



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



HON ERIC RIPPER, MLA
(Member for Belmont)

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 14 November 2012

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LOAN BILL 2012

Second Reading

MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont) [1.16 pm]: I may not have had even a professional life, let alone a life in public affairs, were it not for the efforts of my parents, Harry and Bernice, to ensure that each of their four children received a tertiary education. I grew up in the tiny town of Nyabing, which did not have a high school and which in the early 1960s did not have even a tradition of high school education for young people. The bank refused to put allowances for the costs of children's education into the farm budget. Consequently, my mother worked overtime on applying for every obscure scholarship and bursary that she could, and I believe that my father may have sold bales of wool for cash to Bulla Stephens at the Nyabing general store. Fortunately, I was able to avoid the Katanning Senior High School hostel because it had not been built at that stage. But before I come to that particular point, I want to say that the outside world came to us in that farmhouse in Nyabing via the ABC news, delivered by the valve radio on top of the kero fridge. The rule in our household was absolute silence during the 7.00 pm radio news, and that news was read by the ABC newsreader in magisterial tones. Even then, the spell of politics was beginning to be cast on me; I wanted to be part of that outside world.

I avoided Katanning and I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle, Ivy and Ted Joll, and to attend Churchlands Senior High School. Ted Joll had a very great influence on my political development. He was a journalist with West Australian Newspapers, and, perhaps unusually for that organisation, he was a lifelong man of the left. In fact, he was dismissed as editor of the *Countryman* newspaper and nearly dismissed entirely from the organisation because he dared to write an editorial criticising the British intervention in the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. He gave me a book called *Peace in Vietnam* produced by the Quakers. Reading that book, for me, completely delegitimised conservative political leaders in this country. It was a significant influence on my politics.

I first campaigned for the Labor Party 45 years ago in the half-Senate election of 1967. I have given my adult life to the Labor Party and its causes. I did not do it for this reason, but the Labor Party has repaid me 10 times over in the opportunities that I have been given. I joined the university branch of the Australian Labor Party in 1969. That branch included one future federal leader, one future federal Treasurer, one future national secretary and senior cabinet minister, numerous other cabinet ministers, two future state leaders, two future state Deputy Premiers, a future Supreme Court judge and a future convicted terrorist.

Several members interjected.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: I became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement and the draft resistance movement. This was a heady time for young people on the left; the Whitlam agenda was being promulgated throughout the country. I might say, at that stage in my political development, I viewed Whitlam as far too right wing and I was a supporter of the various challenges against his leadership. In the draft resistance movement, we sat down outside the labour and national service office until the police removed us. When the list of defendants was published in *The West Australian* newspaper, my parents were horrified to see that alongside the name, Eric Stephen Ripper, was also the name John Rivo Gandini, a noted figure in the Communist Party of Western Australia. Together with my long hair, long beard and headband, this incident did not make me an immediate advertisement for the benefits of tertiary education in the town of Nyabing!

I always wanted to be a politician from the time I was about 15. I had some trouble finding the keys to the door. An important development for me was to be given employment as an organiser in the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia. I want to thank the general secretary at that time, Kevin Edwards, for employing me. That was a terrific job. In the first two years there, I had probably the most personal growth that I would have had in any employment. It was great preparation for the life of a member of Parliament. This is an advantage that we on this side of politics have; that so many of our members arrive from the union movement already trained for the job. During that time, I contested an unwinnable seat. I contested the seat of Murdoch and took 8.5 per cent from Barry MacKinnon. Then I set about trying to gain preselection for a safe Labor seat. I was defeated by Judyth Watson in Canning, Geoff Gallop in Victoria Park and Frank Donovan in Morley. That last defeat was particularly galling because the powerbrokers told me that if I withdrew from the contest against the better candidate in Geoff Gallop, I would be looked after in the next round. Unfortunately, the powerbrokers experienced a rank and file revolt and I lost by two votes out of 237. The powerbrokers running the party then had to pulp the campaign material that had already been prepared in my name.

I thought my political career was never going to happen. A year later, Mal Bryce retired from Parliament, aged 43, and I lived in his seat. Mal Bryce and Bob Pearce were particularly important in securing my preselection for the seat of Ascot. Mal Bryce rang to tell me that he had done the deal, but I had to promise to keep quiet about it, otherwise the deal might unravel. He asked, "What's your favourite tippie? I'll buy you a bottle of it if you can keep quiet for the weekend." I said, "Red wine." To my amazement, a bottle of Grange arrived, but it arrived with a peculiar set of instructions. The instructions were that I was not to drink the Grange until I left Parliament and then I was to share that with my successor, and I was to do the same for my successor. I see Cassie Rowe in the public gallery. Cassie, I want to say to you: I look forward to sharing that Grange with you after 9 March.

