



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Peter Abetz MLA
(Member for Southern River)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

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Motion

INTRODUCTION : REMEMBRANCE DAY

MR P. ABETZ (Southern River) [7.14 pm]: Mr Speaker, I am deeply honoured to address the Parliament on this day: 11 November, Remembrance Day. On this day we remember the huge sacrifices that were made by so many during the wars that our nation has been involved in. We so easily take our freedom for granted. We so easily forget the huge price that various generations have paid for the freedom that we enjoy. For example, of the 300 000 young men who left the shores of this country to fight in World War I, some 60 000 never returned to be greeted by their families. Without the sacrifices of these men and those who followed them over the years, it is doubtful that we would have this great institution of parliamentary democracy in our land. It is no exaggeration to say that Western Australian soldiers have played a key role in many wars. Perhaps the most pivotal was the Western Australian 10th Light Horse Regiment, which was part of the Australian Light Horse Brigade. Their so-called mad charge on 31 October 1917 against Beersheba, which was heavily defended by the Turkish forces, was a turning point in the Palestinian part of World War I. It was actually at this time in the evening, at about 7.00 pm local time, that the Australian forces galloped into Beersheba. On entering Beersheba they were able to secure the water supply for their horses, thus enabling themselves and their horses to push on ahead instead of perishing in the sands of the desert. Lest we forget.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OTHER MEMBERS

It is indeed a privilege and an honour to serve as the member for Southern River in this thirty-eighth Parliament of Western Australia. I want to extend my congratulations to members on both sides who have taken their seats in this Parliament.

THE SOUTHERN RIVER ELECTORATE

The seat of Southern River takes in some long-established suburbs, such as a small part of Gosnells and Huntingdale, along with the newer suburbs of Forest Lakes and Canning Vale and now the rapidly developing area of Southern River. This electorate faces special infrastructure and transport needs. The planning for the areas of Canning Vale and Southern River was based on having the Mandurah railway line come through Canning Vale. However, the Labor government saw fit to not have the railway line come through that area. It saw fit to not provide that area with a rail service. The two major roads that lead out of Canning Vale towards the city are choked with traffic for over

two hours in the morning and two hours at night. Those roads are in desperate need of upgrading. One of the things that many electors said to me during the election campaign is would I please fight for a railway station in Canning Vale. I certainly will do that at every opportunity.

Because Southern River is a relatively new housing area, there is a great lack of community infrastructure. I think I may be the only member in this place who can say that his or her electorate does not have a public library. A library is currently under construction, thankfully. However, despite this lack of community infrastructure, there is a great sense of community and a wide cultural diversity, with people from many different ethnic backgrounds having made their home in my electorate.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I am perhaps one of the most reluctant members of this house. I say reluctant in the sense that until five or six years ago I had never dreamed or even thought about the possibility of entering Parliament. For the past 25 years I have had the pleasure and found great fulfilment in pastoring churches. In that role I had the privilege of being with people at the high points of their lives, such as at weddings, anniversaries, celebrations and births, but also of walking with people in the valleys of their lives, such as at times of serious illness and losing loved ones in death. I have many times had the privilege of sitting with people who were on their deathbed and holding their hands as their life ebbed away, and then conducting their funerals and supporting their families. I have had the opportunity of assisting parents in teaching their children a Christian world and life view, which has given them a dependable framework for navigating the uncharted waters of life.

My work with the Dandenong palliative care service in Victoria in the 1980s taught me that ultimately life is about relationships. Never once did any one of the many people on whose deathbed I sat and spoke with say, "I wish I had built a bigger house" or "I wish I had earned more money" or "I wish I had more shares" or, for that matter, "I wish I had been a member of Parliament." Their regrets and their joys always focused around families and relationships. As this chamber considers various pieces of legislation, members can be assured that I will take a very keen interest in how a particular piece of legislation will affect families and communities. Our state will be as strong only as its communities and its communities will only be as strong as its families. As a student of history and having worked with families in many different settings, I am convinced that the quality of the relationships in our families and communities ultimately determines the health and strength of the fabric of our society.

