



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr John McGrath MLA
(Member for South Perth)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 31 March 2005

Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 31 March 2005

Inaugural Speech

Mr John McGrath MLA

(Member for South Perth)

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

MR J.E. McGRATH (South Perth) [12.16 pm]: First, I join with my fellow members in congratulating the Speaker on his re-election for another term as Speaker of the house. I also congratulate the 14 new members of the Legislative Assembly on both sides of the house, 12 of whom are members of Parliament for the first time. The new members from both sides of the house in this thirty-seventh Parliament come from such a diverse range of backgrounds that it is a bit like the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. I happen to have the baker, the member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale, sitting alongside me. I congratulate him on his inaugural speech. We also have a doctor, a policeman, a veterinary surgeon, a crayfisherman, a mayor, a radio announcer and a schoolteacher, who has become a good friend of mine and who is better known as a footballer and commentator. I refer to the member for Murdoch who sits on my other side. I am sure this mix of new blood will enable Parliament to provide an even broader representation of the people of Western Australia.

I regard it as an enormous privilege to be the member for South Perth. Since the election, people have asked me what I will bring to this Parliament. I reply in a similar way as the member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale and say, "Life's experiences". I do not come from a background of local government - I am sure that that will help a lot of other members of Parliament, as it has done so in the past - nor do I have a degree in politics. However, in my previous career as a journalist, I mixed and dealt with people from all walks of life. I am not the first from the honourable profession of journalism to move into politics and I am sure that I will not be the last. I notice that Peter Kennedy, a former colleague of mine, is in the press gallery. I commend him for his outstanding coverage of politics for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

I remind the house that the great wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin, was also a journalist. I am proud to have attended the high school in Fremantle which is named in his honour. John Curtin used to edit a paper called the *Westralian Worker*. He was also president of the WA branch of the Australian Journalists' Association, which I joined as a young reporter working for *The West Australian*. The interesting thing about John Curtin is that he was responsible for another journalist from *The West Australian*, Sir Paul Hasluck, moving into federal politics. Sir Paul was 20 years

younger than John Curtin, but they worked together on the WA branch of the AJA and later John Curtin encouraged the younger Hasluck to take up a senior public service position in Canberra, which proved to be a stepping stone for a political career. The great irony, of course, is that Paul Hasluck became the first member of the seat of Curtin. However, he did so as a Liberal member. In more recent times, a number of journalists have moved into politics. Phil Pandal, my predecessor for the seat of South Perth, was a journalist on the *Daily News* and Brian Burke, who later became Premier of our state, was a reporter for *The West Australian*. Believe it or not, several members of this house have journalistic backgrounds. I refer to the members for Willagee, Perth, Murchison-Eyre and Greenough.

MY POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

My political ideology is quite simple. I believe that politics should never get in the way of an initiative that will benefit the state or my electorate of South Perth. That is the way I will approach the job at hand. While on the subject, I sincerely thank the people of South Perth for showing their faith and confidence in me to represent them in this Parliament. I would also like to pay special tribute to Phil Pandal, who held the seat of South Perth for 12 years after deciding to switch from the Legislative Council. He was the consummate local member of Parliament. He put the interests of his electorate before all other priorities. People in South Perth sometimes joke that if people wanted to buy a new dress or suit, they would first ring Phil to find out the best place to go. Some would say that he was unfortunate not to have held a higher office in this Parliament. Nevertheless, his will be big shoes to fill, and I thank him for his support and wish him all the best in his retirement.

I regard coming into this Parliament as a privilege and the high point of my working life. In the past 55 years the electorate of South Perth has had only three other members of the lower house: George Henry Yates from 1950 to 1956, Bill Grayden from 1956 to 1993 and, of course, Phil Pandal. South Perth is a wonderful and diverse electorate with a rich history that dates back to the settlement of the Swan River Colony in 1829. For most of the nineteenth century the peninsula was used predominantly for agriculture and horticulture. I think of that when I hear other new members speak of country electorates and the importance of agriculture. It was not that long ago that South Perth was a bit of an agricultural centre for the growing colony.

