



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Neil Thomson, MLC (Member for Mining and Pastoral)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 1 June 2021

Reprinted from Hansard

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 27 May on the following motion moved by Hon Pierre Yang —

That the following address be presented to His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia —

May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our most gracious sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [3.38 pm]: I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, and their elders, past and present. I also acknowledge the Aboriginal people of different nations across Western Australia, many of whom I have worked with and have developed close friendships with.

Like others in this house, I am a migrant, arriving from New Zealand 37 years ago. I am a proud Australian, living the affirmation I took when I became a citizen in the late 1980s. I was born in the small town of Ōpōtiki, New Zealand, which is located on the North Island's east coast where I lived until my family moved to the regional city of Gisborne. Those early days involved plenty of fishing and camping and, as I matured, a love for the mountains. Winter was especially important. However, I spent too many of my university years skiing on the slopes of Mount Ruapehu and with friends hiking the high peaks of the Ruahine and Tararua Ranges.

It seemed normal that after I finalised my study at Massey University of New Zealand, armed with a Bachelor of Agricultural Science, I would work for a period as a shepherd, with working dogs in tow, on Mount Earnslaw station in New Zealand's Southern Alps. If you have watched the cinematic version of *Lord of the Rings*, then you will be familiar with Earnslaw station and the location of my shepherd's quarters. These were later to become the site of the Wizards Tower and the Orc's lair—with additional computer generated imagery. To this day, I struggle to imagine the Tolkien series as they should be, rather than thinking of the settings I have walked and each peak I have climbed.

I was part of a family of five children. My dad was a country police officer who worked in inquiries and youth aid. My mum was an artist and businessperson, owning and managing florist shops when she was young, using those landscape paintings to further subsidise household expenses. I am grateful for her artistic talent. Some of which has brushed off on me a little. Some of my earliest memories include travelling with dad in his personal car—there were no patrol cars in Ōpōtiki in those days—when he did his inquiries. We visited Maori families along the rugged east coast of New Zealand where I was plied with copious amounts of tea and biscuits as dad listened intently to Maori concerns.

My dad passed in February last year. He was deeply committed to his faith, as is my mother, with the theme of redemption always being at the forefront of their way of being. This theme also guides me. Dad's parents were Finnish migrants to New Zealand in the early part of the twentieth century and to this day we continue to have contact with our family in Finland. Hanging

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on the wall in my mother's house is a painting depicting a scene of a snow-covered forest in Finland, a gift in gratitude for the many food parcels my grandmother sent from New Zealand during World War II and afterwards during the recovery. I am told that the painting is on the very canvas that wrapped the food parcel—such a potent symbol of how resilient people can repurpose hardship into art and create a symbol of family bonds.

As we have heard in this place, through inaugural speeches, family narratives are important. It is our history. It is our truth. Mine is no different. Even my name “Thomson” is a relatively recent invention. My grandparents adopted it in order to fit into New Zealand society—Granddad's surname being Koskinen. To me it epitomises the era, the opportunity and the desire to fit into something new, as was the story of thousands across the globe. The story of migration continues with, we hope, greater acceptance of diversity.

As families have their stories, so too do nations, the importance of which resonates with our First Nations people as they find their voice in their truth telling. As we listen and engage, we come closer to healing and understanding, especially in this the week dedicated to reconciliation. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my friend Dr Robert Isaacs, who lives with his wife, Teresa, a few blocks away from where my wife, Debra, and I live in Broome. He lives and breathes the story of reconciliation, faith, perseverance and acceptance. I first met Robert through my role as executive director for the Aboriginal Lands Trust; he was the chair. Robert would always jokingly address me as the honourable Neil Thomson. Robert, I do not know what you knew, but your prediction has been realised. Like Robert, my father identified his natural family later in life. Unlike Robert, my father was adopted as a child and it was not until he was in his 50s that he learnt the details of his biological family, both pakeha and Maori across New Zealand. As dad grew older, he found tremendous comfort in engaging with both sides of his massively enlarged family, with numerous brothers and sisters he did not know he had earlier in life. It was his Maori brothers who said to him that there is no such thing as a half-brother in Maori culture, and they embraced him as one of their own. Debra and I have adopted this approach to our blended family. We have eight children between us and it is rapidly growing with the next generation—a family I am very proud of. We love them all and do our best to be there for them no matter what the circumstance.

