PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH

HON BILL STRETCH, MLC

(Member for South West Region)

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CLOSE OF SESSION

Valedictory Remarks

HON BILL STRETCH (South West) [2.16 pm]: Mr Deputy President, I feel a little like Dame Nellie Melba. I am not sure how many farewell speeches I have made, I think this is the second, but I want to add a few other things to what I said in November. I did not expect to be back in this chamber, because I thought that the Liberals would win the last election but, sadly, that was not to be. For a whole range of unfortunate circumstances I am back in this chamber again, but it is a happy circumstance in one way, because I will have another chance to address members and thank them all again. I was particularly touched by the comments made by the Leader of the House, Hon Kim Chance, and Hon Norman Moore earlier today. I really do appreciate that. It was somewhat better than being at one's own funeral and hearing the oration.

Hon Kim Chance: You feel a lot better!

Hon BILL STRETCH: It does give one a chance to hear a few nice remarks, after many years of batting things backwards and forwards across the chamber.

Hon Peter Foss: They never say it while you are here, that is the problem.

Hon BILL STRETCH: No, I cannot say that. I have found this a very pleasant place in which to work. As I said earlier in my speech, and I have said before, this is a house of adversarial nature but it should never become a house of bitterness. Parliaments further down the line should remember that. There is good in everyone and, as I have said before, there is no place for hate or bitterness. A person can win a few, lose a lot, and he can be pretty sore about it, but he should never let it get him down and get bitter. As Hon Christine Sharp just said, there are wonderful things out there in life beyond this place and if we get it out of perspective not only does it damage us personally, but also it greatly affects our judgment and the way in which we develop the legislation in this place.

I was reading through my various farewell speeches, and there is really not a lot more I can say about the quality of the staff and the people I serve in my electorate. I checked my maiden speech when I came into this place and a lot of it centred on the town of Collie. If I were ever wont to come back into politics, I would like to stand as the Liberal member for Collie, because Collie is a place of enormous importance to the state. It is a wonderful town with wonderful people; in many ways it is a straitlaced town; it has a strong Cornish and Welsh mining background with people who call a spade a spade and who work with danger all the time. It brings out a certain quality in people which has always endeared Collie to my heart. It may be my Welsh blood, but it is certainly a very special place. In many ways it deserves political representation from the conservative side of politics.

The future of Collie has been built not only on the work force and the high quality of the mining people of that area, but also on heavy investment. Heavy investment does not occur without a lot of encouragement from government. Mostly it is conservative governments that give that encouragement. It is the conservative governments that have built power stations in Collie. I hope they will do so again. For the life of me, I could not understand why Collie did not accept the challenge to back the Liberal Party promise of a new coal-fired power station, because that will ultimately happen. The technology for coal burning is improving so much that it is only commonsense to spread our power needs. The state will not continue to grow without cheap, reliable power. Collie has the opportunity to meet that challenge. In my maiden speech I spoke about the challenge presented by gas. I urged the people of Collie not to see gas as a threat but to see it as an impetus for finding better ways of using coal and to consider the possibility of integrating gas into the power grid in conjunction with the burning of coal. That is going forward. I am pleased that there has been a lot of progress in that field. I am sure that Collie will continue to be a great powerhouse of the state. Power generation will always be augmented by gas. Unless gas is discovered offshore in the southern half of the state, we will always have to depend on the base-load power from the coalfields, certainly in the south of the state. The many risks associated with a reliance on long gas pipelines have been considered and stressed on a number of occasions.

I want to touch on a couple of things. I will not harp on about my overseas trip. I thank the Leader of the House and the President for their generous comments. I hope that reform will take place in that regard. Leaving all that aside, I want to touch on a couple of matters that came out of my trip. One relates to power and Collie. In the province of Saskatchewan I had the opportunity to stay with friends on their farms. Farmers in that province have entered integrated tree planting arrangements with the Saskatchewan power corporation. That province has grasped the

opportunity to use the carbon credit and carbon sequestration legislation to develop plantations on all sorts of farmland and reserve lands, and to conduct integrated programs with farmers. The Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Forest Products Commission are doing that with farms in Western Australia. I do not think enough emphasis has been placed on the great benefit of these programs to power stations or that there has been enough recognition of the assistance that they can give to the development of a place such as the Collie coalfields. There is a problem, however, which the British delegation of members of Parliament that I took to Collie mentioned; that is, there is hardly any room around Collie to grow more trees. That is not quite true, but it was enlightening to take this group of British industrialists and members of Parliament to the top of the cooling towers of the new Collie power station. They asked when we had planted all the trees. I said that there was a plantation on Stene's land and there was another plantation. They said that there were trees in every direction, as far as the eye could see, right out to the horizon. I said that that was the native forest of the south west of Western Australia. However, they said that that could not be true. All the information and documentation that they had received in the United Kingdom indicated that Western Australia had been denuded of trees by the avaricious and voracious industrialists and farmers. I told them to look around and to tell me where they would land a light plane if they had to. That visit really impressed them. It goes to show that one cannot trust what one reads in the media. Some people do us a great disservice by spreading propaganda around the world about how bad we have been with our environment. Western Australia now has a bad reputation environmentally overseas, which is mostly undeserved. We should not get too carried away, but we should promote more of the good things that have been done and the potential in the south west to assist industry by improving the absorption of carbon dioxide through sequestration programs and plantations.

