



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Tony McRae MLA
(Member for Riverton)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly, Wednesday 2 May 2001

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

MR McRAE (Riverton) [4.47 pm]: It is an honour and a privilege to stand here today. I thank the traditional owners of this country, the Nyoongah people, for their welcome to Nyoongah boodja. It is a thrill for me to give my first speech to a Parliament that has been opened by a joining of the traditions of a Westminster democracy and a welcoming to country by Nyoongah people. The linking of these traditions is more than symbolic. It is an expression of respect between the oldest Australians and those of us from more than 160 cultural and language groups who continue a journey of learning about our home. I pay my respects to the traditional owners and am grateful to history and circumstance that we find ourselves here together.

I come to this Parliament as the new representative of the people of the electorate of Riverton, a district of 26 square kilometres encompassing the suburbs of Parkwood, Riverton, Shelley and Willetton, small parts of Ferndale, Leeming and Rossmoyne, and including the Canning Vale industrial estate. The City of Canning covers more than 90 per cent of the electorate, and the remainder is administered by the City of Melville.

“ . . . the vibrancy and diversity of the community ”

At the February election, more than 24 000 electors were registered in Riverton - up by about 500 people on the 1996 election figures and indicative of the increasing urban densities of the area and of many parts of the metropolitan region. It is reflection, too, of increasing property values, smaller family units and increasing numbers of people living in smaller housing lots of one and two-person households. The increasing number of people coming into the area also reflects the essential livability of the district. It is within easy reach of the city, Fremantle and beaches and has one of the most beautiful stretches of river anywhere in the State.

The district is serviced by three state high schools with a partnership between students, parents, teachers and the community, which has created a culture of success recognised throughout the State. The district contains its own industrial, commercial, sporting and entertainment estates in Cannington, Willetton, Riverton and Parkwood. Importantly, seniors have carved out their niche in the district by developing their own networks and accessing their own range of services. The people in my electorate are in many ways typical of metropolitan Perth, and as well they have the range of characteristics that make the area the dynamic and vibrant place it is.

Riverton's population of under 24-year-olds and 40 to 59-year-olds is well above the state average for those cohorts. The other age groups are well below the state average. On one analysis it confirms the important role that education plays in the lives of the district's parents and families. The larger age groups within the community - that is, the under 24-year-olds and the 40 to 59-year-olds - are the parents and children who make the area's three large high schools hum with activity. It also suggests that to communicate to both groups, I need to learn how to skate, study and sing some retro 1960s pop songs.

There are also Aboriginal and older Anglo-Celtic Australians in the area. Riverton has significant ethnic Chinese and Indian subcontinent communities as well as people from the Middle East, mainland Europe, Africa, South East Asia, the Pacific and the Americas. To understand the vibrancy and diversity of the community one needs only to visit Willetton Senior High School. In the school's main entrance off Pinetree Gully Road a huge sign greets people with the declaration, "This is a multicultural place". It is a sign that points to our future; the future of Riverton and the future of our nation. It is a statement that is clear, optimistic and generous. It includes us all. It affirms an older Australian sense of a fair go. It is a value that is part of the goodwill and hope now given in trust to the Gallop Labor Government.

Last week, and every week since I have been elected, I have spoken to people who have migrated to Australia about their experience of securing their place in this country and of creating a future for themselves and their children. People come to this country understanding the challenges they will face, including those of language and cultural and religious diversity. I have no doubt that, with the passage of time, these people, with hard work and some luck, will grow and prosper. They will find and make their own place here. They will contribute to our collective capacity to fashion a society that includes everyone. This is our challenge and our potential. It is one that I approach with enthusiasm.

I hesitate to say unstinting optimism, as there are those who would refuse this journey. There are those who have been marginalised by changes in Australian society, economics and industry over the past 20 to 30 years and who are reacting against further change. They have become the most vocal exponents of the politics of downward envy - a narrow and fearful approach that would have us return to a monocultural and limited idea of what constitutes community. This is not our future and it is not the way to develop and maintain the social cohesiveness or the sustainable prosperity we all desire.

