



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**VALEDICTORY SPEECH**



**HON DR ELIZABETH CONSTABLE, MLA**

**(Member for Churchlands)**

**Legislative Assembly**

**Tuesday, 13 November 2012**



# Legislative Assembly

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**DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands)** [4.24 pm]: When I was thinking about this speech over the weekend, I just wished that I was Ernie Bridge and I had a guitar and I could sing to you all. Unfortunately, I do not, so you will have to listen to me speak for the next 20 or 30 minutes. But some of us will remember that great afternoon when Ernie sang his valedictory.

After more than 21 years in public life, it is difficult to know where to start and what to say in a speech such as this, but I think I will start with the most important thing, and that is to thank my family for the enormous support that they have given me over the past 21 years. As we all know, it is not possible to do this job unless we have the support of our family members. I think that there are often occasions when those closest to us bear the brunt of us being in public life. Whether it is something in the media or something that has come up in our electorate or in Parliament, they are the ones who are there to console us, to chastise us sometimes, and to give us the advice that we need from people we can trust. I have calculated that my husband, as have many other partners and spouses, has spent thousands of nights at home alone because I have been either in here—in the early days, some people will remember that we used to sit until 11.00 pm on Tuesday and Wednesday, so there were two days a week that we were here late—or away for all the nights involved in the things that I was doing in my electorate and otherwise, or away travelling with a committee. That is a huge ask for any family, and especially in my case, because our sons were grown up before I entered Parliament. They now live in Sydney and California, so they are not here, and their families are not here, to be support for him. I think I owe Ian a great debt for what he has done. I would not have done this and I would not have stood as an Independent unless I had had that total support of my family in the beginning. I thank Ian for his encouragement, his wise counsel and his criticism on a number of occasions. I also thank our two sons, Ben and Jason, for their support, and for the support of their families—their wives, Deanna and Kelly; and their children, Bryson, Stella, Stian and Melize.

In the last week of the school holidays for the Sydney schools, my two grandchildren were here. I brought them up to Parliament House, mostly for me; I wanted them to come while I was still a member and have lunch at Parliament House. The Premier came and spoke to them, and they were very pleased about that. At question time, they sat at the back in the Speaker's gallery and watched question time, and I thought that 10 minutes would do them. After about 10 minutes, Stella—she is seven—said, “Oh, now I know what my news is going to be when I get back to school, grandma.” Apparently she gave a great talk about the Western Australian Parliament and question time when she got back to school, her teacher told me recently. The nine-year-old, Bryson, sat there, and after about 15 minutes I said, “It's time to go now.” He said, “No, no, no. I want to stay.” I said, “Okay; we'll stay a bit longer.” Another 15 minutes went by and I said, “Righto; we've had enough. Let's go.” He said, “No, no, no.” There was the usual interchange during question time. I took Stella out, and his other grandmother was with him, and he stayed in here for an hour and a quarter. When he came out he said, “What do you actually do?” I said, “Well, we make laws.” “Oh”, he said. “What laws have you made?” I said, “I've been here a long time. Lots of laws have been made.” He said, “Can you give me a list?” So, I will give him a list of some of those sometime. Then we walked around and I showed them parts of Parliament House. We went downstairs to the education office and the two of them were given things to colour in, brochures and so on, and he turned around to me and said, “Grandma, now I know what I'm going to be when I grow up. I'm going to be a member of Parliament.” So you all had this terrible effect on my grandson—he is going to be a member of Parliament when he grows up. But I said to him, “I think you should do something else before that. Go out and do some other work first and then consider being a member of Parliament.” Having those children in here was a really nice moment for me in these last few months. My sons, as I said, now live in Sydney and California, but a week does not go by without them ringing to see how I am going, to check up on me and to find out what is happening. That sort of support has been invaluable to me over the last 21 years.

There is so much to say and only a few minutes to say it in. I am going to go back to 1991. A couple of weeks ago, because we were cleaning out my office, I came across a scrapbook that was made of the Floreat by-election and I was reminded of what an extraordinary three-and-a-half-week campaign that was from the beginning to the end. As I looked at the articles in that scrapbook, and I look at what I see now in the newspaper, I had to draw the conclusion that not much has changed in party politics in the last 21 years. For me at least it makes interesting reading. As I looked at it, it reminded me of the incredibly brave few people who supported me back in June 1991 and the people who encouraged me to stand as an Independent for that by-election.

