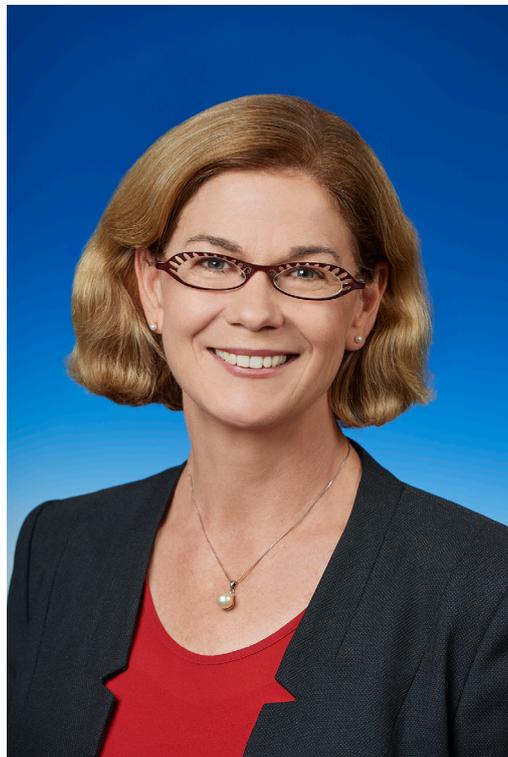




PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Meredith Jane Hammat, MLA
(Member for Mirrabooka)

Legislative Assembly
Address-in-Reply
Wednesday, 5 May 2021

Reprinted from Hansard

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 5 May 2021

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 29 April on the following motion moved by Ms L. Dalton —

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

To His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, 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.

MS M.J. HAMMAT (Mirrabooka) [4.30 pm]: I add my congratulations to Madam Speaker on her election as the first female Speaker of this house. I also congratulate the Premier and all members who have been elected to this Parliament, especially those who, like me, are here for the first time.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the traditional owners on whose country we meet. I acknowledge their continuing connection to the land and pay my deep respects to their elders past and present.

First and foremost, I thank the good people of Mirrabooka for the faith that they have shown in electing me as the member for Mirrabooka. It is a great privilege to be here, and I promise I will work hard for you and I will do my best for you.

I would like to acknowledge the former member for Mirrabooka, Janine Freeman, and thank her for her passionate advocacy for our community over the last 12 years. She has worked tirelessly for the people of Mirrabooka, and she has an abiding affection for our community. In return, she is much loved by people in the electorate, as they have reminded me almost daily since I was preselected as the Labor candidate! I am very grateful to Janine for her friendship and for her generous support. I am aware that I have big shoes to fill as I seek to follow in her footsteps.

I also need to acknowledge you, Madam Acting Speaker, as the member for Landsdale, who until this election represented the suburbs of Girrawheen and Marangaroo. People in these suburbs have also been quick to tell me that the member for Landsdale has been a committed, hardworking local member for them for more than 20 years and that they, quite rightly, expect nothing less from me. While campaigning, I regularly assured people that I will work hard to live up to the high standard that both Janine and Margaret have set, and I reconfirm that promise to the good people of Mirrabooka today.

MY COMMUNITY

On a wall in my office hangs a letter written in 1954 by the then Under Secretary for Lands that tells us that Mirrabooka is named for the Southern Cross. However, the well-known Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal, or Kath Walker as she has also been known, tells the story in more detail in her book *Stradbroke Dreamtime*.

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She tells the story of Biame, the good spirit in the sky, who was extremely busy guarding the Aboriginal people and found that he could not watch them all the time. He decided he needed the assistance of someone to help him to care for and protect his people. He chose a man named Mirrabooka, who was wise and much loved by his people for the way he cared for the welfare of his tribe. She writes —

‘Biame gave him a spirit form and placed him in the sky among the stars ... Biame gave Mirrabooka lights for his hands and feet and stretched him across the sky, so that he could watch for ever over the tribes he loved. And the tribes could look up to him from the Earth and see the stars which were Mirrabooka’s eyes gazing down on them’.