“ . . . the building blocks of community wellbeing ”

The people of Riverton consistently say to me that they want a society that has fairness as its underlying tenet. We have lost our way on this in recent years and this is, in large part, because of the international tide of economic irrationalism and its elevation of efficiency - and efficiency alone - as the overriding determinant of community good.

As I campaigned over the past year and a half - initially on my campaign pledge of "Putting Community First" and, more recently, adding Labor's priorities of health, education, community safety and forests - the response of electors and others in the community was as clear as a bell. They wanted the Government of Western Australia to focus on those things that are the building blocks of community wellbeing and they clearly believe that the Labor team has its priorities right.

I shall take a moment to tell the House of a meeting I had in January this year. At a morning tea for local residents in a park near High Road a couple in their mid to late 50s arrived and identified themselves as lifelong non-Labor voters. They sat for some time listening to the discussion between a dozen or so of their neighbours. When they spoke it was to discuss with me their two adult daughters, one of whom is in her late 20s and the other in her early 30s. They had both attended universities in Perth and completed postgraduate degrees in environmental and biological science.

The older daughter was engaged to be married to a fellow who also had a postgraduate degree in environmental science. These three young adults, representing in many ways the brightest in our community and the most optimistic, had been on short term workplace agreements of no more than six months' duration for more than four years. They could not secure permanent employment and they had been told repeatedly that if they did not take the individual contracts on offer, they were to look for work elsewhere.

The parents were angry that the values of fairness and honesty they had passed on were no longer being reflected in our workplace laws. They said that they were watching their children lose self-confidence and that their optimism for the future was waning. The couple voted for me and Labor, as they had come to the view that only a new Labor Government was prepared to make the industrial relations system in this State fair for everyone.

I have also heard the recent cacophony about the sky falling in as the unions in this State are taking action to protect or advance the interests of their members. Although I do not doubt for a moment that there will be occasions when union action might not be acceptable and it crosses the line, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the election of a Labor Government includes within it the community's desire for the removal of draconian controls over the collective bargaining rights of employees. In this process it should be no great surprise that there has been a release of pent-up frustration and anger at the unfair system that has been in place in this State for far too long.

“ . . . the forging of community links and networks ”

The heartening aspect of my campaign and election has been to hear people from all parts of the electorate talk about the need for the Government to work in partnership with the community to get the services right, to allow people to take charge of their own destinies and to assist in the forging of community links and networks that make living in our community so rewarding. I shall comment further on this latter aspect of community links and networks.

It is no simple harking back to less frenetic, simpler days or a rosy nostalgia trip that is causing people everywhere to reflect on what has been gained, and perhaps lost, in the process of developing a technologically advanced society and its accompanying increase in our material wealth, physical health and life expectancy.

In many urban communities, including my electorate, people often work, study and play away from their immediate, and indeed wider, neighbourhoods. Our connections with local people tend often to be a bit one dimensional in that we see them for one particular aspect with limited opportunity for broader interaction. The general frustration with this style of living is expressed in part by people's expectations of government, in the provision of services and in the delivery of activities that bring people together. A brief walk around the streets in my district will show that the most successful and enduring services and activities are those in which government has entered into a partnership with a community group and has provided the necessary resources and expertise for that group to harness local community energy. It is a strategy that works effectively and efficiently and, just as importantly, builds upon and strengthens existing community networks.

The Bannister Creek Catchment Group is a classic example of harnessing that community energy and resource. Bannister Creek is a permanently flowing tributary of the Canning River and it is systematically being restored from its devastating reconstruction into a drainage channel during the original suburban development of the area. This work is being done under the auspices of the Bannister Creek Catchment Group - a local group that has received limited government funding for a coordinator and part-time environmental worker. The group has become adept at harnessing the resources of volunteers, the City of Canning and every relevant state government agency that has an involvement in the area or representatives of any agencies who pass through the area on any given day that the group is working. The group has achieved extraordinary results in rehabilitating

creek beds and banks and creating a greater awareness of the environmental importance of the creek among the households and businesses in the wider catchment area, including the Canning Vale industrial estate. It is appropriate to acknowledge the good work of my predecessor with the Bannister Creek group. He was a great ally to the group and, in this area at least, I intend to build on the former member's work.

