



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Francis Ford Wilson, MLA

(Member for North Perth)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Fourth Day of Debate

Tuesday, 18 July 1905

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MR. F. F. WILSON (North Perth): I did not intend to speak on this motion because I consider the debate simply a waste of time. But as the other side have evinced a desire to string out the debate as long as possible, I cannot, in justice to myself and the party with which I am associated, allow the debate to close until I have expressed my opinion and announced my intention as to how I shall vote. I think the Labour party and the Labour Ministry have justified themselves in the eyes of the country; and I know from what I hear outside that the country is satisfied with the administration of the present Government. [MR. BURGESS: Perhaps you are deaf.] My friend must have been very deaf if during the last three or four weeks he has not heard that satisfaction expressed while he was travelling about Perth in trams and about the country in trains. Everywhere we hear that to turn out the Government at present would be a misfortune to the State. The circumstances in which the present Government came into power are well known. The Labour party have always been taunted with the fact that while they aspired to power they were not prepared to take the responsibilities of office. The last general election disclosed that the party were returned 22 strong. The then Government were not returned in sufficient strength to carry on. The Labour party being returned by a majority of votes, the James Government inserted a paragraph in the policy Speech practically throwing down the gauntlet to the Labour party, and demanding that they should take up the responsibilities of office. The Labour party have taken up those responsibilities, and carried them out as administrators with credit to themselves and to the country. The Government are charged with doing practically nothing during last session. I consider that as Ministers new to office they did much; and I give the Opposition credit for ably and meritoriously assisting the Government to carry out the programme of last session. I am surprised that after assisting the Government as they did, the Opposition should now turn round and say they intend to fire Ministers out. I think that is base ingratitude. If the Government were worth supporting during last session they are much better entitled to support during this. They have had the experience of a parliamentary session, and they are now more capable of carrying out their duties than they were when they began. Then why this no-confidence motion? What is its object? Is it to secure the emoluments of office? When one comes carefully to consider the question,

one must conclude that the Opposition have no other object. I am sorry to come to that conclusion. During last session the Government have carried through the House many measures of benefit to the country. One was the Inspection of Machinery Act, which I am sure will be a benefit. They abolished the Metropolitan Waterworks Board which had for a long time been giving trouble. I congratulate the ex-Minister for Works (Hon. W. D. Johnson) on his administration of the work which he took over from that board. The people of North Perth owe a debt of gratitude to him for the concessions he was able to make in respect of water supply since he took over the administration. I think the Government are to be congratulated on the measures they passed last session. As Ministers new to office they have done wonders; and having had twelve months' Ministerial experience, surely the time has not come for turning them out. [MR. CONNOR: Go to the country.] I for one do not want to go to the country. I, like the member for Hannans, believe that opposition to some extent saves imposition; and I certainly should not like to see the House composed entirely of Labour members. I believe that a certain amount of opposition is good; therefore I do not wish to go to the country, for I feel sure that on the past performances of the Government the country would unanimously return an all-Labour Parliament. A member says that I should not be returned. Well, I am prepared to stake my chance against his; and if he likes to go to my electorate in the event of a dissolution I am quite prepared to take him on at the polls. The attack of the leader of the Opposition was in my opinion lamentably weak. Firstly, he started to attack the Government for departing from their platform. He said they were returned by the country to carry certain measures, and when they came into power they refused to carry out the country's mandate. I have yet to learn that the Government refused to carry out any plank in the Labour platform. As practically apprentices to Ministerial office, they had to acquire a thorough knowledge of their departments before they initiated new and experimental legislation; and I think they were quite justified in the stand they took during last session. Now, when the Government came forward with a progressive policy, the leader of the Opposition condemns them for that also. It reminds me of One of old who came on earth as a philanthropist, and who was a worker also. When He was rebuked for the good works He had done or was attempting to do, and when certain individuals would have stoned him, He said "Which of these works would ye stone me for?" That is the position of the Government to-day. The

