



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



Dr Mike Nahan, MLA
(Member for Riverton)

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 17 November 2020

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DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton) [4.55 pm]: Tonight is a time for reflection, for appreciation and, importantly, for learning some of the lessons of the past. Perhaps the most common personal question that I have been asked during my time in Parliament is: how did a quirky, straight-talking person from the back blocks of Michigan get to be in the Western Australian Parliament, be the Treasurer of the state and be the Leader of the Opposition? I usually answer euphemistically, “Good question”, and shrug my shoulders. Life acts and goes in mysterious ways. The question is often prompted by the widely held perception that politicians, particularly mainstream party politicians, fit into a certain mould, which I did not. They usually come from safe seats, which are, at least in my party, allocated by powerbrokers to people who work through the system. I did not come into Parliament via a safe seat; I came in via a marginal seat. I won the seat of Riverton from Labor in 2008 with a margin of 64 votes. My path meant that I came to this place on my own terms, with no favours owing, except to win the seat next time—the freedom few on either side of this chamber enjoy.

The curious would then ask: why did I decide to become a politician? The answer to this question is easier. Politics and government are vitally important and I wanted to make a meaningful contribution to my adopted community. I wanted to serve the community to which I felt I owed so much. Also, up to that date, I had spent a lifetime telling politicians what to do and how to do it, and thought it was time—to mix metaphors—to jump the fence and get my hands dirty. I do not mean to imply that those who ask why do not understand the importance of good government. On the contrary, they understand it very well indeed. Underlying the question “Why?” is in fact a general loss of respect for the political process and a bit of exasperation with the political class. I had similar sentiments when I was looking in from the outside. Having been on the inside for 12 years and becoming an insider, I believe that our system generally produces good government. I affirm this even though the political and parliamentary process can be chaotic, longwinded, frustrating and opaque. As the German leader Bismarck first warned, two things people should not watch being made if they wish to enjoy the outcome are sausages and politics!

In my maiden speech, I proposed the elimination of the upper house. Hon Simon O’Brien from the other place had come to listen to my speech. When he heard that, he almost fell off his chair. I could hear the screams from Hon Norman Moore from my seat! I recant. A bicameral system, with the upper house being a house of review and a check on the excesses of the executive, is an important aspect of our system. As to the character of the political class, I think that I, like everybody, tried to do my bit by being an honest, accessible and hardworking local member and minister, and I hope that I was successful.

When I was first elected, the expectation of many was that I would not be a good fit in the role of a local member. I was a big-picture person and dry policy wonk with no background in local activity other than my children’s sports and schools. To be honest, even I was uncertain whether the shoe would fit. Happily, I have enjoyed being a local member immensely. Indeed, being a local member has been the highlight of my political career. The Riverton district fitted me perfectly. It has one of the highest proportions of migrants of any electorate in Australia. Most of its migrants are from Asia, communities with which I have had a long and personal relationship. The Riverton community is culturally diverse, inclusive and aspirational, and values educational excellence like no other. It is family-oriented and loves its sports. It is the heart and soul of our state. It has been a privilege, indeed an honour, to be the member for Riverton. To the people of Riverton, thank you. You trusted me to help you. You invited me into your families, shared your triumphs and sorrows, and enriched my life and that of my family. I will cherish the trust and confidence you placed in me at the time of your need, and I hope that I have been of service to you. Thank you.

In the second term of the Barnett government, I was appointed to the ministry as Treasurer; Minister for Finance; Energy; Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. The Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs portfolio was important and rewarding. It gave me the opportunity to help migrants do as I have done, which is to adjust to and contribute to our new home of Western Australia.

The Treasury and Energy portfolios turned out to be the portfolios from hell. It was as if all those politicians I had lectured over the years in my past profession about avoiding debt and deficits were getting payback. I became Treasurer a month before the release of the 2014–15 budget, and the state’s revenue immediately tanked. I guess it was karma. Over 2014–15 and 2015–16, virtually every source of state revenue declined, with overall revenue

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declining each year by three points. This was the most significant reduction in revenue any Australian state had suffered since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Royalties receipts led by iron ore collapsed by \$2 billion per annum, our GST share fell below 30 per cent, and the private sector was also feeling the pain. The state's domestic economy went into the deepest decline in 85 years. The electricity sector was in a similar deep funk. Synergy was haemorrhaging, the Muja A and B power stations rebuild that I inherited was a disaster and Western Power was required to spend over \$1 billion on poles. As Voltaire said, each player must accept the cards life deals them, but once in hand, they must decide how to play the cards to win. Well, I played the hand as best I could. I cut expenses to the lowest in decades, I raised some taxes, I reformed and cut costs in the electricity sector, I made the case for reforming the GST, I pushed the commonwealth to assist with infrastructure spending and I tried to sell assets, but I lost the hand. Deficit and debt grew, the economy continued to struggle and we lost the 2017 election. I did my best, and arguably I was the best placed to play the hand. I would do it again and I have no regrets.

I then took on the role of Leader of the Opposition, not with any sense of future position, but out of a sense of duty to help rebuild and regroup a shattered team and to help the WA parliamentary Liberal team on the road for a return to government. My frustration was compounded when as Leader of the Opposition I watched the McGowan government not only receive the benefits of our work, but also take credit for them and receive huge revenue windfalls. Politics is a tough game and the victors write history. Any team of politicians is a rolling ball of personal ambition, egos, ideology and competing interests, and the team that I led as opposition leader was no different. I gave the role all I had, including my moustache—and it has not grown back!