My mother's story comes through colonial Australia with a history of hardworking Irish and English ancestors. In fact, my great-great-grandfather, Walter Bailey, arrived in Fremantle in 1851. He went on to build roads in and around Perth. It seems a fitting acknowledgement to my ancestors that my first job in Western Australia in 1985 was in road construction, operating a front-end loader and bulldozer on the Newman–Port Hedland Highway just south of Munjina Gorge.

It was in 1988 that I began my career in the Western Australian public service based here in Perth. We bought our first home, our second and our third as our family expanded, settling in the brand new suburb of Ellenbrook in 1998 where I became involved in many community-based activities, supporting my kids as they grew up. In the early days, there was nowhere in Ellenbrook to get music lessons or be involved in art. Along with a few locals, I joined the effort to establish a music academy and painters group. I acknowledge the many hardworking pioneers of Ellenbrook, including former Ellenbrook RSL president Brian Dillon; Councillor Patty Williams Jones, an inspiration to thousands of young people; and former Labor member Jaye Radisich, who, sadly, passed away in 2012. I also acknowledge the developers of Ellenbrook, LWP Group Pty Ltd, which was exemplary in supporting community groups. To this day, it continues to support the Ellenbrook Cultural Foundation, an organisation that I was a founding member of.

I am proud to have three adult daughters, the youngest being a commercial skipper off the Kimberley coast, another who is a social worker and mother of two wonderful boys, and the third a full-time mother of four beautiful and high-achieving children. My two sons work in the mining and exploration sector in the Mining and Pastoral Region. Debra's three sons came into my life as adults. They now work in the defence industries and the oil and gas sectors and the bond with

them rounds out our very large family. Debra and I acknowledge and appreciate the devotion of those who have co-parented with us and recognise the challenges for all parents who juggle co-parenting responsibilities.

Over the last four years, my wife, Debra, and I have operated an economics consultancy based in Broome. We work across the Kimberley on projects delivering for Aboriginal corporations, local governments, state agencies and the private sector. We have met some incredible people in that role, people who fight tirelessly for the economic prosperity of our region: people like Shirley Brown from the remote community of Mulan, former ALT board members like Preston Thomas from Karnpa in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, Patrick Green from Fitzroy Crossing and Jamie Elliot from the East Kimberley. I enjoy working with them on so many projects but most of all, I am the beneficiary of their friendship.

I have seen the frustration of Aboriginal clients who have battled red tape and the challenges of engaging with our bureaucracy as they try to achieve their aspirations for a stronger community. Land is central to the culture of Aboriginal people. Our land tenure arrangements and our bureaucracy are often too impermeable to enable the economic activity, home ownership, prosperity, and cultural security we need to deliver for both Aboriginal people and the broader community. This needs to change. I have had the opportunity to develop business cases and advocate for funding for road infrastructure and important social projects through our role with local government. I cannot say strongly enough that it is unacceptable that, for many thousands of people who live in the remotest parts of our state, regular periods of isolation and constant danger on our dirt roads is a feature of their lives. We are yet to make sufficient investment to ensure infrastructure is safe and resilient—all year. This is a priority issue for me. It is vital that we see our regions prosper, our kids educated and provide pathways into fulfilling work and a meaningful life.

Opportunities in the resources sector, the defence industries, tourism and services sectors provide opportunities for the next generation and I trust will continue to do so into the future. I have a vested interest in the future of this state and this country, as my family has their future deeply etched into its fortunes. The challenges we face with increasing societal dysfunction, rising crime and antisocial behaviour need to be addressed by the state. We can so easily become desensitised to the ongoing crime and wanton destruction in our communities, but this has a corrosive effect on the trust people have with each other and the confidence we bring to our society. Drug addiction, petrol sniffing and alcoholism are just the tip of the iceberg of dysfunction. The despair of neglect, domestic violence and child abuse can be addressed only when there is a grassroots approach, coupled with a strong response to law enforcement and justice.

There need to be positive pathways to recovery, focused on education and learning to respect each other. I appreciate the opportunities that both education and training provide, as they are a gateway to a better life. Without education, my life would have been less interesting, less satisfying and less prosperous. I have listened to the representatives of business in our regional chambers of commerce as they despair at the shortage of job-ready young people, but, on the other hand, I have also experienced firsthand the challenges of young people trying to break into the workforce at the end of their training or schooling. We need to find more creative solutions to enable the connection between education and training and work to be strengthened and optimised.