Pharisees on the Opposition side wish to stone the Government. The Government are surely justified in asking the country and the Opposition as to which of the progressive works they have embodied in their policy they are to be turned out for. The member for Kimberley wants to know who cast the first stone? I am not in a position to say whether there was any stone cast at all. The persons to whom this question was addressed were so ashamed that they slunk away; and that is the position in reference to this no-confidence debate. I am satisfied it will peter out, and that the success will be with the Government. The leader of the Opposition condemned the Government for their progressive policy and for the various measures they are attempting to bring forward. Methinks I have heard it said that the leader of the Opposition is favourable to almost every plank in the programme of the Government at present. It has been said that the leader of the Opposition before the last elections was asked certain questions with reference to the attitude he intended to take regarding certain measures. He was asked in reference to the reform of the Legislative Council, and he said that if returned he would pledge himself to the reform of the Legislative Council with a view to rendering it more liberal and amenable to public wishes. We all desire that. We all desire the reform of the Upper House so that it may be made more amenable to the wishes of the public. The hon. member also pledged himself to liberalise the Arbitration Act, and to the tax on unimproved land values, which he said he would support as strongly as he could. I sincerely hope we will have the support of the hon. gentleman when the measure comes before Parliament, and that he will support it in the direction I intend to support it—that of having no exemptions. The hon. member said he would favour the stoppage of the future alienation of Crown lands, and that he was in favour of old age pensions.

MR. RASON: The hon. member, knowingly or unknowingly, is misrepresenting what I said. I said nothing of the kind. If the hon. member quotes at all, let him quote correctly and fully.

MR F. F. WILSON: If the hon. member says my statements are incorrect, I will withdraw; but I am satisfied I can substantiate the statements I have made. Having in view the fact that the present policy of the Government is so democratic and so progressive and that the leader of the Opposition has expressed himself in favour of certain portions of it, why does the leader of the Opposition want to turn the Government out? The member for Boulder (Mr. Hopkins) also went in for biblical quotations; but unfortunately the quotations were, like his politics, not quite correct. He said in effect that the Labour party have done those things they should not have done, and that there is no good in them. Now the correct rendering of that quotation is: "They have done those things they should not have done, and they have left undone those things they should have done." I want to know what the Labour party have left undone during the past session that

they should have done. There was no mandate to them from the electors to bring in their platform within 6 or 12 months. [MR. RASON: Nor 12 years.] The life of Parliament is three years, and members of the Ministry were justified in doing their level best to obtain Ministerial experience; and now that they have shown a desire to bring in some planks of the Labour party's platform and are trying to do what they are pledged to do—and they will do it if the Opposition will only let them—and what the they were sent by the country to do, the Opposition are seeking to turn them out. The speech of the member for Boulder put me in mind of a Chinese cracker. First of all there is a fiz and a loud explosion, and afterwards there is a terrible smell. That reminded me forcibly of the hon. member's speech. I thought he would have put up a good fight for the Opposition. Being disappointed in the speech of the leader of the Opposition, I thought, when the member for Boulder got on his feet, that he at least would put forward some justification for turning the Government out; but his speech was something like a Chinese cracker: there was an explosion, and after that died away something was left—we know what. The member for Perth, with his usual versatility, maligned the political Labour party and quoted a very pathetic case with reference to some man who went to him to get a job in the council. I was always under the impression that the city engineer employed men for the council, and I was rather surprised to know that anyone would go to the mayor in particular to get a job. This man represented to the mayor that he was unable to earn the minimum wage, and consequently the mayor informed him that he could not be employed. I am here to state that in reference to corporation labourers there is no arbitration award in existence. So the Mayor of Perth was misrepresenting the case by stating that this man had to get a permit from anybody to get a job under the council. I like things to be put fairly and squarely and the truth to be told; and when the mayor said that this man could not be engaged by the council at less than a certain rate, I am satisfied, since there is no arbitration award in reference to council employees, the mayor was not stating the case fairly. The member for Perth also made a great to-do about the day-labour system. I think we have a standing illustration as to the contract system in the Wellington Street drain. Ever since I have been in Perth, they have been continually tinkering with this drain; and I know it to be a fact that the drain was carried out by contract, and that there was a certain deal made by certain gentlemen in reference to a lot of damaged cement brought in here and bought at a less rate than good cement can be supplied at. These individuals made a nice little pot out of the deal. The cement was worked in, and consequently the drain has gone to pieces and has been a source of expense and annoyance to the City Council ever since. I am prepared to support day labour every time, for by it we get good material and good workmanship, and the country and men get a fair deal for their labour. We

