



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Shelley Archer MLC
(Member for Mining and Pastoral)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [4.21 pm]: I am very proud to stand in this chamber today as a new member for the Mining and Pastoral Region, and I look forward to working with my colleagues in this vast electorate. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and recognise the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today and of the land encompassing the electorate of the Mining and Pastoral Region. I had the opportunity to meet with some of the local indigenous elders and community workers during the recent election campaign. I found that, against all odds, they continue to campaign and work for their people. They show perseverance in the face of much hardship. I commit today to helping them in my new role.

I want to talk briefly about the Mining and Pastoral Region. This region is an area of vivid contrast. It has a natural beauty, with magnificent scenery - gorges, billabongs and tidal surges that are second to none. It has a magnificent coastline. People can enjoy a sea expedition into the stunningly beautiful Buccaneer Archipelago, camp under the stars on remote beaches, fish, collect oysters, bushwalk, bird watch or just dream. The region contains some of our state's richest history, colourful characters, pristine and fragile environments and greatest wealth, but at the same time it has terrible poverty and appalling living conditions.

While it is an ancient land, for the most part untouched since the Dreamtime, it is the centre of global attention from Tokyo to Beijing, and from London to Los Angeles.

I am particularly proud of the fact that the Australian Labor Party won three of the five seats in this region. It was a privilege bestowed on me by my party when it selected me as its candidate; but, more importantly, it was a privilege extended by the voters of what is arguably the world's largest state electorate. While I am aware of the trust that has been reposed in me, I am also aware of the enormous responsibility it brings. Today I will outline how I intend to address that task.

I am from a large Catholic family. With mum and dad plus 16 kids and the odd foster child along the way, we could have almost made an Aussie Rules football team. It was always a struggle for us to get by. I know how tough it was and can be because I lived it with my family and siblings. My journey began with my father, Ted Archer, who was one of this state's most distinguished trade unionists. He embodied the

values of respect for others, tolerance, equity and fairness, social justice, help for others less fortunate in the world and the right of working people to freely organise into trade unions and to bargain for better living standards and social conditions. At a very early age, dad aroused and encouraged in me a sense of justice, integrity and social conscience, and the need to look after those who are less fortunate than we are - the poor, the disabled, the disadvantaged, the old, the oppressed and those who need a helping hand.

The Liberal Party and its policies have produced a further drift away from the mainstream of Australia of the young, the poor and the old. These people believe that they are now being punished for the circumstances in which they find themselves.

My father has been gone now for 18 years, but he is still very much with me, in my memories and in my heart. I can feel him today looking down on me, and I am warmed and strengthened by his presence.

As an adult and an independent woman, I have received help and inspiration from some impressive women whom I have met through Emily's List. I particularly want to thank Joan Kirner, Kay Setches and Cheryl Davenport, who have been my mentors from the time I was preselected. Emily's List is a political network that was formed to increase the number of women Labor parliamentarians who are willing to support the crucial issues of child care and equal pay and to be pro-choice, and they must support in the community the principles of equity and diversity. It is because of this organisation that my journey took a turn. We were in Alice Springs at a national meeting of Emily's List and indigenous women when I realised that there needed to be equal representation in Parliament of women from all walks of life. I made a commitment then that I would do all that I could to ensure that women and working families had a strong voice in Parliament.

Life is stressful for many working families. Balancing work with family needs is particularly difficult when the contemporary imperative is that both parents work and the kids are in child care or out-of-school care.

Much of the onus falls on women. For families in the north it is even worse. Promoting a more family-friendly balance between work and family life will be a constant theme of mine in this chamber, as will the issue of equal pay for women. While the principle of equal pay was won over three decades ago, the reality today is that women are still paid less than men.

As a woman, I am concerned at the increasing intrusion of fundamentalist religious influence into the political sphere of our society. This trend is particularly concerning to me because it is especially oppressive of women's rights and freedoms. As a society, we are inclined to be dismissive of such concerns, associating fundamentalism with the oppressive sharia law and the denial of suffrage in non-democratic Arab and African states. However, in Australia we are not immune to it. Increasingly, we are seeing efforts to impose reactionary and literal interpretations of religious scripts on secular institutions and issues.

Freedom of religion and the right to practise our faith without hindrance in a multicultural and diverse society are rights that I also espouse. However, that must not override the important principle of the separation of church and state on which our legislation and system of law are based.

