



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Laurie Graham, MLC
(Member for Agricultural)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Thursday, 25 May 2017

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 24 May on the following motion moved by Hon Sally Talbot —

That the following address be presented to Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the commonwealth of Australia —

May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

HON LAURIE GRAHAM (Agricultural) [2.35 pm]: May I also take this opportunity to congratulate you, Madam President, on your election, especially for the place you now hold in history by being the first woman to hold this prestigious position in 185 years. Members, it is indeed an honour to address this house, something that in my wildest imagination I did not ever see as being a remote possibility given my age. Speaking of my personal life, I was born in Geraldton to Jim and Mary Graham in 1945 and have a sister, Kay Hopkins, and brother, Kerry. Both my parents were staunch Labor supporters all their lives. At the age of 18 months, whilst chasing after ducks in the next door property, I ran into smouldering ash from a burn-off the previous day. I received first-degree burns to my feet and legs and spent the next three months in hospital, and my walking days were over for the next 12 months. I am very fortunate that the only minor impact today is to my feet. Kids can be pretty cruel, and the nickname given to me by the kids in the street was “Nootes”, short for “no toes”. The family home had ovals, tennis courts, basketball courts, a Girl Guides hall and croquet rinks on the opposite side of the street. It was an ideal place to live, and I cannot remember an occasion when the front door ever needed to be locked. As children we slept on the verandah.

I was educated at Stella Maris College for the first three years and then at St Patrick’s College for the rest of primary school and lower upper school. Not being an academic student, I left school in 1961 after completing year 10. This was only possible after the principal told my parents I was a poor student who would not pass year 12, and their approval was reluctantly given. After a short stint of employment with the railways as a casual, I was fortunate to be employed as a junior clerk with the Harbour and Light Department, which administered most of the WA ports at that time. In 1969 I transferred to the Geraldton Port Authority on its formation and worked my way up in that organisation, and in 1981 I was appointed general manager, a position I held for 15 years until I resigned in 1996 after 35 years’ service. Early in my working life I pencilled at country race meetings for an SP bookmaker, George Wright, and in the mid-1970s held a bookmaker’s licence for several years, betting on local races. It was a great hobby and fun, but not much financial reward was forthcoming. At that time race meetings were held in most towns, and community events were held in association with the races to raise funds for various causes. Attending smaller race meetings involved considerable travelling when there were no meetings in Geraldton. Following a race meeting in October ’70 I went to the Meekatharra ball, where I met my wife for the first time. We were married two years later. No doubt, that is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Dad always had a large fruit and vegie garden in the backyard in Sanford Street. I always complained about the jobs in the yard I was allocated, or no pocket money. From there I moved to Waggrakine onto a four-acre property in 1982, where my mother-in-law, Jen Eiffler, lived with us for many years. Being a keen gardener, she soon had a very large fruit and vegetable patch and today I am a keen vegie gardener myself. I do not have the green thumbs of my dad and mother-in-law, so I restrict the garden to mainly grow onions and beetroot. A number of my friends were very happy to see me elected to Parliament, but they were concerned that there will be no more pickled beetroot in the future. I hope that does not happen.

When my friend Kim Chance became aware that I was leaving the port authority, he approached me to consider standing for the seat of Geraldton in 1996 and I subsequently nominated and was endorsed by the Labor Party. The chance of winning the seat was slim, given the margin and time frame available for electioneering. My first tilt at running for a seat in Parliament was unsuccessful, but the pleasing thing was halving the margin at that election and Shane Hill winning the seat easily in 2001. Although I remained very interested in politics and a member of the party, I could not see that I would be a candidate in an election in the future as had I decided to pursue other employment opportunities as a port and transport consultant. My first clients were Kingstream Steel, for which I developed options for loading slab steel at the proposed Oakajee port onto panamax ships, and representing Rail Services Australia's business development section in Western Australia as it successfully expanded its New South Wales based rail and construction contracts into WA. Following this, my clients included a number of engineering consulting firms, providing advice on cargo handling infrastructure and port operations for their clients in Australia and overseas. Until recently I had a small number of Geraldton-based clients who sought advice on how to negotiate leases and port charges. During my working life I had exposure to computer programs and developed programs for recording aircraft landings and a cleaning contractors' database. Both of these programs are still in use today and I assist from time to time upgrading the programs.