The other feature of my visit to Canada was the vertical integration of farming operations in that country. One farmer grew a lot of stud seed and shipped it around the world. The seed was cleaned and processed on the farm, put into containers, moved to Thunder Bay on the lakes and then moved across to Europe in about seven days. From cleaning to being in the ground in Europe took about a fortnight. We have a long way to go! There are lots of good models that need to be picked up. Unfortunately, I did not include that example in my report. I want that to be on the record because it is good to be aware of these things and to be aware of the potential and opportunities for our farmers to grasp some of the technology that is around. We grow some very good products in Western Australia and have some very useful pockets of land in which we can grow things out of season. We could look at diversifying some of our products for high-value niche markets.

I also visited the American state of Wisconsin, because I was concerned about the impact of extreme environmentalism and how far it had gone in Western Australia. The Wyoming mountains are the natural habitat of wolves and bears. As the settlers moved into that area and cleared much of the lower land, those animals moved further up the mountains and Wyoming became reasonably free of those pests. The mountains became a Mecca for skiers, tourists, campers and hikers - the whole works. Under extreme environmental pressure, the government and wildlife services reintroduced bears and wolves into the southern areas. While I was visiting that area, the first case was reported of wolves moving back onto the cattle ranches and killing calves. The tourist people in the town of Pinedale told me that people would not now walk in the mountains unarmed. Campers were loath to go back there because of the risk from the re-established colonies of those natural animals. That sort of thing is fine within reason. I think they are great things to see. However, we have to be a little careful about how we balance extreme environmental pressure with other industries. The world has changed. People are looking for different things out of their lives and in their recreation. Governments must keep pace with that and must not get too carried away with the emotive arguments that are put forward, particularly in the media. There is a balance to be struck. I do not think we have gone too far yet in Western Australia. However, great pressure is being placed on us all the time. It is significant that because of the build-up of the population of those predators in the Wyoming mountains, they are starting to also affect the other animals that are natural to that area, such as moose and elk. Those animals are now moving back onto the ranches, because it is safer on the ranches than on the mountains. As the farmers in Wyoming have a little more pull than do the farmers in Western Australia, the ranchers got together and extracted from the government a commitment to pay them to grow extra hay to handfeed the wild moose and elk on their ranches during winter. I think that is getting slightly absurd, to be honest. However, if we are to have extreme environmentalism taking over an economy like ours, we must consider making that public cost not just a cost to farmers. In other words, if a farmer is surrounded by national park and is feeding a thousand kangaroos on his property and the government, environmental extremists or tourists want to maintain that for the sake of the environment, perhaps they should be paying the farmers to feed the kangaroos on their behalf. Why should sectionalised parts of industry pay for this privilege for other people who never go to see it? One of the interesting surveys I saw recently indicated that the majority of tourists never move more than 50 metres from their vehicles. They admire the environment but they do not want to go into it; they want to see it from a distance. They certainly do not want to wander through paddocks looking for kangaroos. We manage a herd of between 25 and 30 kangaroos on our farm, but when they get into the thousands they have to be moved on by some means or other. There are damage permits for people looking after the local environment, but it is important that these more balanced programs are continued and that we do not give way totally to extremists, otherwise we will end up killing the goose that lays the golden egg of rural export production.

Another matter I looked at was health care in small rural towns. Most country populations suffer from the same difficulties that small rural towns in Western Australia face: a shortage of doctors and a high cost for medical treatment. My experience with Boyup Brook having the first - or one of the first - multipurpose health services in the country convinced me that it was probably the most sensible way to go for small country towns. I am sorry that this government has turned its back on MPS policy and appears to be going for more centralised programs. For instance, Boyup Brook health service had to get its services from Bunbury for bulk purchasing and other reasons. There could be a minor saving there, but the tragedy is that if the hospital has to purchase in bulk, where does that leave the local chemists and storekeepers who have in the past supplied the necessities for keeping the local health service going?

These were the main points I wanted to put on the record from that report. I have touched on the general education problem for the country. I noted earlier in my speech on the Address-in-Reply that the emphasis from overseas people was that we should, for goodness sake, keep the land-based component of our agricultural colleges because if we let that go, we will never buy it back. It is very valuable for giving hands-on experience to students so that they can turn out virtually work-ready for occupations in the agricultural and primary industries.

