



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Simon O'Brien, MLC
(Member for South Metropolitan)

Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 27 May 1997

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ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

Consideration of Tabled Papers

HON S.M. O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [5.30 pm]: Mr President, I join others in offering my personal congratulations on your election this morning. This is the first day on which I have had the pleasure of sitting in this House in your company, but I have known you for about eight or nine years. Knowing your record and knowing you as a person, I am sure I can safely join with others in acknowledging that you will fulfil the role with dignity and distinction.

In my maiden speech to this House I intend to limit myself to traditional elements; I will not range over a large number of topics. I will simply introduce myself to the House, provide a little background, report briefly on my electorate, bring to the attention of the House some items that might be of interest and perhaps comment on one or two issues of the day.

However, prior to that, I wish members to know that my thoughts are very much of my father, the late Everard McDonnell O'Brien, better known to his peers as Bill O'Brien. He served in another place as the member for Murchison from 1952 until 1959. He was born on 9 April 1907 at Black Range Homestead, which is a couple of hundred miles inland from the mouth of the Murchison and just north of Sandstone. He was educated at Mt Magnet and was variously a shearer, a cordial manufacturer, a pastoralist, a railway and tramway employee, a prospector and a miner. In the early 1950s, he was secretary of the Yalgoo Road Board. For many years he was a keen recreational cyclist. This was at a time when cycling was very popular in this country. In his youth he was something of a regional champion. The other night I was talking to my sister, who lives in Kalgoorlie, and she reminded me she had in her possession a medallion my father was awarded for winning the Boogardie to Magnet road race on 20 May 1922. That was 75 years and one week ago. I do not know what he would make of the high tech carbon fibre bikes we have today when one considers the bikes they were riding in 1922. Similarly, the road from Boogardie to Mt Magnet, even though it is not flash today, certainly would not have been very good back in 1922.

My father had a busy parliamentary career. He was called upon to fight four election campaigns in seven years. He was elected first at a by-election in 1952. He then contested and won the same seat at the general election in 1953. After boundary changes that were not friendly to him, he fought the general election in 1956 and again won against some odds. In 1959, he was up again - probably wishing that like us he had a four-year term - and sadly he lost by 68 votes. My good friend Mr Jeremy Buxton recently prepared a paper on electoral change in the Murchison in which he concluded that in 1959 E.M. O'Brien "fell victim to a combination of boundary change, adverse demographics, the swing of the electoral pendulum, the ALP split of the 1950s and a very strong opponent. It was a combination that would have felled any member." Nonetheless, losing by 68 votes would still have been pretty hard to take.

My father had very conservative moral views by today's standards, although he retained a refreshing capacity for loud and blunt language when the occasion required. I particularly recall an incident when I was about eight years old involving myself and a small tin roofed building in our backyard that my father was occupying at the time. It also involved a serious error of judgment on my part involving a handful of gravel, but more of that on another occasion. Bill O'Brien had a reputation as a hard-working, honest and principled family man who was dedicated to his community, and I would like to dedicate this speech to his memory and example.

My father died in August 1971, at which time I was 11 and my sister was a month short of her fifth birthday. It is difficult for a woman left on her own to raise, educate and provide for two young children. It calls for many sacrifices, and my mother, Mrs Dulcie O'Brien, who is present today, made all of those sacrifices and many more. I am grateful for that and I hope she derives some satisfaction from the fact that her son has succeeded his father as a member of the Parliament of Western Australia.

One becomes a member of Parliament in most cases as a result of a great deal of work over a very long period. That is certainly true in my case. I thank the very large number of people - family, extended family, friends, supporters and party colleagues - who have stood by and assisted me over the years. In particular, I acknowledge my wife, Joy, who is also present today and who has always been my most faithful and hardest working supporter.

I was educated at Graylands Primary School, St Louis School at Claremont and John Curtin Senior High School at Fremantle. For most of my adult life I have worked for the Australian Customs Service, leaving in January after 15 and a half years' service. I liked that job. It brought me into contact with the shipping, bulk petroleum, aviation, freight management and warehouse industries. Sometimes, especially in the early years, the work was hot, dirty and uncomfortable. I have lost count of the number of ships I have searched and the bilges I have crawled through. However, I have been very fortunate in my career, because I have seen interesting parts of my State and country that people often do not get a chance to see; those opportunities are not available to many people.

I worked in many remote areas and also completed an airborne radar operators' course run at the historic Customs House at Townsville, which broadened my horizons in more ways than one. I have travelled operationally and worked at many remote properties and settlements throughout the Pilbara and the Kimberley, the Gulf, Arnhem, Groote, Kalumburu, Marble Bar, Broome, Coral Bay, Cossack, several points 10 000 feet in the air over the Southern Ocean, Darwin, the Abrolhos Islands, on a number of oil rigs - including one on a ship off North West Cape - in the Monte Bellos and the Chichester Ranges. I have worked in most ports in Western Australia, including Port Hedland, Wickham, Dampier, Onslow, Exmouth, Carnarvon, Useless Loop, Cape Cuvier, Geraldton, Fremantle, Bunbury and Esperance.