Undoubtedly, the highlight of my time as opposition leader were the three elections that were held. We were always going to win Cottesloe, but we did better than predicted and it resulted in the excellent new member, David Honey. The Darling Range by-election was special. Against the odds, outspent on advertising by more than three to one and written off in the polls in the media, we won with a massive 9.3 per cent swing and, again, it resulted in the return of one of the hardest working members of the house, Alyssa Hayden. The federal election was also a great win against the odds. The public of Western Australia is indisputably better informed and less persuaded by spending than governments and the media give it credit for.

I have been blessed with the assistance of many people during my political career. First and foremost is my wife, Nyuk. She had her own career but put in the hard yards for me, including hundreds of functions. One year, I think that we—at least I—went to 17 Chinese New Year balls, and the biggest achievement was that I did not put on weight! I could not have done the job without her. My children have made me proud. They have succeeded immensely in their own careers and supported me in mine. No achievement can exceed the achievement of watching your children succeed.

I would not have been in Parliament or become a minister without the support and leadership of Colin Barnett. He was in the right place at the right time, and Western Australia is better for it. It goes without saying that I would not be here without the Liberal Party. It preselected, supported, guided and advised me and it mobilised the community support for me. One of the most uplifting aspects of my journey in politics has been to see and participate in the great community event that is our elections. Win or lose—I have experienced both—they illustrate the strength of our civil society and democracy. They are a great event. During my time in politics, the Liberal Party has had two excellent directors in Western Australia, Ben Morton and Sam Calabrese. Both men are wise and skilled in the process of politics beyond their years. Ben went on to become the member for Tangney, the federal seat that entirely encompasses the seat of Riverton. He has been a godsend in that role. He is hardworking and supportive of the community.

As for my colleagues, thanks for the memories. The highs, the lows, the thrills, the spills, the wins, the losses, the planning and the scheming, the laughter and the pain. I would not have missed it for quids. Good luck. Remember, politics in the end is a battle of ideas, not personalities. To Anthony Spagnolo, the Liberal Party's candidate for Riverton, I say, "Earn it", and I trust you will. Godfrey Lowe and Michael Goddard have supported me from start to finish. I have had outstanding electorate staff—I mean outstanding—including Lyn Mitchell, Ben Kunze and Tracy Cant, as well as ministerial staff, Simon Helm, Natasha Cheung and Luke O'Callaghan. Denice Rice and Andrew Gaspar stood by me during the many lonely days as opposition leader. I thank them all.

A warning: I came into the public debate in the late 1980s, first as a public servant and then in the Institute of Public Affairs, in part, because of WA Inc mark I. Indeed, I am one of the few people in this place who remembers firsthand those times. Members opposite who are too young to remember should read the reports of the royal commission into WA Inc for their own edification. I and the Liberal Party won in 2008 to a significant degree because of WA Inc mark II. Now, as I prepare to leave Parliament, I see signs of a potential repeat. I recognise that what I will say may make some squirm and cause others to write me off as a partisan sore loser, but it needs to be said, and few other than I can or will. The McGowan government is far too close to select powerful commercial interests, particularly in the media and the property sectors in the state. There is a reason why other states have banned political donations from property developers. Governments control planning and own vast tracts of valuable land, and property developers stand to gain mightily if they receive special treatment from either planning determinations or access

to government land. Experience here and in other states shows that without adequate safeguards, some politicians and developers succumb to the lure of largesse and do deals to their collective advantage but to the great disadvantage of the community. In response to the experience of WA Inc, successive WA governments, Labor and coalition, have put in place processes that have greatly reduced the discretion of ministers over planning, tendering and land disposal decisions, and increased the level of transparency of these decisions.

These safeguards, particularly most recently under the cover of COVID-19, are being eroded. This is dangerous. I am not advocating a ban on property developers but the enforcement of transparency and tendering guidelines.

The fourth estate plays an essential role in our political system. It is one of the primary means by which the public is informed about the activities, performance and capabilities of governments and oppositions. To be effective, the media sector should be diverse, competitive and independent of commercial interests. These are not the characteristics of the media in this state now. The traditional media is highly concentrated with one outlet having a near monopoly on newspapers, combined with the dominant free-to-air TV. This is not healthy. Channel Nine is starting to expand in this state and I wish them well. The ABC, which was established to counter weaknesses in the commercial media market, has become very nationally or eastern states-centric. I urge the ABC hierarchy to put more resources into our state.

One of the contributing factors to WA Inc mark I was the takeover of media outlets, TV and newspapers, by commercial interests and then using those outlets to provide political leverage in pursuit of commercial gain—read the royal commission. It is an important and healthy characteristic for the Australia media landscape that most media outlets are independent in terms of ownership and operation of non-commercial interest. That is the general characteristic of our media and it adds to its quality. In Western Australia, the dominant commercial media outlet has ownership links to a large range of commercial operations in this state. These operations have many dealings with state and federal governments. That is not surprising or threatening and, indeed, is appropriate. The concern lies with the potential use of media outlets to advance non-media commercial interests. The solution lies not in special regulation or prohibitions but strict enforcement of, again, transparency and tendering guidelines. If we do not learn the lessons of the past, we are bound to repeat them.

Mr Speaker, I have said what I needed to say. Now I move on. I leave this place with a sense of satisfaction, knowing that at all times I did the best I could for the people of Riverton and of this state, that I worked hard for my constituents and that I remained true to my values. I wish all here well.

[Applause.]
