



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



Ms Janine Freeman, MLA
(Member for Mirrabooka)

Legislative Assembly

Friday, 4 December 2020

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MS J.M. FREEMAN (Mirrabooka) [4.26 pm]: I really appreciate the opportunity to give my valedictory speech. Given my late decision to not recontest, and after a bit of pressure from some of my colleagues, I feel very appreciative that they made me stand here today to say goodbye to you all. I recognise the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, and their elders past and present. It is with a great sense of pride that during the 12 years I have sat in this place, the First Nation people have been recognised in the WA Constitution. That is something that we have done while I have been here. Recognition of the First Nation people now leads the opening of the house each day. I congratulate the Speaker for that legacy. That is a great legacy to be leaving this place with.

In government, Labor has delivered many landmark native title settlements and land use agreements. There is so much further to go in reconciling our past, and truth-telling. I thank the Noongar and other Aboriginal people in Mirrabooka, particularly elders such as Doolan Leisha Eatts and Walter Eatts, for working with me in our area to make grassroots changes to honour the history of our country. It has been an honour and a privilege to represent the rich and diverse electorate of Mirrabooka. I was lucky enough to follow in the footsteps of the late John Kobelke, and of Margaret Quirk. Along with many other members of Parliament, they have provided great support and inspired me in how I undertook the most privileged job in my life.

The Mirrabooka electorate reflects the multi-faith and varied national and cultural heritage that has always made up the story of settlement in Australia. Australia reflects our globalised world, interconnected through not just technology, but also people. Globalisation cannot be just about trade. The diaspora in Australia want an effective avenue to contribute to Australia's foreign and other policies, particularly when there are injustices and conflict in their country of origin. For example, the Indian community, particularly the Sikh community I have worked with, want to be able to voice their concerns about the impact of recent legislative changes on Indian farmers. They are concerned that given 86 per cent of India's farmland is held by small landholders who own less than two hectares, the protections of their standard of living are at risk and will be subject to predatory corporatisation with the removal of the minimum price. We all know that we like to set a minimum wage. We all think that that is an important thing and we need to uphold that throughout the world. With this in mind, I commend the tenth report of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee titled "Turning to India: Investing in our Future", and recommendation 6, which includes active engagement of the Indian diaspora. I urge a future state government to adopt its recommendation for not only the Indian but also other communities.

With some 52 per cent of people in Australia born overseas and 60 per cent speaking a language other than English in their home, Mirrabooka constituents paint a picture of modern Australia. Based on the ABC's 2019 "Australia Talks Survey", the key element of being Australian was in respecting institutions and laws. It is clear to me that people who were either born in Australia or came here as migrants—be it skilled, students or seeking refuge—want the right to belong and to be treated equally by the laws and those government institutions that uphold them. In sharing democratic beliefs, respecting rights and liberties, and upholding and obeying laws—the pledge made at citizenship—all Australians seek a life of dignity and pride and one without prejudice based on race and religion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly reinforced the catchphrase "We're all in this together", which is similar to the saying "A fair go for all". But for that to be a reality, it needs to be reflected in our institutions and in our leadership with support and commitment. In particular, it needs to be reflected in our equal opportunity legislation. The 1984 legislation no longer reflects what is needed to ensure our community responds to discrimination, in particular racism and intolerance.

On a positive note, the multicultural framework introduced this year and based on the multicultural charter is a document that I am proud to have worked on with the multicultural advisory group. Of particular note is the great work of Said Padshah; Maria Osman; Iqbal Samnakay; Zang Ye, or Edward; and Helen Maddocks. Although COVID-19 has delayed some of this great work, I urge all government departments to embrace this framework as a guide to the innovation that diversity will bring to our institutions. That success is the experience of Kaleidoscope, the workplace program for newcomers, in which both participants and employers have had great experiences. It is another great initiative I was honoured to be part of. I thank the City of Stirling for its innovation.

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I truly want to thank all the people of the electorate of Mirrabooka—those who live there, those who work there, and those who have lived there—who have all embraced the spirit of the place in their hearts, including myself. I sing the praises of an area steeped in culture and celebration, from Harmony to Eid, Songkran, Tet, NAIDOC, and the Karen and Chin New Year. I used to say that my new year started in September with Persian New Year and finished with Songkran with the Thais in April. It is great to have New Year's resolutions when they are for only six months!

