



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Jon Ford, MLC
(Mining and Pastoral Region)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council, Tuesday 22 May 2001

Reprinted from Hansard

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 22 May 2001

Inaugural Speech

Hon Jon Ford, MLC

(Mining and Pastoral Region)

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral) [8.13 pm]: I, too, congratulate you, Mr President, on your recent election and look forward to the next four years working under your instruction and guidance. I acknowledge the Nyoongah people on whose traditional lands I stand. I stand in this place, not as a great statesman or a master orator, but as a common man with common ideals and common virtues. I believe I have been blessed with an extraordinary passion for social justice and equity.

In my speech I will address a number of issues that I believe will give my colleagues in this place an insight into the way I view the world and why I find myself standing here now. Perhaps in future I will reflect on this time and measure my views against this record. I have not completed an in-depth statistical analysis, nor have I carried out extensive interviews; I have merely reflected on my life over the years and tried to compile an intelligible account of conversations, flickering memories and deep-rooted staples of my character.

Relevance of Parliament

All members are aware of the cynicism and angst directed at Parliament and those of us who are privileged to serve here. I believe that this is the result of a perception - right or wrong - that we as individuals are collectively self-serving and in a practical sense add little value to the general population's day-to-day life. In general, we are perceived to behave badly. What defence can we offer to address the perceptions of the blind man I met in Halls Creek the other day sitting in the dust without shelter or water while we debate the location of an entertainment centre? Are we relevant to a young couple deciding which bill will not be paid this month as we argue about whether the behaviour of a member of Parliament is acceptable? Is a young girl who has been sacked from her shop assistant job because she has turned 18 years of age interested in how many hours a week we work? Of course, the answer is no.

What can we do to turn these perceptions around and to ensure that this place receives the respect it needs to be effective in carrying out the people's will? Do we gag the Press? I am sure many of those who have frequented these corridors, rooms and Chambers over the years have fantasised about the possibility. However, the press reports are about our debates and actions, so the journalists are not to blame, nor is ignorance of political processes. We are not misunderstood.

We are the masters of our own destiny. We are judged by our actions, not our words. We must listen to our constituents. We must show empathy and act accordingly. We must be measured in our debates. We must examine relevance and what value can be added to our constituents' lives before we emotively attack each other. Although we have high office, we are still human and must acknowledge the frailties of human nature. We must respect and accept each other. We must debate the issue and not the individual. If we cannot manage these simple things, how can we expect others to respect this place? The old adage "respect is earned not given" has never been more relevant to us in this place. If we fail in restoring faith and trust in this Parliament, Western Australians will suffer and history will hold us all accountable.

Collectivism and Its Role in Social Equity

I will address some issues surrounding those forces that attempt to balance social development and material gain. History shows that over the centuries, in an economic sense, there has always been those who have and those who have not. Many different techniques have been used and developed for those on each side of the fence to try to exert influence to gain some advantage over opposing groups. Some of those methods have been novel and some have been extreme. The French Revolution is an example of an effective method of influence of the have-nots over the haves - the guillotine was a great arbiter. The exploitation of slaves in the Americas at the turn of the twentieth century was an effective way of the haves getting it over the have-nots and keeping the hourly rates down. There have been wars, battles and massacres, but thankfully in recent times Australians have been generally spared these extremes. However, many Australians now choose to battle out their class differences through collective actions. Trade unions have played a significant role in representing the have-nots of this country, and still do. The Eureka stockade, the moratorium marches of the 1970s and the Aboriginal tent embassy protests in Canberra have a common thread; that is, they involved a group of people who put their individual views and personal ambitions aside to form a single voice to increase their chances of success. Over time, some endeavours failed and some were successful. All would have failed without collectivism.

Nations recognise the advantages of collective bargaining. Small nations form temporary alliances and unions to be heard and to be effective for the people they represent. As a collective they pool their resources to influence greater nations that require their votes for their own agenda. The struggles continue between the haves and have-nots, the just causes and the injustices of life.

Unions and Society

As I stated, trade unions have played a significant role in maintaining the balance between those who are powerful and those who, as individuals, are weak. Despite being portrayed from time to time in the media and by employer groups and conservative zealots as corrupt bullyboys hell-bent on removing the individual's right to deal fairly with benevolent employers, unions are good. Not only are they good, history has proved that they are essential to developing a fair and just society. I ask members to imagine how Sydney Harbour would have looked to the world during the Olympics if the 1970s green bans imposed on harbour-side development by the Builders Labourers Federation had not been successful. How much more work would have been lost overseas if not for the constant vigilance and action of the union movement in Western Australia? No matter what their detractors say, unions are as entrenched in Australian culture as football, Holden cars and meat pies. Australians have taken great pride in the ethos of mateship, a fair go and a classless society. Whether that is true today or has ever been, and to what extent, continues to be debated from time to time. Nevertheless, these values have played a great part in the development of our collective psyche. Unfortunately, they are increasingly pushed aside in the charge to embrace material value and economic rationalism.

