



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Stephen Dawson, MLC
(Member for Mining and Pastoral Region)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday, 12 June 2013

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [7.59 pm]: How do I follow that? First I would like to thank and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet tonight, the Noongar people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I offer my congratulations to you, Mr President, on your re-election as President of this place. Thank you for your advice, your good humour and your hospitality over the last few months.

MY JOURNEY TO THIS PLACE

It is certainly an honour and a privilege to be standing before you tonight as an Australian Labor Party representative for the Mining and Pastoral Region. Before I elaborate my priorities in this place, let me tell you something about how I ended up here before my family, friends and colleagues. My first experience of the Mining and Pastoral Region was on holiday in 1986. My family first came to Australia in December of that year. At the time I was the eldest of three children, although a fourth child was on the way. My aunt and uncle had come here from Ireland months before to run a youth hostel and we travelled around the world to visit them. After months of planning, we finally arrived in the beautiful city of Perth. We loved the place. We explored its parks, Fremantle, Rottnest Island and the beautiful beaches. Having come from Ireland where we put our shorts and T-shirts on when it hit 15 degrees, this great new place was not what we were used to.

Soon after spending some time in Perth, mam and dad packed me, my sister, Mairead, my brother, Cormac, and a twinkle that was to become my sister, Brid, into a family wagon, and along with my aunt, uncle and cousins off we set for what was for us in those days an outback adventure. The journey took us through the wheatbelt, the goldfields and the south west of this great state. My first experience of red dust was the ochre sand caked into my nice, new, white runners. This was to be the first of many pieces of clothing ruined by red dust over the years. From that trip, I still have many fond memories, including panning for gold in Coolgardie, and some of the friends I made on those travels I still keep in touch with today.

After seven weeks of experiencing firsthand the delights of Western Australia and recognising the opportunities that lay here, my parents made the difficult decision to shift halfway across the world in search of a better life for their children, and upon arrival back in Dublin they began the process to migrate. Like many others who have settled here in WA, we were essentially economic migrants. The economy in Ireland was struggling, unemployment was rising and the working-class suburb we lived in was beginning to feel the consequences of joblessness and the social problems that this brings.

Both of my parents were Dubliners and it was through them I gained my strong values around family, community, and social justice. Mam was one of nine children born to Jem and Dolly Mooney, one of whom, Thomas, a twin, died at birth. Mam's eldest sister, Theresa,

tragically drowned at the age of 16 years, and my heartbroken grandmother never recovered and passed away not long after. Now being the eldest child, mam took on the role of mother to her remaining seven siblings. In what could not have been an easy task for a teenager, she guided them along the path to where they are today. As I was growing up, those aunts and uncles in many ways seemed like older brothers and sisters to me. Often mam would call out “Seamus, Michael, Martin, Walter, Noel” before she finally got to “Stephen”, and I would realise that she was calling for me. The patience she must have gained looking after her siblings no doubt stood her in good stead, as for the last many years she has worked as a carer of the elderly, and those she has cared for often becoming like our Aussie grandparents.

My dad, Noel, was the middle child of three children born to Peter and Monica. Dad’s father died when he was just five years old and so I never got to meet my grandfather, and dad never got to experience what I have experienced with him being a loving father. As a young man, my dad went to England to play football for Everton, but missing home and his mam, he gave it up and came back to Ireland. He went on to have an illustrious career in the Irish Premier League. Dad continued to play top league soccer long after we moved to Perth and has played for and coached a number of Perth’s soccer teams over the years. My parents, Phyllis and Noel, have always been there for me and my brother and sisters, and throughout the years we might not have been happy with all the decisions they made but we know now that they made them with our best interests in mind.

The immigration process over two years felt long, yet worth the wait. We were a young family escaping a depressed economy and in search of a better life. I still cannot imagine what families who board rickety boats to come to Australia trying to escape persecution must be going through when they choose to set sail on those treacherous seas. It breaks my heart to think of and to hear about boats sinking, and with them the lives of people seeking only to make a better life for themselves and their families.

A few weeks before my fourteenth birthday in 1989, we arrived in Australia for good. When looking for a place to settle and schools to attend, a family friend recommended Hollywood Senior High School, and so we moved to Nedlands. Having previously been schooled through the Irish language and speaking English only as a second language, my first day at Hollywood made me feel like I was on the set of *Home and Away*. It was a very different life to the rigours of a Christian Brothers school. People carried surfboards and skateboards rather than the hurley sticks and the round footballs that I was used to. Suddenly all the academic subjects that I had known and loved at school I now found more difficult and lost interest in due to the language barrier. I kept with French, which I had long studied in Ireland and took up the subjects of politics and drama, both of which I have no doubt will serve me well in my role in this place.

For us, like many other migrants, Australia has been the lucky country, but it is only lucky for those of us who make it! All my brothers and sisters have prospered in our new homeland. We have done well and have benefited greatly from our lives here. Between us we have played soccer for the state, attended the WA Institute of Sport and received citizenship awards and all have made the most of the opportunities that WA has afforded us.

