT (East Metropolitan) [8.14 pm]: I congratulate you, Mr Deputy President, on your election and I look forward to working with you in this House. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the Nyoongah people as the traditional owners of the land on which this Parliament meets. I am very excited to be a member of this place. It creates great opportunities for supporting and connecting with diverse Western Australian communities. It is also somewhat daunting. I have had to pinch myself on more than one occasion to check that it is real. I wonder whether I am presumptuous in thinking that I deserve a place here. Upon briefly and tentatively expressing my self-doubt, I was strongly reprimanded by my friends and supporters. This place must, after all, be open and accessible to all members of our community and it is as a young Labor woman from the eastern hills that I rightly take my place here.

My first speech in this place will cover a range of topics with connecting themes of activism and change. In particular, I shall focus on how activism has brought positive social change and thereby makes people's lives better, and how activism can mitigate against some of the worst excesses of change. I will firstly tell the House something about myself as people's life experiences obviously shape their political attitudes. I was born in Kalgoorlie in 1972. At the age of 29 I believe I may be the youngest woman ever elected to this place, although I hope this does not remain the case for long. My mother has instilled in me strong feminist principles and although she was a member of the Women's Electoral Lobby when it was first founded in the 1970s, I would have to say that her feminism was taught to me most strongly by her example rather than her words. My grandmother was a pharmacist until she had children. I believe she regretted having to give up her career. My mother understood the importance of gaining her own economic independence and she studied to become a physiotherapist. Her qualifications became a lifeline as her marriage failed and she found herself as a single parent of two daughters. As I had a working mother, I appreciate the importance of high-quality child care; especially as, at the age of four, I once escaped by climbing through a fence and wandered around Herdsman Lake. When I was six, my mother, Sandra, met Greg, who I now claim as my dad, just as I am his daughter. Following the birth of my younger brother, Nicholas, we moved to the hills. I tell the House this because my family experiences have done much to mould what I think of as family values. They have little to do with marriage or genetic parentage and have a lot to do with who is present to provide love and care in a family. I believe the definition of

such values has been cast so narrowly in the past that it has been to the detriment of many families. Such values were responsible for unmarried mothers being forced to relinquish their children and for many Aboriginal children being stolen from their families.

The sometimes harsh economic climate of the 1980s took its toll on our family, especially my mother, who felt the pressures of being a supermum as she had a stressful profession and a young family. Meanwhile, dad struggled with building our family home while my two-year-old brother wandered around the construction site. I believe dad was the only father on parent duty at my brother Nicholas' kindergarten.

While growing up in the hills may seem an idyllic existence in many ways, with plenty of open spaces to explore, it also presents many frustrations for young people such as the lack of transport, entertainment and employment. These are issues that are still common in the hills and outer suburbs that make up my East Metropolitan electorate. When visiting friends it was almost always necessary to harass a parent into driving me somewhere. At the age of 12 I joined what I feel was my first political organisation, the Girl Guides. That group afforded to me many opportunities that would have otherwise been beyond my reach. I was schooled at state primary schools and attended a private girls school for a short time before attending Eastern Hills Senior High School in year 10. I was shocked at the contrast between the resources and class sizes of the schools, not to mention the bullying and violence. For a short time, I was the victim of intense school bullying. Bullying continues to be a problem with which schools battle. I strongly believe more must be done to tackle it. Despite these experiences, I strongly value my state school education. I had many excellent teachers and a diverse group of friends. It has shaped my values in more positive ways than a privileged private school education ever could.

After leaving school, I worked for a year as a checkout operator at a Coles supermarket. I think it was the hardest job I have ever had and it fed my thirst to make the most of life. I enrolled at the University of Western Australia and did a history major. I also threw myself earnestly into student politics. My first sense of state politics was during the early 1990s when the previous Government introduced the voluntary student unionism legislation. I assisted in organising a protest involving about 1 000 students on the steps of Parliament. Sadly, we did not succeed in convincing the then Government not to proceed with the legislation. As a result, student representation, support services, amenities and cultural activities have been devastated in this State, especially at Edith Cowan University. I am pleased that the new Labor Government will take action to remedy the situation. After university, I spent some time being unemployed and to stop the constant frustration I experienced, I spent my time doing volunteer work. I obtained work experience with members of Parliament and on the anti-French nuclear test campaign. It was this that eventually led me to a part-time job working for a member of Parliament. I never really saw politics as a career path; rather, I threw myself into a range of causes that I thought important, instead of thinking about career development. The contributions of members here are all partly manifestations of our own beliefs and those of our political parties, our ability to empathise with others, and our intellect, but they are also influenced by our life experiences, and my experiences are fairly typical of the so-called generation X. I believe a strong dose of humility is important in politics. Parliamentarians are nothing by themselves. It is only in connecting with issues, communities and ideas that we can really achieve things.