can take Walcott Street, built by a certain contractor. The road went to pieces in 12 months, and had to be re-made. On inquiry by the City Council it was found that not half the material specified to be put in the job was in. At North Perth there is a road made by the Public Works Department; and it is a standing credit to the department for the way in which it has been made. I inspected the road myself. I saw it in course of construction and saw the material used, and that the workmanship was good; and I have the assurance of the Public Works Department that it is being carried out as cheaply as if it were being done by contract. I support the day-labour system; it is the proper system, and we will have it with the Labour Government in power. I am satisfied we will get a far better deal by it than by the contract system. There are three ways in which the contractor can make profits. In the first place he must get more than the job is actually worth before he can make a profit. If he does not do that, then he must get it out of the men; and if he does not get it out of the labour of the men, he must slum the work or rob the party he is working for by stinting the material, which is, unfortunately, often the case. As long as I am a member of Parliament and can lift my voice as a public man, I will support the day labour system. The member for Perth said that no one but a unionist could represent the Labour party in Parliament. I give that a denial. We have men in this House who have never been unionists. The political Labour party does not stipulate that men shall be unionists. The ranks are open to anyone who will go into them and carry out the principles. [MR. BURGESS: What about the pledge?] Of course members on this side of the House and members of the Labour party are required to subscribe to certain principles. If they are prepared to do that, they become members of the Labour party. [OPPOSITION MEMBER: They will not take your word.] We have had too much experience of that sort of thing. We get a man to put his name to certain principles; and if he goes back on them we know how to deal with him. We have done it in the past, and will do it in the future. The member for Perth claims that we desire the foremen of public works to be unionists. I am even prepared to advocate that principle. Our public works should be carried on with a view to utility. They are not for to-day or to-morrow, but are to stand the test of time; and I know that the best mechanics are in the unions. If the Public Works Department selected their foremen out of the unions, then the unions would be responsible for the men they suggested should be appointed; and they are quite prepared to take the responsibility of the ability of such men. If such men be appointed I am quite satisfied the country will get a far better deal than in the past. I can go to the Supreme Court and can pick flaws in the work there. An official of the court called my attention to places where pieces of wood had been thrust under the window-sills and puttied over. Is that workmanlike, or giving the country a fair deal? If men were picked from the ranks of the unionists and recommended to

the Minister by the unionists to supervise these works, we would not have to complain of the scamping of work that is carried on at present. I for one am in favour of the Minister for Works asking the unions to recommend men who shall be the leading hands on the different jobs, and I am satisfied that the workers and the country will then get a fair deal. Only to-day I was informed by a member of a union that certain works were going on at Claremont. A large dam is being constructed in the constituency represented by the hon. member, Mr. Foulkes. I was told that the work was carried out by unskilled labour. Some plastering work had to be done inside the dam, and the first and second coats have been put on by unskilled labour. That work has had to be chipped over, and I am told that it will cost the country £10 or £15 extra. This work will now have to be done by skilled labour. If good mechanics recommended by unions as leading hands had been employed, good work would have been done.

MR. H. BROWN: Your unions made some remarks about the Old Men's Depôt, which were refuted by sworn declarations.

MR. F. F. WILSON: A great deal has been said about the action of the Government in reference to preference to unionists. I claim that unionists, under the Arbitration Act, have given away the only weapon they possessed, which was the strike. If men were not satisfied with the conditions under which they were labouring, or with the wages they received, they had the alternative of laying down their tools and saying that they would not work. The unionists have given away all the privileges they possessed for the Arbitration Act, which states that there is a court created, and workmen and employers have an opportunity of bringing their grievances before that court to have them redressed. What is the position of the unionist under the Arbitration Act? While he surrenders all his privileges and the right to the only weapon which he had, that of throwing down his tools and creating a strike, which brought misery and destitution to hundreds and thousands, and penalised people who had no part or parcel in the dispute that took place, what has he got in return? As a unionist he is penalised, and becomes a marked man. I can illustrate two cases which took place in Perth in which a large firm of ironmongers employed two men as carters who were officers of unions. They had been employed by the firm for several years; one became president of a union, and he was then told that he was wanted no longer, that the firm were going to put his cart off. The man was dismissed, but the next week a nonunionist was put on in the first man's place. In the other case the workman was president of a union, and he was forced out of his employment and had to go into the back country looking for work. These are only two instances out of hundreds that have taken place since the unions gave up their weapon, that of the strike, and have taken the Arbitration Act. Seeing that unionists are victimised in hundreds of instances,