Perhaps it was because we were so far away from our extended family, but we are all good friends and very close knit. Rarely a week goes by that we do not catch up for a barbecue or lunch. We are blessed. As a result of my family’s strong commitment to community, Irish culture and language has always been an important part of my life. I love nothing more than listening to the Pogues and Christy Moore or singing a few rebel songs on a night out. Over the years and to this day I still remain involved in the Irish Club of WA and occasionally tread the boards with the Irish Theatre Players. It seems most Irish politicians, because of the struggles that the nation has gone through, have a tradition of activism in the pursuit of justice. After all, our country was invaded and our culture was suppressed for many years. We have our own strong

indigenous culture in Ireland, expressed mainly through our language, our music and our national sports. Thanks to Janet in the Parliamentary Library, I have discovered that I am the twenty-third Irish-born MP in the Western Australian Parliament, and the first in over half a century—part of a proud tradition of Irish rabble-rousers who have been elected to serve the people of this state.

After finishing high school I decided that I wanted to be an actor, but recognising the difficulty in making a living from that profession, I too decided to go off to Edith Cowan to train to be a teacher hoping to be able to supplement any income from acting with the pay of relief teaching.

I joined the Labor Party on orientation day in 1995, signed up by a then enthusiastic young woman, Linda Whatman, who was to become my best friend and mentor over the years and I continue to value her advice many, many years later. I was training to be a high school French and drama teacher but soon my involvement in politics began to take over; I got elected to the student guild and my studies received less and less attention. It seems a long time ago now that this Irish lad came to WA and got involved in politics. I stand here now, extraordinarily proud and humbled to be representing the Mining and Pastoral Region.

THE MINING AND PASTORAL REGION

The sheer size of the Mining and Pastoral electorate is daunting to many, but I am relishing the opportunity to explore the diverse cultures, concerns and regions that it consists of. It is an electorate of strong cultures, dispossessed communities and migrants of all stripes. The Mining and Pastoral Region is truly one in which the geography could be said to represent the people—the strength, beauty and rich resources of this vast area is reflected in the strength and wisdom of our regional and remote communities. But it is also a landscape that can be fragile, and, with isolation, can also come great vulnerability.

I want to acknowledge the contribution to this place of one who came before me as a member for Mining and Pastoral, Hon Jon Ford. Jon is a true gentleman who I know was appreciated by members right across the chamber. It was 12 years ago that Jon delivered his own inaugural speech to Parliament; a speech of real conviction and determination to serve the people of the Mining and Pastoral Region. Opening his speech, Jon stated —

I stand in this place, not as a great statesman or a master orator, but as a common man with common ideals and common virtues. I believe I have been blessed with an extraordinary passion for social justice and equity.

This passion for social justice has been a legacy of Jon's contribution to the Mining and Pastoral Region and has been fundamental to his work over the years. I hope to build on his work and passion for the electorate and in years to come make others as proud of me as I am of Jon.

The towns in my electorate often suffer from a lack of quality public services that here in Perth people take for granted. I acknowledge the benefits that the government's royalties for region policy has brought to many parts of the Mining and Pastoral Region. While many towns have new community centres or streetscapes, a large failing of this policy is that it has allowed the government to drop the ball on delivering the vital services needed in some of those places. Many communities in my electorate struggle with inadequate health services, with residents having to fly, or worse, drive to Perth to access vital services. Communities in the Kimberley still struggle to access quality drinking water. It is an outrage that this occurs in Australia in the twenty-first century. Government needs to work with regional leaders to address the high levels of youth suicide in the regions, particularly amongst young people and the Indigenous community. I will use my voice in this place to highlight these and other issues affecting my

electors and I am open to working with anyone, regardless of politics, who is open to helping fix these ills.

My focus during the recent state election campaign was predominantly in the Kimberley. I spent a number of months on the ground working closely with my good friend the member for Kimberley, Josie Farrer, MLA. She is a great member for that seat and I look forward to working closely with her over this term of Parliament to bring about solutions for the issues facing our electorates. I believe Josie's background and passion for the Kimberley and its people will leave a lasting impression on this Parliament.

I am proud too to place on the record that I supported the decision of the Goolarabooloo Jabirr Jabirr traditional owners to sign a native title agreement with Woodside and the state of Western Australia for the site of a proposed gas hub at James Price Point. While I did not support the Premier's big-stick approach and lack of negotiation on the matter, the agreement, endorsed by the Goolarabooloo Jabirr Jabirr claim group, was signed to enable high-level traditional owner cultural and economic engagement in the proposed Browse Basin LNG project. At the time, then Kimberley Land Council director Wayne Bergmann said —

The Agreement represented a rare opportunity for positive social change for Kimberley Indigenous people.

Had this project gone ahead, it would have seen lasting benefits for not only the traditional owners, but also Aboriginal people right across the Kimberley.