How does user-pays fit with mateship? How does making an unemployed person who is five minutes late for an assessment at Centrelink wait another week for his or her next appointment fit

with a fair go? How does reducing public funding of legal aid fit with the notion of a classless society? Unions are portrayed from time to time as self-serving, antisocial organisations. I have been a proud and active member of the union movement continuously since I left the Royal Australian Air Force in 1981, and I expect that I will remain a member until my retirement and beyond. My own experience has been far from undemocratic. I joined the union because my mates were members. I joined because, as an individual, I felt powerless against the boardrooms and faceless men who occupied them. I joined and remained a member because I wanted the same opportunities afforded me to be available to my children and their children. Not once have I felt coerced to act against my will or intimidated by union officials. There have been times when I was not happy with the outcome of a vote or a direction of the union, but that is democracy. I have had to live with decisions I did not like of the last Government for eight years, but I accept that this is democracy. The fact is that, while working on the tools as a blue-collar worker, as a member of my union I felt empowered and secure in my job.

In recent years I have witnessed the adverse effects on my work colleagues and other company employees who have been coerced and bribed out of collective agreements. For those people who have accepted the cash inducements of their employers, it has not taken long for the initial euphoria to wear off. In many cases these individuals quickly suffer insecurity and stress at work and at home, as well as being alienated from their communities, despite the good bank balance.

During the lead-up to the last election, a miner lamented to me that he had not seen his best mate socially since he had gone to an individual workplace agreement because they had been placed on opposing 12-hour shifts and their days off did not align for about 18 months. I witnessed communities bitterly divided because the tactics of divide and conquer by the town's major employer were trying to force workers away from agreements that had served both parties well for many years. Families and friends of many years have been torn apart, and to what end? This company makes a healthy profit, but not enough, it seems, as the shareholders enjoy from the company down the road.

Social Distribution of State Wealth

It is not just the worker-employer relationships that have suffered from this unchecked drive for material wealth. Recently I met a man who runs his own medium-sized engineering construction maintenance business. He lamented to me about the good old days in the 1970s and early 1980s when, in his view, business in the resource sector was based on the ethos of "as long as everybody made a quid, everyone was happy". However, now he was glad he was retiring, because he had seen many small businesses go broke because now the major companies just screwed people to the wall. He told of profit margins that were so tight that he could just pay his wages but did not have the capital capacity to see out the hard times, carry out research and development or expand so as to compete with the larger companies. He was worried about the future of his employees, because once he left he could not imagine anyone buying his business because no-one would want to work the hours he was now forced to do. This is a great example of the difference between an individual's outlook on the world and that of a faceless corporate executive. They are as different as chalk and cheese. On the whole, the employee is happy if he or she can pay the bills, go out to dinner from time to time and pay off the mortgage. The contractor is happy as long as everyone can make a quid. This is reflected in his attitude towards his employees, himself and the major companies. The corporation is there not to supply service, to supply goods, to maintain a family, nor to achieve a lifestyle; the corporation exists purely to create wealth for its owners and shareholders. I am not implying that corporations, companies, their executives and their owners are antisocial; I am trying to show that they are driven by different priorities and agendas from those of ordinary Australians. With few exceptions, large corporations act only in the interests of making money. I believe this is one of the core reasons that self-regulation so often fails or is ineffective. This is why people die at work. In mining, my experience has consistently shown that when capital flow is low, the first things to suffer are the

so-called “soft” issues such as safety and job security, along with maintenance. In the early 1980s I witnessed times when I believed companies would even manipulate issues that would inevitably cause a strike, and when the stockpiles decreased, the issue would suddenly be resolved. One year it was so predictable we took bets on when the trouble would start based purely on the predictions of the ore stockpile levels.

Why do we hear arguments from employer representatives, even in years of record profits, that there will be job losses every time the unions have some success in the arbitration commission for an increase in the minimum wage? The answer is simply that corporations are not willing to decrease profits, so jobs are lost or not replaced to feed the unchecked and growing fervour and desire for capital. I do not begrudge corporations or companies making money. I recognise that nations, Governments and healthy economies need free trade and businesses that can make sound profits. The fact that a profitable company has the capacity to grow feeds other businesses and, indeed, in the end feeds the people.