the workers of the country are justified in asking that there shall be some protection for the men who have brought the Labour movement to its present position; who have brought about industrial reform and the privileges which working men now enjoy. The men are justified in asking that some protection should be meted out to them. It is not preference that we ask for but protection. We ask that the unionist shall stand on the same ground as the nonunionist. I know hundreds of men who are nonunionists to-day, and why are they nonunionists? We are taunted with the fact that the unions are composed of only a small proportion of the men working in the industries. Why is that so? Because the men know that as soon as they become unionists, they become a target for the employers. I have had to suffer. I would not be in Western Australia to-day but for the prominent position I took in union matters on the other side. I was a marked man as a prominent trades unionist in another State, and I was forced to quit Victoria to come to Western Australia so as to earn a living. Hundreds of men have not been as fortunate as I have; they have been reduced to starvation and beggary because of the side they took in the uplifting of the masses. We, as trades unionists, are justified in asking that we shall stand on the same ground and on the same basis as nonunionists, therefore we are asking for protection not for preference, that the unionist who has sacrificed all the benefits which he enjoyed outside his union shall stand on the same footing as the nonunionist. I am not surprised that the trades unionists of England, time after time, have rejected Judge-made law. They would sooner, having in view the experience of the Arbitration Courts in Australia, and having in view the treatment that trades unionists are subject to under the Arbitration Act, stick to the old method hereby they can throw down their tools and create a strike. Bad and all as it is, that seems to be better than to have Judge-made laws and Arbitration Courts. As trades unionists, we have surrendered all our privileges for the sake of allowing an independent board to redress our difficulties. I consider unionists are justified in now asking for some consideration in the shape of protection to unionists. It has been said that trades unionists debar nonunionists from joining unions. That is a ridiculous statement. No trades unionist would debar a man from going into a union. The New South Wales Court has held that no man shall be debarred from becoming a member of a union.

MR. H. BROWN: But you cannot let him out once he is in. "Britons never shall be slaves."

MR. F. F. WILSON: The hon. member says we will not let him out. There is only one operation of the Act that prevents a man from going out of a union. He cannot get out while a dispute is before the Court, and I do not see why he should. But when there is no dispute before the Court a man has always the option of giving three months' notice, paying up three months' subscriptions, and then he can cease

to become a member. But my experience is that if a man—and I have had 15 or 20 years' experience—gets into a union, and sees the benefits that unionism gives to him and to his fellow workers, he is content to remain a unionist. Therefore I consider that we, as trades unionists, have a legitimate argument and a right to ask that preference shall be granted to trades unionists. I was glad that Mr. Justice Parker, who has had so much criticism showered upon him by trades unionists, admitted the other day that the Trades Union Act empowered a Judge to give preference to trades unionists, and hope the Judge will carry that out when preference is asked for. [MEMBER: A forlorn hope.] I do not think that Mr. Justice Parker is as black as he is painted. Mr. Justice Parker is one of the greatest patriots we have in West Australia at the present time. I believe that Mr. Justice Parker has been unfortunate sometimes in the decisions he has given, but I believe it is his patriotic nature that has impelled him to give these decisions. He has taken into consideration an industry as it stands at present and the outside competition, and he weighs these facts in his mind.

MR. RASON: On a point of order, is it open to any member to criticise the conduct of a Supreme Court Judge?

MR. SPEAKER: I was considering that point myself; but I understand that the hon. member has referred to the Judge in his capacity as President of the Arbitration Court; therefore I shall allow the member to go on. But I think it will be wise if members refrain from mentioning, either in praise or blame, members of the Arbitration Court who are members also of the Supreme Court Bench.