The electorate of Mirrabooka comprises the suburbs of Balga, Mirrabooka, Koondoola, Girrawheen, Marangaroo and part of Dianella. It is one of the most ethnically diverse electorates in the state. Many Aboriginal Australians call Mirrabooka home, with a continuous connection to the land stretching back tens of thousands of years. The area was considered a rich source of food for Aboriginal people for thousands of years. In the same way that the Mirrabooka of Aboriginal legend cared for and protected the Aboriginal people, so, too, the electorate of Mirrabooka provides refuge for those who come from around the world to settle in its suburbs. Of those new arrivals, some have come as migrants and others have come as refugees, having left political, social and economic upheaval in their home country. Around half of all people in the electorate were born overseas and around half speak a language other than English while at home. The largest group—outside those with Australian or English backgrounds—are people who have come from Vietnam, followed by Burmese people from Myanmar and those of Indian descent. I am fortunate to have recently been a part of many joyful community gatherings, such as the celebration of the Kachin harvest festival, the Karen and Chin New Year celebrations and the Lohri festival. It was a great pleasure to join with the Vietnamese community for its Tet celebrations, welcoming the Vietnamese New Year, at the Girrawheen Senior High School oval in March. The vibrant community celebration brought crowds and festivity, culture, dancing and amazing food to the heart of our community.

Representing the people of Mirrabooka has also brought me closer to world events, as local constituents regularly speak with me about social and political upheaval being experienced by friends and family in their country of origin. Many have reflected on how fortunate we are to live in Western Australia during the global pandemic that has wrought havoc on the health and economic welfare of so many people around the world. The contrast between our experience in WA and how other parts of the world have fared during the pandemic is stark. Quite rightly, people have praised the leadership of the McGowan Labor government in keeping our community safe during these most challenging of times. They have expressed their gratitude for our amazing healthcare workers and a public health system that has responded so capably to the challenge of keeping us safe during these past 12 months. Reverberations from global upheaval touch the lives of my constituents every day. The Burmese people in Mirrabooka have been deeply impacted since the military seized control in Myanmar on 1 February this year. Many civilians in Myanmar have lost their lives in the violence that has followed. These are not just events happening in some country far away, but rather there is a deep and daily impact on my constituents who have been so distressed to witness the loss of life and the loss of democracy.

People in Mirrabooka share a deep sense of community and a deep sense of pride in our area. It is a community that is resilient and knows the importance of standing alongside one another. Everywhere I go in Mirrabooka, there are many excellent examples of collaboration and cooperation. State and local governments, community groups, religious organisations, sporting organisations and businesses are finding ways to collaborate and bring people together. They are finding ways to build strong bonds of community and ways to improve the lives of the people who live there.

Balga Senior High School collaborates with the Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Corporation to help young Aboriginal people grow into valued cultural leaders. At the Mirrabooka markets, the Mirrabooka Square collaborates with MercyCare to create a community market that helps small, mostly home-based businesses grow into retail outlets. State and local governments work with newly arrived migrants to provide them with mentoring and training that will help them find professional and skilled work. Soccer clubs and football teams are formed to bring young people together to learn about teamwork, leadership and discipline. The Naala Djookan Healing Centre, a one-stop shop for people experiencing domestic violence, is an excellent example of how collaboration and connectedness is making our community resilient and achieving better lives for people in the area. These collaborations demonstrate that Mirrabooka is built on mutual respect. Although there is diversity, there is not division. There is a great appreciation among the people of Mirrabooka that the best way to improve our economic and social circumstances is by working together, building strong relationships and by standing together in solidarity with each other.

EARLY YEARS

I learnt a lot about community, growing up in small country towns in the great southern region. I learnt a lot about solidarity—although we don't call it that where I come from! I come from a long line of resourceful and hardworking country people. As a young man, my maternal grandfather, Don Hill, built a shack from corrugated iron near Travellers Lake in New South Wales. He then lived in that shack and called it home while he worked to transform the saltbush scrub around it into a sheep station. When my dad's father died at age 49, my grandmother Patricia Hammat carried on running their sheep station, also in the west of New South Wales, while she had two young daughters of primary school age still at home.

