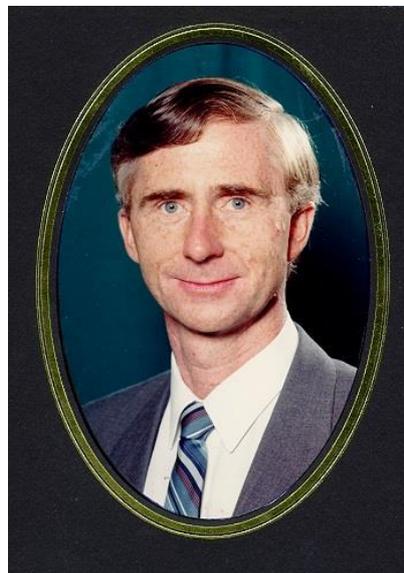




PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr John Kobelke, MLA

(Member for Nollamara)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday, 12 April 1989

Legislative Assembly

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY — FIFTH DAY

Motion

Debate resumed from 5 April.

MR KOBELKE (Nollamara) [2.41 pm]: Mr Speaker, at this, my first opportunity to speak in this House, I would like to congratulate you on your re-election as Speaker.

The SPEAKER: Thank you.

Mr KOBELKE: I want to speak on a number of matters. Firstly I will comment on the electorate of Nollamara which I am honoured to represent; and secondly, I want to recognise the previous members for the area. This will lead me to make comment on the recent State elections and to discuss some aspects of the State's electoral system.

The electorate of Nollamara encompasses parts of the suburbs of Balga, Dianella, Malaga, Mirrabooka, Morley and Noranda, and all of Nollamara. The 1986 census figures revealed that in age distribution and household income the electorate matches very closely the statistics of the Perth metropolitan area. Although Nollamara is in some ways an average electorate, considerable differences exist between the areas within it. The concerns and needs of residents in one suburb are not necessarily relevant to those in another part of the electorate. There are concentrations of ethnic groups throughout the area, particularly Italians, Macedonians, Greeks, Indians, Chinese, Poles, South Africans and Vietnamese. Some of these communities are of very long standing while others are more recent arrivals. All are making a valuable contribution to the development of Western Australia.

The issues of concern to the residents of Nollamara include law and order, education, roads, sewerage, services for the aged, and the provision of facilities for rapidly growing new housing estates. A large number of Homeswest properties are to be found throughout the area - in fact, the concentration is two and a half times that of the metropolitan average. The present Government has a very fine record in the provision of Homeswest accommodation. During the life of the last Labor Government homes were provided at four times the rate of that under the previous conservative Government. A large number of sporting groups, churches, service clubs, and other types of community groups make valuable contributions to our community life. I count it as one of the rewards of this job that I have the opportunity to meet so many genuinely friendly and caring people. It is an electorate which I feel very privileged to represent.

As the new member for Nollamara I would like to mention the previous members for this area: Ted Cunningham, Brian Burke and Keith Wilson. The present member for Marangaroo, while the member for Balga only since the 1988 by-election, has always been ready to assist me, and I express my gratitude to him.

To the former Premier, Brian Burke, I owe a special debt of thanks. Both as the member for Balcatta and Balga, and as the Premier of the State, he offered a very special brand of leadership. While some would prefer to seek out his weaknesses or mistakes, his very real contribution to this State cannot be denied. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses. During his time in this Parliament Brian Burke exercised the self discipline which enabled him to build on his personal strengths and minimise his vulnerabilities. Through self discipline he developed from a young member with a touch of the larrikin to become the consummate politician. In this, as in other things, Brian Burke led others by his own example.

The Western Australian branch of the Australian Labor Party, through the influence of Brian Burke and others, is very different now from what it was 10 years ago. There is a greater acceptance of the discipline which is necessary for members to subordinate individual interests to the good of the whole. This has enabled the party to manage change and plan constructively for the future. The amicable and orderly way in which the Australian Labor Party has brought in new members such as I, renewed the Ministry with new blood and transferred leadership to a new Premier, is something which would have seemed impossible just a few years ago. This sense of unity and the acceptance of ongoing self renewal certainly stands the Australian Labor Party in stark contrast to the Opposition. Through this greater discipline the Dowding Government now has the opportunity to build on the achievements of the last two terms.

