



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Bob Kucera MLA
(Minister for Health - Member for Yokine)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly, Wednesday 2 May 2001

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

MR KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [1.14 pm]: It is with a profound sense of the honour, respect and responsibility that has been afforded me by the electors of Yokine that I rise to give my first speech as a member of the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia. I thank each and every one of them for the confidence, trust and faith that they have placed in me, and I assure them that I will do my utmost to represent their interests in Parliament over the next four years.

An Expression of Thanks

I also wish to pay special tribute to my campaign director, Sharryn Jackson, the Labor candidate for Hasluck, and my campaign manager, Bruce Campbell-Fraser. They, together with a tireless group of unsung heroes - that is, the special volunteers from the community, the unions and a host of community organisations - helped me week in, week out for 10 long months to ensure my election.

True believers such as Ed Hutchinson, Judy Webber, Katrina Monteau, Steed and Karen Farrell, Patrick Behan, Fred Birnie and many more pounded the pavement and walked the Yokine beat alongside me doing what parliamentarians must always do, but what some were not doing, that is, listening to the people. All parliamentarians must do that; however, some did not. The electorate gave the Labor Party a clear message and a mandate to repair the damage caused by eight years of an uncaring, conservative Government. Above all, I thank my family, Tim, Joanne, Richard, Rebecca and especially my wife, Susan, who, for over 37 years, has been the wind beneath my wings. When entering into public life, politicians must enter into a partnership. My wife tells me that behind every successful man is a very surprised woman. I am not sure whether that is politically correct but, in my case, it is probably true.

I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your election and appointment as the Speaker of this House. As a new member I may seek your guidance from time to time and I sincerely hope that you do not take the advice proffered by Theodore Roosevelt to his Speaker that, in his case, he speak softly and carry a big stick. Being mindful of my previous occupation, if I am unsure about something, I may say to you, Mr Speaker, "Hello, hello, hello, what's going on here?" I come to this place with an appreciation of the importance and impact of good law and a real experience of the difficulty of applying poorly framed legislation. After 35 years as a law enforcer, I consider it a privilege to become a law-maker. Never has the need for good government been greater, and never was that more evident to me than when, as a police officer, I experienced every possible human situation and

some situations that I might say were inhuman. No other occupation, save that of perhaps a nurse or a doctor, touches the extremes of the human condition like that of a police officer; therefore, my qualifications for this new role have been earned in the university of life.

Reconciliation

I also congratulate my parliamentary colleague, Carol Martin, the first indigenous woman to become a member of this or any other Australian Parliament. Shortly, I will talk about my passion for equity, fairness and inclusion. Throughout my career in the Police Force I worked with Aboriginal communities. My first posting was to Mt Barker in 1967 where, as part of my duties, I was the Inspector of Natives. The state of the native reserve was nothing short of a scandal. Sadly, even today, little has changed in some of the places I have visited. I enforced many of those rules to which Ms Martin referred. Unlike some members, I have no problem in saying sorry. In the twenty-first century, I like to think we live in an enlightened world, one of understanding, tolerance and compassion. It has been said that the past is another country; yet, unless we journey from that country along the pathway of reconciliation, how can we travel into the brave new country we call the future? I thank my colleague, the member for Kimberley, and the other traditional owners of this land for showing me the way.

Personal Background

Today is a date with destiny for me. It is the culmination of a journey of almost 56 years that has brought me from the coalfields of south Wales to what I believe is one of the great cities of the world. My father, Charlie Kucera, met and married Norah Williams while they were both fighting against the Nazis who had driven my father from his native Czechoslovakia and who were attempting to overrun Wales, the land of Norah's father. I was the first of their three children. By coincidence, they were both stationed with the Australian 10 Squadron, flying Sunderlands from Pembroke Dock in south Wales. The mates they made and the friendships they forged led them to Perth in 1964, almost 20 years later, where they made a new life for me, my younger brother Richard and my sister Janet. However, it was my childhood spent in the Welsh valleys, the birthplace of the industrial revolution and unionism, that instilled in me a set of principles that I have followed fiercely: Fairness, equity, democratic freedom and the fundamental right of everyone to a decent job and a quality of life, which they choose for themselves, through their own efforts. These have been my priorities.