Activism and Change

I will now speak about change and the ability of Western Australian citizens to participate in creating the kind of local, state, national and global community they would like to live in. This might seem like a grand, idealistic platform to tackle; nevertheless, it is entirely appropriate to discuss this as it is at the heart of the general malaise and cynicism that surrounds people's feelings about politics and politicians. Many people in our society are disempowered and

disenfranchised. We claim to be an egalitarian society. However, we permit high levels of unemployment and poverty, unequal distribution of wealth, inequality of life expectancy, and unequal education and employment opportunities. Many people face issues of social exclusion because of disability, sexism, homophobia, loss of family networks - the list goes on. It is easy to see how people feel they are at a loss in being able to participate in society, when it is a struggle just to get by. Many people complain that things in the world are so dreadful, and ask what difference they can make. Some feel the problems facing the world are too hard and many of our problems too intractable. The temptation is to give up and get on with one's own life. Such pessimistic feelings can be overwhelming; I have had them myself at times, and I believe this is one of the reasons many people express cynicism when it comes to politics and politicians. I have had more than a couple of people express alarm at my becoming a member of Parliament, as if to say "What did you go and do that for?". Fortunately, not everyone has a pessimistic view of the future. I believe that when people dare to hope for a better future, and act on that belief, anything is possible. Mark Allen, a young union organiser with whom I was fortunate enough to go to university, had a favourite saying: "Dare to struggle, dare to win". Sadly, Mark died in a tragic accident on a demolition site while defending workers' rights - something he passionately believed in. I would like to acknowledge the imprint he left on many people's lives. I want to pay tribute to the many other activists who have fought for so many causes in our community. Such activists do believe that we can change things, and in fact do so. Western Australia may be a diverse and vast place, but in many ways it is still a small community. I have found this means that even small groups of people with commitment, hard work and creativity can create change and right wrongs in our society.

The Australian Labor Party

This is what brought me to join the Australian Labor Party. As a party of reform the Labor Party has historical gathered muscle to tackle large and confronting social issues, such as sexism, racism, discrimination, social and economic inequality, native title and reconciliation, although I must say we have not always moved as quickly as I would like on many issues. The key to the Labor Party's success in tackling these issues lies in its strong links to people and communities. This strength has grown out of Labor's historical and continuing commitment to representing working people and doing it collectively. I will stand up for the rights of people to organise collectively as unionists and as activists for social and economic justice and change. Being involved in the Labor Party and the wider Labor movement has enabled me to participate in a whole range of important causes and networks of people, including feminists, workers for reconciliation, environmentalists, anti-nuclear activists, unionists and others fighting for social justice and human rights.

Lesbian and Gay Rights Equality

Since the age of 22 I have been a lesbian and gay rights activist, a cause which at times seemed hopeless. I have sat in the gallery of this place many times listening to debates. Once I even wore a pink triangle pinned to my chest. The pink triangle has now been claimed as a lesbian and gay liberation symbol, but it first appeared when the Nazis used it in the same way as they used the Star of David: to mark people out for extermination. I was outraged by the lack of progress made on these issues under the previous Government. It was at times extremely upsetting to listen to the myths and stereotypes about lesbian and gay people emanating from this place, although I must also acknowledge the very heartening voice of those who worked for reform, despite the failure of the legislation to pass both Houses. Western Australia has the worst laws in the nation as far as lesbian and gay rights are concerned. We have no antidiscrimination legislation, and no relationship recognition. This discrimination disadvantages not only lesbian and gay people, but also their children. Our laws restricting lesbian access to reproductive technology and the discriminatory age of consent for gay men

contravene both international and commonwealth law. We cannot kid ourselves that we are a just community until these laws are changed. Mr President, you can imagine my joy on Labor winning government and my being elected to this place. To go from being a community activist feeling like I was banging my head against a brick wall to becoming a member of this place who will have a voice and a vote on these matters is truly exhilarating. It is time that my partner Linda and I were properly recognised as a couple with the same rights that others take for granted, including property rights, inheritance rights, guardianship rights and superannuation. I, like other lesbian and gay people, am sick of being treated as a second-class citizen in this State. I hope to be part of a Parliament that will finally begin to bring real equality to lesbian and gay Western Australians. For me this is no small turnaround.

