



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Matt Birney MLA
(Member for Kalgoorlie)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly, Thursday 3 May 2001

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

MR BIRNEY (Kalgoorlie) [10.12 am]: In the absence of the Speaker, I add my voice to the myriad voices that have already congratulated him on his ascendancy to the Chair. He gave a commitment at the new members' seminar to give members of Opposition a fair go and, as a member of the Opposition, I look forward to being a recipient of that fair go. I begin by acknowledging my friends and family in the public gallery and the Speaker's gallery, some of whom have come from Kalgoorlie to be here today. I also acknowledge my mother, Shirley, who is in the public gallery. She has been a constant source of encouragement and a very stable foundation stone.

I come to this place today as the first Liberal member in history to represent the seat of Kalgoorlie. It has been held by the Labor Party for the best part of 100 years, with two brief exceptions around 1920. Neither of those members was Liberal. It is a tremendously overwhelming and humbling feeling to be chosen to represent a community of people who would not hesitate to give someone the shirts off their backs and then promptly forget that they did so. I quote the words of my father, Jack Birney, who passed on long ago, in his maiden speech to the Federal Parliament of Australia in 1976 -

It is with great pride, yet with a feeling of deep humility, that I accept the trust reposed in me.

My only regret is that he is not here today to witness this event.

An expression of thanks

I take this opportunity to thank the many terrific people in my campaign team who placed their faith in me during the election. These are people who ignored the odds and who thumbed their nose at history. These are the people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude that I acknowledge will be very difficult to repay. This has been a historic win and with your indulgence, Madam Acting Speaker, I name my campaign committee in this place so that their efforts will forevermore be recorded and recognised by history. They are: Brett Nazzari, Angus Moffat, Rino Borromei, Daniel Sutton, Graham McGarry, Tammy Atkins, Keetha Wilkinson, Glenn Briers, Helen Taylor, Darren Taylor, Antonell Caputo, Alan Dungey, Tom O'Neil, Richard Harding, Matthew Eggleston and Greg Smith.

The electorate of Kalgoorlie

It has been said that Kalgoorlie is the mining capital of Australia. It is no secret that, to a large extent, the local economy rides on the back of the mining industry. My electorate consists only of the City of Kalgoorlie and does not include any of the outlying towns, although Kalgoorlie acts as

a hub for these areas and the issues are basically the same. Kalgoorlie has a rich and unique history and even though we have achieved international recognition for our bush two-up ring, our brothels and our pubs on every corner, it is worth remembering that Kalgoorlie, while retaining much of its history, has become a very sophisticated city. We now have world-class facilities. We have a magnificent arts centre, an all-encompassing recreation centre and top-notch sporting facilities. We also have new green residential subdivisions that would rival some in Perth, and we will soon become the home to a national icon in the prospectors' and miners' hall of fame after raising some \$7 million in donations from the private sector.

The people of Kalgoorlie are also unique. They need only know someone for a short time before they will call him a mate. They are innovative and resourceful and they very rarely approach Governments with their caps in hand. I am reminded of the eastern States tourist who many years ago was passing through Kalgoorlie on his way to Perth. He stopped at a local service station to buy some fuel. The service station owner happened to be short-staffed and, after a brief chat, offered the tourist some work, which he graciously accepted. Twenty years later, that tourist was still living in Kalgoorlie and was the owner of that service station. Such is the spirit of Kalgoorlie.

If there is one event in recent times that encapsulates that spirit, it is undoubtedly the actions of the group of people who are now known as the rebel road builders. In the early 1990s there was a burning need for a bypass road capable of diverting heavy traffic around the outskirts of Kalgoorlie. A request was lodged and the answer came back from Main Roads that while it was a good idea, it would take some 18 months to plan and complete. Local industry leaders were not happy with that response, so they got together and devised a plan. At dawn on Saturday morning, everyone in town who owned a bulldozer or truck gathered on the outskirts of town, and by Monday they had ploughed the road through. Such is the spirit of Kalgoorlie. A similar story can be told about our local speedway. Once again resisting the urge to throw themselves at the mercy of government, the proponents of the speedway got together and, in typical Kalgoorlie style, applied pressure to certain individuals and companies to front up with their machinery and materials. It is now a matter of history that we have in Kalgoorlie an international standard speedway worth \$1.5 million that cost the club absolutely nothing. Such is the spirit of Kalgoorlie.