Mr Speaker, I joined the Liberal Party, I think about five years ago, at the urging of some close friends who knew me well and who shared my deep concern about various pieces of legislation that were coming before Parliament; legislation that was beginning to reshape our society into one which increasingly made the weak and vulnerable dispensable. I mention abortion, euthanasia and attempts to legalise prostitution and so legitimise the sexual abuse of women. Increasingly, the freedoms and protections that we have known in this land are being eroded by the propositions put forward by the so-called political correctness movement. A defining moment for me was some years ago when I was serving on the staff selection panel of a local Christian school. A young lady who had been working in a childcare centre had applied for a position and I asked her, "Why do you want to leave the childcare centre and work in a Christian school?" She told us that in the childcare centre where she worked she was required to make special mention of Chinese New Year, Muslim Ramadan and the Jewish Day of Atonement, but any reference to Christmas and Easter was strictly forbidden. In fact, she said that the staff were not allowed to teach Christmas carols to the children and were not even allowed around Christmas time to have Christmas carols as background music. At that time there was also a push on from various political quarters to take away the exemption that Christian schools have to employ exclusively Christian teachers. Therefore, Mr Speaker, I was persuaded to nominate for preselection, and I guess the rest is history.

THANKS TO SUPPORTERS

Let me add that without the generous support of my family, many of whom are present this evening, friends who are also in the gallery and members of the Liberal Party, I would not be here today. A special word of thanks is due to my son David who took time out from running his businesses to act as my almost full-time campaign coordinator, and did a sterling job. Thank you, David. I also publicly record my sincere thanks to the more than 70 volunteers who involved themselves in my campaign, to those who contributed financially and to those who helped on polling day. There are two other people I wish to mention by name. My wife Jenny, who is in the gallery, has stood beside me now for the past 33 years as my wife. During the campaign she put up with me leaving home at 5.30 every morning and often not returning before 11 or 11.30 and sometimes midnight. I also thank my brother Eric, Senator Eric Abetz from Tasmania. He knew that I was pretty raw and untried in the whole thing of politics. He came over to Western Australia in the first week of the campaign and said, "I'll teach you a thing or two"; and he certainly did. He taught me some very useful tricks of the trade and I believe that some of those tricks that he taught me, which I would never have thought of using, actually helped me get over the line in Southern River. He also phoned me quite regularly during the campaign just to encourage me and to make sure that I was not losing focus.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

As I enter this Parliament, I do so conscious of the great opportunities that Australia has given me. I first set foot on Australian soil in March 1961 at Fremantle, as my parents were on their way with their six children to start a new life in Tasmania. Members may find it hard to believe today that in those days, as an eight-year-old, I could not speak one word of English. Perhaps I know too much English now! Having come to this country with my parents from Germany, I can say that throughout the world there are many people who love what we have. That is why so many people seek to come to the shores of our country. The current influx of South African migrants, with whom I have had the privilege of working—some are in the public gallery this evening—are testimony to the fact that this country has a tremendous amount to offer.

We all like this house that we call Australia. It is a great house. It is a house that gives its citizens great opportunities and much protection, and also opportunities for prosperity.

As one of six children in a migrant family, I was able to pursue university studies and I graduated with an honours degree in agricultural science. I am a fan of organic growing, which might be of interest to the previous speaker. Four of my siblings also completed university degrees and my brother Eric, as I mentioned, has served in the federal Parliament as a senator for a number of years. Australia is one of those very rare countries where, with effort and ability, one can go a long way towards fulfilling one's life dreams.

FORCES SEEKING TO CHANGE THE NATURE OF OUR SOCIETY

Western Australia is part of that house that we call Australia. However, every house needs a foundation and the more solid the foundation, the longer that building will last. I believe that our forefathers laid a very strong foundation based on Judeo-Christian values. They built a foundation from which we still benefit today. However, this foundation is being increasingly undermined and eroded. The values which underpin our society and its great institutions are under increasing attack by those who want to reshape our society, and the society that is being shaped is not a pretty one; we need look only at the increasing violence and antisocial behaviour in our communities. When I was growing up, people used to leave their back doors unlocked—and I am not that old! I cannot recall anyone in my class throughout my primary school years having his or her home burgled. No-one in the circles that I moved in ever had his or her car stolen. The notion of teachers being attacked by students was just unthinkable.