Those members who were here then will recall that the Floreat by-election was an extraordinary political event. As I said, it was only three and a half weeks in length and began with about 10 people pushing and encouraging me to

stand as an Independent. We started with about 10 people and by the end of the three and a half weeks over 300 people were manning the polling booths and helping me. I have always been enormously grateful to everyone who helped up-front, those who lent their support behind the scenes and those who supported me personally. I will mention a few names. Obviously it is not possible to mention everyone who helped me, and they will be thanked in another way. I thank Jeff Langdon, who ran a number of campaigns for me; the late John Dallimore; and Tom Herzfeld, who was the member for Mundaring in this house from February 1977 until he lost his seat in 1983 by 16 votes to Gavin Troy and who at one time after that was the director of the Liberal Party. He rang me and said he would like to run my campaign, which he did with enormous flair, creativity and sheer hard work during those three and a half weeks. During that campaign I was very lucky to have the support of a number of quite high-profile people, three of whom I will mention today. Hon June Craig, who was the eighth woman to be elected to this Parliament, doorknocked the electorate after she rang me and said she wanted to help. She took a lot of flak for that from the Liberal Party. A former Liberal Senator, Peter Sim, who I had never met before, resigned from the Liberal Party and doorknocked with Hon Dick Old. They had a great time doorknocking for me. A small group of people who helped me then and have helped me ever since—I knew only two of them before then—are Barbara Adrian; Helen Taylor; Colin and Anne Bennet; Cliff and Lynn Rocke; Frank Oliver; Brian King; the former member for Curtin, Allan Rocher; and Sally Hollins. I wanted to put their names on the record today.

When I worked closely with Tom Herzfeld during that first campaign, I learnt that I really loved campaigning. I liked planning campaigns and every part of campaigning. I especially liked doorknocking because when you walk up to someone's door and knock on it, you just do not know what will happen. There is that moment of, "What will happen?" I have a couple of stories to tell. In the by-election I was doorknocking in the southern part of Floreat and a rather large woman came to the door with her much smaller husband beside her. She asked me, "Are you married to that professor?" I thought, "What do I say?" I told her that I was and she said, "Oh, good! We're both voting for you because he took my husband's eye out last year and he has never been better." The poor guy probably had a melanoma or something. I kid you not, I walked around the same block and knocked on another door and another woman said exactly the same thing to me. On one block were two people who were voting for me because my husband had removed an eye. I thought that was a pretty tough way to get a vote!

**Mr B.J. Grylls** interjected.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** You are absolutely right.

During another election I was out doorknocking with Peter Sim, who I mentioned a moment ago, and a woman was very upset when she came to the door. She told us that her cat had just died and that she did not know what to do with the body. Peter had been a farmer or had grown up on a farm in a former life and he asked her whether she had a shovel. She said she did and so he dug a hole in the garden and buried the cat for her. That was quite an exciting thing to happen while out doorknocking.

I have a very busy husband who has not given very much time to doorknocking or helping out during elections, as I know other partners and spouses do. I think it was in the second campaign in 1993 when we were at a shopping centre in City Beach and he was helping me hand out brochures on a Saturday morning when someone asked who he was handing them out for. Ian said, "They're for Liz Constable", and the bloke said, "I wouldn't vote for her if she was the last person on earth." Ian replied, "I'm really sorry to hear that because I have been married to her for over 30 years." The poor bloke did not quite know what to say! Another fellow came up not long afterwards and said, "Who are you handing out brochures for?" Again, Ian said Liz Constable and the fellow told him, "I don't know her, but I know her husband very well." I know that we all have stories to tell, but as well as being hard work, there is a lot of fun in what we do.