This part of Australia is vast and remote, and at the time it lacked communication and services. When going to town meant several hours of slow car travel over sand dunes and opening and closing gates along the way, it made sense that neighbours looked out for one another and helped each other through the best and worst of times. My parents, Andrew and Lesley, arrived in Western Australia in 1963. They had just married and moved to this great state in search of opportunity and land. They packed up a Volkswagen Beetle with all their worldly belongings and made their way to WA. They arrived just days before Christmas and celebrated their first Christmas in WA with tinned peaches and tinned ham, eaten on wooden crates, as they had arrived here with neither furniture nor funds to do any more. My dad worked as a farmhand in Broomehill and my mum as a midwife. At the same time, my dad secured his own property on newly released land north of Jerramungup. For the first part of my childhood, he worked as a farmhand at Broomehill during the week and spent almost every weekend working the block in Jerramungup, clearing, fencing and turning the sand and scrubland into viable farmland. Through their example, my parents taught me a great deal about hard work. They also taught me the importance of looking after your neighbours and making sure that nobody gets left behind. They taught me about the importance of community and that we all have a responsibility to contribute to building something better. These values have stayed with me throughout my working life, and they will continue to guide my work in this Parliament.

I started school at the Broomehill Primary School, a small school with about 60 students and only three classrooms. I later attended Kojonup District High School and completed years 11 and 12 at Governor Stirling Senior High School in Midland. I am very proud of my public school education. Our public schools consistently deliver excellent education outcomes and transform the lives of young people. Although Broomehill Primary School was a small school, its quality of teachers, education assistants and other staff was excellent. I received an outstanding education from all the schools I attended, and so I take this opportunity to thank all those who work in our public schools and particularly those teachers who contributed to my education and my progress to this place.

UNION MOVEMENT

Like many young people, while I was at university I supported myself financially with a number of casual jobs in hospitality and the fast-food industries. Because I could not live at home, these were jobs that I relied on to pay rent and buy food. It was these casual jobs that made me a unionist, as I discovered, like many young people experience even today, that it was all too common to be underpaid and unfairly treated. By the age of 18 I knew enough about work and the law to know that what I was experiencing was not fair and it was not legal. I was also smart enough to know that if I raised my concerns with my boss as a casual worker, it would only lead to my hours getting cut or losing my job altogether, rather than any improvement in my circumstances. Although laws that protect workers are important, it became clear to me at this time that laws on their own are not enough to give working people protection from a bad boss or equal power with their employers; it is only unions that do that. So it was, that when I started my first job after finishing university I immediately joined the union.

I found in the union movement many of the same values of community, solidarity and making sure no-one gets left behind, which I had learnt while growing up. I am indebted to former leaders of the Australian Services Union who took a chance by employing me in a full-time role when I was young and inexperienced. When I can, I try to repay this debt to young people I meet who are just starting out in their careers by offering support, encouragement and opportunities.

I spent over 17 years at the ASU, including time as assistant branch secretary. I was elected as the president of UnionsWA in 2008 and then elected as secretary in 2012, when Simone McGurk left UnionsWA to campaign for the 2013 state election. I am particularly grateful to her for the straight talking and advice she gave me at that time, without which I may never have accepted the opportunity that was presented to me. I also recall that when I started at the ASU, I was the first woman to be employed to organise the mainly male union members in the energy industry. At the time, Simone McGurk was an official with the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and was a valuable role model for me, providing me with an example of how a youngish woman in her 20s might organise workers in a male-dominated industry. I am indebted to her for a great deal of wise counsel, assistance and friendship over the years we have known each other.

It was a great privilege to represent working people of this state and I want to thank union members of WA for giving me that honour. Overwhelmingly, union members are people who understand what it means to ensure that no-one is left behind. They understand solidarity—that is, standing side by side with one another, offering strength and support, not judging and not condescending. Union members are people who care about not just themselves, but also others in their workplaces, in their industries and in the broader community. They understand that our society and our economy are strongest when we focus on our collective wellbeing, instead of just focusing on delivering benefits for the few.

I became a Labor Party member because of the union movement. It was the union movement that made me active and politicised me. It was the union movement that taught me, particularly during the campaign against the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation, that we need governments that are prepared to fight for a fair go for everyday working people, and that, in particular, we need Labor governments.