“ . . . barbed wire around the high school ”

The obverse of this example of the Government's working in partnership with communities would most appropriately be the contracting out of cleaning and gardening work in our schools.

The sacking of school-based cleaners and gardeners and their replacement with contractors whose contributions to schools were calculated by time and motion experts is one of the best examples of the old adage, “They knew the price of everything and the value of nothing”.

One of the last gardeners employed by the Riverton Primary School before the contracting system was introduced lived next door to the school. He loved his job. He made a gate in his back fence so that he had ready access to the schoolyard. In addition to his gardening responsibilities, he was there early, hosed down the verandahs in the morning, helped the cleaners, was there after school, and walked through it during the evenings and on weekends. The school was secure because of him; therefore, there was minimal vandalism and the parents allowed their children to go there after school. He contributed towards making the school a part of the local community. He, the kids, the parents and the teachers owned it.

It is a similar story with most school cleaners. Many of them were mature-aged women, some of whom had children or grandchildren enrolled at the school. They cleaned the schools and were part of the schools' activities on fete and school carnival days. They knew the children and the children knew and trusted them. They were a vital and important part of those school communities.

Compare this with my experience at Kwinana Senior High School last year when I was working on a vocational education program for non-TEE students. I asked a teacher why the contractors were erecting an 8 foot-high fence topped by barbed wire around the high school. He said they were spending \$60 000 to fence the school to stop a vandalism and graffiti bill of nearly \$300 000 a year. It emerged that the high level of graffiti and vandalism began the year the former resident gardener/caretaker was replaced by contractors. It is this alienation from our resources and our inability to articulate what it is that we value that is causing so much frustration and anger being directed at Governments and service providers generally. As the elected representative of the communities in Riverton, I look forward to the contribution I will make to the building and regeneration of these vital networks.

“ . . . economic, social and environmental values ”

In my broader role as a member of Parliament and its roles of legislating and carrying out policy and program reviews, I am excited to be part of the first Government to establish sustainable development principles as its basic framework. Great support exists throughout the community for the Government to develop the tools to assess its priorities on the basis of sustainable development. The use of the triple bottom line has been advocated or welcomed by everyone with whom I have discussed this issue. It is widely recognised that what we have done and what we propose to do must be assessed on economic as well as social and environmental values. I will comment on each of these issues.

The challenge for our business community is to recognise the changes to the Australian and world markets and to include their employees and local communities in that change. Companies that assume that their business relationships will not be affected because of the way they treat employees, the environment or their customers are doomed to fail. A report from the New South

Wales Chamber of Commerce last weekend has confirmed that more than 75 per cent of Australians are now directing their purchasing choices on the basis of social or environmental issues. The New South Wales Chamber of Commerce has rightly warned business leaders that they must respond to the shift in consumer behaviour and make their companies respond to that changing environment.

Similarly, our constituents also expect Governments to set appropriate rules for national and international competition. Many doubts have been expressed about the capacity of the present national competition policy to reflect the full economic, social and environmental costs and benefits in all industries and in all regions of the country. This issue will continue to drive much of the debate on industry policy in this State and, I suspect, in this Parliament over the next four years. The related controversy over Royal Dutch-Shell's bid for control of Woodside flushed out even the federal Treasurer from his previous adherence to an unfettered free market policy. The Treasurer's decision to block the takeover in the national interest was the right one. However, there are plenty of doubts about his motives.

I believe our role is to support businesses to be more efficient, sensitive and responsible to the legitimate expectations of the community and of this Parliament. The State's role must be to establish an economic environment that encourages long-term investment and long-term views on profit and reinvestment. Short-term thinking is killing our industries and eroding the broad social contract between people, government and business. We must also face the fact that investment in skills development nationally and in this State has fallen below the necessary level required by the community. It has fallen below the level required as a launching pad for our economic development. With our rich resource base and diverse community, the State's economic and democratic future depends on its capacity for dynamic thinking, technical proficiency and the inclusion of all of its people in the process. This State will prosper only if we nurture a culture of education and training and a confidence about our openness and creativity. That is not happening today.

