



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Sue Ellery, MLC
(South Metropolitan Region)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council, Tuesday 22 May 2001

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Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan) [7.52 pm]: Mr President, I apologise to you and to the House for my voice; it is not normally this croaky. Congratulations on your election this morning, Mr President. I noted that you received genuine and warm commendations from across the House, and I know that they are well deserved. I have had the pleasure of working with you in party forums for many years and I look forward to the Cowdell wit and wisdom dispensed from your new Chair.

I support the motion that was moved by Hon Ken Travers. I am proud and excited to take this opportunity to introduce myself to the House, and to put on the record some comments on a range of public policy matters that are of particular importance to me. At the outset I want to thank the voters of the South Metropolitan Region for placing their faith in the Australian Labor Party and in me to represent the diversity of their interests. It is a responsibility that I take very seriously. I intend to repay their confidence by working hard to ensure that the commitments made during the election campaign are honoured.

The Governor, in his speech, outlined the key areas in which this Government intends to deliver honest, accountable and inclusive government, prudent financial and economic management of the people's resources, and social reform to deliver high quality public health and education, and to improve community safety and protect and sustain our environment. I look forward to playing my part in delivering on those commitments to Western Australians in this new phase of my career.

I have spent my career to date working in politics and in the community sector, and in the past 12 years I have been privileged to serve the working people of Western Australia in the trade union movement. I have been lucky to work for a number of different unions covering a broad range of working people, including local government, registered nurses, Department of Conservation and Land Management workers, Main Roads workers and agricultural workers; and, for the past seven years, the members of the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union. "Miscellaneous" is not in that union's title for nothing. During my time there, I worked with members in water and manufacturing, members employed as Aboriginal health workers in the community control sector and in government, and with members employed in child care, in disability services, in aged care, in private health and in the public health sector: The ALHMWU is at the forefront of major change within the trade union

movement as it embraces the “organising focus” - a name given to the strategy that is based on empowering workers to take the union forward. It is a strategy that can just as easily be applied to community activism and the role that we as political leader ought play in empowering those in our community whose voices are not always heard. In essence, a checklist is applied to every activity undertaken. It includes the questions: Does this empower people; does it expand the base of leadership in the community; and does it build the political voice? These are questions I will be asking myself in the course of my term here to ensure that I remain true to the principles that brought me here. I know I bring the aspirations and the hopes of those union members with me. I know they are eagerly awaiting the changes to Western Australian industrial relations laws, in particular, that the Gallop Government was elected to deliver. Those industrial relations changes are critically important because the previous Government ripped away the safety net from WA workers.

I have learned a lot from the union members that I have worked with, but one of the most inspiring times for many of us in the WA union movement was during the 1997 campaign to oppose what became known as the third wave of industrial relations legislative changes. Those legislative changes have since been judged by the people of Western Australia and by many others, including international bodies, to be grossly unfair. The role this House played in 1997 in getting those changes in place was not one of which it can be proud. However, sometimes out of adversity, the human spirit can soar, and in the cooperation between sometimes rival unions, the political education and empowerment of ordinary workers, the greater understanding of the process of parliamentary democracy, the creative approach to campaigning, the huge numbers of Western Australians who marched on the streets to protest, the friendships formed and the food and entertainment shared on cold and rainy nights across the road at Solidarity Park, the courage of those who occupied part of Parliament House, and the unbridled joy on the night of the first workers’ embassy ball, our spirits did indeed soar.

During that campaign, and many others less sensational than that campaign, I have been privileged to work with and learn from some wonderful mentors. I particularly acknowledge Helen Creed and Keith Peckham as union leaders who know that true leadership is as much about teaching and nurturing as it is about managing people and money and making tough decisions. In the broader Labor movement I have been mentored by many great women and I am pleased to see some of them here tonight. Pat Giles, a former Western Australian Senator and now a very busy activist at an international level, is a shining example of how to pursue feminist objectives with grace and dignity in a male-dominated Parliament. Cheryl Davenport never lost faith that I would get into Parliament. I am enormously proud to be her replacement in the South Metropolitan Region. Joan Kirner has motivated and no doubt will continue to motivate me and many other Labor women. For sheer grit and determination in the face of enormous pressure, Carmen Lawrence has also set an example. These five women, among whom I include Helen Creed, continue their commitment to encourage more women to become involved in politics. Over the past five years they have founded and developed the new Australian political organisation Emily’s List - I wear its brooch tonight - a financial and political support network for Labor women candidates. To date Emily’s List has assisted 54 new Labor women into Australian Parliaments, taking the total of Labor women nationally to 124. I am proud to be both a member of Emily’s List and one of those 124 women.

I am very pleased to be one of five Labor women in the Legislative Council. Women in Western Australia have achieved a lot since the first woman, Ruby Hutchison, was elected to this place in 1954. However, there is much to be done, particularly in respect of pay equity. Nineteen sixty-nine saw the first win in the fight for equal pay for women. However, until real change happens in recognising that the value of the work done predominantly by women - for example in the caring and service industries - is worth at least as much as that done predominantly by men in, say, the manufacturing industries, we will not have pay equity. We

should highly value the work of those who care for our children in child care centres and our elderly in residential aged care services. We put their welfare and indeed their very lives in the hands of those workers. However, if we regard the rates of pay as a measure of the value we place on their work, we will have a disparity. A child carer is paid \$12.31 an hour, a carer in an aged care facility is paid \$12.93 an hour, and a manufacturing worker first year out of apprenticeship earns \$13.34 an hour. These are award rates of pay. The previous Government's workplace agreements saw rates of pay drop in many industries in which women work, and the gap between earnings increase. This Government has already taken action to redress this by raising the minimum wage, and more change is to come.

