



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Tom Stephens MLA
(Member for Central Kimberley-Pilbara)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 30 March 2005

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON TOM STEPHENS (Central Kimberley-Pilbara) [2.45 pm]: Mr Speaker, I join with other members in congratulating you upon your election to the Chair. I congratulate the cabinet ministers for their election to the cabinet postings. I also take the opportunity to congratulate upon their election to their positions the Leader of the Opposition and his deputy. I also congratulate the newly elected members of Parliament whose inaugural speeches I have just had the opportunity of listening to and enjoying. To all members who have been re-elected to this place, I say that it is good to be in their company. It is a great privilege to serve the people of Western Australia in this Parliament. It comes with all the challenges, heartaches and pleasures that are associated with parliamentary life.

THE ELECTORATE

I want to pay particular tribute and give thanks to the voters and electors of Central Kimberley-Pilbara, which is a part of the state I have grown to know and love well. It is a part of the state that I believe holds some of the greatest attractions and strengths of what makes up Western Australia. In addition, I have been lucky indeed to have been supported in my quest for election to this Parliament, not only by those electors but also by a team and network of people from one end of the electorate to the other; from the north-eastern-most end of the electorate at the Warmun community at Turkey Creek, all the way south through communities and towns like Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing, out into the remote communities of Kiwirrkurra and Balgo, Noonkanbah and Yiyili, and places as far into the Pilbara as Pannawonica, Tom Price and Paraburdoo, and, of course, the main centre of Port Hedland. In each of those communities people of great dedication have fought hard for the election of a Labor member and the return of Labor to office in this state. To them I express my deep appreciation. I know that they are looking forward to a government and a member who will deliver the goods to meet their needs.

SPECIAL THANKS

I have also been particularly blessed with the strong support of a close family, including a young team of three children - two daughters and a son - who have been dedicated in their support for me.

Together with my wife Anne they have provided extraordinary support in the face of the challenges of politics. One member of my family network in particular, my young son Ben, has been amazing in his dedication to have my family and me in particular available to serve the community of Western Australia. I say thanks to them for the long trek we have been on.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICE

I was first elected at a by-election in July 1982 to the old seat of North Province, which took in all the Pilbara and Kimberley regions. Subsequently, in 1989 I was elected to serve the vast Mining and Pastoral Region. It was while a member for that region that I was elected as Leader of the Opposition in the other place and had the opportunity of serving the people of Western Australia as a cabinet minister in this State. I consider that to have been an enormous privilege and a great opportunity to put my hands upon the levers that can deliver to people in need from one end of regional Western Australia to the other. While in that role I was faced with the sudden death of a friend; the death of your good friend, Mr Speaker, Kevin Richards, whose candidacy for the federal seat of Kalgoorlie was only days away from the close of nominations. There was the extraordinary sadness for the extended network of friends in the vast electorate of Kalgoorlie who found that they had been stripped and robbed of an opportunity to deliver into the national Parliament someone of that character and colour. In the face of that tragedy all hell broke loose around the Labor Party and the federal seat of Kalgoorlie to find someone ready, willing and able to contest that seat. They did not find someone willing to contest the seat, but the pressure came on from all quarters, from one end of the seat to the other, from every section of the Labor Party and from good friends all around me, who encouraged me to do what needed to be done; that is, be available as a candidate for the federal seat of Kalgoorlie. I knew that a couple of options were available to me: election to the national Parliament or, if that did not happen, come back to this place. I again had the strong counsel and advice from my young son Ben, a student of politics and economics at the University of Western Australia. He is only in his second year but he has more wisdom than his dad! He said that he hoped I would appreciate that it was an impossible task in a strong economy like ours and with circumstances as they were. I said that it probably was but there was just a slim chance and we should give it everything. At the national level we were up against the Howard government, which in my view had lost the right to govern. It had lost respect for the issues of integrity and honesty in government and in my view deserved to be up against the effort and energy of many Australians in rising to the opportunity to show it the door from the national Treasury bench. I knew that it would be a superhuman task but I was also conscious that throwing energy, enthusiasm and hard work at everything I have ever done in my life has conquered all. In this case it was not enough and that extra special bit of magic that comes from a national trend that was required to gain that seat was not there. Therefore, I was unable to deliver on the dream of Kevin Richards and his supporters - the people in the federal seat of Kalgoorlie who wanted to see a Labor government elected from there. Nonetheless that then created an opportunity for me to come back and focus on where I was heading; that is, back to the state Parliament to focus on the challenge of delivering good and responsible government not only to the people of regional Western Australia in particular, but also to all Western Australians. I believe that that has been done well in the first four years of the Gallop team and I am confident that it can be done in successive terms of this team in office.