It was with pride that I saw the Koondoola Community Centre built to cater for the large and cohesive Vietnamese seniors group, and the opening of the Westnam United Soccer Club, where the love of soccer sees all the different communities in the area play alongside each other. There are so many landmarks to mark my 12 years: the Reid Highway bridge; the Princess Road Park upgrade; the development of the land around Mirrabooka, including Mia Vista Nursing Home; and the establishment of the Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Resource Centre.

But those are the built forms, which do not demonstrate the pride in the area—a pride that is strongly defended. When, some seven or eight years ago, the front page of the daily news screamed about the fear of young African–Australian men, the community stood strongly against the stereotypes that misrepresented the good work of so many young Australians. Indeed, the defence went so far as to take the matters to the Australian Press Council and seek redress to highlight the leadership of young African–Australians. Those Australians with African heritage, such as Ayor Makur Chuot, who is the number 3 Labor candidate in the North Metropolitan Region, demonstrate the strength of the community to rise above the prejudice and adversity that unfairly confronts them. I look forward to seeing her in the other house following the next election.

One of the biggest issues that confronts the Mirrabooka community is employment opportunities. From the high of 25 per cent unemployment that we saw under the Barnett government, the residents of Mirrabooka have seen a decline, in March 2020, to 19.1 per cent. Given the circumstances, it is comforting, but it is not enough. The federal government's changes to JobKeeper and JobSeeker will have a detrimental impact on the community in Mirrabooka. I urge the WA government to continue to lobby for unemployment benefits that reflect the cost of living of people of Western Australia.

Through COVID, we have learnt that decisiveness is valued by the community and expected of our leaders. We politicians have appreciated the respect of our communities and worked with them to ensure that both their physical and mental health needs have been met. Through my 12 years, but particularly in this year, it has been an honour to work with the local councils in my area and their staff at the Cities of Stirling and Wanneroo. I particular want to thank the local councillors I worked with, David Boothman, Keith Sergeant, Hugh Nguyen, Domenic Zappa, Vinh Nguyen and Brett Treby, both the mayors and other mayors, and the past councillors, including Anh Truong.

There is never one reason to make a decision to leave your job, but even though I may change my title, I will not change the thing that drives me and makes me passionate about seeing a more inclusive, fair and equitable Australia. As the saying goes, meaning and hope are as important to human beings as bones. This role, representing the people in our Mirrabooka community, has given me that and more. In the Parliament, the opportunity to be on parliamentary committees and, in particular, to be the Chairperson of the Education and Health Standing Committee, has been a highlight. I have achieved many things in this place, both in opposition and in government. I got to work in the second chamber on pivotal health legislation on which we now rely, and changes in vocational education training in schools that came from an inquiry that I chaired. I am proud that this government delivered on the fly in, fly out worker report I worked on and established an occupational health and safety code of practice for mentally healthy workplaces with a view to preventing self-harm and suicide. I was privileged to work alongside the member for Kimberley as we investigated the tragedy of Aboriginal youth suicides to produce the recommendations in the "Learnings from the Message Stick" report. I welcome the federal and state governments' Closing the Gap commitments to build a community-controlled sector, which is critical to developing appropriate and effective services. It is important to have those community sectors and community organisations deliver on the ground to people in need.

I am very passionate about the report "The Food Fix" and the need to address the epidemic in our community that is type 2 diabetes. It is a disease that costs people their lives, and costs some 10 per cent, and increasing, of the health budget. This is a disease that can be put into remission. The health authorities' lack of action is questionable. We should give people the hope they need, work with primary providers and meet the challenge with proactive and resourced responses, such as those in the recommendations of the report. I urge the government to do this. Thanks to all the committee staff who worked with me over the years, not forgetting my three years on the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation and our good work on fees and charges, and Australian Standards.

To the state Parliamentary Labor Party staff, members of Parliament and electorate office staff in other members' offices, all of whom I have worked with over my 12 years here, thank you. To the ministerial staff, who, in both Liberal and Labor governments, have been respectful and helpful, and the many public servants I have worked with, thank you for your dedication and commitment to our WA community. To all the staff of Parliament, both on the frontline and in human resources and information technology, including in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, thank you. Please accept my thanks. You have always been respectful and helpful, despite my naughtiness at times—I can be a bit naughty at times! Your willingness to stop and share your personal stories with me has