In the words of another Welshman, Aneurin Bevan, "the language of priorities is the religion of socialism" - in the language of Australia, a fair go! My father went back to Czechoslovakia in 1945 to what was left of his home, only to escape again when the Soviets closed the borders. He returned to Wales as a refugee, and we grew up in a postwar era when everyone from Europe was viewed with suspicion. As a smallgoods manufacturer, Charlie's shop became the focal point for many hundreds of Jewish, Balkan and east European refugees and displaced persons.

In the early days I was the son of a "reffo". My mates were Jewish, Polish, Latvian or whatever group we mixed in with. That period of my life made me realise that I would never just practise tolerance but rather would always seek to understand and accept difference, and celebrate it! History is littered with the tragic results of communities that think, selfishly, that they can afford to exclude others from the quality of life that they themselves demand. Norah and Charlie, my parents, instilled in me that thirst for social justice. Growing up in a house that was always filled with Europe's discarded peoples and listening to their stories made me determined that, no matter what, I would always seek out roles in life where I could make a difference. I hope that Norah and Charlie are somehow listening today because they were right, and those principles are as valid to me today as they were then.

Multiculturalism

Last year I again discovered the joys of listening to people with similar stories when I began knocking on the doors of those in the Yokine electorate. I met again with Tom Milevski and Vic Radis and their fellow countrymen at the Macedonian community club. I met my Greek constituents, such as the Linnios family, and I enjoyed the great Turkish coffee that Vasi made me at the Aegean Cafe while we argued about politics. I relived some childhood memories when I visited the synagogue and listened to the wonderful men and women at the Maurice Zeffert Memorial Centre for the Aged tell their tales. I then revisited some of the horror of the children of Terezin in the exhibition that Rabbis Freilich and Coleman so thoughtfully showed me through. How fortunate I am to be in a position to represent such a culturally rich and diverse electorate: The hardworking Italian community, with people like the Minnitti family, my Chinese and Vietnamese friends, and the newest constituents from the Horn of Africa who comprise my many Islamic friends whom I have come to understand and respect. Yokine is Australia in microcosm, the multicultural success story that makes our country renowned among the lands.

When I came to Australia nearly 38 years ago, it was a very different community. Yokine has been intertwined with my life almost from the beginning of my Australian journey. I met my wife, Susan, just six months after arriving. Her family had lived in North Perth and Mt Hawthorn since the early part of the century. My wife, as a member of the Ptolomey family, grew up in North Perth and went to Kyilla Primary School, while the whole family, including her brother Robert and her father, Mick, were one of the mainstay families of the West Perth Football Club. Robert played first ruck alongside Blue Foley, and Uncle Fred was the president. My wife's mum, Vi, was one of three sisters who all married Mt Hawthorn boys. In the early part of our married life, we lived in that electorate in the same area until we transferred to the bush. We came home to North Perth nearly 10 years ago when we returned to the family home, and we have seen the rebirth of the electorate as young families have moved back in. We have also seen the electorate change as the City of Stirling and the Town of Vincent have moved into the twenty-first century. It is not only my electorate but also my home.

Commitment to Addressing Social Issues

My home and the homes of those who live in my electorate are, like many others in recent years, now constantly coming under increasing pressure from the three key issues on which the Labor Party essentially campaigned: Health, the education of our children and our safety and security. This is the very foundation of the quality of our life. Driving this pressure has been the headlong attack on the basic fabric of our community underscored by the mantra of economic rationalism - a philosophy that has hurt many Western Australians over the past eight years of conservative government. The most common question that I have been asked so far has been why did I leave a perfectly good career to become a politician. I often give the same answer as General Charles De Gaulle, "Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians". However, now I am one, seriously!

