



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Sue Walker MLA
(Member for Nedlands)

Legislative Assembly, Thursday 28 June 2001

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MS WALKER (Nedlands) [10.09 am]: I take this opportunity to thank the people of the Nedlands electorate who have granted me the privilege of being here. I thank them for placing their trust and confidence in me, and in return I commit myself to do my best to represent their interests in Parliament. Having survived the rigours of preselection and the by-election, I have been genuinely taken aback by the real warmth and friendliness I have received from members of Parliament of all persuasions, and parliamentary staff, since I became the member for Nedlands. I wish also to place on public record my loving thanks to my family, my father Joseph Walker, my children Alex and Sam, and in particular my four sisters, Linda Bedford-Brown, Joy Appleyard, Sheila Walker and Vivian Zotti, and also my close friends Linda Healy and Rhonda Peploe, who worked virtually full time and tirelessly on my election campaign and also provided me with substantial financial assistance.

I pay personal and particular tribute to Peter Collier, the president of the Curtin division of the Liberal Party and my campaign manager, who, although he was working full time, devoted an enormous amount of time to the administrative side of a very professional and well-thought-out campaign. All the 150 to 200 volunteers who helped me during my campaign were marvellous, but I would be remiss if I did not single out Mike Watts and his daughter Kate, Julie Johnston, Roy Dewar, Daphne Bogue, David Stephens, Brian Pontifex, and the committee members of my own Dalkeith branch of the Liberal Party, including David Sutton, Patrick Breen and Anne Patrick. I also give very special thanks to Hon Colin Barnett, the Leader of the Opposition, Hon Ray Halligan, member for the North Metropolitan Region, and the state Parliamentary Liberal Party for their assistance during my campaign. That assistance underpinned my campaign. I also thank Andrew Carew-Reid, whose advice and assistance I sought when I decided to stand for the seat of Nedlands. I have been sent to this place by not only Nedlands voters but also my local active Liberal Party branches of Dalkeith, Nedlands, Claremont, Leederville, Hackett and West Perth. I also mention and thank the branch presidents, including Sally Plummer, for their efforts in sending me here. The campaign was hard work but enjoyable, and I thank the committee members. I appreciate sincerely the tireless work and efforts of everybody who helped me during that period.

The electorate of Nedlands was carved out of the seats of Claremont and Subiaco in 1930. For the past five years, it has included parts of West Perth. I am the fifth elected representative and the first woman representative of the seat of Nedlands; but I am not the first woman to represent West Perth. That honour and privilege goes to Edith Cowan, who won the seat in 1921 and who was the first woman

elected to an Australian Parliament. It is in her honour that the clock at the entrance to Kings Park, which forms part of the Nedlands electorate, now stands.

It is to Edith Cowan, who gave her maiden speech in this House almost 80 years ago, that I owe a debt of gratitude. In 1923, during her term in Parliament, she achieved passage of her private member's Bill - the Women's Legal Status Act - which was designed to remove women's disqualification from entry into the legal and other professions. It has undoubtedly been said in this place, and I was amused to read, that she was also successful in eliminating the tradition of the Speaker's gallery to my left and other parliamentary galleries being reserved solely for men. As a successful student of the University of Western Australia Law School, I thank Edith Cowan, and I reach back into the history of this Chamber to honour her efforts in pursuing that private member's Bill, which has afforded women the right to enter the legal and other professions. It is a Bill from which I and many other women have benefited, and I am delighted that Claremont resident Hilary Silbert has founded the Edith Dircksey Cowan Foundation to ensure that she receives her proper place in history.

When I consider the Nedlands electorate, which takes in the suburbs of Dalkeith, Nedlands, Crawley, Shenton Park, Jolimont, Subiaco and West Perth, I am truly awed by the great honour and privilege of serving this unique community. The Nedlands electorate is home to some of the most beautiful riverfronts, parks and reserves in this State, as well as the magnificent Kings Park, which was set aside in 1872 and which commands, in my opinion, one of the best views in the world. The Nedlands electorate contains a wide cross-section of people. As a longstanding resident, I am aware of the challenges it faces.