I have participated in many sporting clubs and associations. In addition to being an active participant in most sports, I managed committee positions of treasurer or secretary of swimming, basketball, hockey, tennis and squash clubs or associations over a 20-year period. My first position was as the secretary of a swimming club when I was 16. I was a bit inexperienced with meeting procedures at the time and too slow to say no to the nomination the night of the annual general meeting and was elected in a few seconds. I was fortunate to live in an era when competing in three or more sports each week was possible and not expensive at the time. Today's parents shudder when the accounts for sporting fees arrive. Following my sporting endeavours, serving on community bodies followed. I was the treasurer of the St Francis Xavier Primary School board for 10 years in the 1980s, when the school was transitioning from a one to two-stream school, which involved doubling the number of classrooms and considerable financial challenges.

The Geraldton Amateur Basketball Association formed a trustees committee to manage its finances to facilitate the building of additional indoor basketball courts. Management of its finances, at arm's length to its association management committee, was required to satisfy the loan conditions set by the town council. I was appointed to that committee of four at its inception and was the chair or treasurer for 10 years. Most of the borrowed funds were repaid by the committee before it wound up, and it disbanded when the association was financially secure.

In 1997, I was elected as a councillor for the Shire of Greenough and remained a member of that council until it was disbanded in 2007 to make way for the amalgamation with the

City of Geraldton. During this period I was deputy president for two terms, chair of the planning committee for eight years, and served on numerous council committees. I was a strong supporter of the amalgamation with the City of Geraldton. A significant council appointment was to the Geraldton–Greenough Regional Council for six years. The Geraldton–Greenough Regional Council built and managed a new landfill facility for the City of Geraldton and the Shire of Greenough. Its operations were merged into the City of Geraldton–Greenough at the time of the amalgamation of Greenough and Geraldton councils. Today that facility receives waste from most local governments in the immediate area. Whilst a councillor, I was appointed a deputy member of the Local Government Grants Commission and the Local Government Advisory Board for one term each. I especially enjoyed being a part of the hearings on amalgamations, mainly initiated by larger councils proposing to join a smaller one. Generally, when council's realised that government was not serious about forcing reform, the smaller council most affected by amalgamation would pull back as its residents became agitated at the proposal. This was really about losing identity.

In 1997, I joined the board of Joblink Midwest and became chair the following year, a position I still hold today. Joblink mainly provides employment and training services to schools and young people finding their way into the workforce via contracts it administers for the department of employment and training. Profits from contracts administered by Joblink are mainly committed to disadvantaged groups, which is fantastic, and older people seeking to re-enter the workforce in the midwest Gascoyne areas. Joblink was formed by Jeff Carr about 30 years ago to help youth in the transition from school to work and still provides the same service today. The most pleasing part of being on this board is hearing of the staff successes of placing a young person in a job. Young people are often job ready, and a suitable position has been found but they do not have the financial resources to either get to the job or pay for tickets or safety clothing required. This cost is often not able to be funded from other employment contracts. The investment of a few hundred dollars by Joblink achieves an employment outcome in more than 90 per cent of the clients helped in this situation. It is a shame governments cannot take a risk and provide funding for bodies to provide such a service, because although it is risky—we sometimes filled up a car with petrol to find it ended up in Perth instead or Perenjori, where it was supposed to go—the 90 per cent of the time when it is successful, it is well worth the investment. Also in 1997, I joined the board of Apprenticeship and Traineeship Midwest when its core government funding was in jeopardy. I served on that board for six years; the last three years I chaired the organisation. ATC Midwest, as it is better known, is a group training company that was the hosting employer for more than 300 apprentices and trainees for 100 businesses in 2000.

In 2001, I was appointed as a board member of the Mid West Development Commission and served on the board for six years, chairing it for the last four years and was its representative on the Regional Development Council. At that time, the Regional Development Council was an advisory body made up of the chairs and CEOs of the commissions and chaired by Ian Taylor. It was tasked with providing direct advice to government on issues affecting regional WA. This structure, which I believe worked very well, was disbanded shortly after my term at the commission ended, which was most disappointing. In 2007, I joined the Monsignor Hawes Heritage Interim Board and in 2010 was appointed as the treasurer of the incorporated association. I remained a member of the management committee and treasurer until the 2016 AGM. Monsignor Hawes Heritage Incorporated was formed to raise the awareness of John Hawes' legacy and to assist with securing funds for the local communities' maintenance of the 17 heritage-listed buildings in the midwest. These buildings are mainly churches and are the main tourist attraction in many of the midwest wheatbelt towns today. With the injection of funding from royalties for regions and Lotterywest, the Monsignor Hawes Heritage Centre was recently built in Geraldton. It adjoins St Francis

Xavier's Cathedral and houses a museum that tells the story of John Hawes and displays the movable objects that are now able to be put on public display for the first time.