From 1986 to 1992, I was a training and staff development officer. My task was to provide technical and management skills training to various branches of the service. With several colleagues, I ran the 12 month and later six month training courses that provided the majority of officers who now form our customs front line. I also developed a course in field identification of narcotics and established the first in-house physical training program for recruits to the ACS, to the distress of many. In recent years Federal Governments have found it necessary to continually cut staffing numbers - a common feature of our times. This occurs in the face of an exponentially increasing workload in the form of people arriving from overseas, the number of import transactions and many other indicators. The Australian Customs Service has had to change dramatically and is a leader in management improvement programs and the exploitation of new technology to tackle labour intensive tasks. Despite all that, many officers work very long hours in order for the ACS to meet basic workload commitments. How the organisation resolves these challenges in the next few years will be critical to its future. The ACS is an instrument of the Commonwealth and not of the State. However, because of our huge coastline, which is vulnerable to low level foreign incursion and the quarantine risks that such incursions pose to our primary industries, the success or otherwise of the ACS in enforcing the customs-quarantine barrier should be of concern to all in this Parliament. In my observation the commitment and expertise of the men and women of this organisation are first class and they deserve our full support.

I was honoured to be elected as a member for the South Metropolitan Region on 14 December 1996. The primary votes cast for the main parties that contested that region were Australian Labor Party, 75 462; Greens (WA), 14 359; Australian Democrats, 13 495; and Liberal, 86 281. After the distribution of preferences two Liberal members, two Labor members and one Greens (WA) member were returned. I am proud to be one of those members. The South Metropolitan Region includes the Legislative Assembly districts of Alfred Cove, Cockburn, Fremantle, Murdoch, Peel, Riverton, Rockingham, South Perth, Victoria Park and Willagee. The region exhibits a range of demographic patterns and communities of varying vintage from 1829 to the present.

I am genuinely pleased to support the government view that the quality of society is enhanced and the preservation of family life is assisted when neighbourhoods consist of good homes owned by those who live in them. The government program of Homeswest refurbishment and private ownership has added enormous quality and value to many communities in the region and I look forward to those programs continuing.

The region is home to specialist skills in a wide range of disciplines ranging from corrosion control to the latest in computer design technology. One success story that deserves mention at this time is the region's shipbuilding industry. Based on Jervoise Bay the participants have created an industry that provides thousands of jobs, a catalogue of magnificent products and big sales to overseas customers. Our State needs large scale employment. Its future lies in developing value added manufacturing industry and the greater export income that generates. However, the shipbuilding industry suffers from low margins and an uneven playing field. Though we welcome the decision of the Howard Government to extend the shipbuilding bounty to 1999 at this stage it is my earnest hope that this industry receives all the further practical encouragement that this Government can provide for it.

We have impressive development in the south west metropolitan corridor with substantial urban growth around Rockingham and in coastal areas such as Secret Harbour, Port Kennedy and Cockburn Sound. We see encouraging signs of a more vibrant, go-ahead and innovative community. For example, the marine education centre at Rockingham Senior High School has 300 pupils, including many from regional Western Australia. I predict it will go from strength to strength and it has the potential to attract overseas students after the inauguration of its proposed floating learning centre.

The Kwinana conceived and based organisation Kidlink is operating its early childhood intervention program successfully and has been credited with reducing local crime rates and improving quality of life for children and

adults. It is important that we remember that people in this expanding region deserve the same quality of transport services and other government amenities that, perhaps, people elsewhere have come to take for granted. I expect to remind the House of this from time to time.

There has been much speculation as to what the electorate can expect of the Legislative Council in the next four years. Commentators have noted that the balance of power has changed with the non-coalition parties now outnumbering coalition members on the floor of this House. This is very exciting for some people who are absolutely hugging themselves in the anticipation of an occasion when a coalition Government is outvoted on the floor of the upper House - good for them. Everyone in this town who is unconnected with the Liberal Party seems to think we are wringing our hands in despair at this turn of events. We are not. We have accepted the results of the election without complaint. We have even reduced our number by one by nominating the President. We are happy to approach the upper House from a position where we are not in the majority, though I grant that if the election results had been slightly different we would have been even happier. Nonetheless, we are happy with the situation.

I remind all members that it is the coalition members of this House in years gone by who have fiercely maintained that this is a House of Review with the power to amend or defeat legislation, despite the strident views to the contrary of some commentators on the issue. In the past others have wanted to nullify the powers of this House or even to abolish it altogether. It would have been a tragedy for parliamentary democracy in Western Australia if that had occurred. Those of us who are excited by the current composition of this House and the opportunities it presents to them should reflect on that for a while. There would not be a meaningful upper House in this Parliament if it were not for successive coalition Oppositions in this House. That is all history. Everyone, regardless of their disposition towards the coalition, seems confident this House will be an effective House of Review. Even the former abolitionists have suddenly decided that this upper House is a wonderful thing. That augurs well for the immediate future. Let us hope we can continue to find things to agree on and deliver good government to the people of this State.

I feel we can look to the future with confidence. We have a great State, in a great land, with great people. The management of our State is now on a firm footing. It has regained its AAA credit rating; the Budget is in the black; and the future looks good.

In conclusion, I will quote from an article of belief to which I subscribe -

Under the blessing of Divine Providence and given goodwill, mutual tolerance and understanding, an energy and individual sense of purpose, there is no task that we cannot perform and no difficulty that we cannot overcome.

I thank honourable members for their courtesy during my speech.

[Applause.]
