



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Paul Papalia MLA
(Member for Peel)

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 27 February 2007

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Inaugural Speech

Mr P. PAPALIA (Peel) [7.00 pm]: Mr Speaker, I stand here before you the result of a striking decision by the people of the Peel electorate. Asked by many and expected by most to punish the incumbent government in this by-election, the voters of Peel instead took a different path. On 3 February they resoundingly endorsed the leadership of the Premier and this government. Not surprisingly, the result confounded the pundits. Why, they asked, would people choose to support a government in such a controversial by-election? Why would they not only support that government but also return its candidate with an even greater margin? Mired in a cynical and constrained view of political life, some commentators sought to rewrite their pre-election assessment. "It was always a safe seat", they declared; "the people of Peel are blue-collar workers who will always vote Labor. They have very short memories these days and incumbency is everything." Mr Speaker, it will probably not surprise you that, being new to politics and unencumbered by years of grinding pessimism, I have a different view.

In the course of the campaign, I had the pleasure of meeting thousands of voters in the Peel electorate. I met them at their doors, in their shopping centres, at community centres, clubs and associations. I met them in the southern suburbs of Kwinana, the leafy streets of Settlers Hills, the established pockets of Woodbridge and Hillman and in the rapidly expanding coastal strip in suburbs as diverse as Waikiki, Warnbro, Port Kennedy, Secret Harbour, Golden Bay and Singleton. Although I could not meet all those who reside in the semi-rural expanses of Baldivis, I wrote to all of them and received dozens of detailed replies. The people I met share many things in common. These are people who aspire to a good life. They care about their community and are angered by antisocial behaviour such as vandalism and irresponsible driving. They want the best for their children and grandchildren, including good schools, employment opportunities and high quality health care. Overwhelmingly, they care about their environment and recognise the need to protect and preserve the many unique natural attributes of the Peel electorate and this state. They see security of water supplies and combating global warming as mainstream issues that we all need to confront in a positive fashion. But - and it is a salient point overlooked by many commentators - these people are not a homogenous mass easily pigeonholed under the label "definite ALP voter". Rather, I believe the people of the Peel electorate share other characteristics that explain the election

result. They are positive and optimistic. Faced with the alternative of anger and negativity, they chose hope. Given the chance to support an honest and forthright Premier, willing to take hard decisions, the people of Peel grasped that chance with both hands. Instead of the easy, negative option of sending a message to the government, the people of Peel took the more challenging decision to encourage a fresh approach. This is why so many commentators were perplexed by the result. Optimism does not appear in the lexicon of the average political analyst. By contrast, optimism and hope are things I have encountered constantly throughout my short but very crowded political life.

That I entered this process at all is entirely attributable to the vision and courage of three men and one woman. The three men are the Premier, Hon Alan Carpenter, MLA; my old navy colleague, Hon Mark McGowan, MLA; and the Australian Labor Party state secretary, Mr Bill Johnston. Despite my complete lack of political experience, and in contravention of accepted conventions, these men saw fit to ask me to nominate for preselection, and then supported me through the subsequent turbulent months. Theirs was a bold decision and I will at all times aim to fulfil their trust.

The woman to whom I refer is my wife, partner and closest friend Gillian. Together, we considered the consequences of following this new path, and together we decided it was an obligation rather than a choice. But she alone will bear the brunt of my absence and the burden of public life without accolades. I will be forever grateful for that and will always strive to repay her support in kind.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many others who have joined this journey. The dedication, enthusiasm and energy of our campaign volunteers were constant sources of inspiration. The steady hand of experience provided by Simon Mead, Hon Kate Doust, MLC, and Margaret and Max Duff firmed resolve and calmed nerves when things might otherwise have gone awry. At the same time, the youthful exuberance and idealism of Terry Healy, Gus Riggs, Varun Gosh and Esmeralda Rocha proved irresistibly contagious. All of these people, teamed with the serene and calming presence of Maureen Meredith, made my first political campaign far less turbulent than it might otherwise have been.

