HON ROBERT WIESE, MLA
(Member for Wagin)

Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 23 November 2000
MR WIESE (Wagin) [12.04 pm]:  Like all members who are leaving the Parliament, I have mixed feelings. It has been a wonderful 14 years for me. I came in on a by-election after Campbell Nalder suffered an untimely death. I have seen a lot done in that time. It has been a tremendous privilege to be a member of the Parliament and part of the governing process. Nearly half the time I have spent in Parliament has been in Opposition. I have no regrets and I would do it all over again if I were given the chance.

Two nights ago I was driving home and listening to ABC radio. I heard a story on the radio that made me think about the Parliament. It was that Pamela Anderson had been given an award in the United States by a toothpaste manufacturer for having the most attractive smile. I thought that was interesting. It crossed my mind that the great majority of people would never have thought of Pamela Anderson as having an attractive smile. They probably looked at all her other attributes that are more eye-catching. It seemed to me to be analogous with the Parliament. The obvious parts of the parliamentary process are the things that get all the publicity; they are in the public eye. Debates, disputation and question time are parts of the parliamentary process that, in some ways, do not really represent what Parliament is about. They are the things that catch the public eye and are given public presentation. The reality is that the Parliament works extremely well and its real achievement is all its not-so-public aspects. The Parliament achieves an enormous amount and, on a great number of occasions, the Government and Opposition work together to ensure the passage of legislation. Amendments from backbenchers and the Opposition are incorporated into legislation when something has been overlooked or something worthwhile is brought up. That is the side of the parliamentary process that is a bit like Pamela Anderson’s smile. It is the side that we never look at or put in the public eye.

It crossed my mind that there is another similarity between the Parliament and Pamela Anderson: It is the shell that contains the persona or, in this case, the building. As she ages, Pamela Anderson needs some maintenance and reconstruction to keep her structure and keep her body right so she is able to continue doing what we expect her to do. Some might say that she has had more maintenance, upkeep and rehabilitation than has this Parliament. I do not want get into that argument. There is a similarity between her and this building. This building is old and is ageing, and it needs some maintenance, upkeep and restructuring. It needs major work - as, no doubt, Pamela Anderson will at some stage in the future. It has been terrific to see some of the improvements and changes made to the building over the past six to eight years, as well as those occurring now under the guidance of the Speaker. Some very significant improvements and changes have been made to the building. We have got rid of nearly all those dreadful cubbyholes that filled the corridors. We have also upgraded some of the furniture, equipment and carpets. The real major structural changes this Parliament has desperately needed since I have been a member, and for a long time before that, have still not been tackled, and they must be tackled. Every time I go to a Parliament in another State I have seen how they have addressed the same problems that we have; that is, an old building that has an inadequate capacity for the requirements of this age. When I come back and look at this building I think it is time we spent some money on it. Parliament must bite the bullet and tackle the issues of rebuilding and putting in place better accommodation to meet the current needs of this Parliament and for the coming century. It is disgraceful that the committee officers and personnel work across the road in Hay Street. They should be a part of this Parliament. They should be readily accessible for members because they help us to do the work of Parliament. While we have a lack of facilities, they are not able to work as effectively as they could. It has been a disappointment to me because we considered and discussed upgrading Parliament when we came into government. It was to be one of our major projects in the second term; yet, we still have not tackled it. That is one of the few disappointments I have had during my time in this House.

I address some of the issues that have been addressed by all members in Parliament. Without the help of electorate staff and ministerial staff - during the time I was a minister - none of us would be able to perform our jobs. I pay tribute to my electorate officers and the ministerial staff I had during my time as Minister for Police. They do a fantastic job and have been an enormous support to me, as have the other electorate officers to their members, who could not do without them. I also pay tribute to those party supporters who have been part of the strength behind me at the branch, district council and state level. They do an enormous amount of work without any thanks, pay or recognition. They are, in many cases, the sources of and driving force behind some of the initiatives, changes and ideas that are brought into Parliament. Other members and I owe them a lot. It is not only the party people who have been an enormous help; the supporters with no party affiliations have also given my family and me a huge amount of
support. Without naming them - I cannot compete with the member for Girrawheen - they are fantastic and we owe them much. I pay tribute to them for all the help they have given us.

I thank other ministers and especially their ministerial staff. Many problems are brought to members of Parliament and we endeavour to tackle all of them. We achieve a great deal of success in our efforts to help those people who come to us, and we do that with the help of ministerial staff. Whether in Opposition or Government, all those people have been a great support and help to me as a member of Parliament and, I am sure, to all other members. Again I thank them and the departmental people who get much criticism and not a great deal of praise. They do an enormous amount of work behind the scenes to help members of Parliament and ultimately to help our constituents who come to us looking for our assistance.