I came to Western Australia in 1967 with my father, mother and four siblings. I pay tribute to my father, Joseph Walker, and my mother, Sheila, for giving us decent standards and values by which to live, as well as a very strong work ethic. Western Australia has been very kind to my family, and we have worked hard and become successful. My sisters operate small businesses in the Nedlands electorate and in the regional centres of Albany and Narrogin. I am aware of the importance of small business in Western Australia, particularly as it employs half the private sector work force. I am also aware of the problems that small businesses face and I assure them that I will put forward their views in this Parliament. There is no dispute that sound economic management is vital to our community, and that has been reflected in many of the maiden speeches I have read. It is clear that the previous coalition Government has a good record on this front. Its runs are on the board. However, it is also clear that people in Nedlands and elsewhere do not wish any Government to see them only in terms of numbers. They require a balance between social, economic and environmental factors. People want to be seen as the individuals they are - their hearts and souls - and they need politicians to reflect and deal with issues that relate to them on that level.

I take this opportunity to express my views on three matters of concern to the Nedlands electorate, and which are doubtless relevant to many other electorates: the environment, aged care and the use of drugs in our community.

ENVIRONMENT

As a former pastoralist and grazier who lived in the Australian bush for a number of years, I have a deep appreciation of the beauty and frailty of the natural environment and of all living things. Western Australians of all age groups are concerned about the preservation of our planet. They ask us, as parliamentarians, to ensure that we carefully protect our planet and talk with and listen to the community when deciding on issues that affect the environment. I concur with these views. It has been said that psychological research suggests that people have a deep need for contact with nature. For some it is

spiritual, for others it manifests itself directly through recreational activities such as bushwalking and exploration.

Old-growth forests are an example of the concern that the Australian community has about the retention of irreplaceable community assets. They want us, as politicians, to ensure that they remain and flourish for future generations to enjoy. In particular, it is important that we, as parliamentarians, ensure that we provide spaces where our natural environment can exist and prosper and that offer solitude and natural settings in which we, the people of Western Australia, can find a release from our busy lives. I reaffirm my commitment to support the ban on logging in old-growth forests, and I recognise that this action brings with it the need to deal sensitively and constructively with the issues and problems that will beset the relevant communities. The phasing-out period will deeply affect the families living in these communities. I know their needs will not be ignored. I place on record Dame Rachel Cleland's personal endorsement of my genuine commitment to the environment in this regard during the campaign. I sincerely thank her for that.

The Underwood Avenue bushland issue is an environmental matter of local importance. Kings Park was set aside in 1872 when our forefathers recognised the bushland's aesthetic and recreational value. Perth bushlands and wetlands provide a habitat for wild flowers, diverse bird life, lizards and marsupials. Many of the plants that come together to create these habitats are unique to the Swan coastal plain and the Darling Range. The previous coalition Government recognised the importance of protecting urban bushland through the introduction of Bushplan and Bush Forever. There is now an opportunity to build on that work.

Many people in my electorate are concerned about the proposed development by the University of Western Australia of a regionally significant site at the corner of Underwood Avenue and Selby Street in Shenton Park. This is high-quality bushland that acts as a fauna corridor between Bold Park and Kings Park. Of the initial 30-hectare parcel, just under 22 hectares are to be developed, leaving a remnant of 8.5 hectares. Urban bushland plays an important social role in our society. The uniqueness of the bush gives us our Australian sense of place and identity as well as fulfilling a deep need for many people to have contact with nature. This bushland, which acts as a link between Bold Park, the Shenton Park bushland and Kings Park, is critical to the survival of many species, particularly avian fauna, frogs and some species of reptiles. The importance of vertebrate fauna on the site is recognised by the Western Australian Museum. Fauna studies and surveys over many years have identified 37 bird species, 60 reptile species and three amphibian species. Seven of those bird species are recognised as having high conservation significance. According to the Labor Party's environmental policy, published on its web site, the Government will -

establish an Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Unit to develop a strategy for sustainability to monitor and report on progress towards sustainable development;

The Underwood Avenue proposal does not meet the sustainability criteria. Experts from the Western Australian Museum do not support the view that the 8.5-hectare remnant from the original 30-hectare area will retain its environmental values in the long term, nor will it act as an adequate corridor. The Conservation Council has suggested that the negotiated planning solution approach to this issue focused on good economic outcomes rather than on good environmental outcomes. Our natural environment is unique and irreplaceable, and I am aware of high levels of community support and concern surrounding the proposed Underwood Avenue woodlands subdivision. My understanding is that 5 000 signatures have been collected in relation to its retention. The land is part of the original bequest of land to the University of Western Australia.

