



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Sheila Mills MLC
(Member for South Metropolitan)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

Inaugural Speech

Hon Sheila Mills MLC

(Member for South Metropolitan)

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON SHEILA MILLS (South Metropolitan) [7.31 pm]: Mr President, I congratulate you on your election to the high office of President of the Legislative Council. I also congratulate members on their election and re-election to this house, and His Excellency the Governor for his address. I also congratulate Hon Bob Carr on his tenth year today as Labor Premier of New South Wales.

Mr President, I was born in Wales. Most of my family still live there. They are proud, working-class people - real working-class people - not the redefined Peter Costello variety. One grandfather worked down the coalmines and the other worked in a brick factory. My father was a strong man. He had no privilege in upbringing, but through sheer determination he became a computer scientist after being a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm in World War II. It was always my father's belief that education was the key to social and economic emancipation. His view was that he did better than his father and it was my mission in life to do better than he did. Thus, he spent a large amount of his time and energy making sure that I achieved, not only at an academic level, which was his priority, but also in sport and music. I used to play a pretty mean tenor saxophone and was quite a handy timpani player. I look forward to joining Hon Sally Talbot in a jam session one day. The one piece I would like to play would be the Triumphal March from Verdi's Aida!

No-one in my family had ever stayed at school beyond 15 years of age. Further education was not an option, even if they had the ability and aspirations. I was the first person in my family to go to university, such was my father's determination that I succeed. I attended the University of Wales. The day that I was scheduled to attend for the first time provided a caravan of family members winding their way down from North Wales to Swansea. It was during my grammar school days that my political opinions started to take a firm shape. This was ably assisted by the headmistress of the school, Miss Dean, who told me that "people like me did not go to university" - my background was obviously not privileged enough. Universities were the province of the well-off and the privileged. Nevertheless, I gained offers from five universities, including Durham and Liverpool. However, I chose the University of Wales. That I was able to take up the offer was thanks to Harold Wilson and the then Labour government which, through a system of grants and means testing, made it possible. I do not know that my father ever saw the irony in this as for some strange reason, which he never articulated, he was an unrepentant Tory. Yet it was Labour that afforded me the opportunity to

which he was so committed. In fact, when I was first able to vote, we went to the polling booth together because he needed to monitor my behaviour. When I came out he asked whom I voted for. I said Wilson and Labour, of course. He did not speak to me for a week. My mother gave me a gold badge of Lenin!

Notwithstanding that, as I stand here today representing the Australian Labor Party, my father would have been a very proud man. My political views sharpened during my time at university, much to my father's chagrin. It was a time of marches, protests and sit-ins. Despite what was hoped to be a sea change in British society, it remained fundamentally non-egalitarian and retained a privileged social structure.

As Mr President would be aware, I have always been a keen advocate of workers' rights and conditions of employment. Since 1970 I have been involved in the union movement. I have been a member of the CPSU/CSA for the past 16 years, the majority of that time as a delegate. Incidentally, for those members who do not know me, I was a parliamentary officer in this Parliament for 15 years. I was the union delegate for a number of those years. My research indicates that only one other parliamentary officer has entered Parliament as a member. That is the deputy leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party, Jenny Macklin, who worked as a researcher in the commonwealth Parliamentary Library. It may amuse some to see a former staff member as a member but, believe me, I have a wealth of experience and insight into the operations of this place.

It seems that my political life has come full circle: from being a worker fighting for the rights of workers to becoming a member legislating for the rights of workers. I will never lose my proletarian agenda.