Although tertiary qualified, my first role in the public sector was as a level 1 field officer in 1988, undertaking field trials on behalf of the Department of Agriculture. We are fortunate to have some of the finest researchers and academics across the field of agriculture and other sciences. Our world-class botanical diversity is still to be understood in the development of new fodders, foods, nutraceuticals and medicines, and it is particularly important if we are to develop northern Australia and expand our existing pastoral farming system and our nascent irrigated agricultural sector.

Our natural world is becoming an increasingly important focus, as we tackle the challenges of climate change, oceanic pollution and the pressures on our natural habitats. We must continue to invest strongly in R&D and take advantage of our natural resources in a responsible way, including investing in our people to enhance their expertise. It was a commitment by the then Department of Agriculture to excellence and research that provided me with the opportunity to complete studies at the University of Western Australia, gaining a master's degree in science (agriculture), majoring in agricultural economics.

In 1997, I was transferred to the Department of Treasury, which ultimately led efforts in competition policy and micro-economic reform. It was the federal Labor government under Paul Keating that introduced competition reforms, which were progressed by the Liberal Howard–Costello partnership. This economic reform played a key role in creating our unprecedented prosperity, with the longest stretch of continuous economic growth of any Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development country prior to the COVID pandemic.

I am committed to promoting a market economy, coupled with sensible laws and processes that enable fairness, accountability and predictability. Creating this environment enables businesses to make investment decisions with the confidence that their risk assessments are predictable, and they are likely to be rewarded for their hard work and investment. For that reason, we should attempt, to the greatest degree possible, to ensure that our laws are properly defined and can be managed efficiently. If we do not have incentive in our society, we have failure.

The strength of the Liberal Party is that we have fought to maintain incentive, contextualised within a fair and progressive tax system that involves a reasonable redistribution where it is needed. The system must be sufficiently beneficial to promote one of the most basic instincts of the human condition, which is to get up every morning and go and do a solid day's work and to put capital on the line, whether it is human capital in the form of physical effort, intellectual endeavour or artistic creativity, or to risk financial assets—investing to gain reward.

The unprecedented growth in Australia is no more felt than in the Pilbara, where we see huge opportunities. These opportunities come with community pressures. I acknowledge the incredible work of the Barnett–Grylls partnership, which transformed towns like Karratha and Port Hedland through the royalties for regions program. But there is still so much more to do in building our key regional centres, starting with ensuring that there is adequate housing and services to promote a vibrant residential community. The ongoing challenges of the interface of industry and our residential areas in towns such as Port Hedland also need to be addressed and done so fairly.

Although FIFO has been essential in our state, there is no substitute for long-term residential populations in our towns. These generate strong small business sectors that support our volunteers, who are so vital for our communities. I see the impact of FIFO firsthand on my home town of Broome, where business owners are disproportionately represented in the army of volunteers in sporting clubs, marine rescue services, volunteer fire brigades and the State Emergency Service.

With its huge resources wealth, Western Australia is well positioned for the future, but we must diversify our economy if we are to withstand the potential global shocks from emerging international belligerence, the evolving pandemic and environmental threats. Even the risks associated with emerging technologies are tangible and should be considered carefully to ensure that a fair and equitable society is maintained into the future. We are also well positioned as a future energy superpower, with ample sunlight and massive potential oil and gas reserves that will enable our transition to the new energy economy over the coming decades. Our iron ore industry will need to diversify with the production of green steel, with sustainable energy an obvious opportunity. Legislatures around the world will increasingly grapple with the full impact of these emergent technologies on our social and environmental wellbeing. We must promote technology but understand its impact. It should be managed and understood.

This is also true for our social media. Although the issue was short-lived, the enormous power of Facebook was on display in its deeply disturbing action that saw many of our community services' pages shut down and our then state opposition leader's page cut off just weeks before the state election.