made my time in this building rich and fun. Thanks to those who are endlessly patient, like reception; those who listened and corrected my speeches, like Hansard; and the clerks and chamber staff who let me challenge them when I was in the chair. It was always fun to grab out the green book and question what I was being told. I thank the Parliamentary Library staff for their acceptance of my continual requests for articles and books, the catering staff for the tolerance of my eating habits, and to those who run the Parliament. I get that it is difficult, and your concern for staff and safety is a core commitment. I acknowledge and thank you. But it is a house of the people, the common house, and those people include parliamentarians. The building should be a welcoming place. During the 12 years I have been here, I fear that that has been undermined by other priorities that are maybe no less worthy, but without the commitment to a core value of making us, MPs, feel as though we fully belong. I commend the decision to have a family room, but it needs to be more than a room. It has to be inclusive, accepting and tolerant of inconvenience, and most of all give a sense of belonging.

Regarding Parliament, when anyone questions the value of targets for women in Parliament, they will have to question the value of my contribution, as I am proudly the result of many women and supportive men ensuring that women like me stand in this place. One of them is in the gallery today, Helen Creed. I came to this place as a result of the Labor Party's commitment to affirmative action. As I have demonstrated here and in the electorate, I have merit. Some bloke with greater capacity was not overlooked because the party gave me, as a woman, preference through targets. If you are a woman who wants to follow your passion and seek to change the delivery of services into the community or introduce new innovations, my standing here tells you that you can too—well, you can if you are a member of the Labor Party. Bateman will be interesting! To take on this job, you need support from your colleagues, volunteers and community, but most importantly from your family and friends. To the freedom girls, the EMILY's List crew, the yoga mob, the neighbours and all my volunteers and supporters—too many to name individually—thank you all. Thanks to the community whom I represented and the non-government organisations. They are all fantastic people to work for.

Thanks to my family—now I am going to cry. It has been a hard year, but we have loved and supported each other through it. To Jodie, Nathan, Tracy and Ken, you are amazing; I love and cherish you all. To my mum, throughout my 12 years here you have taught me resilience and reliability with a strength of character that has served us so well in this tough year. You have also taught me that I have to deal with my anxiety, which is a very good lesson to learn. I could not imagine running for re-election without my biggest supporter and also my greatest critic, my dad; so now I guess I will not have to. To my lovely radical son who runs a close second in the questioning-my-belief stakes. He keeps me questioning and his arguments are pretty convincing. Can I just tell you that the women's revolution of the 70s produced me, so I am so looking forward to what the social revolution of this time, of this age, produces as the leadership of the future. I can imagine that that future will not be captured by the laissez faire capitalism of privatisation and small government that I was taught at uni, but it will embrace the health and wellbeing of its citizens. I am heartened that my belief—that the wealth of a nation is built on the public ownership of its facilities, the delivery of universal health and education, the importance of stimulating the economy for employment, and a compassionate welfare system—has borne fruit in this time of pandemic, and that is something that we should all be committed to. I trust that a future Labor government will continue to ensure that the wealth that is quarried from the Western Australian earth will profit all Western Australians, not just a few, and that the community of WA will continue to receive a commensurate amount of the wealth from the resources extracted, and that Aboriginal heritage and culture will continue to be preserved.

This health crisis is only a precursor to the urgent need to address climate change. I came into this place calling for a carbon price. That has been such a vexed issue, but we need to resolve it. I welcomed the government's recently released climate change policy and its commitment to net zero emissions by 2050. I am sure that this commitment will have a plan and goals to meet that target and ensure that we deliver on this urgent issue. I welcome the health commitments released today and commend the Minister for Health and Tarun Weeramanthri for their great work on the impact of climate change on the health of our community. Tarun Weeramanthri came to our culturally and linguistically diverse community to ask for input around that. We received a great contribution from him and he is a great asset to our community.

Back to my thankyou's. To my best friend in Parliament, Roger Cook. Your emotional intelligence makes you an exceptional human being and just a joy to be around. I can go dancing now without worrying, but you will have to wait until you give your valedictory speech before you can join me on the dancefloor in a nightclub. To my other parliamentary colleagues, I will miss you all. My first caucus meeting in this place was as the president of caucus. I sat before you as the president of caucus before I had even sat in caucus! You have all shown me—mostly all!—such respect and regard. You have also shown me why being in the Labor caucus is the greatest honour a political tragic like me could have. To the Premier, Mark McGowan, it has been an honour and a privilege to be part of your team. You never failed to acknowledge me in any setting—a simple, "Hi, Janine", whether you were rushing into a meeting or in deep concern, is a great testament to your unpretentiousness and your capacity to be a leader and to be one of us. Also, thanks for letting me burst into your office at any time, especially when Julia Gillard was visiting so that I could say hello! That was exciting.