The reality, however, is that people are now viewing politics with a degree of cynicism. I found when doorknocking that people have a sense of alienation and a very real view that collectively government is not listening. Increasingly over the past few years I have come to realise that the key determinants of crime were far beyond the capacity of the police or the prison system to fix. I believe that every one of us who seeks political office has an absolute obligation to make a difference. That is why I stand here today. Former United States President Lyndon Johnson, whom one would hardly describe as a social reformer, recognised that the key causes of crime in the United States were want, ignorance prejudice, disease, unemployment and poverty, and he was right. Coppers and courts cannot fix those problems. Only an effective and a committed Government can. Rest assured that the Gallop Labor Party is committed to be effective and compassionate.

Let us analyse these key causes for a moment. Ignorance and prejudice result from a lack of awareness and education. Disease is a product of poverty and poor health services. Want is caused by unemployment and inequity in wealth distribution. Unemployment is a direct product of either poor government policy or, more latterly, the absolute insistence on economic rationalism and the pursuit of the almighty dollar. It is now accepted that if these social determinants exist - poor education, poor health, unemployment and inequitable wealth distribution - then according to Lyndon Johnson we will have high crime rates. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to work out why we in this State have high crime rates and why these key issues - health, education, community safety and unemployment - are those that troubled the Western Australian electors the most.

Trying to deal with these key issues was a fundamental part of my life before I came to this place. The Police Force was a great career, but it was the realisation that for 35 years I had been dealing with the results and not the causes of crime that made me undertake what I suppose one could call my seachange. The real watershed for me came in 1991 when I returned to work in Wales as part of a Churchill Fellowship and saw at first-hand after 27 years what Thatcher and her brand of economic rationalism had done to the green valleys of my birth. I spoke with the miners, and the police. I saw how the policies were splitting whole communities. I went to Corby in Lancashire and the northern towns where coppers were fighting with their own. This cannot happen in Australia, I said, but it did, and it has.

Throughout my previous career I took great pride in being apolitical. I kept my principles, I worked with many members on both sides of the House and with ministers and I went to great lengths to support the Government of the day regardless of its persuasion. However, the final crunch came a few years back during the waterfront dispute when my young police officers had to stand between balaclava-clad minders, with their dogs, and the ordinary men and women of this State. At the end of the day, we live in a community of real people who are just trying to get on with their daily lives, not in an economy.

Commitment to the Electorate of Yokine

The people of Yokine, my constituents, have the same expectations and aspirations, for they are no different from any other community within this great State. They expect us as the representatives of their democracy to deliver on the fundamental social contract that is demanded of government. My priority, which I pledged to the electors of Yokine, is to represent their local interests and most importantly to listen to their views. Supported by my party, I made four clear commitments: To rebuild the Mt Lawley Senior High School; to reduce the health bureaucracy and put the money saved into patient care; to boost state police numbers by 250 officers; and to stop all logging in old-growth forests.

On the first commitment, Christine Richardson and the long-suffering members of the parents and citizens association of Mt Lawley Senior High School, together with the principal, Ian Murray, have struggled for many years to produce some of the most talented students in Western Australia. The previous Government and the local member made hollow promises for eight long, frustrating years to do something about what was the most neglected high school in the State. My thanks go to the sheer persistence of Christine, Ian and their colleagues in placing this at the top of the list of issues in Yokine. Through the efforts of Diana Warnock, the former member for Perth, John Hyde, the current member for Perth, and my colleague Hon Alan Carpenter, Minister for Education, we announced recently the \$17 million rebuild of that great school. Education is a fundamental right of all Western Australians. Mt Lawley Senior High School is the only public high school in the electorate, and its level of neglect is an indictment of the previous Government. It can now return to its former glory and continue to be a centre of excellence, producing well-educated students.

Similarly, many local primary schools have suffered years of neglect. David Rose, Craig Heath and the wonderful staff and parents of Yokine Primary School do not have sewerage toilets at their school, yet the sewerage line runs past their front door. The basic care and maintenance that once was the province of the cleaners and the caretakers in our schools has almost disappeared. The fabric of the school community has been undermined so that contract firms can profit while our schools fall down or burn down at the hands of vandals. What has been the cost of privatisation? Care and compassion has gone for some meagre savings, but at what cost? It is estimated that vandalism and arson in our state schools last year cost \$6.4 million. How many cleaners, caretakers and crossing guards would we get for that, Mr Speaker, and how much safer would our children be?