As assistant director general for the then Department of Planning, I was responsible for the information technology effort and observed with some disappointment the inefficiency of our data procedural management systems. I am an advocate for greater transparency and permeability in decision-making processes, and technology can be a key to achieving this. As shadow Minister for Planning, I will be advocating for greater community participation in land use planning decision-making processes. To this end, I am a great supporter of the role of local government. I have 26 local governments in my region and, in my experience, they have always punched above their weight. I have experienced incredibly positive examples in local government in my region and seen how they rise to the challenge when there is a gap, including through the COVID pandemic.

At the state level, we can achieve so much in partnership with both our local authorities and the commonwealth government. But it is in this place that we review laws, and I will always reflect on whether those laws are the right instruments to deal with the problems that we have or whether there are less-restrictive alternatives that can achieve the same outcome. This approach was enshrined in clause 5(9) of the Competition Principles Agreement, which was adopted as part of the competition reforms that I referred to earlier. Clause 5(9) is an incredibly effective tool. It is elegant and I will paraphrase it for the purposes of broader application here today. Firstly, in the review laws, you should always clarify the objectives of those laws. You should identify how those laws either restrict or empower, and analyse the likely effect of those laws on individuals, groups and the economy generally. You should assess and balance the costs and benefits of those laws, whether cultural, social or economic. You should also consider alternative means for achieving the same result, including non-legislative approaches. The discipline of this assessment should be applied before assigning bills into law, taking seriously the role we have collectively in this house of review.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge some key people who have influenced my life. I had the pleasure to serve as Hon John Day's chief of staff after the win of the Barnett government in 2008. I hope I can follow John's meticulous approach as the shadow Minister for Planning. Dr David Morrison was my mentor and boss in the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Treasury, and I worked with him on and off for nearly two decades. Hon Eric Ripper was Treasurer while I was assistant director of the microeconomic reform unit in Treasury. Eric was a great supporter and a model politician—someone who always read his briefings and provided feedback to the public service.

I would like to give special thanks to Susan Chown, the immediate past president of the Durack division of the Liberal Party, without whom I would not be here today. I thank Hon Bill Marmion and his wife, Katelyn, who supported me in my endeavours well before I entered Parliament. I thank Hon Melissa Price, MP, whom I have worked with closely in my role as president of the Durack division of the Liberal Party. Melissa makes an incredible contribution to regional Western Australia. Senator Dean Smith works tirelessly as the patron senator to Durack and is always willing to do a road trip in the bush to meet people in small communities, towns and our regional cities.

I acknowledge Councillor Geoff Haerewa, shire president of the Shire of Derby–West Kimberley and also a former Liberal candidate for the Kimberley. At the last election, Geoff had the largest positive swing in his primary vote of any Liberal candidate. Without his efforts, I would not be here today. I also acknowledge former member for Kalgoorlie Kyran O'Donnell. Again, without his dedicated work, I would not be here as a member for Mining and Pastoral Region. I also thank Alys McKeough who ran as the Liberal candidate for North West Central. She fought adversity

during the campaign, including floods, as she promoted the Liberal vision. I acknowledge the relentless Camilo Blanco of Port Headland, who is passionate about his region, and stood as the Liberal candidate for the Pilbara in the last election. I acknowledge David Serafini from Derby and Jan Ford from Port Hedland who made the long trip to be here. Thank you for your support. To those who are watching this video feed—friends, colleagues and family around the state, the nation and the globe—thank you.

The Liberal Party is a grassroots organisation. It is run by volunteers across this state. They are good people from a range of backgrounds, including small business, volunteer groups, religious and non-religious, Indigenous and non-Indigenous—men and women all with different perspectives but with a common purpose as outlined in the objects of the party.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my wife, Debra. Her love and devotion, I hope I can match. We are a team in life.

In closing, I would like to make reference to my mum, Joyce Thomson, in Zealand. She is in her twilight years and we converse regularly by phone. She continues to be that link to my past and family across the sea. Recently, when I told mum of the final count in the Mining and Pastoral region—which took some time as members would know—she was quick to provide some unsolicited advice: “Don’t be like those other politicians, Neil. Be honest and don’t exaggerate!” Then, as an afterthought, she said, “And most of all, love everybody.” Now that seems pretty straightforward; doesn’t it? I spoke to her a few days ago and she reminded me in her telling-off tone to remember what she said and not to forget that word. I asked, “What word, Mum?” “Honourable”, she said. “It’s a good word and you shouldn’t forget it!” Yes, Mum. I won’t forget.

[Applause.]