THE CAMPAIGN

I have come to realise why I am Labor absolutely to my bootstraps. It is because of an experience I had that has shaped me. I originally came into politics in Western Australia supporting the contest for the state seat of Kimberley back in 1977 when I worked with Ernie Bridge in his election to the state Parliament. It took three goes before we were successful in effectively securing his election in 1980, with a case in the Court of Disputed Returns in the middle of the first two attempts. It was hard work. At the time we were up against politics and legislation that made it difficult and social conditions that made it challenging for an Aboriginal person to represent a seat like that in a place

like this in Western Australia. An extraordinary advance was made in his election and, of course, has been followed by his successor in this place in my colleague the member for Kimberley, Carol Martin. She brings all of the strengths that come from the Aboriginal community to this Parliament, as well as the many other strengths that she has and puts on display in this place, as she does in her electorate. The contest for the seat of Central Kimberley-Pilbara, from which I have just come, was a much more difficult task for me than I ever imagined would be the case. Firstly, the campaign was longer than expected, unencumbered as I was either as a minister or as a member for the area. It is a vast seat that was very difficult to contest and made difficult as well because of particular pressures. I regard the difficulties that were on display during that contest as almost bitternesses. A lot of very personalised campaigning went on in that area over an extended period. However, I chose to rise above the personality politics that was taking place in the north of the State at that time and to contest the seat by focusing on the issues and delivering an agenda to meet the needs of the people of that area. As one who takes politics seriously and works hard at it, I found it totally exhausting. I gave it absolutely everything. I know that many other members in this place have had the same experience. We know how much of our family, social and business life, and how much of our financial resources, we need to give up to make ourselves available to serve the community. For many of us that was part of the exercise through which we have just gone. Nonetheless, those of us who are sitting in this chamber know that winners are gridders, and we on both sides of the house can now sit back as members of Parliament and have the satisfaction of knowing that our campaigns were successful. However, we now face the more difficult task of delivering upon and meeting the needs of the people who have elected us to this place and have entrusted to those on this side of the house the formation of government.

THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

I have been blessed with prodigious amounts of energy and enthusiasm for the work that I have discharged, and I have been able to use that energy and enthusiasm to deliver upon and meet the needs of people in regional Western Australia in particular. Since 1977 my life has been intimately caught up with the lives of people in regional Western Australia. The links that I have been able to build with the Aboriginal community have been a driving force in my life and in politics. My relationships and friendships with the Aboriginal community have motivated my efforts to strive for a better nation in which we embrace and protect the interests and rights of the Aboriginal people of this country and thereby enhance the body politic of the whole Australian community. That journey has taken me through the remote and regional communities of Western Australia. Throughout that journey I have learnt a great deal about the struggles and needs of people in remote and regional Western Australia, and throughout my political life it has motivated me to fight for the provision of services to remote and regional Western Australia.

One of the great yardsticks for me in politics and in my working life has been the way in which I relate to those who are less fortunate than me. One yardstick that all of us in the Australian community need to have, regardless of the role we play, is the way in which we respond to and meet the challenges of those who are less fortunate than ourselves. That has become a critical character test for me. I also find myself asking others to be responsive to the needs of the less fortunate. In my view, those who are less fortunate than us should have the first call on each of us. The primary requirement for us as human beings is to respond to the needs of the less fortunate. It is then up to all of us to support those with promise and talent so that as a community we can provide more widespread support. These criteria are essential if we are to create a just and humane society.

THE AUSTRALIAN SPIRIT

Today we in this part of the globe are conscious of the fact that our neighbours have again been struck with an earthquake and tragedy. Through the tragedy of the Boxing Day tsunami we discovered a lot more about not only the region of which we are a part but also the Australian

community. The Australian community is basically decent and generous. It is extraordinary open to generosity of spirit. That was on display to our near neighbours recently. Good leadership is required for the Australian community to keep open its hand of friendship and to support others in need. That good leadership often has to come from Parliament, governments and other people in the community who can keep guiding and shaping the generosity of spirit that is intrinsic to the Australian condition. It makes us quite special among the community of nations. An important part of being a parliamentarian and a servant of the community, and of being part of a government, is to carefully focus on building communities that have a strong sense of community. People who live in those types of communities not only look after one another but also have a sense of obligation to each other. That requires real focus and hard work. It should be rewarding work when it is done at its best. That work involves building not only infrastructure but also developing the people within our communities, working with families by making sure they can thrive, and developing neighbourhoods that can flourish and towns and regions that can prosper. The state will benefit from that work.