My experiences in life have shown me that a fair go and a good job cannot be taken for granted. As secretary of UnionsWA, I have stood up for WA workplaces to be fair, equitable and safe. I have fought for a fair go for everyday working people and I intend to carry on that work. Good, well-paid jobs are an important way that we can build a society in which nobody is left behind. For most of us, a good, secure job is the cornerstone to being able to live a good life. A good job provides the income, security and peace of mind that allows us to buy a house, have a family and enjoy family time on weekends. I am proud to be a part of a government that has a comprehensive plan to create good jobs for everyday working people.

Supporting local manufacturing and having a long-term plan to make things here in WA will diversify our economy and give us access to well-paid, highly skilled jobs of the future. Making it easier and more affordable for people to go to TAFE and access vocational training will help people get skilled jobs. Investing in critical infrastructure such as Metronet will create jobs and also make public transport accessible and affordable for everyday people. Having a strong safety net of public services like schools, hospitals and other services gives everyone a fair start in life and support when they need it the most, regardless of how much they earn or where they live. We should also ensure that so-called women's work is properly recognised and paid. Many women in my electorate work in aged care, health and community services, retail and other service industries. We need to take steps so that the occupations and industries that predominantly employ women do not continue to undervalue them for their skill and for their contribution to the economy. I applaud the work of unions, the United Workers Union and the Australian Services Union, towards addressing the structural issues that are contributing to the gender pay gap.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: We live in a moment of great opportunity to create the secure, well-paid jobs that we need for WA's future, jobs that will build both a prosperous economy and a fair and inclusive society. I want to be a part of making sure that everyday people get what they need to live good lives, and I want to be part of the debate about how we share around the wealth of this great state to make sure that everybody gets a fair go.

THANKS

There have been a great many people who have supported and encouraged me along the way; it is impossible to mention them all by name. Many union members, delegates and union leaders have provided me with so much sensible advice, encouragement and friendship over my 25 years in the union movement. I would like to particularly thank today Carolyn Smith, Wayne Wood, Steve McCartney, Jon Phillips, Pat Byrne, Rikki Hendon, Peter O'Keefe and Mick Buchan. Some of those people are here and I want to also thank them for being able to endure yet another speech from me! They have certainly endured enough over the last eight years. To Owen Whittle, who follows me as secretary, and all the wonderful people who worked at UnionsWA during my time there, thank you for your friendship and all that you do for the working people of WA. UnionsWA is a special place to work, and you have an incredibly important role to play in the debates that will shape the future of our state. I wish you well in all that you do.

Thank you to the people who worked so hard on my campaign and kept me diligently working to the plan, especially the ever-fabulous Izzy McDonald and Amy Blitvich, who both came early and stayed to the end. I also thank Katherine, Sue, Donata, Hiba and Carly, who are an important part of the team. I extend my great thanks to the members of the Nollamara branch and the many, many other volunteers from the community, the Labor Party and the union movement who joined our campaign because they believed in what we were doing. I am particularly grateful to Ibrahim, Emmanuel, Dave and Laurice, Robert, Hassain, Lovelte, and Kayande.

As always, the final word and the greatest thanks must go to my family. I thank my husband, Matthew, my two sons, Adam and Jeremy, mum and dad, my brother, Steve, and his partner, Monica, for their love and support, without which none of this would have been possible. I know I can rely on you to keep me grounded and I know you will ensure that I never become too big for my boots.

Let me say in conclusion that it is a great honour to be here as the member for Mirrabooka. However, the point is not just to be here to enjoy the fine debate in this chamber. What matters is that we build something better during the time that we have here. Like my grandfather who built a sheep station from a corrugated iron shack in the far west of New South Wales or the migrants and refugees who settle in Mirrabooka to make a better life for themselves and their families, we

all bear a responsibility to build something better for the generations of Western Australians who will come after us. It is an opportunity to build a better life for individuals, a more prosperous economy and a fairer and more inclusive society. I will work hard to achieve these things for the people of Mirrabooka. During my time in this place, I will hold in my heart and in my head the story of the original Mirrabooka who so loved his tribe, he was raised up to care for and protect them. Thank you.

[Applause.]