Being an activist for lesbian and gay rights has not always been easy. All lesbian and gay people struggle with issues of coming out, and it is not something that is done once. There can be many awkward moments through life meeting new people. Being up-front and honest has always been important for my own peace of mind. Being a gay and lesbian activist has not just been about law reform; it has been, more importantly, about reaching out to the wider community, demonstrating to people that it is okay to be lesbian or gay. It has also been about creating positive images in the media to make it easier on young people who are lesbian or gay and who struggle with self-loathing and low self-esteem, because they think the world despises them. I have heard too many stories about school bullying, which often includes violent incidents that are essentially criminal in nature and is based on a student's perceived gayness. It makes little difference if the person is gay or not. This is something that must be addressed as a matter of public policy in our schools, particularly in rural and regional areas, where there is a high rate of youth suicide.

I sincerely thank my family for being so supportive of me, of my partner Linda and of my political activities. I have been very fortunate, as many lesbian and gay friends have suffered terribly because their families have rejected them. I pay tribute to the visible, vibrant, diverse and supportive lesbian and gay community here in Western Australia. In particular, I pay tribute to the Gay and Lesbian Singers of Western Australia, Lesbian and Gay Pride, and Gay and Lesbian Equality, and the many people who have over the decades campaigned for lesbian and gay rights in this State, including Damien Meyer, Kamila Kaninski, Brian Greig and countless older and wiser lesbians. I would also like to thank the lesbian and gay press, which has played an important role in keeping people informed and facilitating community activism. Lesbian and gay issues are not the only issues for which I have been an active campaigner. Of course, as a lesbian that issue has been of personal importance to me.

Listening to Silenced Voices

It is unfortunate that many people feel reluctant to speak out on issues of personal and emotional importance. Most often these subjects are talked about on a detached and theoretical basis. Too many issues in society are blanketed as taboo subjects. More people need to speak out about domestic violence, child abuse, drug abuse, racism and sexism. We can build positive change out of people's experiences. A really good example is how much the stories of people from the stolen generations have contributed to the spirit and progress of reconciliation.

I know that as members of Parliament we should listen to the experts and consultants. However, importantly, we must also listen to and draw on the experiences of people affected. In order to achieve this we must create the space within our media, community and democracy for oppressed and silenced voices to be heard. My experiences have taught me that committed community activism and confronting issues head-on can change things for the better. At times during these campaigns it was difficult to see the big picture - or whether we would reach any of our goals - but the important thing was to keep on pushing.

Community Activism

A strong personal and collective commitment to a cause can indeed create change - or stop regressive change - as we can see from as far back as the campaign to give women the vote in the 1890s, through to the more recent Patricks waterfront dispute, the fight to save Leighton Beach and the abortion rights campaign in 1998. The examples in Western Australian history are endless.

I especially acknowledge the forest activists who have played such a vital role in protecting our old-growth forests. At times there was alarm expressed at their tactics - people chaining themselves to machinery and climbing huge trees, not to come down for days on end. At times it seemed as though the wider community could not relate to the pleas of people stereotyped as feral tree huggers who were perceived as interfering with other people's livelihoods. Community sentiment gradually changed and people realised a lot was at stake in the old-growth forests of our south west. The commitment of these activists was at the heart of turning the forest issue into a real election issue, and an issue which helped decide people's votes at the polls. I was therefore ecstatic when logging finally stopped, and this became one of the first of Labor's policies to be implemented. However, we still have much work to do to ensure the sustainability of both our environment and local communities who need viable livelihoods.

This leads me to speak more broadly about the ability of people and communities to shape and control their individual family and community lives, particularly in a rapidly changing and increasingly globalised world. As I said before, there is some talk, but I suspect there is an even greater subcurrent of feeling, about the sense that people cannot influence the rapid changes fuelled by globalisation that are shaping our world and our local communities. Globalisation has, in part, meant that it is accepted that Governments must curb their spending and restructure their economies in order to participate in international markets. I believe many people have correctly perceived that our social and economic choices have narrowed because of what international markets will allow. This in turn has fed cynicism about the political process, as people question the ability of Governments and politicians to solve the problems facing our communities.