While the university is sympathetic to this issue, it asks how it can move forward in the climate where universities are coming under more and more pressure to be financially self-reliant. The question is how is the university to be compensated for its land because of the loss of funds that would have been generated by the subdivision and used for the continuing and important education of our community.

Our natural heritage must be protected. It is important for the community and the Government to work through the issues in relation to this bushland with the University of Western Australia, the Water Corporation - which is rejecting the subdivision because it comes within the buffer zone of its treatment plant - and the Friends of the Underwood Avenue Bushland. I support the retention of Underwood Avenue bushland.

AGED CARE AND THE SUNSET SITE

I started with the environment, but my most pressing concern, and a burning issue in our electorate, is that of aged care; specifically, the provision of high and low-level care for the aged and frail aged in our community. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of people living in Western Australia at 30 June 2000 was close to 1.9 million, with nearly 141 000 or seven per cent aged 70 years and over. One-third of that group is aged 80 years and over. It is stating the obvious that Australia's population is ageing rapidly. The next 20 years will be the most critical. By 2017, the number of people in Western Australia aged 70 years and over is expected to increase from 7.4 per cent of the total population in 2000 to 10 per cent - an increase of over 96 000. The number of people aged 80 years and over is expected to increase at an even greater rate. By 2017 about 81 000 people - or 3.4 per cent of the population - will be over the age of 80 years. It is a well-established fact that aged care accommodation in the western suburbs is deficient, and what is available is old building stock, not in keeping with the needs of future residents. It is disturbing to me that in the Nedlands electorate, where the largest single group of people is over 70 years, there are elderly residents without high and low-level care facilities, particularly in the Nedlands-Dalkeith area. Families should not have to go through the disturbing experience of searching outside the area for such facilities. Western Australian companies specialising in aged care service delivery are at pains to find land in the Nedlands-Dalkeith area that they can develop to enable them to provide quality aged care services to our residents. The existing Sunset Hospital site in Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith is, in my view, an ideal location. The 8.2 hectare site, which operated from 1906 to 1995 and is listed on the state register of heritage places and covered by a conservation plan, has lain dormant for some years at a cost of \$500 000 a year to the community. The site is currently managed by the Government Projects Office and is vested in the Health Department of Western Australia. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Hon Alannah MacTiernan, has scrapped proposed plans for a retirement village for people aged 55 years and over. My tentative view is that it is an appropriate decision, given the more immediate need for the provision of high and low-level care for the aged and frail aged in our community. As to the proposed future use of the site, the minister has been silent.

The need for the provision of aged and frail-aged care in our community is urgent and requires immediate action. I will be pursuing the current Government to see what steps it is taking in relation to the use of Sunset Hospital and the prevention of a further drain on the public purse in this matter, and how the Sunset site is proposed to be used in view of this most urgent need in our community.

DRUG ISSUE

Lastly, I turn to a broader community issue, which is the perplexing and complex question of drugs in our society. I congratulate the initiative of the current Government and Hon Bob Kucera, the Minister for Health, in organising a Community Drug Summit at Parliament House in August. I congratulate the past

coalition Government for establishing the Drug Court and enacting legislation dealing with the confiscation of the proceeds of crime. As a former crown prosecutor working daily in and around the superior courts, these were most welcome initiatives. Because of my involvement with the Palmerston Association, I know that programs such as Next Step and bereavement counselling were generously funded and established under the coalition Government.

Regarding the Drug Summit, I concur with the views and thoughts of Canon Frank Sheehan, the resident chaplain of Christ Church Grammar School and head of the Centre of Ethics, when he recently wrote in *Perth Weekly* that it is -

an ethical debate that is of crucial importance to all in our society.