I was also buoyed by my encounters with the wider labour movement. Coming from the outside, I had been used to the critics invoking the image of the Labor Party as some type of machine, grinding its way on an endless quest for power and influence. The portrayal of the unions as faceless monsters intent on wreaking havoc on workplaces and destroying the economy is standard conservative fare. My experience has been different. The hundreds of Labor Party and union volunteers who joined me in doorknocking during the campaign and who flocked to assist on the day of the election were just people. People driven by a shared ideal that government should afford a fair go to every member of our society and should be responsible for offering a hand up to those who fall by the way. People willing to sacrifice their time and energy in the service of that ideal. But other than that, they are just good, honest people. People typified by the members of the Australian Labor Party sub-branches comprising the federal Brand electorate council. None had met me before preselection, but all willingly embraced and supported the campaign. I am proud of all these Labor Party people. That I stand here now is tribute to their collective generosity and hard work.

One of the good Labor people who helped in the campaign has, in my opinion, also contributed to the building of this nation as much as any Western Australian in modern times. Hon Kim Beazley, MP, rightly lists the two-ocean navy concept and the associated basing of our ships and submarines at Garden Island amongst his proudest achievements. As a consequence of this far-sighted decision, the Peel electorate has the highest density of serving military personnel of any electorate in the state. The fact that both the member for Rockingham and I have a Navy background shows that Labor

recognises the importance of service personnel to the Rockingham-Kwinana region, the state and the nation.

My Navy service as a clearance diver has shaped who I am. Mateship, determination, courage and an abiding sense of humour distinguish the clearance diver. His forebears dived in murky waters, or waded across mudflats, to render safe by hand mines and bombs never before encountered. Their heroics stamped them as the bravest of the brave and ensured they were among the most highly decorated Australians of World War II. Foremost of these men was the late, great Western Australian Leon Verdi Goldsworthy, GC, DSC, GM. Subsequent generations have seen hazardous service in Malaya, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Gulf War, East Timor, and Iraq, and many other smaller events around the globe. They served in the counter-terrorist squadron of the Special Air Service Regiment for 15 years and continue the same role with the Commando Battalion to this day. I am honoured to be an ex-Navy frogman and remain thankful for the friendship and support of so many who carry the same title.

In particular I wish to acknowledge three ex-divers and their partners who supported my campaign: Mr Simon Smith, recipient of a Commendation for Distinguished Service in East Timor, and his partner, Raylene; Captain Adam McPhail, Cape Cuvier port pilot, and his partner, Veronica; and Captain Michael Edwards, OAM, Cape Cuvier port pilot, and his partner, Ilonka. All residents of Peel, they have been, and continue to be, stalwart friends. Veterans' support for my campaign was not limited to the recently retired. I am also very grateful for the assistance and advice of two ex-soldiers, Mr Terry Healy senior, and Mr Barry Gilbert. They are representative of a great many of my constituents, and their presence on my team meant an enormous amount to me.

Labor acknowledges the high regard in which members of the service and ex-service community are held in today's society. My feelings reflect this attitude. I am proud of my service. However, I am even more proud of the men and women who continue to serve. If I achieve anything in my time in this place, I hope it will be a greater voice for our service and ex-service, and in particular our veteran, community. They and their families deserve more than a photo opportunity on their return from a mission. Those who place themselves in harm's way on our behalf deserve our ongoing respect, gratitude and care.

In contrast with the respect so rightly afforded to our ex-service community, the political process and those engaged in it are increasingly held in low esteem. Many times during the Peel campaign a range of people questioned my motivation, if not my sanity. One senior journalist, touchingly concerned for my wellbeing, asked why on earth I would willingly relinquish the highly revered status of a veteran for perhaps one of the most derided professions in the community - a politician. In retrospect, one response might have been that I refuse to relinquish that status. After all, politicians are just people who bring with them, and draw upon, the sum total of their previous life experience. However, that reply would not do justice to the question. I am deeply concerned by the ongoing decline in respect for the political process. Mesmerised by constant revelations of the human frailties suffered by some in the political process, we risk diminishing more than the reputations of a few politicians. Daily public focus exclusively on wrongdoing and perceived wrongdoing by the few disregards the goodwill and honest intentions of the many. To remain optimistic is difficult. Far easier instead to mock the entire political process and all those engaged therein, or, worse still, to opt out entirely and claim no interest whatsoever in the political process. As a society we risk succumbing to political apathy.