During the election campaign I personally doorknocked around 1 500 homes, and from the feedback that I got it was very clear that law and order was the number one issue in everybody's heart and mind. Everyone was keen to see more police on the road. I endorse that but, as I said to my electors, that would address the consequence of a far deeper issue. We must address the root cause as well; that is, to return to instilling values into our children, which must begin in the home. However, in so many homes there is little or no teaching of values, and so children grow up thinking that the world must revolve around them. I believe that we are actually reaping the harvest of an era when the educational fad was to have so-called value-free education. By having so-called value-free education we were sending the message that values did not matter. Then there was the era of so-called values clarification when teachers were supposed to not say that anything was right or wrong; their role was supposedly to clarify for kids the values that they were choosing to adopt. Too bad if the value was that graffiti was fun rather than criminal damage. Thankfully, times have changed a little. More parents and schools are teaching values to guide their children's personal actions and teaching them personal responsibility to the community of which they are a part. I believe there has been so much emphasis on rights that people have lost sight of the fact that every right has a commensurate balance of responsibility. I am delighted to see that several schools in my electorate are actively teaching values to their students and that their teachers have abandoned the foolish notion of the 1970s and the 1980s that education should be value free. We need to encourage a focus on values. I have written to every school in my electorate and have offered to sponsor a community values award in each.

WHAT I WILL BRING TO THE TASK

One thing that I will bring to this chamber is a strong sense of justice and of right and wrong. Whether that was something that God endowed me with in my mother's womb or whether it was something that my parents and teachers instilled in me, I do not know, but I do know that as a four or five-year-old I took on a bunch of teenagers who were up to no good. I cannot remember the incident, but my mother did tell me that I came off slightly second best. Members of the chamber may be pleased to know that I have learnt to choose my battles a little more wisely since that time! I can assure members that I find it impossible to stand idly by when I see others treated unfairly or unjustly. The many migrants and refugees that I have advocated for over the years can testify to the fact that the fire of justice burns very brightly and strongly within my heart.

Since being elected on 6 September, I have been amazed at how many constituents are being forced to live with the consequences of poorly thought-through decisions made by governments or bureaucrats, and the despair and powerlessness that that generates within citizens. A case in point is the compensation issue related to the Bush Forever program, which is a big issue in my electorate. I will certainly be working hard to reform the current system of compensation.

Holding a degree in agricultural science, I hope to bring to this chamber a rational and analytical approach to any legislation that will come before it. My strong interest and my long involvement and experience with environmental issues, particularly sustainable farming, along with my experience of running a small business for a number of years, I am sure will be a great asset. My strong interest in agriculture will also cause me to keep a close eye on the activities of Biosecurity Australia, which all too often has been willing to recommend that our disease-free status should be sacrificed on the altar of free trade. At the same time, my pastor's heart will always be asking: What impact will this legislation have on families? What impact will it have on the weak and the vulnerable? What impact will it have on individual freedoms? Will it help to build the community or will it damage the community? What impact will it have on future generations? I see these questions as a practical outworking of my campaign slogan, which was "Putting People First", and that is something that I will seek to do at all times.

As an ordained minister, some people have asked me how my faith will affect the way that I function as a parliamentarian. I would like to answer that question for the benefit of all here tonight. I believe in the first place that every human being is made in the image of God and therefore is precious to him, and therefore I believe that every human being must be treated with absolute and utmost respect, and with integrity and dignity. Mr Speaker, I believe that future generations will judge this current generation on the way that we treat the weak and the vulnerable in our society. Furthermore, I believe that, within the creation, God has also given us moral laws, just like there is the law of gravity and if you deny the reality of the law of gravity, it does not stop you from falling over or hurting yourself if you jump off a high-rise building. I believe that we should not ignore those moral laws, which are commonly known as the Judeo-Christian ethic. Any society that chooses to ignore that ethic does so to its own detriment; therefore, I will also be seeking to promote those values in this chamber.

CONCLUSION

I love the words of the prophet Micah that he wrote some 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. He asks the question: What does the Lord require of you? Then he answers it and he says, "To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

It is my prayer that I will be able to do that throughout my term in this Parliament and indeed for the rest of my life. My pledge to this Parliament, to the electors of Southern River and to the many people who assisted me and worked so hard during my campaign is simply this: I will continue to put people first. I will continue to be a strong advocate in this chamber for the values that have made our nation and state the envy of the world.

[Applause.]