ACTIVISM

We in the Labor Party have a long tradition of fighting for equality with many of the country's great social reforms being delivered by Labor governments. I have been an activist over the years both in student politics and the gay and lesbian community and I am proud of the progress made in the past 10 years, but we still have a long way to go until everyone is treated the same in this state and country. We face many challenges, including an intolerant society that is prepared to judge and not accept. But we will accept and stay true to the dream that we hold in our hearts.

I also congratulate Hon Adele Farina on her election as Deputy President and for being the first woman in the history of this Parliament to hold the role—a great honour in itself. I have been a supporting member of EMILY's List for a number of years now and I want to pay tribute to that organisation for the support it has given many of Labor's female candidates that has ensured that we have a more representative and diverse Parliament than those of the past. Over the years I have had the great pleasure of working as an electorate officer, adviser and chief of staff to a number of politicians to whom I am very grateful for them having shared their wisdom, passion and political acumen with me. All are very passionate people with different styles, and they have taught me a great deal on my road to this place. To former Senator Jim McKiernan, Jackie McKiernan, Judy Edwards, Jon Ford, David Templeman, Louise Pratt and Hon Gavin Jennings, MLC, former Minister for Environment in Victoria's Brumby Labor government, thank you.

I am proud to be a union member. I first joined a union as a 14-year-old working at Hungry Jack's. Unions have played an important part in my life and the lives of many other working Western Australians. I sincerely thank the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union for its support in my election to this place and its members, organisers and staff. Thank you for looking

out for Western Australian workers, especially those in the Mining and Pastoral Region. Thank you for putting up with me for a few years.

I also acknowledge another former member of the Legislative Council—my good friend and comrade the late Jock Ferguson, who I know even in his short term here left a lasting impression on many in this house. It was under Jock's guidance that the AMWU reached out to a number of young student activists in the mid-1990s and encouraged us to get more involved in the ALP. My dad had been a shop steward in the Irish Transport & General Workers Union, a sister union to the AMWU's Printing and Kindred Industries Union. Therefore, it seemed a natural fit for me and my activism.

I acknowledge the hard work of Labor's lower house candidates at the recent state election. Kelly Howlett in Pilbara, Jennifer Shelton in North West Central, Terrence Winner in Kalgoorlie, Greg Smith in Eyre and Josie Farrer in Kimberley are all passionate people who believe in a better society. All worked tirelessly to promote the Labor Party and what we stand for. The election was not ours for the taking but we will regroup, work hard and deliver for our communities over the next four years. Thank you to the great Western Australian Labor Party for giving me the opportunity to represent it in the Parliament. I thank all its members. I look forward to being a progressive voice in this place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my mam and dad, my sisters Mairead and Brid, my brother Cormac, and their partners Pat, Michel and Josie. To my partner's family Dale, Henry and David Pekel and Colin Liddelow, thank you all for your love and support. My family members and friends have long been dragged to ALP branch meetings and votes over the years, all in the name of my passion for politics. Thank you to Steve McCartney and Tanya, Justine Parker, Hon Sally Talbot, Daniel Smith, Bryan Bekker, Linda Whatman, Tina O'Connor, M. Ward, Cindy Portland, Zoe Carter, Juliana Addison, Kim Bryant, Owen Whittle, Rhonda Donaghey, Aram Hosie, Jessica Houston, Pat Abbott, Margriet van Tuyl and Angela Padley. Thank you to friends and staff Sharon Webb, Nicole Coppock and Tricia Hebbard. I have received a great deal of support over the years from these and many others, some of whom are here tonight. If I have forgotten anyone, thank you. To those who are watching online, I want to thank each and every one of you for your support and friendship.

I would like to congratulate my good friend Hon Alanna Clohesy on her inaugural speech tonight. She and her partner, Philip O'Donoghue, have been great friends of mine for many years. I thank them for their friendship and support on the road to this place.

To my partner of 10 years, Dennis Liddelow, thank you. I highly value your advice and counsel, and I love you dearly. You have been on this journey with me over the years and I have no doubt that I could not have done it without you. You challenge me, you console me, but most of all you love me.

Before I started in this place I had the pleasure of working the last few years as state manager for Essential Media Communications. At EMC we ran campaigns for a range of charities, non-government organisations and trade unions, helping to make Australia a better place by securing social change. I had the pleasure of being involved in the Every Australian Counts campaign, a precursor to the National Disability Insurance Scheme and DisabilityCare Australia. I am very proud of the work we did at EMC. To my friends at EMC, I am grateful for the opportunities you gave me and will certainly use my time in this place continuing to help make Western Australia a better place. Thank you also to the parliamentary staff for their assistance over the

past few years. Having worked in and around the Parliament over the years, I am well aware of the dedication and professionalism of its staff. I look forward to working with them in my new role in the years ahead.

Many of us in this place have made promises in our first speech here. I want to make only one promise; that is to stay true to the values of the Labor Party, to stay true to the electors in the Mining and Pastoral Region and to stay true to the people who elected me. I am often daunted by the task that lies ahead of me but I am committed to giving my all. Thank you, Mr President.

[Applause.]