The answer to the journalist's question of why would I become a politician is simple. Given the opportunity, I felt obliged to step forward. Generations of Australian men and women have sacrificed much so that we can benefit from this political system. It is one of the best political systems in the world. It is the bedrock upon which all our freedoms, rights and conventions rest. To enjoy the benefits of a representative democracy such as ours is a very rare privilege. I have been to

parts of the world in which people would willingly forfeit everything for a democracy that is remotely like ours. I also believe there are many good men and women on both sides of politics. I believe that all those who enter this place do so with the intention of doing good and serving their community. The vast majority of members maintain that focus and contribute greatly to the betterment of our society. I believe it is essential that we attract good aspirants to political life from as many walks of life as possible. Therefore, faced with the opportunity to contribute, I simply had no choice.

Beyond the apathy and cynicism of politics I will focus on another issue that increasingly threatens the wellbeing of our society. To illustrate my concern I request the indulgence of members as I tell the story of a man I know. This man came to Australia from overseas. Although he gratefully adopted his new home, this man spoke English with a broad accent and preferred to speak to his friends in his mother tongue. His wife wore traditional clothing that many Australians found to be dark and strange looking. The man and his wife had children who were born in Australia, but their family was still viewed with a little suspicion by other Australians. This suspicion was heightened when Australia joined a war in which many of the man's former countrymen were on the opposing side. Concerned over security and fearful of attack, the man's neighbours reported what they believed to be suspicious activity. They were concerned that he might be a terrorist. The man was removed from his family and jailed. Left behind, his family were subjected to harassment by the authorities and verbal abuse by their fellow Australians.

That story probably sounds familiar to many members and, no doubt, some members are already categorising me as a bleeding heart for telling this story. Maybe I am soft on terrorists or anti-American. Maybe I lack courage and want to cut and run instead of standing by my mates. Today, these are common criticisms of anybody who is willing to stand up for people like this man. However, there is a point to my telling this story. The man whose story I told was eventually released from confinement. He and his wife made an honest contribution to Australian society. His sons and daughter went on to make their own contribution. Indeed, inside a decade of this man's release from confinement, one of his sons served in the Australian Army in the Korean War. His grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren continue to make contributions to this day. In fact, one of that man's grandsons stands before this house as the most recently elected member of Parliament in the state in which a little over half a century ago he was imprisoned as a potential terrorist.

I am not soft on terrorists. I am not anti-American. I love my country and will willingly do anything to defend it against a threat. However, I am gravely concerned when minority groups are used as scapegoats and targeted for political purposes. I believe the best way to defend this country against internal threats is to promote inclusiveness. Minority groups that feel they are part of society will work to defend it and are best placed to identify rogue elements. Debate on this matter is often led at the federal level, but the impact of that debate and subsequent changes to society are experienced in every state, including this state. By isolating people we fuel discontent and risk missing out on potentially significant contributions from future generations. I believe it is the role of government to exercise good leadership and assist everybody to make a full contribution to society.

This government is leading for all people. The people of the electorate of Peel recognised that at the by-election. They could see the evidence: the massive Perth to Mandurah railway and Perth to Bunbury highway projects; a \$100 million upgrade to Rockingham-Kwinana hospital; a \$107 million investment in school infrastructure; and a commitment to a transit police station in Rockingham and a police station in Secret Harbour.

Since the election they will also have noted the move by this government to fund a shared equity scheme to assist with the housing needs of those challenged by the state of our economy. There is always more to be done and I look forward to being part of the team that continues to lead in this state's progress. I also take the opportunity to repeat my election night pledge to the people of Peel: I will never forget who put me in the job and will always remember who I work for.

In closing, Mr Speaker, I must return to the subject of respect for the political process. While it is true that many wondered why I would ever choose this path, it is just as true that many of our family and friends have been incredibly supportive. I thank my parents, Frank and Edna Papalia, who are here today from my home town of Burekup, for their unstinting loyalty and practical support throughout the campaign. They raised all their sons with a touchstone sense of right and wrong. It has guided me through my life and I trust it will aid me in navigating these new and challenging waters. I thank Gillian's mother, Patricia Weston, for her unfailing support throughout this process. I might add that it made the decision process far easier knowing that my mother-in-law was an absolute true believer. To my brothers, sister-in-law, nephews, extended family, including Gillian's extended family, and friends, some of whom are here today, I thank them for their support and the flood of best wishes we have received. They all served to strengthen our resolve. I thank our little boys, Daniel and Jacob, for always reminding me of what is truly important: I hope that one day they will forgive me for disrupting their lives. Finally, to the journalists concerned over my well-being, I say thank you, but rest assured I am a Burekup boy and, by comparison, Balmain boys are wimps!
[Applause.]