The issues and problems facing our community in relation to vulnerable young people and their exposure to the drug world are still with us. We need to try to find a way through the complex problems of drug use in our community. I have been aware that, for several years, there has been a rising tide of feeling within the western suburbs and many other electorates that a compassionate approach to this issue needs to be adopted. In particular, I refer to the distressing loss of young lives to the illicit drug, heroin. While there has been a recent drought of heroin on our streets, according to Dr Ali Marsh of Curtin University, there is anecdotal evidence that it will soon be back on our streets with a consequent rise in overdoses.

It was for this reason that two years ago, in May 1999, as president of the Dalkeith branch of the Liberal Party, I persuaded my committee to hold a community drug forum with the ethics centre at Christ Church Grammar School. I believe that the now Labor minister, Hon Alan Carpenter, attended. We sponsored and invited to the forum two leaders in the drug reform debate as key speakers. They were Dr Alix Wodak, Director of Alcohol and Drug Services at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, and Professor David Pennington from Melbourne, who chaired Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett's Drug Advisory Council. We also invited a panel of local experts in the area.

The speakers informed us of the most current study results within Australia and worldwide. If he were here, Hon Alan Carpenter could tell the House of the terrible storm that raged that night, yet 300 to 350 people attended to hear what the experts and the panel had to say. We can compare the community's intense interest in this matter two years ago to the recent lack of interest by the community when candidates - other than myself - in the Nedlands by-election invited the community out on a winter's night to another venue to discuss the by-election. Only 20 people attended. I suspect that some who attended were politically affiliated. I raise this as it demonstrates the feeling of concern in our community.

Regarding the drug forum, the editorial in *The West Australian* of Thursday, 27 May 1999, reminded us as a community, and more especially as politicians, to keep an open mind. It is vital that we retain an open mind to any new idea that may assist us in saving the lives of our children, who can too easily descend into the drug-related world of violence, suicide and crime. In relation to the heroin debate, I have seen first hand the terrible dilemma that parents of children face when they become aware that their child is a heroin addict. As members of Parliament, we must place ourselves in their situation to see what it is they are asking of us. It is an issue that cannot be saved by simple political rhetoric. It is an issue that needs to be brought out into the open, and all solutions that may help our children overcome substances that control, damage or destroy their lives, and the lives of many other people in the community, should be examined.

In my view it is dangerous to our children's lives to adopt a position on matters without listening to new and relevant views. As the editorial stated -

As is the case with most major problems in our society, solutions will come from a wide range of ideas and free and open discussion. No one has an exclusive hold on wisdom about how to deal with drug abuse.

The harsh reality for parents who face the knowledge that their child is using heroin is this: they are aware their child is using a substance that can kill him or her at any moment. They become aware that their child is not at the stage at which he or she can make a voluntary decision to go off the drug and they become very aware that they are unable to help their child by providing heroin of an appropriate quality because it is against the law. I raise that because, during my time as a crown prosecutor - the member for Innaloo may agree - parents came before the courts because they had provided their children with heroin. Parents of heroin-addicted children are virtually powerless to help their children and they turn to us to find a way to keep their children alive until they reach the stage at which they can voluntarily stop using the substance and participate in one of the many excellent programs made available not only to addicts, but also to parents, families and friends.

I do not have the answer to the terrible question that faces parents, but it is the responsibility of all members of Parliament to apply our collective minds and use the knowledge of experts in addressing this great problem. We as Western Australians have the great privilege of living in a truly magnificent country - we are often called the lucky country. We used to lose our young men and women in wars preserving our way of life. We are still losing our young in a very real and damaging war, and we need to fight this new enemy with all the courage and determination that our ancestors did. I am very hopeful that, at the conclusion of the Drug Summit, strategic processes will be put into motion and that positive outcomes will be forthcoming.

I look forward to representing the seat of Nedlands in this Parliament and hope sincerely that I can make a balanced contribution to the State of Western Australia on the economic, environmental and social level.

[Applause.]