I saw a couple of glaring gaps when I looked through my last farewell speech. I have always thought that the party secretary's job was the worst job in the world. The party secretary must sit through every party meeting and minute, within reason, all the discussions. I have a very enlightened attitude to minutes; that is, their main attribute is to ensure that the party secretary never ends up in court for recording things that are best left unsaid. In my very early days in the Liberal Party one leader said to me that he had not been at a meeting but he had read my minutes and had not the faintest idea about what went on. I told him that the minutes contained the bare bones of what had been said and if in future he wanted to know what happened in a meeting perhaps he should attend the next one. Funnily enough, I continued on as secretary uninterrupted. I thought that having to sit through all those meetings was purgatory itself, but I enjoyed them and I thank my colleagues for their forbearance. However, I discovered that there was a worse job and I had not acknowledged it; that is, the job of party Whip. I have mentioned Fred McKenzie of the Labor Party. I have also mentioned Margaret McAleer of the Liberal Party, who was an outstanding Whip and a person of great wisdom and counsel to members. She was followed by Hon Muriel Patterson, who served as a Whip with great distinction. She became a great friend to all of us in this place and made friends right across the Parliament. Her house in Albany is still open to members of all parties. She was, of course, followed by the indomitable Hon Bruce Donaldson. I realise that in my last speech I had omitted to thank them for their support to me over the years. Bruce, particularly in my dotage, has looked after me extremely well and accommodated my needs when they have arisen, as he has also done for all our other members with great equanimity and calm. We have always been very happy to fill in for him on the rare occasion he was absent on a short jaunt overseas and so on. However, select committees never sat while the house was sitting, so it was never a problem. Like Hon Bruce Donaldson, I am a great believer in the need for backbenchers to travel.

Several members interjected.

Hon Kim Chance: They're really picking on you, aren't they?

Hon BILL STRETCH: If ever a man had a reputation!

I was very encouraged by the President's comments this morning in which he virtually exhorted members to spread out wherever they can and enlarge their knowledge of the parliamentary process. I was a bit concerned to think that he wanted to bring them all in here! It is equally or more important in a small and isolated state such as Western Australia that our backbenchers get out and see things too. It is not enough to use the Internet to try to see it all that way. There are always photographs of the good bits but we do not always see the bad bits. Members really need to walk around and talk to people on the ground to get the benefit of it all.

In closing, I pay tribute to my family and thank them for their support. I pay tribute to Moya and Bronwyn, my electorate officers in Boyup Brook, and the various people there who have relieved them over the years. They have been absolute stalwarts. We will have a wonderful farewell dinner on Saturday night that the people of Boyup Brook are kindly putting on for us. I will be saying more about them then. However, as has been mentioned, the electorate staff are very special people; they are the eyes and ears of the electorate. If we as members do not listen to them as our mentors and advisers on things local, we will head for a reasonably short political career. They are very special people who always give their services beyond the call of duty, as do all the people I have been associated with in my time in Parliament. I will not repeat what I have said about all the wonderful people in this building. It has been an absolute pleasure and honour to work with them and I thank them all for their service. I thank my colleagues on both sides of the chamber for their forbearance and friendship and the tremendous contribution that they have made to this state. We never agree on everything but neither do we disagree on everything. As I said, the adversarial nature of the house is a good thing for democracy but it must not give way to extremes of feeling. When that occurs, the real needs of the people in the wider parts of the state whom we represent are ignored. We must keep our feelings in this chamber in perspective so that we can hear carefully the messages that come to us from our electorates. It is a great responsibility and a great honour to be the representative of those people. It is a burden that I have gladly accepted and gladly borne. I do not believe that any member ever moves away from politics entirely. As I have said before, politics with a small "p" starts in the kindergarten playground. A group of children playing, at a very early age,

develops differences of opinion and different interests, and that is politics. The tragedy, if anything, is that politics has become a capital “P” profession, when the fact is it should be a small “p” profession of representing the interests of groups of people and doing one’s best to resolve differences through a debating process. It has been a tremendous learning experience, and one that I will treasure forever. To various Presiding Officers down the years, thank you for your guidance and protection. When I first came to this place I went to see the then President, Hon Clive Griffiths, and told him I did not know much about standing orders. He said I should not let that worry me. I should say what I wanted to say, and if I got it wrong, he would correct me. He said I should not feel that I was on my own, because most of the other members in the house do not know the standing orders either, and if they did, they did their best to ignore them!

It has been a great learning experience and a great privilege to work with members of this house, and I thank them for that. I also thank the electors who put me here for 22 years.

[Applause.]