THE OLD MILL

The colony's first successful wind-powered flour mill operated on Mill Point. The Old Mill is still preserved as a National Trust property and is believed to be the oldest standing industrial property in Western Australia. The people of South Perth have always treasured the area's rich history. The City of South Perth historical register records that in 1957 there was a confrontation between the then Main Roads Department and a group of local conservationists when it was found that the ruins of the Old Mill lay in the path of the proposed Narrows Bridge and Kwinana Freeway. I am happy to say that the conservationists won the day on that occasion. The state government ordered a change in the freeway route and Perth industrialist Sir Lance Brisbane funded the reconstruction of the Old Mill as a folk museum. The Brisbane family continued to fund the maintenance of the Old Mill until the early to mid 1980s.

The people of South Perth form a very civic-minded community. Evidence of that is the South Perth Community Hospital, which on 22 April 2006 will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. In the late 1940s there was a hospital crisis in Perth. It seems that nothing has changed. Many private hospitals had closed down due to World War II and public hospitals had not been expanded due to lack of finances. This situation led to the South Perth community centre association being formed and an appeal for funds being launched. The people of South Perth had a rather unique way of raising money. They went from door to door. They sold bricks for the hospital to the residents of South Perth. If people wanted a hospital in the area they could buy a brick. They held fetes to the

point where the state government of the day subsidised the hospital dollar for dollar. The hospital was built at an initial cost of \$250 000, of which the state government and the Lotteries Commission contributed \$90 000 each. That was a local initiative in which the government saw great merit. Many South Perth residents have come into the world in that community hospital. Sadly, the maternity wing no longer exists, but I am happy to report that the hospital has grown into a first-class medical centre. It is debt free and has three state-of-the-art operating theatres. The honorary board members are all local residents.

SAVING THE RIVERS

I intend to devote much of my time as a member of this house to securing the wonderful lifestyle and environment that the people of South Perth enjoy today. I will work to improve and maintain the services that already exist in my electorate. Most people know that the electorate of South Perth is bounded by two beautiful rivers, the Swan and the Canning, and their future is of major concern to me. Both of these precious waterways have played a tremendously important role in the development of our state. They have provided food for the tables of fishermen and their families and recreation for generations of Western Australians and have served as a transport route. They have also given our city an aesthetic that is admired and wondered at by visitors. Our rivers, particularly the Swan, are the nub of a thriving tourist industry. We heard the Minister for Tourism announce yesterday that 587 000 international tourists visited Perth last year. They would all have seen and admired the Swan River. Without the Swan and Canning Rivers our city of Perth would be just another big town, but with rivers providing life and beauty our city has been enhanced and is admired by all who come here. The South Perth foreshore is a jewel in the crown and an area that has become a favourite recreational spot for many thousands of Western Australians.

It has become obvious that the development of Perth and its suburbs has come at a price to our two rivers. Chemical and sewage spills and algal blooms have become a major problem. We saw a report in *The West Australian* only this week that a beautiful big mullet was among 130 fish that had been killed by an algal bloom in the Swan River between Guildford and Middle Swan. This is a real concern. I am pleased to say that the Swan River Trust is drafting new legislation to impose fines of up to \$5 000 a day for landowners whose activities damage the Swan or Canning River. The Swan and Canning Rivers need to be protected, nurtured and cherished. To do so we must be ever vigilant to ensure that the Swan River Trust and any other government departments entrusted with the responsibility of protecting our rivers are adequately funded to do the job. It was therefore encouraging to hear today from the Minister for the Environment that new legislation will be drawn up to give the Swan River Trust greater powers to coordinate river management. Government departments must be armed and supported with legislation to ensure that now and into the future these Western Australian icons receive the protection they deserve. I note with interest that funding of the Swan River Trust's Riverbank program was recently increased eightfold to \$1 million a year as part of the state government's initiatives to help protect and improve the health of the rivers. I commend the government for this initiative but warn that it must be an ongoing commitment. As the member for South Perth, I will work to make sure that funding for the Riverbank program is maintained. Furthermore, if necessary, I will strongly support a joint house inquiry into what can be done to further improve the management of the two essential waterways of Perth.

THE ELECTORATE

The electorate of South Perth boasts a diverse mix of cultures and special interests. Recent boundary changes have added parts of East Victoria Park and Bentley that were once in the electorate of the Premier. I welcome their residents to my electorate and assure the Premier that they will be well looked after.

