PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH

Dr Judyth Watson, MLA
(Member for Canning)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply: Fourth Day

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Motion

DR WATSON (Canning) [3.48 p.m.]: It is my pleasure and also my privilege to represent the people of Canning in this House and to join the Government at the beginning of what promises to be a very long term in office which will see many more fine achievements.

In Canning few people are employers, self-employed or professionals, and few have a tertiary education. Most post-school qualifications are associated with trades. The electors are, on the whole, working people who may or may not be employed. Those men and women who do have work are predominantly in trades, services and labouring occupations. Whether in employment or not, incomes are low.

There is increasing evidence of the multicultural nature of Australian life, and while a large proportion of the constituents of Canning originated in Britain, migrants from Indian Ocean islands, South-East Asian and South American countries, for instance, now are settling in the suburbs of Canning.

As with other communities an increasingly larger proportion is becoming older. However, spread throughout the electorate is a higher-than-average population of families with four or more children under the age of 16 years. In 1981, 31 per cent of our population was less than 15 years of age.

Canning has the two largest Homeswest housing areas, many of the occupiers being families headed by women. Children are often a significant economic burden, and those families in which the head is unemployed, especially where that head is a woman, are likely to be abjectly poor.

Changes in the economic and industrial sectors have produced large and rapid changes in social and family relations throughout Australia. Different Government departments are charged with trying to do the kinds of things that families used to do, and people who live in the electorate of Canning and who are without family support and other resources are often reliant on numerous, rather impersonal agencies.

I now want to set this picture in the context of wider Australia. Australian social structure is one in which enduring inequalities are related to social class origins, gender, ethnic background, and disability. Whole categories of people are overrepresented among the poor and the unemployed, and in health and welfare organisations and services, and underrepresented in higher education and decision-making.

In 1978 it was calculated that five per cent of Australians owned more wealth than the other 95 per cent put together. In 1981–82, 10 per cent of males earned 24.5 per cent of the country's income, and 40 per cent earned 14.6 per cent of that income.

However, ideologies associated with a classless Australia persist. A recent Western Australian Council of Social Services report reveals that almost half the people who are poor here are children. This is because 40 per cent of married couples with more than four children are poor, and 82 per cent of single parents with three or more children are poor. I have already said that we have a high average population of children in the Canning electorate.

Professor Henderson noted: "Poverty is not only a condition of economic insufficiency, it is also social and political exclusion"; that is, absence of wealth and low income are reinforced by unequal health standards, by employment conditions and prospects, and by inadequate access to key pieces of information.

Such inequality is also reflected in inequalities of power between classes and sexes, and between providers and users of services, and between employees. These relationships are a pervasive aspect of our society, in which things are done for, and to, and at those who are in the more subordinate position, and not with them.

Inequalities are sustained and transmitted in complex ways across generations, so if we are to build an optimistic future for our children and for their children, some attention must be paid to certain aspects of this structure.

The Australian Labor Party is committed to a more just society through reforming the institutions and values that shape it. Indeed, the Australian Labor Party, as with other social democratic parties, distinguishes itself from conservative parties by its ideological and policy commitment to redressing inequalities. Such commitments are underlined by a philosophy of fairness and equity inherent in those policies.

Committed Labor voters have very high expectations of what a Labor Government will and should do. The party has a history of and a commitment to participatory decision-making in its own structure. The practical importance of these processes has been learned.

Two of the policy areas which I contend make a difference between Labor and Liberal Administrations are the ways that industrial relations and community services are approached. These matters are significant ones for people resident in the Canning electorate. Working class people, employed or unemployed, hold hopes that their experience of inequality will be redressed.

But a Labor Government cannot be a force for justice if paternalism or authoritarianism towards many diverse groups such as low income people, non-English speakers, women and disabled people, for instance, is its motivation, for these are imposing measures that they have come to expect.

In a truly democratic organisation, whether it be a political party, a workplace, or Government agency, consultative decision-making will embrace not only policy formulation, but consideration of options and timetables for implementation. Participants should be included in the setting of objectives for the plan of implementation, and should assist in its monitoring and evaluation. At all stages, access to information is crucial for all parties.

I turn now to two participatory programmes in those key areas of industrial relations and community services; one to do with involving workers and their employers in making their working environment safe; the other to do with inducing well-being and autonomy within neighbourhoods as a preventive welfare measure.

Participation by workers is a prerequisite for careful decision-making procedures about workplace health and safety. Most hazards do not require high levels of expenditure for their reduction, but rather an evaluation of workplace organisation. This entails encouraging workers to identify hazards and consulting them, especially about change. It entails setting up mechanisms for their involvement in decision-making. An informed and participatory work force may be the best safeguard against injury and disease.

The promotion of health and safety at work and the prevention of injury and disease are appropriate and concrete issues in which workers should participate, for they bear the risks of unsafe working environments.

The tradition of workers' participation in Scandinavia and the benefits accruing to all parties is widely acknowledged. The principle is upheld in Swedish and Norwegian working environment legislation where workers' representatives have been granted extensive rights to information, to investigate, to participate in planning, and to be trained.

Almost all EEC countries, including Britain, have legislated for workers' participation at plant level, though a variety of mechanisms for this exist, as well as a variety of powers and rights.

In all Australian States except Queensland, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia, there is some form of statutory provision for the involvement of workers in the creation and maintenance of safe working environments.