Community and Economy

Government, business and the media place a huge emphasis on our economy. I am not saying this is not justified. However, I suggest that this has at times been at the expense of community values and at the expense of dialogue about what we can do to build communities. For example, increased emphasis on productivity and efficiency has demanded from people longer and longer working hours, which cannot help but be at the expense of people's personal, family and community relationships. Paradoxically, many others remain on the unemployment queue. Other examples include the privatisation of school cleaning and the contracting out of many social services, so that the bottom line is no longer community outcomes but profitability and competition. We have a strong discourse in both our local and international communities that promotes the principles of the market economy. However, the value systems that support community and social justice are more diffuse and for some reason are seen as less tangible than the market. Therefore, we often rely on economic and market indicators to show us how well we are doing as a community. Hon Geoff Gallop touched on these issues in a speech he presented a few years ago to the Western Australian branch of the Economic Society of Australia. He pointed out the flaws of using growth in gross domestic product as a measure of society's progress and wellbeing. The clean-up costs of a massive oil spill would show up as a positive in our GDP while the work of householders in caring for children and the elderly and volunteer work would not. Many of the things that make living in Western Australia worthwhile are the result of voluntary contributions, community activism, sporting club activities, environmental restoration projects, firefighting and meals on wheels. People's

contributions to local communities are endless. I hope that the Labor Government can turn serious attention to valuing properly the healthy and happy communities that are so important to our quality of life.

There is no doubt that there have been both winners and losers in the course of globalisation. It has opened the way for huge economic exports of iron ore, other natural resources and primary produce. Over the past few decades it has contributed to significant economic growth. However, the importance we have placed on the market and maintaining economic growth has been used as an excuse not to tackle pressing social, environmental and justice issues. A good example is the way the previous Government saw native title as a threat to the economy. I believe this purported threat is neither real nor likely. Indigenous people know it is a matter of balance; the naysayers do not. The previous Government did not approach the process with the same sense of goodwill, and I hope that we can improve things. More and more, people are now realising that we cannot simply let the market rule. The Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse emissions is an example of the collective, worldwide recognition that market forces must be reined in to prevent the destruction of our planet. I have been mortified at Australia's lack of commitment to the Kyoto Protocol to decrease greenhouse emissions. The weakness of our position contributes to enabling the United States to snub its nose at this very important issue. John Howard has turned his back and Australia is not pulling its weight in this regard. That does not mean Western Australia must follow his lead. All Western Australians must pull their weight; as the saying goes, "Think global; act local." Indeed, should Western Australia fail in reducing emissions, it will put us behind economically because we will fail to maximise our use of new and important technologies. Globalisation, which has significantly increased our level of consumption and industrialisation, has greatly increased pressure on our environment. The demand for economic growth has been at the expense of our biodiversity and forests and has contributed to the laying to waste of large tracts of land to salinity.

Growing up in the 1980s was a strange dichotomy, as it still is for young people today. Ours was always a globalised world. The focus of our world is on consumer culture, but we are being increasingly educated about and made aware of the perils this culture presents to our natural environment. Globalisation has brought with it an escalation in our consumer culture. Our acceptance of that culture is dangerous not only to the environment, but also to our social fabric. More and more of life's opportunities are available only if one has money. We have reached the point at which young people cannot hang out in shopping malls. They are asked to move on by security if they have no money to spend. We cannot continue to restrict people's ability to participate in society according to whether or not they have money. Families with unemployed breadwinners find that their children cannot afford to participate in local sporting clubs. This is one of the reasons for the backlash against the federal Government in response to the impact of the goods and services tax on hotel beer prices. Australians were offended by a tax on basic social interaction - meeting one's friends at the pub for a quiet beer.

As Western Australians, we cannot surrender our powers as a community or a democracy to the so-called inevitable forces of the market and globalisation. I am not antiglobalisation but we must shape our own State and community and not let market forces be the sole dictators of our values and direction. We must remember that we live in a community, not an economy.

Tackling these issues will present many challenges for Governments around the world as we head deeper into the twenty-first century. I do not believe that Governments should just seek to ameliorate the inequities that economic globalisation can impose on communities. We must do more to push the principles of international democracy in order to exercise some international control. Members might wonder why I bother to make that point in State Parliament. I agree with Dee Margetts that confronting this issue is a job for not only our federal Government, but also state and local Governments which are continuously confronted with the consequences of

our increasingly globalised world. If we want a global economy, we must also be a fully functional global community with all its accountabilities.

Improving Democracy

I passionately believe in improving the quality of our democracy. Recently, I have enjoyed reading about the history of women gaining the vote in Western Australia. In 1899, women gained the right to vote by a concurrence of women's demands and political expediency on the part of the Government. In the late 1890s, the Premier, Sir John Forrest, appeared an inflexible opponent of women's suffrage, although his wife, Lady Forrest, was a determined advocate of enfranchisement. During a parliamentary debate on the matter in December 1897 the Premier said, "I would like to know what would be the feelings of any man who works for his living if, on returning home after a hard days work, seeking to provide for his wife and family, he found his wife had gone to a political meeting."