Community is a real sense of soul. I refer not just to the classic psychological or religious sense; maybe it has more in common with soul that is talked about regarding music. In whatever sense the word is used, a community has soul about it when its people have a nurtured respect for one another. That respect makes the community a healthy place in which to live. That sense of soul has been lost in some places around the world and in our state and nation in the communities in which the people are really struggling. Presently, the battle has been lost in too many places. Some basic features of necessary community building must take place. Often a community's infrastructure is symbolic of the community. Regrettably, some of those symbols are now quite decrepit. Some aged public infrastructure has lost its shine and usefulness to its community. It will require an enormous effort by the government to replace the old infrastructure with new infrastructure. New buildings must be built that can deliver the health and educational needs of communities and provide centres for sport and recreation. They are the symbols of what can be done when communities are humming and thriving at their best.

INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE NORTH-WEST

During this term of government, in my electorate of Central Kimberley-Pilbara, an opportunity will be afforded to the government to provide much needed capital infrastructure to that electorate as a result of the pre-election commitments given by the Australian Labor Party. Some \$79 million worth of expenditure will be rolled out for the hospital and aged care facilities in the major town of Hedland. The Hedland Senior High School will receive \$6 million to upgrade its facilities and the South Hedland Police Station will receive \$8.4 million. A huge effort is being made regarding government employee accommodation in Hedland and throughout the Pilbara. Much work must to be done to the infrastructure, which is the symbol of many communities.

Towns find it difficult to attract people to them. It is no wonder it is difficult to attract people to live in some towns because things have been left to fall into disrepair. Recently I have looked very closely at the housing accommodation provided to doctors. Frankly, over the years it has become a disgrace. It is no wonder it is very difficult to attract medical professionals to work in those communities. It should come as no surprise that these days it is becoming almost mandatory to learn to speak Mandarin to get access to medical treatment in regional parts of Australia because foreign doctors are needed to fill the positions and to live in circumstances in which others will not live. Increasingly, Australian doctors are working overseas in Canada and other places in which the communities provide proper facilities for and place a greater value on doctors' services. This is a challenge. I am pleased that the government has recognised the challenge and has set aside funds for government employee accommodation and medical employee accommodation to make it possible for doctors to be attracted to and retained in those communities. More will have to be done.

In places like Tom Price and Paraburdoo are communities that many people will remember from visits in previous years. They were attractive little places; towns considered great jewels in the Pilbara. Over the years time has marched on and the places are no longer as shiny and bright as they were when they were first commenced. An upgrade is much required in those places to make them attractive places in which to work and live. Huge pressure is placed on this state as people opt out of residential lifestyles in those communities because, essentially, they are no longer the attractive places they once were. The infrastructure that was attractive has gone. The houses are now looking shabby and tired. The companies have not done their work to maintain the houses in the manner that is required by a contemporary worker. Governments have not done all that is necessary to ensure that the schools are upgraded and maintained to a level that attracts families to live. Fortunately, the backlog is now to be tackled. The money will be on the table over the next four years to tackle the issue of school maintenance backlogs and to continue the upgrade of basic amenities that will, in the end, attract people to again live in the communities and to work in the communities long into the future. Part of the program of making the places attractive to live and work is to ensure good connections by road to other centres. The second stage of the vital Tom Price-Karratha road will be developed during this term of government. It will hopefully lead in double-quick time to the final stages of construction of a bitumen link from Tom Price to Karratha, which will open up opportunities for not only inland residents but also coastal residents. Of course, just as importantly, it will open up fresh economic opportunities through growth in tourism and access to the resources sector.

In other parts of the electorate are places like Fitzroy Crossing. An amount of \$11 million has been allocated to the construction of a new hospital, and \$12 million has been allocated for work to commence on the new high school. There will be work in Halls Creek to complete and open the new hospital complex. As a result of our pre-election commitments, \$2.9 million has been allocated to complete the new Halls Creek aquatic centre, which is much sought after in that community.

ABORIGINAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION

There are other towns, places and centres in my electorate such as Marble Bar, Nullagine, Pannawonica and Telfer. They are communities that require focus and attention from government and the corporate sector to respond to their needs. My electorate has a vast number of remote Aboriginal communities, such as Warmun, Balgo, Yandeyarra, Kiwirrkurra, Noonkanbah, Wangkatjunga, Muludja, Ngulungudgi, Dgugerari, Yakanarra, Ngalapita, Mulan, Kundat Djaru, Yiyili, Mindibungu, Kunawarratji, Punmu, Parngurr, Strelley, Warralong, Wakathuni and Belarie. They are just some of the remote places in Central Kimberley-Pilbara. I have got to know those communities extremely well and they have got to know me very well over the years. They have so many needs. Frankly, life for many Aboriginal people has never been worse. Some individuals and families and a small number of communities have started to do well and are doing well. The overwhelming majority of Aboriginal communities, especially those in the remote parts of Western Australia, face huge challenges in health and education to ensure dramatic improvements in literacy and numeracy and to access paths in employment and training. These are huge tasks that we, as a community, have an enormous responsibility in rising to as a challenge. In addition, rampant diabetes affects many Aboriginal communities.

Quality work is being done, but not enough. My former colleague Hon Ernie Bridge is doing fantastic work in challenging the threat that diabetes represents to the Aboriginal community. Quality work is being done by Ernie and his team from one end of this state to the other. Interestingly, it is being supported by the national government in Canberra, which is tackling the many needs of the Aboriginal community in places like Narrabunda, which is a lower socioeconomic part of Canberra. It is an area I know reasonably well from my days as a student at the Australian National University. That area now seems to have a very large number of Aboriginal

people. Ernie has risen to that challenge as well. There is an extraordinary statistic within the demographic of the Aboriginal community; that is, more than half the Aboriginal population is under the age of 19. A tidal wave of youngsters is coming through that demographic of Western Australia, especially in the northern parts of the state. Those youngsters must face the health issues that come with their birth and other challenges. Their dreams will not be met unless the community and the government of Western Australia can find ways to respond to the opportunities that should be theirs.

The difficulties facing the Aboriginal community are self-evident in a major population centre such as South Hedland, where enormous levels of dysfunction are on display. One's exposure to those problems becomes quite intimate during an election period, when candidates are in and out of the houses of so many people. I am afraid to say that some aspects of South Hedland are a huge blight on our state. I was familiar with this community when I started in this job 22 years ago. I have now come back to this area with a more intense interest and have found a community that is in collapse in the face of the vast resource wealth that is being generated from that part of the Pilbara. Huge amounts of prosperity are on display as resources go through the port. The oil and gas industries are undergoing huge expansion. Vast quantities of investment are being made in these industries and there have been vast returns to the Western Australian community and the corporate players. We have an enormous obligation to find ways to invest in the people who are part of the regions that make up this great state of Western Australia. I am pleased that my colleagues the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure and the Minister for Housing and Works became involved in this issue in the lead-up to the state election. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure was able to gain the support of the government to announce a major initiative in South Hedland to respond to that town's planning, housing and urban challenges. That initiative will require enormous dedication, hard work and effort to turn that town around. The design will include safety features. There will also be a focus on intervention programs within the community of South Hedland, and much-needed work will be done on public facilities. Programs that the government has put in place can respond to those needs. The Pilbara fund and the regional investment fund are great initiatives. Great work needs to be done as a result of those programs.

CHALLENGE FOR REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The market opportunities in China and other countries that are available to this state are producing enormous benefits for us all. However, during my life in Parliament I have discovered that risks are associated with resource development. I began my parliamentary career with an electorate that included the thriving towns of Shay Gap and Goldsworthy as well as the hugely successful communities of Cockatoo and Koolan Islands. I knew these communities very well. Shay Gap and Goldsworthy are now just part of the landscape. Not a single feature is left to show where the towns once were. Of course, Cockatoo and Koolan Islands are in a different shape now from what they were in just a few short years ago. It has been a lesson for me to see towns and communities disappear off the landscape. There is a challenge in regional Western Australia to make sure that with the pressures of resource development we do not forget the need to build a strong regional Western Australia at the same time. Enormous benefits flow from focusing on regional development and by tackling the needs of the people who live within and are a part of those regions; the Aboriginal people for starters and the others who are there. Many of these people are looking for employment opportunities in the resource sector. Madam Deputy Speaker, do I have the opportunity to ask for a small extension? I do not. In that case, I will finish by saying that I look forward to working on these many challenges long into the future for the benefit of all regional Western Australians and, indeed, for the whole of this great state of ours.

[Applause.]