When the votes were counted in the by-election, I received 49.2 per cent of the primary vote and 57 per cent of the two-person preferred vote. That was not expected, except by one or two people in the media and certainly it was not expected by the Liberal Party at the time. One of the things that I learnt then that I always remembered for later campaigns was that it is not necessary to spend large amounts of money to win a local campaign; what you need is people. I always have been blessed in campaigns with very large numbers of people to deliver things, to doorknock and be available on election day. I have lived by that ever since when campaigning. The result in 1991 was interesting because it reflected exactly what our polling had indicated 10 days before and the response that we had got at people's doors. The people made up their minds very early on during the three and a half weeks and, as we learnt afterwards, it was over quite early.

As I have said, the list of people I could thank runs into many hundreds and I will be thanking them all in another way but I want to put on record my gratitude to every single person who has helped me over the past 21 years. It has been astonishing from the beginning to the end. The circumstances of the by-election clearly caught the imagination of many people very early on, and they have been assisting me ever since. I especially want to put on the record my thanks to all those thousands of electors who on six occasions have given me results that most members can only dream about. I know that I have been very privileged to have had that support from people living in Floreat, Churchlands, City Beach, Woodlands, Wembley, Wembley Downs, West Leederville, Glendalough and previously in

Osborne Park, Scarborough, Innaloo and Doubleview. They have given me incredible support over the past 21 years and it has been a privilege to be their member of Parliament.

When I first came into this house in August 1991, I was made welcome by members on both sides. I think I was a bit of a novelty as an Independent had not been elected since Bill Grayden was elected in 1956 as the member for South Perth. I was the first woman to be elected as an Independent. It was an interesting time and a few members here will remember that it was a minority government with four other Independents—I see Hon Eric Ripper nodding—who held the balance of power. It was a case of really being dropped in the deep end. There are two people to whom I will always be grateful—Hon Ian Thompson and Hon Bill Grayden. Ian Thompson organised for me to sit between the two of them, and they did not leave me for the first three weeks. They answered all my questions and I felt that I had such amazing people to help me, one who had been a Liberal Speaker and was then an Independent and another who had started as an Independent but returned to the Liberal Party and became a minister. Bill was also the longest serving member of the house. They sat with me and taught me some of the things I needed to know about how this place worked. Everyone was kind to me and helped me. The then Speaker, Mike Barnett, was particularly helpful. He said to me very early on, “If you’ve got a question you want to ask during question time, just let me know ahead of time and I will make sure you get the call.” One day I told him that I had a question to ask. It was quite early on in my time here and about halfway through question time, several members stood up to ask a question while I was still sitting down in the back row and the Speaker said, “Member for Floreat.” Everyone turned around and said, “She’s still sitting down”, and he said, “But I saw her first.” I got to ask my question without having to stand up. There were wonderful moments like that.

Another story that I feel I must put on the record is that a lot has been said about Independents, especially more recently in the federal Parliament, but I had a delicious moment in the last sitting week in 1992 when Jim McGinty came and sat next to me. He was a minister at the time and he said, “It’s been great having Independents in Parliament.” I thought it was a rather odd thing for him to say and I said, “Why is that, Jim?”, and he said, “Because we’ve had to think before we’ve brought anything into Parliament.” The next day Hendy Cowan sat next to me and said, “It’s been great having Independents in Parliament.” I thought it was interesting to get the same comment two days running. I asked Hendy, “Why is that?”, and he said “Because we’ve been able to achieve things in opposition.” Perhaps it is not so bad having Independents in Parliament after all.

I have had some fantastic opportunities as a member here, particularly when serving on committees. I noticed that just before I got up to speak, and with only a few sitting days to go, I was appointed to yet another committee. I want to mention just one of those committees—the Select Committee on Ancient Shipwrecks. It was chaired by Phil Pandal; it was his idea. The members were Geoff Gallop, Jim McGinty and Ian Osborne, who was then the member for Bunbury, and me. We do not seem to have select committees these days, although I think it is still possible. There is an erroneous belief that standing committees can do the job and we do not need select committees. In my view, matters occasionally come up and issues need to be looked at over a fairly short time, and a select committee can do that. The job of the Select Committee on Ancient Shipwrecks was to determine who the primary discoverers of the six ancient shipwrecks on our coast were. We visited the *Batavia* site. Kirsten Robinson is the Deputy Clerk now.

[Member’s time extended.]