“ . . . the physical infrastructure that underpins the community ”

In addition to these issues there is the perennial challenge of developing sustainable regional communities throughout this State. No magic formulas or quick fixes exist for any of these issues. Each will require a broader understanding of our opportunities and responsibilities as well as a concerted effort to create those partnerships that have the confidence and support of the community, business leaders and Government. I have mentioned the importance of community networks to deliver more effective services and to harness community energy and resources. This might be best characterised as harnessing the State's social infrastructure. In my electorate and in the communities across the southern metropolitan region there is a need for a new approach to the physical infrastructure that underpins the community, especially in public transport. The southern metropolitan corridor is being extended down the Kwinana Freeway. The Labor Government, through the competent Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, is now developing the only railway line to be laid by any Government since the Second World War other than the Joondalup line that was built during Labor's term of government in the 1980s.

We must pay attention to the older and more densely populated areas along the east-west axis between Fremantle and Cannington. A recent proposal written in *The West Australian* by Kevin McQuoid for a light rail system to provide essential links to Perth's transport system was visionary and a logical extension of the exhausted Stephenson plan used by the previous Government. It is well to remember that when Stephenson laid out his plan in the late 1950s, demographic forecasts suggested that by 2020 Perth would have a heavy industrial base, employing more than 40 per cent of the total work force in the State. The revolution of advanced technologies was not part of Stephenson's vision for our community and he would no doubt be surprised to see that Perth's

manufacturing work force in the year 1999 was 16 per cent and falling. Stephenson also failed in his labelling of Perth's extensive tram system as old hat nineteenth century technology, and in his labelling of freeways as being the epitome of modernity. Someone forgot to tell Melbourne, Vancouver, Amsterdam, Munich and many other cities that love their trams and are demonstrably more successful cities than freeway-dominated cities such as Perth. If we are to get serious about addressing the economic, social and environmental costs of a petrol-based city such as Perth, we must get serious about public transport systems that people want to use and enjoy.

We need a new Stephenson plan. Kevin McQuoid's contribution is a good start, and to that I would add a light rail link from Fremantle to Murdoch University, east to Riverton and across the Canning River to Curtin University, the State's largest university, with in excess of 30 000 students. From there it would link to the existing heavy rail line in Victoria Park or to the light rail circle proposed by McQuoid. His idea is right; he just missed out on one of the most important natural community and transport corridors running east from Fremantle to my electorate. If there are any doubts about that proposition, one need only check the consistently high passenger numbers on the present bus circle route, which runs along a similar line to the one I am proposing.

In education, too, we need to identify the investments that we can make to build on the work initiated by the minister last weekend. I will be raising the issue of a multi-function performance space for the large high school populations in my electorate and surrounding southern suburbs. Rossmoyne Senior High School music students have been in New Zealand for the past few weeks and were the only Australian orchestra and band to participate in major New Zealand Anzac Day ceremonies. It was of course a great honour, and it also reflects the enthusiasm and talent of this wonderful group. Rossmoyne, and Lynwood and Willetton Senior High Schools, some of the largest schools in this State, have struggled with substandard performance and rehearsal spaces for a number of years, and undoubtedly communities across the whole of the southern metropolitan region would benefit from appropriate government investment in this area.

Finally, on the environmental leg of the triple bottom line, I will make a brief comment on forests. One night after the election, while my family was sitting down to dinner I asked each of our three daughters what they would want the Government to do immediately. My eldest daughter, Jade, instantly listed the ending of logging in old-growth forests as her priority, and she was quickly joined by Tegan and Ruby. I am proud of our three daughters and proud to be part of a Government that has made this its No 1 priority. It is the right decision, and it has the overwhelming backing of our community. The announcement last Saturday that three forest blocks in the south west will be assessed to determine their scientific, economic and social values is right too. It is a practical demonstration of what we mean when we talk about the triple bottom line and will, I imagine, cause some indigestion for the present federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry when it is included in the State's next forest management plan.