During its last term the Government circulated its policy on occupational health and safety, inviting submissions in response. We are now in the fortunate position of being able to elaborate on the advantages of experiences of other countries and other Australian States, and of being able to avoid various problems. We also now know through the submissions and through continuing consultations what may and may not be appropriate for Western Australian workplaces.

Our local experience with progressive employers also confirms the findings of British and Canadian researchers that the single most effective factor in reducing workplace hazards and consequent injuries and harmful exposure is the participation of workers with managements in making environments safe. Joint management–worker health and safety committees complemented by workplace health and safety representatives will play a major role in achieving the key objective—that of prevention of injuries and compensation claims, rather than a *post facto* reponse to them.

Secondly, we can look to two measurable dimensions of the quality of life that we experience. One is to do with income and its security, and the material things that flow from it; the other is to do with self-esteem which is often linked to these material standards. On page 17 of the recent *Community Services Review* the author argues that "those conditions in our community which promote a sense of self esteem or self regard promote health and well-being. In contrast, those conditions which reduce a person's self regard hazard their health, not only in a mental, but also in a physical sense."

The theme through the submissions, evidence, and hearings in the welfare review was that welfare policies and practices need to enhance well-being rather than to solve problems. No-one wants to be defined as a welfare recipient. People say they want to define their own needs, make their own decisions, and have locally-based services. They want these services to be preventive, accessible, non-coercive, and locally based, rather than reactive and centralised with limited access.

There are severe limits on what a State Government can do to reduce poverty, given the constraints of centralised taxation and social security systems. Welfare services themselves have not in any case reversed poverty; jobs and housing can.

In its first term of office the Burke Government achieved tremendous gains in jobs and housing programmes. More than 72 000 jobs were created, and over 6 000 units of public housing were established, and innovative schemes established to free-up the private housing market to low income earners. These are only two of the many measures taken to extend the distribution of basic material needs and to build a more just Western Australia. Some aspects of the powerlessness that accompanies the consequences of having a low income can be alleviated.

I want to briefly describe a joint Commonwealth–State funded venture in Langford—the community house. It is a marvellous example of a locally based preventive service in which its users define their needs and make their own decisions about meeting those needs and those of their neighbourhood. One-half of the house is a child-care centre, the other functions as a meeting place with child-care facilities and a resource centre. A steering committee was formed to get some background work done before the house was built and occupied and a management committee of local people has now been elected.

Local people have interviewed and appointed the staff they want. They do and will decide who can use the house. So far a women's learning centre and English classes are held regularly, nutrition and budget discussions take place, a public meeting to try to attract pharmacists to the area was held, and gardening busy bees have been held regularly. Increasingly, individuals call in to see what they and the house can offer each other. The house is still not yet officially open, such is the recognised need of locals and such is the recognition that their well-being can be and has been enhanced by participating in a wide range of matters that affect them. Contact with Government agencies is on their terms. The community house activities are a testament to community needs for individuals to develop and maintain personal responsibility, self-reliance and independence. Such early success augurs well for extending services locally in an accessible, informal and participatory setting.

The key is participation but I must emphasise that I am not proposing these processes are any substitute for material security and assistance. What they do do is restore and enhance dignity that has so often receded.

I hope that I have done some justice to the notion of participatory processes for people who, in my examples, are the bearers of risks of injury or users of sometimes coercive and sometimes judgmental services. Such decision-making emphasises equity.

The goal of a preventative welfare policy is to improve the well-being of categories of people who, for many reasons, are actual or potential users of Government health, welfare and social service agencies. The goal of a preventive safety policy is to create and maintain a safe working environment so as to minimise injuries. Both such goals are underlined by a commitment to social justice. The processes of achieving such justice are to do with equity.

Equity is closely related to notions of fairness and justice. If all interested parties make the rules and determine how they will be administered they will be seen as fair and acceptable to all parties. Fair rules will produce the benefits of reducing injuries and improving well-being. They benefit the community.

Equity is not an event but a process with the potential for far-reaching change, not the least of which is an increasing community commitment to that process.

Equity then is a means to an end; the end continually being redefined in terms of current definitions of social justice. The Utopian view of social justice is probably consequent on the redistribution of income and wealth which, in turn, should result in a classless and egalitarian society. This is just not possible within the framework of our economy. Some of the components of unequal distribution, however, can be reduced. Increasing opportunities by increasing access through a commitment to equity is one means. Its cost is to do with values. The monetary values will logically be reduced. The nettles to be grasped are the cultural costs, for it means that people formerly without a say in matters that affect them will have a voice in their health, safety and welfare. The attitudes that have prevented that must be changed. These kinds of reforms will demonstrate the collective benefits to the community, for instance, improved working conditions and the promotion of well-being in workplaces and neighbourhoods alike. The well-being of a society is contingent on the well-being of its people. The well-being of this generation will influence in positive—or negative—ways the well-being of the next generation.

The achievements of our long-term State Labor Government will not only be concrete and legislative ones, but also there will be changed expectations of Government as more and more people are consulted and are able to participate in decisions that affect them. Indeed, there will be a community commitment to those processes and expectations that will be hard to budge. There will be an expectation of equity.

Gough Whitlam said words to the effect that people should be participants and partners in Government and fair and equal sharers in the wealth and opportunities that this nation can offer.

In conclusion, I want to thank the women and men who worked to have me elected, not the least of whom was Tom Bateman, the former member: I owe much to the 18 years that Tom spent in representing Canning so well. I feel an onerous responsibility in being the representative now and I will continue to work to meet the needs, hopes, and expectations of the constituents and my colleagues.

[Applause.]

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