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** She was the clerk to our committee. We had Professor Geoffrey Bolton and Graeme Henderson, the director of the Maritime — Western Australian Museum, advising us. We did just that. We took evidence in Geraldton and Kalbarri. We visited the site of the Zuytdorp Cliffs where the *Zuytdorp* was wrecked on the cliffs. We determined not only primary discoverers but a category of secondary discoverers. That is now enshrined in legislation. Those people received an *ex gratia* payment, which was the recommendation of the committee. It was a fantastic experience to be part of that select committee.

Another committee in which I have been involved is the one that looked at the Parliament’s art collection. I am very proud that the Aboriginal art collection has grown from no paintings when I first came here 21 years ago to one that includes the Aboriginal People’s Room with the slump glass. We went out to Warburton and commissioned the glass for that room. I hope that over the years to come the collection will continue to grow to represent our Aboriginal culture right across the state.

I had a quick look at my first speech to the Parliament when I was deciding what to say today. There are a couple of matters I want to pick up on and perhaps tie up some loose ends. I mentioned freedom of information legislation, which other states had but we did not have at the time. I still believe that freedom of information legislation is essential so that individuals can access information on themselves and to allow for an open government and for others to access information. I think that sometimes opposition members get a bit excited about freedom of information and use it perhaps a bit too much, but it is there and it should be used.

I mentioned preprimary education, which interests me because there is a bill before the house now to make the preprimary year compulsory. It is rather nice to stand here talking about something I mentioned 21 years ago and to know that it is being dealt with in this way. I note with satisfaction that when I was the Minister for Education, it was my decision, along with cabinet, to make preprimary compulsory. It is important for a number of reasons. Children in

that preprimary year are now older than they used to be. The Australian curriculum demands that children start at that year. I think we need to make sure that all children have that opportunity, although most children are enrolled in the preprimary year now. The on-entry assessments for preprimary children that we put in place a few years ago are really important for those children who perhaps need some extra help in that year to be ready for year 1.

I talked about the need for more school psychologists. I am pleased that the number of school psychologists increased enormously under my watch. The member for Forrestfield will be pleased to know that in my original speech I also talked about gifted and talented children. I will have another plug today for those students. As a minister I discovered that there is an erroneous view among some of the bean counters in government that gifted and talented students do well anyway and we do not have to spend any money on or do anything special for them. I hope that I got the message across to those people that they are very wrong indeed. We are quite happy in this state to spend millions and millions of dollars on elite sports men and women, but we are not happy to spend the same amount of money on our very bright, gifted and creative students. While I enjoy elite sport and enjoy watching it as everyone else does, I think we can do equally well for our most bright and talented students.

One small step that I took as minister was to establish a selected gifted and talented program at Bunbury Senior High School. That was the first one outside the metropolitan area. I felt that was a step forward for students in at least one regional area. There is no doubt in my mind that we have to overhaul the programs for academically bright students at the primary level. While the Primary Extension and Challenge program has been a reasonable program, I think we need far more. If we look at other states such as New South Wales, which have had opportunity classes since I was a child growing up in Sydney, we see that we could do very well to progress this by having opportunity classes starting at about year 5 for the last two years of primary school. Just as we want our best sports men and women to win in our sporting arenas and stadiums that we are building, we need our brightest young people to be at the forefront of knowledge, innovation and discovery. We will all benefit if we nurture those young people.

I thank the staff of Parliament House for their enormous support, particularly Peter McHugh. I can remember our very first meeting 21 years ago. I also thank John Mandy, Kirsten Robinson and all the Assembly staff. I thank the Hansard staff, who do the most incredible job for us. I thank the staff in the dining room led by Mark and, of course, numero uno, Vince La-Galia. I also thank the people in Parliamentary Services. Today I received, as all members probably did, an email letting me know that Cathy Harrison, the voice of Parliament when people phone up, has decided to retire, I think in January. I am sure everyone joins me in wishing her well.

I have a couple of notes about my electorate office. There is no doubt in my mind that being a local member and assisting constituents is the best part of this job. Many members have said it before. Despite everything else I have done, it has provided me with the most satisfaction. I enjoy assisting people who do not know how to access the system; they come to me and they have tried writing to a minister or in some other way. They say, "I have never been to see my member of Parliament before, but I need help with something." That is when we really do our job. I have always believed that if we do that part of the job well, we can deal with a lot of issues in here; the issues come up in our electorates because individual people illustrate them for us. There is an example from very early on that I must put on the record.