I had no idea when I pledged my second commitment that I would be Minister for Health in the Gallop Government. However, during my election campaign I saw the impact on my constituents of the challenges that providing public health services presents. The poor quality of life of someone like Rae Hedley of Tuart Hill, a proud grandmother, demanded that she have a hip replacement. On five occasions she arrived at hospital, only to be turned away. On the sixth occasion, after my intervention, she was successfully treated in the private system, paid for by public funding.

My first action as Health minister was to abolish the Metropolitan Health Service Board, and I will ensure that the estimated \$4 million savings are put back into patient care. Last week I announced the first phase of a review of the health bureaucracy that will tackle the challenges ahead. In the past seven weeks I managed to visit almost all public hospitals in the metropolitan area and many country facilities. I found no-one who does not want to excel in our system. I was extremely proud a few weeks ago to present Peter Campos and the staff of Osborne Park Hospital, next to my electorate, with a well-deserved full accreditation. From my almost daily personal interaction on the floors of the wards in the hospitals I believe that we have the basic underpinning of what could be a great health system. However, imagination, vision, leadership and, above all, compassion are the four ingredients essential to accomplish a return to that greatness. That will be our Government's mantra as we embark on a journey of repair and reform.

On my third pledge, my colleague Hon Michelle Roberts, Minister for Police, has taken the first step towards recruiting those police officers, to ensure that the safety of our entire community is a priority. However, even more important is the vision of our Premier in establishing in his own department a social policy unit and a cabinet subcommittee whose principal role is to cooperatively address the social determinants of crime, that I spoke of earlier.

Ensuring that government policy allows young Western Australians to reach out for their dreams and aspirations will be a key element of this Government. It is essential that our community volunteers - the Jim Easterbrooks of this world and the committee of the Yokine Little Athletics Club - be supported; that Norma Brooks, who has coached literally thousands of young people in the little swimming pool behind Tuart College, including greats like Louise Sauvage, are recognised, together with Lionel Warhurst and Jim Bradley from the Tuart Hill Swimming Club. Their tireless efforts for almost 30 years ensure that the fabric of our society is continuously renewed. They and many other countless volunteers, especially in this the International Year of Volunteers, make my electorate of Yokine a great place in which to live and work. Respect for others and the understanding of the true meaning of our community are the greatest weapons we have against crime.

Mr Speaker, my final pledge is to ensure the future of a wonderful part of our great State - native forests. It is a matter of record that our Government has commenced that process, and I again thank the people of Yokine for giving us that mandate.

I began my Address-in-Reply speech by emphasising my journey through the rich tapestry of Australian life. Last Wednesday morning on Anzac Day, our national day of remembrance, I stood

at the Osborne Park RSL alongside Fred Birnie and Bill Sullivan, President of the Osborne Park subbranch of the Returned and Services League of Australia. Later I attended a dedication at the Mt Hawthorn memorial with former state RSL president, Ken Murphy, and the family of the late Jack Axford, VC, MM. It reminded me of the awesome responsibility that each of us accepts in this first session of the thirty-sixth Parliament of Western Australia. We have inherited the legacy the Anzacs left us to ensure the continuation of the wonderful institution that is our parliamentary democracy.

A few years ago I asked a young woman, a political refugee from South America, what she thought of police officers and government. Her reply was “shiny black boots”. I was a bit puzzled about that and asked her why. She said that that was all she remembered of the night they took away her brother, and he never came back. Mr Speaker, it is this institution that now protects that young woman. The laws we make honour the legacy left by the Anzacs and shield her from the totalitarian regime that my father fought against and the regime that took her brother. It is said that many are called, but few are chosen. I am proud that the people of Yokine chose me. My hope is to live up to their expectations; my desire is to make a difference for the betterment of their lives; and my goal is to serve the people of Western Australia to the best of my ability. I look forward to becoming a part of the great tradition that this Parliament represents.

[Applause.]