Dr G.I. Gallop: When I started, my electorate had a chunk of South Perth in it, and with each redistribution the electorate has been expanding towards Berwick Street, and now you have taken on East Victoria Park.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: The former residents of the Premier's electorate will be well served as residents of the South Perth electorate. It means that the electorate takes in those two suburbs as well as the more traditional areas of South Perth, Como, Kensington, Manning, Salter Point, Waterford and Karawara. The electorate also takes in two very progressive local governments: the City of South Perth and the Town of Victoria Park. I look forward to working with both of those authorities.

Within the boundaries of South Perth are some outstanding facilities for education, commerce, tourism, sport and recreation. Ours indeed is a lucky electorate. The Curtin University of Technology is the largest university in Western Australia. It is a world-class centre of learning. The main campus is located in Bentley, where there are 25 989 students. It has an international focus, with 6 792 overseas students. They once included the son of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who graduated in February this year with a commerce degree. Aquinas College, Wesley College and Penrhos College are first-class private colleges, each having established a reputation in academia, sport, culture and the arts. Between the three colleges there are nearly 3 500 students, with nearly 500 boarders, mainly from Western Australia farming towns and communities, and approximately 60 international boarders. In addition, Clontarf Aboriginal College, located in Bentley, currently runs programs in driver education, creative arts, general studies and sports skills, and includes a first-class Australian football academy. We have seen evidence of that with some of the graduates from that academy entering the Australian Football League. The college won the 2004 highly commended national achievement awards for quality schooling.

Several government schools in the South Perth electorate also have fine reputations. Unfortunately, most of them are getting old, like many government schools that were built in the 1950s, and they need renovating or rebuilding. These schools are continually frustrated by the problems they have in getting government funding. For instance, Como Primary School desperately needs a covered assembly area for its students. Manning Primary School has an enormous problem with traffic in the mornings and afternoons. It needs a safe drop-off and pick-up zone so that parents can deliver their children and take them away from school without the risk of their being injured. Kensington Primary School is bursting at the seams as more young families move into the area and the class sizes increase, and it needs more classrooms. Another school that I heard about while I was campaigning is Millen Primary School in East Victoria Park. That school desperately needs a new toilet block. We have some wonderful schools in South Perth, but they need assistance. Como Secondary College is just about falling down around the teachers and students. That is now an old school, and it may need to be totally rebuilt. I have made a commitment to my constituents that I will address all of those problems, and hopefully some of the education budget will come into the Premier's neighbouring electorate of South Perth.

SOUTH PERTH AND TOURISM

South Perth also plays a part in contributing to tourism, with the world-renowned Perth Zoo attracting more than 600 000 visitors a year, many of them making the trip by ferry, as did a lot of us when we were kids, and alighting at the historic Mends Street jetty. Hopefully the state government will honour its commitment to build a railway station near the Zoo, which I believe is proposed to be done as part of stage 2 of the southern rail line.

I am pleased that in my first term in the Parliament I have been entrusted with the shadow portfolios of seniors, and racing, gaming and liquor licensing. Some of my friends have unkindly suggested that I can relate to all four areas. I assure the Parliament that I will not be treating any of these

portfolios lightly. The seniors portfolio is particularly important to me, because Australia has an ageing population. I am one of the huge wave of baby boomers who are about to move into the ranks of seniors. That will have a profound impact on the services that we can offer to people over the age of 60. At the recent state election, in my electorate alone, 9 934, or 35.2 per cent, of the 28 220 voters were over the age of 55. In the whole of Western Australia, 403 082, or 31.7 per cent, of the 1 267 693 voters were over the age of 55. The Council on the Ageing says that in the not too distant future 50 per cent of all Australians will be over the age of 50. Therefore, seniors cannot be ignored by any government, whether it be commonwealth or state. Older people make a continuing contribution to society through their work, volunteering and family roles, and as individual community members. That is a huge challenge facing this Parliament.

I turn now to my other shadow portfolio of racing, gaming and liquor licensing. Most members would be aware of my passion for the racing industry. I grew up in Hamilton Hill, not far from some famous racing and trotting stables. I later moved to Belmont, where my father-in-law, the late Arthur Wagener, was quite a successful trainer. I guess he got me hooked into horses. I had my first horse at the age of 24, which I raced in partnership with a former member for Darling Range, the late Ken Dunn. I think that if he were still around he would be pretty pleased that I am standing in this place today. Since then I have bred, owned and trained quite a few horses. Some of them have been quite successful. Others I could have beaten on foot. However, it has been a good experience.