In my electorate the perception of the constituency is that during the resource booms of the late 1960s and 1970s, when the north west of this State was opened up at an unprecedented rate, along with the biggest local township infrastructure investment that has ever been witnessed since the gold rush era, the social investment was forced upon the companies as part of the agreements signed by them and the Western Australia Government of the day. I do not know whether that is true, but that is the perception. The perception now is that the resource towns have diminished, communities are struggling and government services have dwindled while the Governments of the day reap the royalties and the resource companies’ investment in the communities is reduced to small donations for local sporting clubs and community groups. Why does this perception prevail? As a whole, the resource sector is well and the future potential for development is staggering. I and the people who live in the resource districts of this State believe that successive Governments have let these developments off the hook. They pay royalties, but where is the ongoing local commitment? I realise we must make some concessions to encourage and assist in the establishment of projects, but we must ensure that the maximum benefit from these ventures is invested for ordinary Western Australians, just as the companies’ directors push for maximum returns for their shareholders. I recognise that these companies make a significant contribution to this State, but the point is that if our State were a publicly listed company and we were the directors, would our shareholders be happy with the returns we get for them?

While in my electorate I am constantly asked about how we can ensure a greater level of local content in fabrication, local supply of goods and services, investment in youth employment, local company preference, etc. Some specific examples come to mind. In Karratha residents would like to know why, although they are next to one of the greatest gas reserves in the southern hemisphere and part of Australia’s largest resource development, no natural gas is reticulated in the township. In Port Hedland struggling small businesses ask why they must pay rates and the resource companies do not. In Perth large contracting firms want to know why they are not ensured assistance to compete for fabrication work and, in some instances, not asked to tender at all. We must address these concerns with action, not just rhetoric. I know the job cannot be done overnight, but we must be seen to be working for our constituents or all of us here will feel the consequences. I believe it is time for us as a nation to debate what is fair and reasonable profit. What is a reasonable social dividend? Should taxpayers invest in infrastructure and support the working poor and the unemployed when corporate Australia sacks tens of thousands of workers while still announcing record profits? Why is the shareholder’s interest more important than that of the unemployed Australian? Why should our redundant friends, our unemployed neighbours, be told they have a mutual obligation to us when it is the Governments of this nation that gave corporate Australia the privilege of deregulation? As leaders of our communities, States and Commonwealth, we are obligated to help the working poor and the unemployed, not because it is

the Australian way or what one would expect of mates; it is because these Australians are victims of our decisions, policies and ideologies.

What can we do to turn this around? We often complain that the Commonwealth milks the revenues of our State and redistributes them inequitably. However, this is only part of the problem. We need to be innovative. We need to encourage business to show real social responsibility to those who have invested their lives in this State. We should invest our citizens' money in infrastructure to encourage more businesses to expand and develop in Western Australia. However, we, as custodians of our State's expansive resources, must ensure that all Western Australians gain real benefit from them. It is the Government's role to ensure that in the ongoing struggle between those who have power, resources and influence, those who have little and those who represent them, people are allowed to debate and express their views without an unfair advantage.

The current industrial relations legislation is a good example of an unfair advantage. It assumes that an employee and employer are of equal status; for instance, that a 16-year-old shop assistant could somehow negotiate on equal terms with an employer. Some will argue that this is not true; but, Mr President, that is the reality for many of our young people. Until this legislation is changed young people in this State will be exposed to exploitation. We must not allow legislation that attempts to silence and decimate unions, any more than we should legislate to allow companies to be controlled by the State.

The Stolen Generation and Indigenous Reconciliation

Mr President, as you can see, I have developed strong opinions on issues of social justice and equity and, perhaps, these next few words describing some of my early years will explain how these views have been formulated. In 1958 I was born into a poor family which lived in a tent village on the banks of the Edward River at Deniliquin, New South Wales. My father then was an itinerant worker who initially supported my mother, his daughter and five sons through market garden labour and fruit picking. He eventually gained work as a dragline operator for the Murray River irrigation scheme development which, unfortunately, meant he was away from home a great deal. My parents' relationship deteriorated and money at home became very tight. Social safety nets at that time were very limited and this was compounded by the fact that they were not married. However, my brothers, sister and I stayed with my mother as a family unit. My mother earned a little money singing at the local hotel and house cleaning, and received gifts from the charity of friends and the community.