A family came to me who had a deaf daughter who was in the first group of students at the then Swanbourne Senior High School in the special program for deaf students. The bus she had to get home to Woodlands came to the school at the end of the second-last period of the day. She missed the last period every day in order to be bussed. I sat down, having lectured in special education at UWA for some years, and I wrote a long letter to Kay Hallahan, who was Minister for Education at the time, explaining why this would be a bad thing for any child, but for a deaf child it was the worst thing that could happen. I remember just squealing with delight when we received the letter saying that the bus timetable had been changed so that the child could be there for every period at school. We could all tell thousands of stories such as that, after having been here for as long as I have, of helping people who cannot access the system themselves and who really need help from us. That is where the most satisfaction comes from, certainly for most of us. Just having constituents coming to talk about issues—things they have been thinking about or something they have read in the local paper that they want me to know their point of view on—is the way we really learn our trade and learn about the issues we are dealing with. I have had four electorate officers who have all worked part time for me and who have given the most amazing support, and I must mention them this afternoon. Liz Newby, who was with me for 12 years; Kay Hooper, who is still in my office and who has been working part time there for 14 years; Jan O'Neill, who has worked there for over eight years; and Sue Oldham, who has been there for seven years. They are very experienced women who have been the total support to me. I had a number of wonderful research officers—Katrina Burton, Jani McCutcheon, Natalie Rose, Gavin Rackosky, David de Hoog, Andrew Hohnen and Gen Faulkener. I discovered that law students in their final year are very good researchers, if anyone is interested, especially for the work we do in Parliament. I thank every one of those people for their remarkable support over such a very long time.

Although I have done it differently from most people, in many ways I have had a dream run as a member of Parliament. I have had six successive election results that some people, as I said earlier, only wish for. I was the first Independent woman of this Parliament and only the twenty-third woman. I think everyone in this Parliament should

buy and read the book that was launched last week that tells the story of the first 74 women in Parliament in Western Australia. There needs to be more, and some political parties really need to do something more about that situation. I would like to hope that in the next few years the number of women members will grow. I have had the honour of serving as a minister of the Crown and I am proud of my achievements. As Minister for Tourism, we restructured the agency to provide more funds for events and promotions and I especially thank Kate Lamont, who was chairperson of Tourism WA at the time, and Stephanie Buckland, the CEO, for their great support. In education there was a range of things accomplished that I am very proud of—independent public schools, year 7s who will be going to high school in 2015, the announcement of the 10 child and family centres and the unprecedented building program. I thank the director general, Sharyn O'Neill, who is still sitting in the Speaker's gallery, and her senior staff for all the work they did while I was minister. I particularly want to show my appreciation to the CEO of the Department of Education Services, Richard Strickland, and the boys from DES for their exemplary work in everything they do, particularly in developing legislation for teacher registration and the School Curriculum and Standards Authority. It is an excellent agency and they worked amazingly hard for me.

I am almost out of time, but I want to touch briefly on two things. I said to the Premier when I was no longer Minister for Education that the one thing I regret is that I was not able to achieve more in the area of Aboriginal education. His response was that he thought every minister of recent times would feel the same way. Some gains were made, but I am an impatient person and for me they were too slow. We all have to make sure that our efforts go into ensuring that our Aboriginal students continue to make gains and that we provide the very best teachers for them. We must be careful of Canberra telling us how to do it, because Canberra does not run schools—we do, and we know the best thing for those students. So, beware of Canberra.

I would like to thank my ministerial staff, Carlie Pyburn, was with me from the beginning, and I also thank Jeremy Lee, who was my chief of staff and who kept my feet on the ground, and Joanne Taggart, who worked tirelessly as a principal policy officer. I leave this place with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, and I look forward to life beyond Parliament. I know I have some interesting things to do. To those who are retiring from Parliament on 9 March, including the Speaker, and to those who hope to return, may all your dreams come true.

[Applause.]