Like other speakers before me, the privilege of serving the Parliament and the people as a minister is something that I can never forget; it is fantastic. The Police portfolio had its moments. It is a challenging portfolio as many ministers before and since have found. I am sure that has always been the case. Even people from overseas who have served in the same position tell the same story. I suspect that the challenges of the portfolio do not change from one State to the other or from one country to the other. When I entered the Police portfolio, I was confronted with several problems facing the Police Service. Members will recall that it was the time of Eucla and Argyle, from which many issues arose. At that time, the Police Union (WA) was almost bereft of funds as a result of the legal costs it had previously incurred defending its members, which is its role. It had no repayments from the Crown for many of the costs it had incurred in rightfully and properly defending its members. I grappled with that problem for a couple of years. I am sure that has always been the case. Even people from overseas who have served in the same position tell the same story. I suspect that the challenges of the portfolio do not change from one State to the other or from one country to the other. When I entered the Police portfolio, I was confronted with several problems facing the Police Service. Members will recall that it was the time of Eucla and Argyle, from which many issues arose. At that time, the Police Union (WA) was almost bereft of funds as a result of the legal costs it had previously incurred defending its members, which is its role. It had no repayments from the Crown for many of the costs it had incurred in rightfully and properly defending its members. I grappled with that problem for a couple of years. I am glad that the Government was able to provide assistance and recompense the union, which it rightfully deserved and expected.

The Police Service was suffering from the taint of corruption and allegations were made about it. Morale was desperately low, the working conditions and equipment were poor and there was a range of ongoing salary issues. No-one can overestimate the extent of the changes that have occurred since then and which commenced during the first four years that I was the Minister for Police. I did not do that on my own by any means. I was extremely lucky to be the minister at that time because I had enormous support from the Government and my cabinet colleagues. I especially pay tribute to the Premier for his help and support during my time as the minister. I appreciated it - probably even more so in hindsight because I was too busy with my nose down and my tail up working my heart out at the time. Without all that help, we could never have done what we did during that time.

Very early in my time as the Minister for Police I confronted the tragic death of Stephen Knight. What followed was a learning experience about the Police Service and how it operates and functions which I will never forget. It was an insight into the psyche and culture of the Police Service. At the time, I was moved not by only by the death but also the ceremonial police funeral which followed; it had an enormous effect on me and I will never forget it or what it revealed of the Police Service. I will never forget the strength of Marie Knight and her young family. The experience gave me an enormous insight into the service. In that time I also saw the terrific support and work done by Police Legacy to assist the Knight family and the other families of police officers who had lost a family member either in doing their job as a member of the Police Service or in their everyday lives. The organisation does a fantastic job.

The police organisation was an extremely difficult organisation to work with on many occasions. It is a self-contained and closed structure. It has a culture of its own, which no-one should forget or ignore. That culture is part of the strength of the service, but it is also a great weakness, preventing police officers from coming forward and giving evidence against their colleagues, even when they are sure those colleagues are way out of line or even corrupt. I was able to work with both the hierarchy and the grassroots of the Police Service in bringing about some major changes in the organisation.

The Delta program was initiated when Brian Bull was Commissioner of Police, but Bob Falconer and his senior command colleagues really drove the program and made it work. The Delta program turned the Police Service from what it was into what it is today, and it is still having a significant effect. The Delta program brought about the building and equipment programs. The equipment program caused some problems, because the Police Service thinks it alone knows how to spend money, and believes that the Government should not interfere. I was able to direct some of that funding into equipment, which had to be useable by the officer on the beat. The Delta program also brought about the enormous recruitment and training program. When I became Minister for Police the average age of police graduates coming onto the beat was about 20 years. Most had joined the service as cadets, aged between 16 and 18 years, then went through 13 weeks of training. By the time they assumed normal duties, they had spent two to three years in the force, working in police stations alongside veteran police, learning all the bad habits. The last group that I graduated had an average age of 26. Nine or 10 had tertiary qualifications and all had been in the work force. That in itself led to enormous changes in the type of personnel coming into the service, and needs to continue.

Some of the less obvious parts of the Delta program were the organisational changes taking place. The commissioned officers’ retirement program was significant, as was merit-based promotion, and the changes to the salary regime. The emphasis on training was greatly increased, and the professional standard portfolio was established. That brings me to
the issue of how the Police Service deals with its own officers who transgress or who are corrupt. It is a difficult problem for any police service. It is very difficult for the police hierarchy, and I can say from experience that it is also difficult for the minister of the day. During my time, nearly 40 police officers were removed, all under section 8 of the Police Act. It will be a tragedy if the ability of the commissioner to remove police under section 8 is removed.