THE RACING INDUSTRY

Therefore, I believe I have some knowledge of the inner workings of the racing game. The racing industry has made enormous strides since the Totalisator Agency Board was formed in 1961, when we were all so happy that betting turnover reached \$1 million for the whole year. That was a huge figure back then. By the 2003-04 financial year that turnover had grown to \$1 billion. It should be pointed out that the racing industry - that is, thoroughbreds, harness and greyhounds - generated every dollar of that turnover and at the same time provided about \$60 million for the Treasury coffers. In the lead-up to the recent state election both the government and the opposition agreed that the racing codes needed some relief from what was considered to be an unfair taxing system. We look forward to that relief being provided for the racing industry in this session of the Parliament. The recent yearling sales provided ample evidence of the renewed optimism in the industry.

Racing is the only form of entertainment in which the entertainer pays to perform, yet it offers substantial employment opportunities for a wide range of people. To some extent it is an industry that relies solely on human resources. As someone said to me once, we cannot put a computer on a horse's back and send it out on a training gallop or a race; we need physical labour. There is no doubt that the racing industry is about to go through a period of great change and revitalisation under the management of Racing and Wagering WA. I commend that body for the projects that it has already undertaken.

Ascot Racecourse, or the headquarters, as it used to be known, is undergoing a massive returfing project. Belmont Park has been earmarked to become the central point of what will be a state-of-the-art \$1 billion racing and lifestyle complex on the Burswood peninsula. The Western Australian Trotting Association across the river also has grand plans for the redevelopment of its course. However, the administrators of thoroughbred racing face an even greater challenge in the years ahead. If the state's water resources continue to diminish and salinity becomes a major problem, as has occurred recently at Belmont Park and Burswood Park Golf Course, the administrators may need to decide whether the industry can continue to race on lush and beautiful grass tracks or whether those tracks should be replaced with some kind of all-weather artificial surface that will require less watering and maintenance. Racing administrators in Victoria are already experimenting

with artificial tracks for training at places like Ballarat and Seymour. That is one step away from racing on an artificial surface. Let us face it. The Kentucky Derby is run on an artificial track. The world's richest race, the Dubai World Cup, is also run on an artificial track. The truth is that the oil rich sheikhs, with all of their wealth and expertise and with the availability of desalination plants, are still opting to use an artificial track for their biggest races. These are not just dirt tracks. Modern technology has turned them into state-of-the-art refined surfaces that provide a much better galloping environment for the animal. Australian riders who have ridden overseas have returned to say that the horses are far more comfortable on these tracks. Therefore, switching some of our tracks from traditional grass to an all-weather artificial surface is not necessarily such an impossible dream. I am not saying that all of our turf tracks should be ripped up, but with the increasing scarcity and cost of water, our racing administrators should look at trialling an artificial track that is low maintenance and does not require any water. The training track at Lark Hill, which is close to the electorate of the new Minister for Racing and Gaming, could be a good one to look at.

Another challenge that is facing racing administrators is the need to bring carnival racing back to Perth and to attract big name horses, owners, trainers and jockeys from other states. Western Australian racegoers should not be denied the opportunity to see the best compete in a carnival atmosphere, as occurs at the great carnivals in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, and to a lesser extent in Adelaide. I honestly believe that the decision to play around with the dates for the traditional feature races such as the Railway Stakes, the WA Derby, the WA Oaks and the Karrakatta Plate has diminished the focus on the Perth Christmas carnival as we once knew it.

THE SUPPORT TEAM

In closing, I thank all the people who have given me the opportunity to play a role in decision making in this state. I thank Karen, my wife, who is in the gallery today. Having a wife who has been an adviser to a minister in the federal government means that I am never short of advice around the kitchen table. I also thank my two children, David and Erin, both journalists, who encouraged me to run for Parliament. In fact Erin came all the way back from London, where she is working, to help me in the last two weeks of the campaign. I was also fortunate to have the help of a great band of hard-working and loyal supporters, some of whom are in the gallery today, in particular my campaign committee of Barry Farmer, Keith Ellis, Phil Bruce, Ted Gray, Ann Jones, Kay Durrant, Allan "Chubby" Stiles, Paul Farmer and Norm Haywood. I will forever be grateful for their contribution and the faith that they have shown in me. I thank all members, and in particular the Premier, for their attention today, and I look forward to making a contribution in this Parliament.