In the early 1980s, I left my loose association with the left of the party and became a foundation member of the centre-left, a faction of which I remained a member until it ceased to exist at the commencement of this parliamentary term. I did that because of my experience during the Whitlam period when it became apparent to me that economic and financial management were absolutely critical to the success of Labor governments, and longevity in government was absolutely essential for the sustainable implementation of Labor objectives. Therefore, I was already moving towards market solutions. It seemed to me that market solutions were the best path for the economic prosperity, growth and security that the Labor constituency needed. I arrived in this Parliament in the midst of the WA Inc issue. Every day for five years or more, the Liberal Party found a way to debate the WA Inc issue. The appalling consequences of financial mismanagement were drilled into me every day by Barry MacKinnon, Bill Hassell and Richard Court. I learnt how to do opposition from the way in which the Liberal Party did opposition in those days. But my pride in the competence and integrity of my own party was shaken by those events. Ever since then, I have fought hard to make sure that the Labor Party regains that reputation for financial competence and integrity and that it retains it.

So what have I done, together with my colleagues, on the basis of that political development to promote justice, opportunity and prosperity for all of us? Let me start with the Gallop and Carpenter governments. The issue that has given me the most satisfaction in public life is to become involved with native title. We took this state from a national embarrassment in native title to a national leader. I was Labor's spokesperson on native title in opposition and for the entire period of the Gallop and Carpenter governments. During my time, approvals for recognition of native title reached a total of one million square kilometres of Western Australian land. We pioneered new forms of agreement with the Burrup and Maitland Industrial Estates Agreement, the Ord Final Agreement, the commencement of the Broome negotiations and the commencement of the Nyoongah negotiations for the south west. There can be no greater victory in politics than when your position becomes the settled position of all parties. I am pleased that this government has taken on native title and that we now seem to have a settled policy in native title in this state.

As the Treasurer, with my Expenditure Review Committee colleagues—the member for Balcatta, Alan Carpenter, Jim McGinty, Geoff Gallop, and Nick Griffiths at one stage—I delivered eight surplus budgets. We spent \$30 billion on capital works and cut debt over the period of the government by \$900 million. It was my job as Treasurer to secure funding for the agenda that the Labor government had. I provided the initial funding for the biggest hospital building program this state has ever seen, including full funding, which this government has used, for the Fiona Stanley Hospital project. I provided the funding for the doubling of the urban rail network, which was built, in the end, debt free. In my own portfolio, every tax law was rewritten. Ten taxes were abolished, two business tax reform packages were implemented and we ended with the most competitive tax regime of any state for a small and medium business as judged by those noted left-wingers, the Institute of Public Affairs. I did not hesitate; I did not shirk the battles when it was necessary to raise taxes, because the finances had to be repaired. Neither did I shirk the internal battles required to achieve five rounds of tax cuts. Each of those five rounds of tax cuts were achieved against considerable internal resistance. We achieved a revolution in the procurement of government services—a revolution that is saving this state hundreds of millions of dollars. We introduced new leadership and professional development programs into the public service.

I will conclude on the Gallop–Carpenter government period with the creation of a competitive electricity market and the break-up of Western Power. That was the most difficult reform of all. It was achieved despite intense opposition from the Australian Services Union, and despite misconduct and incompetence in the then Western Power. It was ultimately achieved by my successor as Minister for Energy, Alan Carpenter, but he was implementing the legislation and scheme that I had prepared. I stand by that reform as the best thing to happen to our energy system. I stand by that reform as continuing to save the people of Western Australia hundreds of millions of dollars.

I also served in an earlier government; I served in the Lawrence government. I was Australia's first disability services minister, and ever since that period I have had the most profound respect for the commitment that the families of people with disabilities make to their care. It is as a result of my experiences in that portfolio that I remain a very strong advocate of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. In that government I introduced, but was unable to take to completion, groundbreaking new adoptions legislation and groundbreaking new disability legislation. I also promoted a new approach to juvenile justice, based on crime prevention, restorative justice, and diversions from and alternatives to custody. With regard to that particular reform, I was overrun by events and by politics. There were a series of terrible high-speed chases and deaths; Howard Sattler organised a rally of 20 000 outside Parliament. They