Academically, as an officer of the Parliament, I engaged in extensive research in parliamentary and governmental structures. It involved both state and federal structures and the interconnection between the two in matters of jurisdiction and constitutional arrangements. This brings me to express a major concern I have about the direction our governmental system is taking. We all know that, since the promulgation of the Australian Constitution, there has been tension between states' rights and a need for an Australian federal government to act in the national interest. At one time or another, both major parties have been accused by the states of a Canberra power grab. However, I do not think there has been a politically sophisticated articulation of Australian federalism since the Whitlam and Fraser new federalisms during the 1970s. There seems to be a lack of understanding of the complex relationship between the states and the commonwealth. Since the 2004 federal election, in an unimaginative and heavy-handed manner, the Prime Minister has once again raised the spectre of Menzies. In his address on federalism to the Menzies Research Centre on 12 April 2005, he said that the goal of the federal government was to expand individual choice, freedom and opportunity, and not to expand the reach of the federal government. Despite the professed Liberal belief in limited government, Menzies simultaneously flaunted a respect for federalism while expanding the powers and functions of the national government. That the federal nature of Australia has been undermined by the financial dominance of the commonwealth is a fact. However, the Howard agenda is to use its financial power to force political and social policies on the states in an unprecedented way and contrary to the states' express wishes at the time of their agreement to federate. State sovereignty existed prior to Federation. That sovereignty was enshrined in the document that the states agreed to. It should also be noted that, at the time of Federation, the sovereignty of Western Australia had not been subjected to participation in the commonwealth. Indeed, had it not been for the free traders from the eastern states, Western Australia would have remained outside the commonwealth entirely. The federal government was allocated those tasks that the states deemed appropriate. The Howard government fails to recognise now, more than ever, that the Gallop government, as do other state governments, has a very important stake in the authoritative determination of public priorities in Western Australia.

Howard's political problem is that, because all state and territory governments are Labor, he has a limited capacity to implement coalition policies at a micro level. The Howard response to this political dilemma is to utilise the coercive powers that are available to him; for example, the corporations power. This issue is not about choices and freedom; it is about coercion and social and political manipulation, which undermines the great Australian principles of egalitarianism, cooperation and a fair go. This is a repudiation of social justice for the states; no matter that individuals have repeatedly exercised their individual choice to vote in Labor governments in every state and territory in this country, no matter that those individuals made that decision because they like the state Labor government's policy ideas about how to best provide choice and opportunity for all or at the very least that they wanted a check on the coalition government. In the Prime Minister's mind, there is only one philosophy with a valid claim to the lofty ideals of expanding individual choice, freedom and opportunity, and that is his own.

It is interesting to note that while Howard is increasingly unilateralist in his dealings with the states, the Productivity Commission's final report on national competition policy tabled in the federal Parliament on 14 April 2005 makes it quite clear that success will depend on cooperative federalism, that national coordination among governments will be critical to good outcomes.

The Prime Minister argues that state incompetence was forcing him to reshape federalism. However, he was not given any mandate to reshape federalism in this country. Certainly Western Australia is the economy driving the nation but it is widely punished by the Howard government for sheer political reasons. It is reassuring to me and to other people on my side of politics that a bipartisan response to Howard centralism has been adopted by the leader of the state opposition and, indeed, the former leader of the state opposition. Furthermore, as prominent conservative commentators point out, the commonwealth is invading areas that one imagines that it would not want. The centralism push is completely out of tune with twenty-first century realities and bucks an international trend by moving towards a centralist system when other countries, including Britain, are moving in the opposite direction. Should the Prime Minister have a referendum on the issue of increasing commonwealth powers, I do not believe that it would succeed. Rather, while recognising the reluctance of the Australian polity to alter its constitutional arrangements, the Prime Minister seeks to bludgeon the states into acquiescence by an overt corruption of the principles of Australian federalism. Historically, Australians have opposed anything that remotely resembles an autocratic accumulation of power to the centre, particularly the so-called outlying states such as Western Australia. We should not forget, students of history, that the secession movement was strong in the 1930s in Western Australia, when a referendum on secession was passed. This attitude is still current among large sections of the Western Australian community, and Howard's approach will result only in the increased alienation of the Western Australian electorate from the commonwealth.

Again, I believe this view is bipartisan in Western Australian politics. My concern is that those who seek to undermine the sovereignty of the states forget the constitutional history of the commonwealth as a creature of the states' desires. Despite the ideological push of the federal government, this state, under our current Premier, will strongly resist any diminution of the capacity of this government to set its own priorities and agenda.

I will, during my time in this place, articulate these views at greater length within the context of commonwealth interference in states' rights, particularly in industrial relations laws.

Finally, Mr President, I would like to thank various people for the support they have given me. I would particularly like to thank Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich; Hon Shelley Archer; Kevin Reynolds, Secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union; Tim Daly, Secretary of the Australian Workers Union; and my sons, Simon and James. I would also like to commend and pay thanks to Hon John Cowdell, who did a marvellous job as President of this place. He is a man of

wit, intelligence and erudition. My special thanks go to my husband, David, for all his encouragement and support; he has been marvellous. On a final note, solidarity forever, comrades! [Applause.]