These views prevailed until he thought that women's voices would balance the radical and growing voices of workers in the goldfields. In 1899 women gained the right to vote. It was hoped that by doing so, it would swing the balance of power back to the more gentrified coastal towns. The hard work and energy of women suffrage campaigners also did much to win John Forrest and his allies over to the side of democracy. Although we can reflect proudly on the fact that Western Australia was one of the first democracies to give white women the vote, it was, sadly, a long time - 1963 - before the property franchise was completely removed in this place, something which would have also contributed to excluding women.

There are parallels between the campaign for women's suffrage and our current one vote, one value debate. I am incredulous that a vote in the Mining and Pastoral Region is worth four times that of a vote in my electorate of the East Metropolitan Region. If we want to continue to claim to be a democracy, we must stick to a principle of one vote, one value. No citizen should have a greater democratic voice than any other. Members of this place must continue to examine the quality of our franchise in terms of how representative it is of the community. We should do so on democratic principles and not political expediency. I believe the problem of vote weighting in the election of members to this place has caused more than one travesty of justice. We must pursue one vote, one value for the sake of our democracy. Without vote weighting, I am sure that the State would have made more progress on lesbian and gay rights and rights for Aboriginal people, particularly concerning native title.

We should introduce public funding for elections at a state level. Although some people would express alarm at public funds going to political parties, we must counter a growing cynicism in the community about business exercising influence, whether subtle or overt, over political parties and politicians. Although I understand that Government must smooth the way for business to operate free of impediments, business - as I reflected on in my earlier comments about globalisation - should not impede democracy.

I believe that we should examine lowering the voting age to 16, as the majority of people of this age are at least as politically aware as other voters. They have their own articulate views and opinions, to which members of Parliament should be responsive and accountable.

Women in Western Australia

Women in Western Australia have come a long way since the suffrage debates of more than 100 years ago, and I make special mention of the many women, especially Labor women, who have contributed broadly to politics and the feminist cause. At the first Labor women's conference in Western Australia in 1912, the following motions were passed advocating female representation in Parliament and equal pay -

That this first Labor Women's Conference urges upon the Government to promote legislation that will remove sex disability and grant to women full citizenship, thereby permitting them to nominate as candidates for the Legislative Council and Assembly, municipal councils . . .

That equality of employment and wage be persistently advocated for men and women, practised in our own labor union's business transactions.

Although women have come a long way, these issues are as relevant as ever. There are more women in this place than ever before, but they still do not comprise 50 per cent of members, which is how it should be. Equality of wages between women and men in this State has gone backwards. We must urgently address that. I am pleased that the Government has begun tackling this by increasing the minimum wage.

We live a complex and fast-changing world that can at times be a struggle for everyone, but especially for those who are impoverished by economic or social marginalisation. Fortunately, Western Australia has many committed citizens working together to improve our community and protect our environment. As parliamentarians, our worth will depend on our links with the people at the coalface of the hands-on work of trying to build a better world.

I conclude by saying thanks, firstly, to mum and dad, my sister, Fleur, and my brother, Nicholas, who are brilliant people and have been of great support. I thank Carmen Lawrence for being a mentor and supporter, and someone who has inspired and challenged me. I have a deep respect for her. She has shown me that the satisfaction gained from assisting people and communities far outweighs the stress and adversity of politics. I thank my friends and supporters in and outside the Australian Labor Party, who are too numerous to mention; however, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge Penny Sharpe, Jo Tilly, Alan Kirkland, Philip O'Donoghue, Ruth Webber, Jacke Alderson, Roger Janssen, Teresa Browne, Emma Stallard, Marinomoana Ward, Kim Bryant, Maddelena Torre, Jaye Radisich, Marlene Robinson and Jan O'Meara. I also thank Young Labor and Emily's List. I especially thank Alanna Clohesy for TLC at stressful moments, and I extra especially thank Steven Dawson and his family. I thank my partner of eight years, Linda, without whom I would not be here. Our partnership is not only one of passion and love, but also has been full of political debate and practical assistance. I am very lucky to have a partner who understands politics and political life, and whose political talents in many ways surpass my own. I thank those involved in the lower House Labor election campaigns in the East Metropolitan Region for working so hard and thereby assisting my election to this place. Lastly, I thank the electors of East Metropolitan Region. I humbly assure them that I do not take my place in this House for granted, and that I will remain committed to working for a better future for all Western Australians.

[Applause.]