Issues in the electorate

I turn to some of the issues and challenges confronting my electorate. Native title continues to be the scourge of Kalgoorlie. It has been a major contributing factor to the downturn in the mining industry. Never before has a piece of legislation wreaked such havoc upon an industry, and never before has a piece of legislation decimated a work force with one fell stroke of the pen. Never before has a piece of legislation pitted black against white and black against black. This issue cannot progress until the right of a claimant to negotiate is removed. Why should a claimant be given the right to negotiate when he or she has not yet proven his or her claim? This is a constant source of frustration for my constituents.

The Government's proposals to reform the electoral system and abolish vote weighting in country electorates that would result in the disappearance of 16 country voices from this place would be a slap in the face for those Western Australians who choose to live in country Western Australia.

In an environment where banks, post offices, services and the like are rapidly disappearing from country Western Australia, are we as legislators going to stand here and say that we do not value the contribution of those people in country WA by reducing their representation? I would hope not.

The people of Kalgoorlie are currently facing up to some very challenging times. The promoters of the so-called tax effective schemes targeted my electorate very heavily. They saw my constituency as high income earners who may be enticed into these schemes. It is now well documented that many decent and hard working people in my electorate are facing massive tax bills

that will more than likely result in the loss of their homes, their cars, their marriages and, sadly, perhaps even their lives. I have seen a Queen's Counsel's opinion that says these schemes were okay and I am aware that over a long period of time the Australian Tax Office gave out some very grey advice regarding the legitimacy or otherwise of these schemes. The Federal Government must act now. It must abolish interest and penalties associated with these schemes and pursue only the refunds or profits which were paid directly to these people. I trust that if the forthcoming test cases are successful, the ATO will immediately wipe out these debts altogether and allow these unfortunate individuals to rebuild their lives.

The recent collapse of Centaur Mining and Exploration Ltd for the second time in Kalgoorlie has presented another challenge to my constituency. The ripple effect is being felt throughout the business and wider community and with reported debts of around \$40-50 million, it will take a long time for some of the businesses in my electorate to bounce back. I trust that when Joseph Gutnick decides to establish another mine in Kalgoorlie in the future, as he will, that my constituency will not be so accommodating.

For many years people have viewed Kalgoorlie as a place to go to earn a few bucks for a couple of years before returning to the city to spend those bucks. However, I never fail to be amazed at the number of people who tell me that they went to Kalgoorlie 20 years ago and they are still there now. The focus for Kalgoorlie has shifted from being a place where a person would go to work, to being a place that he might now call home. People are now demanding quality of life in Kalgoorlie and they are looking for quality recreational pursuits. Kalgoorlie needs a year-round natural body of water that is suitable for recreation, water sports and the like. Recently Lake Kopai on the outskirts of Kalgoorlie filled up with water and it was like sitting on the banks of Deepwater Point in Mount Pleasant. It was standing room only. Kalgoorlie experiences very significant rainfall events and I am sure that, with a relatively minor amount of earth works, this water could be captured and utilised for the community in one or more of our many lake systems.

Members may also be aware that the Government has called for expressions of interest from parties to bring water to the goldfields. This is an extension of the previous Government's idea. I hope that the successful bidder, when submitting its bid, considers the need for a natural body of water that may be utilised by the community.

Statewide issues and philosophical beliefs

I will now address a few issues that are not necessarily related to my electorate but have state-wide implications, and I will put on record some of my own philosophical beliefs. Before coming to this place I was actively involved in three small businesses. As a member of the Liberal Party I am very comfortable representing the views of small business people. It may come as a surprise to members that the biggest issue facing small business in this country today is not necessarily the goods and services tax, company tax or stamp duty. Rather, it is the 30-day account that frequently becomes a 60-day account, a 90-day account or a 120-day account. There is no greater impediment to small business investment in our country today than the fact that figures on paper very rarely reflect money in the bank. It is only when we, as legislators across the country, adopt a system that involves payment for goods and services at the point of sale, no matter how big or how small the sale, that we will see a significant improvement in business growth and investment in Western Australia and, indeed, Australia. Unfortunately I do not have the answer to this problem. However, I know that we, as a society, and certainly we, as legislators, need to address this problem and identify another method of payment which will become the norm in the future rather than use the 30-day account method. The lead needs to be taken on the one hand by the upper end of the corporate sector and on the other hand by the Government. To this end I congratulate the Government on its recent announcement regarding payment terms for small businesses dealing with government.