Bob Falconer’s appointment was controversial at the time. He was the first Commissioner of Police to be appointed from outside Western Australia. When I first met Bob Falconer and his wife Sylvia, after the selection process, he had a very serious back problem and was due to have surgery the following week. Two or three weeks later I travelled to Melbourne to go through a briefing process with Bob Falconer, and to hand him the results of a major scoping survey, which was the beginning of the Delta proposal. During the discussion, over an afternoon, Bob Falconer was on his back on the lounge room floor, as he was recovering from his recent surgery. Had I known then what I know now, perhaps I would have taken a bit more advantage of the position he was in that day! I know some will disagree with me, but I found Bob Falconer a great person to work with. We did not always agree, but he was a very positive, forceful person, and he was the person for the times, and drove a change process through the organisation that lesser men may not have been able to do.

I mention also one other person - Les Ayton, who was appointed as Bob Falconer’s deputy. There are mixed feelings about Les Ayton both within and outside the Police Service. He was seen as an idealist and a zealot, and sometimes very hard to get along with. I got on very well with Les Ayton, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for him. Tensions between him and Falconer led to Ayton’s resignation. I was disappointed that he left, but it was time for him to leave, given the situation that existed at the time. Les Ayton was a very strong, dedicated fighter for integrity in the Police Service. He hated corrupt police officers, and did everything he could to get them out of the organisation. He did that job, and served the State very well. I doubt that Les and I would be on the best of speaking terms right now, but I want to place on record my respect for him. I also worked with some terrific officers in the police senior executive, such as Bruce Brennan, Bob Kucera, John Standing, to name just a few. I still have many friends in the Police Service, and have great respect for the job they do. I was touched very recently at a valedictory dinner for me at Narrogin, when Mike Dean, the president of the Police Union, and Chris Cassidy turned up and, totally off the schedule and without any notice, presented me with a plaque from the Police Union. They made some very gracious comments in making that presentation, and I express my sincere thanks for their very positive relationship during my time as minister.

I have spent most of my time talking about the Police Service, but I will make a brief mention of the Emergency Services section of my portfolio. That area also had huge problems when I came into the job. There was a huge gulf between the hierarchy of the organisation, the firemen, the union, and the volunteers. The organisation was split from top to bottom. There were nearly as many dramas in the fire service as there were in the Police Service, although somehow it did not get the public and media exposure that the Police Service did. The fire brigades section of the portfolio went through a huge process of change during my four years there. There were huge changes in equipment, equipment upgrades and better death insurance for permanent and volunteer firefighters. We pioneered and put in place the collocation process that is still going on. It has been a successful initiative and will continue into the future. One of the matters of which I am most proud relates to the fact that when I went into the portfolio, not one piece of major equipment was manufactured in Western Australia. I had to fight with the fire brigades hierarchy to get tender documents to a Western Australian firm that was interested in tendering for the manufacture of a piece of fire brigade equipment. I am pleased to say that the majority of equipment is now manufactured in Western Australia. Some of it is manufactured in regional areas like Narrogin and Collie. An industry in Western Australia has grown as a result of the changes made in that area, and I get a great deal of satisfaction from that.

By the time I left the Emergency Services portfolio, we were near the end of the process of bringing together all the organisations involved in this area. There had been a total lack of confidence in and communication between the volunteers and the permanent officers in all sections of the organisations. We brought the permanent fire brigades, volunteer fire brigades, the whole of the bushfire organisation and the State Emergency Service under one umbrella - the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia. That was nearing completion when I left, but was achieved afterwards. It was a great achievement for this State.

The other matter I comment on quickly is the gun debate. After the Port Arthur tragedy, all police ministers came together to try to initiate the regime that John Howard announced, without any consultation with anybody, virtually immediately after that tragedy. Western Australia was in a terrible position, because most of the things that needed to be done had been in place in this State for many years. In the second or third of those meetings between the police ministers and John Howard, Western Australia presented a proposal for the re-manufacture of all semiautomatic shotguns. Our proposal demonstrated that all semiautomatic shotguns could be re-manufactured to the equivalent of single or double-barrel shotguns and could be retained in the hands of the existing firearms owners. John Howard rejected that proposal totally out of hand, virtually without listening to it, on the basis that it was his political judgment that the people of Australia would not accept that sort of change. I was disgusted with that. It was a dreadful mistake. I estimate it could have saved the Australian community between $100m and $150m, because those firearms could have been re-manufactured, and there would have been no need for the buyback scheme to apply to them. It could
also have resulted in the firearms organisations being onside with the Government, instead of being totally opposed to its initiatives. That firearms debate led to the start of the One Nation organisation. If that issue had been handled differently, perhaps the political spectrum in Australia would be different today.

I owe an enormous amount to my family, and especially my wife, Chris. She is a fantastic person. She has been a fantastic support behind me in this position. She is a wonderful person. She has a gift for listening to people and of relating to everybody. She was an enormous asset to me; she did the job far better than I did. Without her I could never have done the job, and I want to publicly record my enormous thanks to her for the person she is and for the fantastic job she has done over my 14 years in this place. I also say an enormous thank you to my family - to my boys Mike, Tim and Anthony for the terrific support they have given me over the years.

[Applause.]