MR. F. F. WILSON: My excuse for mentioning the name was that, as President of the Arbitration Court, Mr. Justice Parker has given decisions; and I was attempting to justify the decisions given; I was attempting to show that the President of the Court had given certain decisions because of his patriotism to the State of Western Australia. But I will not labour the point farther. I believe certain decisions of the Arbitration Court have been given because the Court was of opinion that unless certain rates of wages were paid, certain industries could not exist. But my opinion in reference to that matter is that if industries cannot be made to pay a living wage, it is far better for these industries to cease than for men to work for starvation wages. The member for Canning, in his able and eloquent speech, alluded to the cost of living, and stated that the Labour Government had done nothing for the unemployed. The cost of living to a great extent is determined by the rent which the workers and shopkeepers have to pay. I believe that if the Labour Government bring in a Bill for a tax on unimproved land values without exemptions, and if that Bill is put through the House and placed on the statute-book of Western Australia, the measure will have a great effect in reducing the rents which have to be paid at the present time. A lot

of members and people outside Parliament hold the opinion that the tax will be added to the rents at present existing; but my opinion is that a tax on unimproved land values will cause a lot of the land at present lying idle for speculative purposes to be put to some use. I believe it will compel the sale of a lot of land which is at present being held for speculative purposes. The workers and others will have a better opportunity of getting a piece of land on which to build and make a home, and it will also have a tendency to reduce the rents at present existing, because it will not pay a shopkeeper to keep a shop empty for any length of time. He will naturally be forced to get a tenant of some kind or other in order that the shop or land shall become rent-producing so that it will pay the tax placed upon it. I sincerely hope that when the Government bring down the measure they propose to this House for taxing unimproved land values it will be carried without exemptions, because the Labour party have always been accused that they always wish to tax the other fellow, to tax the capitalist. I, as a member of the Labour party, was returned to this House on the pledge that I was in favour of a tax on unimproved land values without exemptions, and that is what I intend to support. If the Government bring down a measure with exemptions up to £400, I am going to fight that measure for all I am worth. If the Government carry it with the aid of the Opposition, I say good luck to them, but I repeat that I am going to oppose it for all I am worth, and I sincerely hope that the exemptions will be knocked out altogether. There is the question of the Pilbarra Railway. That is a question which has caused a good deal of discussion. I do not intend to support the proposal. I think that we in Western Australia have had too much of that already, and I intend to oppose the construction of the Pilbarra Railway by private enterprise. [MR. CONNOR: Two planks are broken already.] I do not think private-enterprise railways are a plank in the Labour platform; but I realise that the position of the Government is this, that during the term of the previous Government, a resolution was carried in favour of the Pilbarra Railway being built, and that if the Government were not prepared to build it, offers should be invited from outside people; and if the House be not prepared to adopt the building

of this railway by the country, the Government, I presume, in carrying out the mandate of the House, are going to invite private enterprise to build this railway. I recognise that the Labour party in this House number 22 members, and if there is a majority against us we are entitled to bow to the will of the majority as representatives of the country. A great deal has been said in reference to the finance and the administration of the present Government. We found that the James Government, at the termination of the year ending June 30th 1903, had a surplus of £231,659 12s. 8d. On June 30th 1904 they left a surplus of £83,364, testifying that the James Government spent £148,295 12s. 8d. more than they received in revenue. Now members criticise the present Government for their bad financial arrangements, for bringing down a deficit to this House. What is the position? When the present Government came into office there was a surplus of £83,364. At the end of the financial year June 1905 there was a deficit of £46,520 1s. 6d., showing that the present Government spent £129,885 more than they received in revenue. That £129,000 has to be placed against £148,000, and these figures prove that although the present Government have administered the affairs of the country well and desirably in the interests of the country, yet they were more economical to the extent of the difference between £148,000 and £129,000. [MR. BURGESS: How do you prove it?] The hon. member must be very dense if he cannot understand those figures. Surely the hon. member can understand the difference between 148 and 129. It is only a simple sum. If he cannot manage it, and will allow me the opportunity when I have concluded, I will be pleased to show him. A great deal has been said against the present Government. I admit that they are not the acme of perfection, but I am forced to this conclusion, that they are far better in their present position than the Opposition would be; and with Shakespeare I say we would

...rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.

I shall vote against the no-confidence motion, and support the present Government.

On motion by MR. BURGESS, debate adjourned.