In 1959 the government authorities decided that it was in the best interests of the two youngest children that they be removed from the family unit and adopted or fostered out. I was the youngest of these children. My sister recalls coming home from school to see my mother sobbing on the ground whilst my brother and I were bundled into a black car and driven away. She chased the car until she could run no further. A few months later my remaining brothers and sister were taken to a children's home in Sydney.

But what of me? I was the lucky one. I was adopted into a loving family. I could not explain to all members just how grateful I am for the love, care and affection I have received and still do from my mother and father, Rob and Eunice Ford. Had they destroyed all the adoption documents, as they were instructed to, I probably would not have been reunited with my siblings some 32 years later.

What is the relevance of all this? Despite all that love, and all that care and support, I never felt that I fitted in. There was always something missing. At times I felt so alienated that I imagined something was wrong with me. I cannot describe the relief - in fact, I do not believe anyone who has not been through this experience can understand - and the joy of being reunited with my biological birth family, of being able to talk to people whose processes work like mine, who share

common views, who sound similar, who look similar and who, despite being separated for many years of their lives, share similar traits and habits such as handwriting, the way they eat meals and the sports, hobbies and interests they have participated in over the years. When I was reunited with my brothers and sister for the first time, I felt as though a part of my life, my soul, had been reconnected and brought back to life. Do I hate the people who removed me? No. Am I suspicious of their motives? No. Do I regret that I was removed from my family? Mr President, yes I do.

Some 18 months ago while visiting New South Wales for the birth of my grandson, my wife and I revisited Deniliquin. As I stood on the banks of the Edward River, a small punt went past with a couple of lads out for some fishing and fun. For the first time in my life I felt ripped off. I genuinely felt sorry for myself. I looked at those children and thought, "That should have been me 30 years ago", and I grieved for a different childhood that I would never know. Mr President, despite the love that had been generously given to me; despite the good intentions of all the people who thought they were looking after my best interests; despite all of this, at that moment I believed my whole youth had been stolen from me.

I hope, Mr President, that you can see why, to me, many of the arguments around the Aboriginal stolen generation have completely missed the point. Why argue about motives? Why debate who was responsible? To me the term "the stolen generation" refers not just literally to a generation of stolen Aboriginal people; it refers to that part of the heart that has been stolen from every one of those people - every mother, father, brother, sister, son and daughter affected by the policy of that time of removing children from their families.

We, as a community, should accept that it happened; that children were removed from their communities and from their families against their parents' will. The evidence is there; it is living and breathing amongst us. No matter what the motive surrounding the policy, it was the wrong thing to do. I know it was wrong. This was just a part of the many injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal people. As Australians, we must recognise the impact of government policies of the time and demonstrate some real empathy for those whom those policies and decisions affected. We must assist, where we can, with the healing processes, not because we should accept responsibility for the actions of those who have been before us but because it is the right thing to do. Mr President, reconciliation is part of the healing process. If we cannot actively move towards the goal as a society, we can never be united and we will never be whole.

Acknowledgments

I thank and acknowledge the following people and organisations. I thank the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region who have allowed me this greatest of opportunities and privilege, for the chance of living and working with all the great characters of the north west - the Knobbys, the Bone Heads, Crackers and the like! I hope I can give back something of substance to the communities of the Mining and Pastoral Region that have rewarded me and supported my family so well.

I thank the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, its members, organisers and staff for their support and protection during my past employment, and their continuous ongoing vigilance, political and industrial activism, especially for the working people of the Mining and Pastoral Region. I thank the Maritime Workers Union for the support its members have shown me in my political endeavours over the years. I thank Jock Ferguson for his friendship, guidance and support. I thank the Australian Labor Party for showing faith in my abilities. I thank my predecessor, Hon Tom Helm, for the many years of friendship and his commitment to the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region. I thank all my previous work colleagues of the past 10 years who have had to endure my incessant political rantings and who, regardless of this, still managed to talk to me.

I thank Lyn Jager for being a great mate over the years.

I also thank my father and mother, Rob and Eunice Ford, my brother Peter Ford, my sister Bonnie and brothers Bruce, Shane, Patrick and Stuart. I thank my great and dear sons Liam and Rohan and my beautiful daughter Erinna who, one day, I hope, will be the President of Australia; my grandson Zac; and my in-laws Kevin and Annette Jeffcoat.

I especially acknowledge the great love and support shown to me by my wife, friend and partner, Taryn, who has remained with me, despite having to endure the challenges and grief that I am sure living with me has given her, and without whom I would never have achieved the level of success I have enjoyed in my life to date.

[Applause.]