If we want to talk about what is fundamental, then surely it is a fundamental right for women to make decisions about their own lives and bodies. I deplore the public hand wringing over unwanted teenage pregnancies by those who at the same time want to restrict commonsense access to safe contraception, and the double standard of those who espouse individualism and free choice as an idealistic and political principle but who want to restrict the right of women to control their own fertility. As a woman, a mother and a grandmother, I will argue for the right of women to make choices fundamental to their physical and mental health, and that this choice should be available to all women, regardless of their economic status.

There is also another issue that I believe is truly fundamental - fundamental to our democracy. For too long I have noticed the practice of removing indigenous voters from the electoral roll. This is especially the case

in the north west of the state. Before the last state election, a letter was sent to many indigenous voters. If the mail was not collected in time, they were removed from the electoral roll. This practice exploits the itinerant and nomadic nature of many indigenous citizens and applies a white man's one-size-fits-all law to indigenous culture. Indigenous people face many problems: third-world infant mortality rates; lack of access to fresh, clean, running water; lack of employment opportunities and training; and alcoholism and other health problems. However, if they are stopped from voting, they are excluded from having their voices heard in our society. In this chamber I will stand up for the rights of indigenous Australians. I will defend their right to vote and their right to share in the prosperity of this, their country.

One of the things from which I derive constant inspiration is the sheer physical beauty of my vast electorate. It is no wonder that icons like the Ningaloo Reef are on the World Heritage List. I opposed the proposed Mauds Landing development and applauded when the Gallop government quashed it. The need to develop a management plan to secure the long-term future of Ningaloo Reef is a high priority. At the moment, there are a number of overlapping state and federal departments and an over-abundance of agencies, all with responsibility for some aspects of the reef. They should be replaced with a single Ningaloo reef authority, modelled on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. In this chamber I will argue for an intelligent balance between the environment and development. However, if there is a reasonable doubt about the benefits of any development, I will give my support to the environment every time.

One of the things I remember as a kid is Sir Charles Court railing about the Canberra conspiracy. The funny thing now is how faint are the voices in the opposition to the most blatant power grab from Canberra since federation. The Howard government wants to run our tax system, control our health system, regulate our technical and further education colleges and universities, take over our industrial relations system and blackmail the state governments on funds for water and transport projects if they do not toe his ideological line. Australia is a federation of states. Even a constitutional conservative like Professor Greg Craven from Curtin University has criticised the Howard government for its power grab. I suspect it will be tough enough getting people in Perth to understand the needs of the north west let alone a remote insular bureaucracy nestled on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin. In this chamber I will support genuine cooperative federalism that has benefits for my constituents, but I will resist the power grab of the Howard government.

That brings me to the tax system and the institutionalised discrimination it imposes against the north west. The zone tax offset allowance has effectively remained unreviewed since it was first introduced more than half a century ago. A zone tax offset may be claimed by residents of remote regions of Australia in recognition of the disadvantages to which those residents are subject, such as the unpleasant climate, the isolation and the higher costs of living compared with other areas of Australia. Earlier this month the federal Treasurer, Mr Costello, brought down the federal budget. Quite apart from the fact that the federal budget disproportionately rewarded the government's mates at the top end of town and did little for the battlers, it also did not review the zone tax offset allowance. There is a chronic distortion in the tax system when it comes to northern and remote Australia. The goods and services tax magnified the problem. Everything that people in the north buy costs more because of transport costs. The lack of competition means the price of many goods and services is inflated even further. That automatically means that it is more expensive to live in the north west of the state than it is in Perth and that the people in the north west pay extra tax. In this chamber I will call for tax reform that will encourage people to live in the sparsely populated north of this state, not penalise them for doing so. Although tax is mostly a federal issue, I will be seeking a fairer share of the state's goods and services tax revenue for the north.

It is not for nothing that my electorate bears the name Mining and Pastoral Region. It is the engine room of the Western Australian economy. More tonnage is shipped out of its ports than out of any other region in Australia. One of the distinctive features of the mining industry is that, although it produces wealth from the region, it does not contribute much wealth to the region. Another feature is that despite the fact that the original mining agreements required a shift to value adding, our mining industries still export raw commodities. In this chamber I will support a vibrant and responsible private sector that creates the skilled jobs and good wages that entrepreneurial initiative can produce. However, the mineral wealth that those companies have developed belongs to the people of Western Australia. Therefore, in return for access to those riches, I want to see greater employment opportunities for indigenous Australians and a genuine commitment in this state to value adding to those raw materials.