Labor was elected on the promise of a review into discrimination in the workplace, including in particular recommendations on ways to reduce the gender wage gap. One way of constantly reminding the players in industrial relations to pursue pay equity would be to enshrine that as one of the objects of the relevant industrial relations Act. I look forward to that happening.

The Labor Party has not always historically been the voice of change for women. However, the modern Labor Party has done much while in government to improve the status of women. I know that the women in this new Government and others have high expectations in that regard. It used to be from the outside that the sisterhood was watching. Now that the numbers of the sisterhood inside the Parliament are growing, the sisterhood is among us, and Western Australian women will hold us accountable to deliver for them.

Electoral reform, with particular regard to the role of this House, has long been Labor policy. The Labor Party went to the election with a public commitment to introduce one vote, one value legislation. In its report No 1 of August 1995, the Commission on Government made a number of important recommendations on the role of this place, which we have an obligation to pursue. Among them was that the electoral system for the Legislative Council ought to be changed if the Council is to properly perform the functions of a House of Review. However, to my mind the question remains: at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly as we celebrate 100 years of development and finetuning of the Australian version of parliamentary democracy, do we still need a House of Review? We have in place three tiers of government and many checks and balances. In any event, checks and balances can be applied genuinely only in the absence of partisan behaviour. In the debate in this place in 1997 about the industrial relations legislation, the House did not provide an independent review. A calculated partisan decision was made. If we put aside the merits or otherwise of the legislation in my example, the Legislative Council duplicated the role of the other place in that instance. I do not believe that is what the people of Western Australia wanted. The question becomes all the more pressing when the system of electing this House of Review is weighted very unevenly against the majority of the population. In preparing this speech, I read a number of first speeches from the past. I was fascinated to read in the first speech of Hon Ruby Hutchison, or Red Ruby as she was known, her call for electoral reform to recognise, and I quote -

. . . the fact that the people have given a decided answer that democracy has reached the stage where we can expect to attain fair and just representation in both the halls of Legislature in this State.

That was in 1954. I look forward to real change in the electoral system arising from the current round of negotiations.

I acknowledge the role of my family in getting me to this point. At the outset I must make a confession to you, Mr President, and my comrades on this side: it is as a result of the politics of the other side that I am here at all. My parents met at a Young Libs function in 1959. I have now "fessed up". Political discussion was always a part of the household as I grew up. I come from an extended family of very strongly opinionated folk, some of whom sadly are no longer with us. However, I thank them for respecting the rigours of debating. They rarely agreed with

the views I held, but I was encouraged to hold my own in an argument. I did not get my brand of politics from my family, but I got a commitment to involvement in political matters. It is only as I have matured that I have realised the invaluable lessons taught me through the process of argument around the family table. As a seething adolescent I remember looking on these loud and often alcohol-fuelled arguments as grossly embarrassing. It later dawned on me that they were teaching me to play a role in public policy. They were also teaching me about the effects of alcohol, but that is another story. I was taught that I should have views about important social questions of the day, that I should learn how to properly articulate them and that I should act on them. I was privileged in that sense and I recognise that the opportunities I was given are not afforded to many.

Still on my family, in January 1994 my mother was involved in a very serious car accident, which changed all of our lives forever. As a result of that accident we have experienced the frustrations and the mind-numbing exhaustion of working our way through the disability and health systems. We have also met and formed relationships with some fantastic carers and service providers. However, it takes a very resourceful and focused effort to survive the process. Unfortunately, it also takes money. Very many Western Australians will have had an even worse experience than my family had.

Western Australians with disabilities deserve better. I am pleased to be part of a Gallop Government that is committed to significantly improving services for people with disabilities and their families. From my experience I know that Western Australian families supporting a family member with a disability need much greater coordination of services. Families continuing to work and provide care in the home rather than in an institution should not have to run around among a range of community agencies and government departments trying to work out which of those services meet their needs and how they can fit into their assessment criteria, all the while dealing with the consequences and the emotional aftermath of a traumatic accident.

I am proud to be part of the Australian Labor Party for many reasons, but one of those is that we have a strong history of caring for people and of making real social change. I want to see the Government build upon the important changes made in the disability area under the last Labor Government. It is also important that real change in this area is not held up by arguments between State and Commonwealth Governments about how funds are to be allocated. I am pleased that the Gallop Government supports more flexibility in funding arrangements rather than an ideological commitment to impose a competitive tendering regime. In the human services area, competitive tendering has not resulted in better service delivery to those who desperately need it. In disability services, for example, pitting longstanding agencies that have built holistic services around target group needs against newcomer organisations that crunch the numbers to provide a basic service has not had a positive outcome. Competitive tendering for those agencies already operating on shoestring budgets forces down the wages of employees and reduces the range of services available from each agency. As a result, the users have even more running around to do because they must go to more agencies to get the services they need.

Labor's commitment to initiatives that recognise the role of carers and to review and improve services for those carers who want to stay in paid employment is long overdue. I look forward to playing my part in implementing those initiatives. Equally, the improved coordination and flexibility of respite services promised by this Government is critically important to many Western Australians.

Finally, I acknowledge my partner, Peter, who put up with all the craziness that goes with someone aspiring to be elected to this place. We have an interesting time ahead of us, not the least because of the hours we work. Peter is a shiftworker, and his hours and mine in this place will make life interesting. We will probably never see each other. However, we are looking forward to the journey ahead.

As a new member of Parliament I look forward to working with my colleagues in this place to deliver honest and inclusive government.

[Applause.]