In 2013, concerned with the rates increases that had occurred and those proposed for future years, I again stood for council and was elected as a councillor of the City of Greater Geraldton. I was pleased to be part of the council whilst it restructured its operations, and the proposed rate increases under its long-term financial plan were able to be reduced considerably.

The community concern with the rate increases resulted in most of the sitting councillors who stood for re-election in the 2013 and 2015 elections losing their seats on council, which gives members some idea of people's concerns with rates. As a doughnut council, the amalgamation of Greenough and Geraldton councils was inevitable, due to the rapid increase in the Greenough population in the urban areas. However, the jury is still out on the benefits of the subsequent amalgamation of Geraldton–Greenough and the Mullewa councils. The main reason for the amalgamation in 2011 appears to be the desire of Mullewa council to reduce the need to expand its staff to operate under the changed Local Government Act and the new financial requirements that were being implemented. As part of the terms negotiated by Mullewa council, representation by two councillors for eight years was provided for in the governance orders for the Mullewa ward. The City of Greater Geraldton council has expressed support to reduce the number of councillors due at the 2019 election from 15 to 10 or fewer, but it has not formally voted to confirm this. If one vote, one value principles are strictly followed in the ward review of the Mullewa ward, a small number of electors will disappear. The rural areas of Greenough make up 98 per cent of the land area of the City of Greater Geraldton and have 2 000 electors compared with the urban area's two per cent land area and 25 000 electors. The challenge for a ward review will be to provide appropriate representation for rural areas. I also believe that de-amalgamation proposals will be forthcoming if Mullewa councillor representation is seen to be lost. I do not believe it has to be totally lost but at least it has to be seen to be there.

I turn to the recent election. It was fantastic to be part of the campaign team supporting Lara Dalton's attempt to win the seat of Geraldton. It was an extreme disappointment for Lara and her large band of supporters that she got so close and election looked likely on election night. I hope that Lara, who is a fantastic candidate, is willing and able to run again in 2021. Just a few weeks before nominations for the election closed, I was preselected for the Agricultural Region ticket. To be truthful, I did not believe that Labor could win a second spot but hoped my being on the ticket would help Lara get elected. A true believer is looking at me.

Special thanks to Lara Dalton, whose outstanding dedication to try to win the seat of Geraldton resulted in me being elected to this house. Also, thanks to Darren West, who helped the candidates run great campaigns in the seats of Roe, Central Wheatbelt, Moore and Geraldton. Labor had its best vote for many years thanks to Darren's efforts. Thanks also to Carol Martin and Luke Clarkson for being part of the Agricultural Region ticket with Darren and me. No doubt this helped our vote. To the large band of party members and Lara's friends who doorknocked, letterboxed, folded pamphlets, attended functions and worked on polling booths, a sincere thank you.

Thanks to Reg Clarke, who passed away a few years ago. Reg was the inaugural manager of the port authority and my boss for 20 years. No doubt, his influence helped with my appointment to the various positions on the board, especially my elevation to general manager. Reg was a brother-in-law of Senator Don Willesee. If Geraldton had not been in the safe Labor hands of Bill Sewell, he would no doubt have been a Labor candidate for the seat at some time. Thanks to my wife, Heather, and my children, Gemma, Stacey and Ross. Without their unwavering support, it would not have been possible to have been involved in the many community boards and committees I served on to the extent I did. When I indicated

that I was putting my hand up for Labor for the Agricultural Region, I was shocked when they were fairly supportive of me doing that. I had expected that they may well tell me it was time to move on, as I had been threatening to do in recent times, and wind back my community involvement.

Thanks to the staff who facilitated the attendance at Monday's swearing-in ceremony of my six gorgeous grandchildren—James, Kate, Ben, Flynn, Emma and Sam, and Gemma's partner, Dan. They really enjoyed being able to attend. There are many friends and acquaintances whom I could thank but the list would be very long, so I have kept my thanks brief and trust that no-one will be offended by this.

I move on to some of the things I hope to achieve in the next four years. I will be advocating for changes to the Local Government Act, employment and training, community boards and committees in the not-for-profit sector. My concerns with local government are numerous so I will highlight the main ones I have. The new Local Government Act imposes unreasonable requirements on many small councils in WA. They total about 100. I do not believe that change in the financial area is required for the metropolitan or several of the larger country local governments. A key change I see as being required is for the act to allow local governments to voluntarily merge their management via parish councils or a similar model that allows each council to retain control over representation, construction and maintenance operations, and income and expenditure setting within their local government area. There are currently several regional councils, mainly managing large landfill operations in the metropolitan area, and several smaller informal regional councils in WA. These or new entities created could manage groupings of smaller councils that wish to merge their management if the act allows that. This change would remove the high costs for small councils individually complying with the current Local Government Act.