arrived carrying nooses—either for the criminals or the minister; I am not sure which—and still the government held firm; but after a particularly serious accident on Christmas night the government resolved, over my objections, to introduce the most draconian juvenile justice legislation imaginable. It was so draconian that even the Liberal Party ultimately repealed it. However, the same government that introduced that legislation—which, by the way, destroyed my reputation as a juvenile justice reformer—also put me on the drafting committee. The legislation was extremely cunningly drafted so that in the end, while it scared the living daylights out of potential offenders and their families, it only ever led to the jailing of two people. Also at that time, the Premier’s office came to me and said, “We want you to organise the campaign against this legislation”. So, as Minister for Community Services, I worked with the welfare groups to organise the campaign against the legislation. The theory was that the more the welfare groups protested, the more the public would like the legislation! In fact, that was a dying government and our internal polling showed that that legislation was amongst the most popular things that we had done, so there are many ways to achieve reform.

I know that time is flying, and I have a substantial reform manifesto to put before members, and a series of people to thank, so I will need to seek an extension.

[Member’s time extended.]

Mr E.S. RIPPER: I want to talk briefly on what I think about some of the big issues of the future, on the basis of my experience. Let me say this: I am dismayed at the state of state finances. Every last cent of financial capacity for this term and, indeed, for the next term has been chewed up by this government. The official figures are bad enough, but the budget is full of every accounting trick and savings device one could conceive of. In my view, the post-2017 government will still be repairing finances as a result of this period. People say that there is a problem with the GST, and indeed there is; it is unfair and we should continue to campaign for Western Australia to get its fair share, but we need to do so in a sophisticated way. Simply whingeing to appeal to the Western Australian electorate does not cut the mustard. We need a national interest argument to show the rest of the country how the whole country could be richer if there were investment in the fastest-growing state in the federation. We also need an intellectual defence of federalism. Too often, national reformers think that uniformity is a reform; too often, national reformers see federalism as just an obstacle to the reform of the country. Be aware: it will take a decision that is unpopular in other states and a major act of national leadership to bring the GST for Western Australia somewhere closer to what we want.

But there is a bigger problem with the GST: the GST base may have been permanently damaged by the global financial crisis. The pool from which we receive our distribution is going to be smaller than we thought. The reason for that is that people are saving more and what they are spending, they are spending on health, education and food, which are outside the GST base. We are going to have some very significant financial issues. I do not see a repeat of the stamp duty boom of my time, or the royalties boom of this government. I see health and police spending growing much faster than revenue, so the state will be driven back to our own tax base—the three ugly sisters of payroll tax, land tax and stamp duty. They are all ugly, but the ugliest is stamp duty because of its impact on the efficient utilisation of our housing stock and its inhibiting effect upon people moving to where the work is. There is merit in the proposed trade-off between stamp duty and land tax, by which stamp duty would be phased down and land tax would be broadened to be a universal tax and increased, but it would be a very difficult reform to implement. But governments in this state will, I think, be faced with intense financial pressures towards the end of the next parliamentary term. Those financial pressures will not be only operational; they will also be on the questions of debt and infrastructure. In my view, the infrastructure demands of this state, combined with the debt levels that are already forecast, will lead inevitably to debate about privatisation. The privatisation of Verve and Fremantle Ports will surely come onto the agenda during the next parliamentary term. Someone is going to advance the proposition that those entities should be sold and the moneys put towards infrastructure investment.

Cost of living is the big issue for this election. Of course, we need a government that gives priority to containing the cost of living, but behind that there needs to be reform—further utilities reform. Do not look back on electricity reform; take it forward and move on to full retail contestability. Move on to time-of-use charging. Move on to the installation of smart meters. If we cannot afford to install smart meters, let us look to a crude analogue. Let us have higher charges for electricity in summer and lower charges in other seasons. Let us think seriously about the stupidity of having both a carbon price and a renewable energy target. I am a supporter of the carbon price; let it do its work and let us rely on that and do away with the renewable energy target.

In respect of water, we are now in a program of desalination plant after desalination plant. That provides unlimited water, but at very high prices. Recycling water may be about 15 per cent cheaper, but it will require strong leadership to get public acceptance for that. The Water Corporation is a great organisation, but it will not deliver anything other than those big projects. We have to let in the private sector to compete for the provision of bulk water supply, and to do that we have to take procurement decisions outside the control of the Water Corporation and give those procurement decisions to an independent procurement entity as recommended by the Economic Regulation Authority.