To my union friends, particularly Carolyn Smith and all the others, thank you for always keeping it real, appreciating my work and listening to my concerns. To my staff, particularly Sue and Donata, who actually managed to stay with me through a campaign and beyond—thanks! To Razia, thanks for coming back to save the day. To all the others in my staff who have contributed, it has been a real honour to work with you and I thank you for putting up with my bluntness, at times, and sometimes offhanded comments.

To all the Nollamara branch members and volunteers, especially Amy, Robert, Eric, Harry, Kayande, Rafal, Hiba, Nick, Senada and anyone I have forgotten—because you always do—and to all the booth captains and the workers, thanks for the support. The job cannot be done without you and you have all been fantastic. To Danny, thanks for your wisdom and guidance. To Shani, thank you for your support over these last several months. To my friend Elizabeth, thank you for being with me on an enormously long journey since university.

To my partner, John, I am not sure whether the last 12 years have been hard on us or kind to us, but we have loved each other through it and prevailed. I cherish your support and thank you for your no-nonsense guidance. You are kind, patient and loving. I love you and Thomas very much.

I could keep going, but it is Friday afternoon! I want to say in conclusion that I came into this place saying that I am a feminist. That did not mean that I was up for a fight or that I just wanted to change the use of language—although I did win on taking the “man” out of “chairman” in estimates. Every time someone printed a copy, that used to be me who scrubbed out “man”. But saying that I am a feminist did not mean that, and I did not come here to do those things, although those little things matter because, frankly, they are like fingernails scraping down a blackboard when you are a feminist. It meant I wanted to see change to make women’s lives better and to deliver equality. I wanted to see women represented in this Parliament. I have really cherished this Parliament since 2017, with all the women colleagues I have had. The change I work for is, like that delivered by Edith Cowan, one of significance. Next year will be 100 years since she was elected to this place and the first time a woman was elected to any commonwealth Parliament. This should be honoured by ensuring that next year we have the first woman Speaker of the WA Legislative Assembly. That the person who sits in the chair at the centre of the chamber should be a woman in the same house that catcalled and jeered 100 years ago when the first woman stood to speak seems to me a historical opportunity. Further, women have done it tough over the COVID pandemic, and early childhood education and occupational opportunities need to be the focus of the coming government—a focus that a commitment to a women’s budget will deliver.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be here. I could go on and on and talk about the many memories I have of this place. Now that I have spoken, I can keep going! I got really good at being able to speak at the drop of a hat. When I told the Whip I was leaving, he asked who he was going to get to stand up when he needed someone to speak. When I first came to this house, I hated public speaking. I used to get up and be really nervous and very reticent. I felt like you had to know so much to be here.

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yes, that is right!

I never wanted to let the people of Mirrabooka down by what I said or end up on the front page of the newspaper for having said something. I want to say things that can be a bit off the cuff sometimes and a bit cheeky! People have always listened to me and given me respect, although a few times maybe not. I can remember one instance when I felt like I was disrespected in this chamber. When I stand with a lot of women next to me in this house, it makes me feel like this place is a place for me and it makes me feel like it is easier to speak.

It can be a really odd chamber—standing across from each other. It is very adversarial. I do not think it needs to be like that. I have talked about the second chamber we had for the health legislation, which was back there in the committee room, and how it was such a different experience as a member of Parliament and how we were able to get really into detail and speak directly to advisers in a manner that delivered a better piece of legislation than the one that had come to this Parliament. We were in opposition doing that. At the time, the minister himself said that as he gave a speech for the third reading of the bill. Reform is needed in this place to make it more welcoming and inclusive. It probably needs to be more multicultural. How we bring in people from a diverse set of backgrounds is a challenge for the Labor Party.

Mr P.A. Katsambanis interjected.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yes, okay! There are people who can do that on this side as well, member for Hillarys.

It has been an honour and a privilege, and I have really cherished it. I look forward to what happens after 13 March. I look forward to another WA Labor government. I believe Labor has done such a good job that it should be returned to government. I am looking forward to Meredith Hammat being the member for Mirrabooka, although she has to still go through the Labor Party processes! She has my support, just in case anyone wants to know! I thank you all for having me in this Parliament.

[Applause.]