My father was a trade unionist and my husband is a trade unionist, and the same commitment defines me as well. Trade unions historically have won rights and entitlements for Western Australian workers and have lifted the incomes of ordinary workers everywhere. They continue to do so. The recent state election gave us a mandate to pursue our industrial relations policies. The recent federal election did not do the same for the federal coalition government. Industrial relations was part of our campaign. A federal industrial relations monopoly was not part of the Howard government's agenda. It was raised as an issue only after the federal election. The other day I heard Michael Chaney, the chairman of a national company, call for one federal uniform industrial relations system in Australia, because he did not like the fact that he had to deal with six separate state jurisdictions. Mr Chaney knows that he can get a national agreement for his workers tomorrow if he is prepared to negotiate with the federal union. The only thing that will stop him is if he wants to cut wages and conditions to below the standards established in state awards. This ploy by the federal Government is yet another attempt to cut the wages and working conditions of workers while those at the big end of town enjoy their extremely high salaries. In this chamber I will stand up for the working people and the unions that protect their living conditions.

Workers' compensation is another issue on which we could do with a bit more honesty. It is an ongoing agenda for employers to complain about the high cost of workers' compensation premiums and to try to cut workers' benefits in order to reduce the premiums. A better way of keeping down the cost of premiums would be to cut the number of accidents and single out recalcitrant employers. Accident levels in Western Australian industry are still too high. The focus should be on three fronts: safety, compensation and rehabilitation. This is a tripartite responsibility involving governments, employers and unions.

Another issue that I wish to address is aged care. My mother, who has lived for over half her life in the north west of Western Australia, and the last 18 years in Derby, by choice, was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. I and the family researched the possibility of moving mum from the pensioner unit she was living in at the time to a more suitable aged care home in Derby so that she could be provided with the appropriate medical care. Unfortunately, and directly due to the lack of facilities, we had to move mum to Perth, where she is being cared for by one of my brothers, Vedant, and a host of carers who ably assist him in this very time-consuming task. It was quite heartbreaking for my family to have to tell mum that she could no longer live in the town she loved and in which she had hoped to live out the rest of her life because there were no facilities that would meet her needs. It is even more heartbreaking when we go to visit mum and she asks if we are there to take her home to Derby. The lack of facilities in Derby for an aged person with Alzheimer's disease is outstanding. I decided then I would do whatever I could to try to facilitate an increase in amenities for the aged not just in Derby but the entire north west. I acknowledge that in the past four years this government has achieved some of the goals that I have set myself. However, there is still a way to go before I will be satisfied that we have done what we can for this part of my constituency. I will be making every effort to ensure that our elderly people get what they need, including access to health care

services, a bed in a nursing home if they need one, and access to home care services if they want to remain in their homes.

Now, very briefly, thanks to those who supported me in attaining this position. I thank the women who were just there: Eileen McParland, Barb McDonald, Diane Smith, Jill Hawkins, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich, Sheila Mills, Colleen Hayward and so many others. I was fortunate to grow up with a strong network of women. As a young woman, we were the gang of five: Yvonne Heagney, Diana Forster, Jenny French and Elizabeth McSweeney. What times we had and continue to have. Thank you for everything.

I was also fortunate to be given the joy of becoming a godmother to a delightful group of what are now young women: Danielle Harmer, Chloe Forster, Emma Heagney and Victoria Sullivan. Thanks guys.

To my brothers and sisters - there are lots of them - but especially to those who live in the north west of the state: Allan and his wife Bonnie, Brad, and Wayne who believed in me and my ability to make a change and who came out to give a hand on the day. I also thank my nieces and nephews, Dene, Sean and Justin, who helped and gave me support, encouragement and a sense of themselves. My special thanks go to my daughter Melanie, who thinks I am absolutely not in my right mind for entering politics but has given her full and unconditional support to making sure that I achieve my ambition. I also thank the light of my life, my grand daughter, Taylah-belle, who keeps me grounded. I send my thanks to my other daughter, Leonie, and her girls, Jessica and Jade, for their help and their lightheartedness in the face of some difficult times. I thank Rod and Clint and their partners Justin and Emma. Thank you; I know it was not just the trip to Broome that enticed them to come all that way and give me a hand. It was because they believed in what I wanted to do.

I need to mention the other men in my life who gave me their support: Joe Bullock, Joe McDonald, Hon Graham Giffard, Rewi Lyall, Mathew Keogh - the young one - Kim Young, Kevin McParland and Ian Hawkins. A very special thanks to Brian Burke and Senator Peter Cook for their love and unconditional support.

Now, last but not least, a very heartfelt and special thanks and love to the extraordinary man in my life, Kevin Reynolds. He championed my cause and then gave me his all to ensure that I achieved a part of my ambition. Without him, I would not be here today. Thank you.

[Applause.]