Having served for 13 years as a councillor, I am concerned with the negative impact on all councils' reputations from the recent events in Exmouth and the City of Perth. These councils are governed by some 1 000 councillors who generally work tirelessly in the interests of their electors. Their efforts to deliver good governance are tarnished regularly by the actions of a few. Changes are needed to the Local Government Act such that those responsible for breaches can be suspended or dismissed more easily than is currently possible. Changes are also required to the act to protect councillors who commit technical breaches of the act that result in their dismissal by the State Administrative Tribunal due to incorrect advice being given to a councillor on the provisions of the act.

The capacity to allow vacant councillor positions to be filled by unsuccessful candidates from the last council election up until the next ordinary council election is another desirable change. Election provisions could be structured in a similar manner to that in place for unsuccessful candidates in this house who are able to fill the balance of a term when a vacancy occurs. This would result in more people standing for election against strong candidates than currently occurs when the prospect of election is slim. It would also encourage councillors who would like to resign due to changed employment or family circumstances to more easily make the decision to do that. Councillors tend not to resign in these circumstances due to the high cost of by-elections and feel obliged to complete their term.

When it was introduced, the waste avoidance and resource recovery levy was originally intended to fund waste management initiatives and reduce the volume of waste to landfill. Now 75 per cent of that levy funds the activities of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, which means that government is dependent on what is essentially a pollution tax to fund the department's budget. Only a small proportion of the levy is now being invested in waste management programs to help reduce the volume of waste to landfill.

With the financial state of the budget, I recognise that it will be difficult to change how the funds are currently being used. However, with increases in the levy of \$5 a tonne scheduled for the next two years, it would be most beneficial if these increases could be allocated to the reduction of waste to landfill programs, as was originally intended when the levy was introduced. If the future rate for the levy for the next five to 10 years and the potential expansion of that levy to larger non-metropolitan landfill operations were known, this would also be a catalyst for industry and councils to plan for a certain future. I believe the wheels are currently spinning, waiting for government to indicate where levy charges are going. Obviously, the problem we have is that the increase in that levy will drive change.

Plastic bags are an ever-increasing pollution problem that needs to be addressed. A large number of councils are supporting the introduction of laws in this area. These councils should be encouraged by government to do so.

With my long involvement on management committees of incorporated associations, it is clear that the recruitment of members to serve on management committees is most difficult in these busy times. When people who are interested in serving on an incorporated board attend a training or briefing session on their obligations and personal exposure if things go wrong, the majority tend to lose interest in serving their community in this way. Other than employees of organisations who have the vested interest of their employer to serve on a management committee, it is rare to see community members under 50 years of age serving on management committees of non-sporting bodies. Changes to make sure that incorporated association management committees are less exposed when they have a demonstrated track record of managing well but get caught up by a single issue when the management decision looks questionable are most desirable.

The patient assisted travel scheme is a great program but needs streamlining to remove some of the impediments, such as the need for patients to consult their own doctor again to sign a form to justify the travel claim after a specialist has seen the patient at a county clinic and advised that a procedure is required in Perth. The application process should be far simpler and be available for lodging online without the need for visiting a PATS office or the doctor. Country hospitals need to be better funded to accommodate more visiting specialists so that the costs of PATS can be considerably reduced.

Apprenticeships and traineeships used to be monitored by departmental field officers and were later monitored by community groups under contracts. They provided invaluable services to apprentices, trainees, their families and employers and saved many apprenticeships over a long period of time. These services are now provided centrally from Perth and there are delays, sometimes of days, before they get back to the employers. With no intervention available at the local level in regional WA, many apprenticeships are needlessly lost. Local support for an employer experiencing problems with an apprentice or trainee should be restored in some form. With no support in dealing with indentured apprentices or trainees, smaller employers find it much easier to part company with an employee. The reintroduction of monitoring and support services to cover the regions would not only save many apprenticeships but also identify opportunities to place new apprentices and trainees with employers. That used to happen in the past when, in most positions, an apprentice completed their time, their position would be backfilled with another apprentice. That does not happen these days.

In closing, I congratulate all members in both houses for their success in being elected and look forward to working constructively with all members in the interests of all Western Australians. Thank you.

[Applause.]