I refer to rents. The cost of living impacts most severely on those people who are confined to the private rental sector. It is horrendous out there. Anyone who has young people in their family knows there are queues of people outside houses and people are bidding up the rent. If they get a house for \$600 a week, that is a bargain! We have to do

something about the control of rents in this state. I do not have the answer, but I think we need a major microeconomic reform program. We need to take it out of the hands of the planners. My suggestion would be to commission the Economic Regulation Authority to develop a major reform agenda to get rents under control in Perth, and then get on with implementing the recommendations of that report.

Finally, on the cost of living, our systems providing help to the most disadvantaged in this state are poorly targeted, costly to administer and provide too little for those really in need. I suggest we need to negotiate with the federal government to piggyback on its assistance delivery mechanisms. If we do that, we can deliver more to those people really in need at less cost.

Very quickly, on native title, I just want to say that we still have more than 80 registered native title claims to go and another 23 or so that are not registered that might eventually be registered. We need to bring an end to the resolution of native title claims. I think we should set ourselves a target: Let us resolve every existing native title claim in this state by the thirtieth anniversary of the Mabo decision. Let us give ourselves till 2022 and get every one of those claims resolved. That will take a major act of leadership and a major act of prioritisation from the government.

No political career is merely an individual effort. I want to thank a lot of people. Firstly, I want to thank my partner, Ljiljanna Ravlich. I want to thank her for her love and support, which I cherish. I want to thank her for her flair and her practical energy and her Labor values, which I admire. I want to thank her for her capacity to make me look half competent on the dance floor, and I want to thank her for teaching me a bit about what it is like to be the partner of a politician.

I want to thank my sister Anne and my brothers Bill and Frank. I want to thank my sons Ben and Alex. I want to thank my daughter-in-law Jess, and Ben's partner Aimee. I want to thank them for their support, for their tolerance of my obsessions and for their forbearance when they have been held accountable. If your name is Ripper, it is hard to avoid being held accountable for the mistakes of your family member in politics.

I want to thank my electorate staff Merrilyn Ercegovich, Jean Gors and Jasna Barbarich. I want to thank my long-term electorate officer Judy Matheson, who is here in the gallery today. Judy and Merilyn taught me how to be a local member of Parliament, and I want to say they established a culture in my electorate office in which we always fought for an outcome for the constituent. There was no post box activity there and no palming off people. We fought for an outcome, and Judy, Merilyn and their colleagues did that.

I want to thank Andy Duckworth and the ministerial staff from 1991. I am very touched that you are here in the gallery. I want to thank Michael Megaw and the Deputy Premier's staff, who are also here in the gallery. I want to thank Michael Megaw, Donna Plummer and the opposition staff who are present here in the gallery. I want to thank Chris Bolt, who was my executive officer from 2001 until 2012 and who prevented me from making any accountability errors. Michael, Donna and Andy led wonderful, loyal, committed, intelligent teams whose work was absolutely vital to the achievements I have claimed. I am sure Andy and Donna would accept it if I pay special tribute to Michael Megaw, who was my chief of staff for nearly a decade in government and in opposition. His friendship, his wisdom, his leadership skills, his understanding of business, the public sector and native title were absolutely invaluable to me in everything I did; and he was brilliant at leading high-morale, high-performance teams. Michael, I thank you very much for your contribution to my political career.

I thank my State Parliamentary Labor Party colleagues who gave me the honour of being their deputy leader for 11 and a half years, and their leader for three and a half years. I might say that when I became deputy leader, the two other alternatives were Jim McGinty, supported by the left, and Julian Grill, supported by the right and centre; I came through the middle at Geoff Gallop's request. I want to thank Carmen Lawrence, who asked me to join her cabinet. I want to thank Geoff Gallop who asked me to be his deputy, Treasurer and minister responsible for native title, and who gave me sterling support in every difficult decision that I took. I want to thank Alan Carpenter who confirmed me in those roles and who also supported me in some very difficult decisions.

I want to thank the union leaders I have worked with, whom I believe have been unfairly demonised for their important role in our society. I want to thank the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union in particular, who supported me in every preselection I ever contested, except the last one; and, in particular, supported me with my losing preselections. They never once asked me, in 25 years, to take any particular political decision or any particular course of action. They preselected me and let me get on with my parliamentary career.

I want to thank Peter McHugh and the staff of this house. I want to thank the staff of this Parliament. I want to thank all of you, on both sides, for your friendship, support and respect. I wish all of you the very best, but naturally, as a Labor person for 45 years, I wish my Labor colleagues special good fortune in the election ahead. They have the talent. They have the energy to win the election. They have the capacity under Mark McGowan's leadership to be an excellent government. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]