“ . . . what it is to be Australian ”

I will now say a little about me. I came to live in Western Australia more than 21 years ago, and for a number of years I lived and worked in the iron ore industry as an electrician. Since then I have been involved in state and national committees on skills development and industrial relations. I completed a degree in social ecology at Murdoch University and commenced a masters degree in sustainable development - a postgraduate degree I suspect I will not be able to complete given my current role. I am director of a consulting company and have worked for mining and manufacturing companies on greenhouse gas reduction strategies and with regional Aboriginal communities on economic development and community management. This work and education experience reflects in many ways the expression and reality of lifelong learning.

I come to this Parliament as a sixth generation Anglo-Celtic Australian. I am not the first from my extended family to be elected to a Parliament in Australia. On my paternal grandmother's side, Mr Malcolm Brown was the member for Singleton in the New South Wales Parliament in the 1930s. My mother's family is represented by Peter Lawlor, a leader at the 1854 Eureka Stockade and by 1856 a member, and later Speaker, of the Victorian Colonial Parliament. This heritage hardly constitutes a political dynasty and probably indicates that my family has been involved in the business of family making, independence and building this country rather than focusing on the political life of this country.

Not all of my family is thrilled that I am on this side of the House. A cousin in New South Wales wrote recently to say that the McRaes were all excited at my election to Parliament although some secretly wished I had stayed closer to our agrarian socialist roots and become the National Party member for the New England district in New South Wales - a place otherwise known as Scot's corner! My family now represents the best of what it is to be Australian. In addition to the Anglo-Celtic traditions I have mentioned, we also celebrate our links with Somalia, Egypt, Hungary and the Gunibidji people of Arnhem Land.

I have contemplated the way in which my family's history in this country reflects the experiences of so many who now share this place. From my earliest ancestor's arrival as a convict in 1796, it has been a migrant family's story of learning about the country and its people; of developing the capacity to see this landscape for what it is; and of understanding that many of the lessons of Europe are not sustainable.

In thinking on these things, I am reminded of a comment by Henrietta Fourmile-Marri, an Aboriginal researcher on indigenous property rights, who asserted that everything we see in the Australian landscape is an artefact; it is not the product of an unguided ecological process spanning millions of years but is the product of more than 60 000 years of Aboriginal land and resource management. Even if this interpretation of the Australian landscape were only partially true, the legacy and sustainability of Aboriginal society and resource management has parallels in no other place in this world and at no other time in human history. This is an awesome legacy.

I am reminded also of my role as a director of research at the National Native Title Tribunal, where I had the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the legal basis of native title rights and interests. The fact that British and now Australian common law derives from the Norman invasion and conquest of Britain in 1066, and that this is the means by which indigenous Australians have secured their rights to land, must strike even the casual observer as an ironic and extraordinary connection across more than half a world and 900 years.

The McRae clan's experiences in Scotland also resonate in Australia today. I am in many ways a product of the diaspora from the Jacobite rebellion and the clearing of the highlands in Scotland, and in Australia generations later I seek to make my contribution to right the injustices of colonisation and dispossession. I suspect many Australians from older Celtic families can trace similar connections. It is an exquisite and personal connection of past, present and future.

“ . . . to thank each and every one ”

I need to give some thanks. To the business people in my community who had to cross an imaginary line, to the union officials, members and workers who still believe in the greater good, and to the youth groups and their leaders who have an unlimited faith in the essential good of people, I thank you all for your support and encouragement. To past politicians whom I admire very much, including Don Dunstan, Gough Whitlam and my long-time friend Peter Dowding, thank you for living the possibility of humanity in your work. In the International Year of Volunteers, it is most appropriate to thank each and every one of the Riverton campaign volunteers - this has been

your triumph. No tough political campaign can be successful without the support of many people, and each of the more than 120 of those volunteers did it month after month after month. To my campaign team, the most possessed one will ever meet, each of you were a delight, and your intelligence and determination were an inspiration.

To my parents, Colin and Lena, my brothers John, Paul and Stephen and their families, and to Michael and Phil, thank you for knowing me so well and forgiving me my foibles. To Jade, Tegan and Ruby, thank you for helping me keep my feet firmly anchored, and for your love. To Maria, thank you for doing this with me. To the people of Riverton, thank you for your support and trust. I pledge to put the community first in all that I do.

[Applause.]