Australians and particularly Western Australians have a lifestyle that is unrivalled by any country or state in the world today. Part of that lifestyle can be attributed to our willingness to be involved in recreational and sporting pursuits. I believe that the public holiday and the long weekend should be viewed as sacrosanct in Australia and should be recognised as the vehicle that bonds families and friends together.

Affordable air travel for all Western Australians should also be a priority for successive Governments. It is a tragedy that the new airlines operating in the eastern States have not yet seen their way clear to operate out of Western Australia. In my own electorate of Kalgoorlie both major airlines charge approximately \$540 for a return fare to Perth that takes 50 minutes one-way. This, in my view, is bordering on extortion, and it will only be when we can break the two-carrier monopoly in this State with the introduction of a third or even a fourth airline, that we will be able to offer Western Australians a diverse lifestyle. I urge the Government to play an active role in securing the services of another major airline into Western Australia.

I believe that successive Governments have a responsibility and indeed an obligation to continually test public opinion on issues such as daylight saving. Even though we have had three referenda on this issue in the past, is it necessarily the case that public opinion will not change over time? How many people do members know who have nine to five jobs and who actually knock off at five o'clock? Very few, I suspect. Working hours are increasing and, as a result, the number of daylight hours available for families to spend quality time together are decreasing. Apart from the obvious business arguments in favour of daylight saving, a good case can be made for daylight saving in favour of families and quality time for families. I urge the Government to revisit this issue.

I would like members to turn their attention briefly to the law and the justice system. I refer specifically to the current situation that allows the media to print the name of an individual who has been charged with an offence before that individual has been found guilty. It matters not that in a future court hearing that individual may be found not guilty, because in the court of public opinion, once that name appears in the newspaper, that individual is forevermore guilty in the eyes of the public. This is an injustice. Changing the legislation to allow a person's name to be reported in the media only when he or she has been found guilty can only protect the innocent and has very little down side. We must at all costs resist the temptation to go down the same path as the American legal system where anyone can sue anyone for anything and win. The Government must, through legislation, encourage people to take responsibility for their own actions and ensure that the option of shifting the blame to another is not available. However, we must continue to take a hardline on individuals who refuse to respect our laws by breaking them and we must be vigilant in the pursuit of these people.

I am a very strong proponent of DNA sampling at birth and it will only be when the hysteria and the emotion surrounding this option are removed, that we will be able to move forward with the apprehension of criminals. I wonder if the so-called Claremont serial killer might be cooling his heels in Casuarina today if DNA sampling at birth was introduced a generation or two ago and I wonder how many murderers and rapists who are still at large in our community today might have met the same fate if DNA sampling at birth had become a reality. The Government must empower our Police Force with the necessary tools to adequately address crime and we must not bow to noisy minority groups. We must govern for the many and not necessarily for the few. We must embrace the concept of mandatory sentencing and, where possible, we must extend it. One such extension might be to impose mandatory jail terms on offenders who commit totally unprovoked physical assaults on others. This would ensure that the scum who bash others just for kicks would be removed from our streets like litter.

All Western Australians should have the right to go about their business unhindered; that is a basic principle of democracy. The rigours of political correctness have been thrust upon us like a virus over the past 15 years and it represents a stifling of public opinion. We have become slaves to that concept. I wish to place on record that not everything I do or say in this place will necessarily conform to the principles of political correctness and I make no apology for that. I also hope to bring some humour and the odd light-hearted moment to this place. It is easy to become engrossed in one's daily activities without stopping to appreciate the lighter side of life.

Conclusion

I conclude with a series of words once used by Theodore Roosevelt. I have these words framed and hung on my lounge-room wall. To date I have lived my life by their meaning. I cannot help but wonder whether this series of words is relevant not only to me but also to every member represented in this Chamber today. Mr Roosevelt said -

He who tries and knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and who spends himself in pursuit of an achievement, at best knows the triumph of that achievement and at worst, fails while daring. His place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

[Applause.]