I wish to recall some of the achievements of the two Governments led by Brian Burke. Without underestimating present concerns about the Australian economy, the situation in Western Australia now is far healthier than that which was inherited by the Burke Government in 1983. In order to assist the people of Western Australia, whom the Labor Party represents, it was necessary to tackle the growing unemployment problem urgently and provide homes for our families. This could be done only through private sector growth in a climate which then doubted Labor's ability to promote private enterprise interests. That the Burke Labor Government was so successful in working with the private sector to achieve growth in employment and near record levels of housing construction has created a new problem of perceptions. It has been fertile ground for the myth that the Burke Government had lost touch with the people it represented. The successes in economic and commercial matters seemed to overshadow the Burke Government's welfare and other reforms. In effect, welfare spending was more than doubled and, as already mentioned, provision of Homeswest housing was increased fourfold.

It is not my purpose to recount here the numerous achievements of the Burke Government and the rapid development of Western Australia which took place in those years. These facts are well documented elsewhere. However, I would like to say something about one achievement of which Brian Burke can be rightly proud. He was always hopeful of establishing a gentler community, and tried to move the style of public debate to one which used less scathing terms. He tried to find accommodation between opposing views and to lead people to being less confrontational. I believe his efforts to promote this spirit of gentleness have borne some fruit in Western Australia. My belief is illustrated by a change that has taken place in Western Australian politics since Brian Burke took leadership of the Labor Opposition in 1981. His style was appreciably gentler. This change in political style broke the mould in which Oppositions were usually formed. The Labor Opposition was still questioning the then Government, but it was an iron rule that criticism must be set beside the positive things that Labor would do in Government.

In the lead up to the 1983 election, Press releases from the Leader of the Opposition almost inevitably outlined what the State Labor Government would do and only later was the then Government criticised. This positive style was continued in Government after 1983. A perusal of the Perth newspapers during the last years of the Court Government would readily show the stark contrast with the Court Government Press releases which continually attacked the Labor Opposition. After five years of Government lead by Brian Burke, politics have changed in this respect: No political party can get away with solely attacking its opponents and being negative. It is incumbent upon political parties to convey positive policies and programs to the people. The recent general election provides an excellent example of what I am saying. The Premier, Mr Peter Dowding, led the Australian Labor Party to victory through a number of factors, not the least of which was his outstanding leadership. At the outset of the election campaign, the Premier gave very clear and unequivocal instructions to all the Labor Party

candidates. He was adamant that in our local campaigning, as at the State level, we must promote the positive aspects of our campaign and our hope for the future of Western Australia. There was to be no recourse to mud slinging or personal attacks on our opponents. Throughout his campaign, the Premier stuck to his objective of maintaining a positive and constructive campaign. Many people, I am sure, will attribute the recent election results to quite different factors. However, I would not underestimate the contribution made by a positive campaign in an electorate which had experienced six years of a positive and caring Government. The election results have reinforced the changes made by Mr Burke, further pressuring all political parties to adopt a positive approach.

I believe that we are all here in this place because we feel we can make a contribution to our fellow citizens of Western Australia. However, in the roundabout of politics such ideals may not always be seen to the fore. Personally, I am indebted to Brian Burke for showing to me that our political system can work, that ordinary individuals can make a contribution, that it is possible, even against a gerrymander, for a Labor Government representing the people of Western Australia to be elected and re-elected.

Mr Speaker, I turn to make mention of Keith Wilson, the previous member for Nollamara, and now the member for Dianella who was directly responsible for creating the vacancy which allowed me to stand for election in Nollamara. The action he took to transfer from the safe seat of Nollamara to the very marginal one of Dianella is to my memory unprecedented. To place principles and party before one's own political security is not commonly done. The member for Dianella is a modest man and I do not intend to embarrass him by attempting to list the reasons he is held in such high respect. May it suffice to express my thanks for the leadership he has given.

Government members: Hear, hear!

Mr KOBELKE: If I have spoken more of people than of issues it is but a reflection of that which I think more important. It is the people of Western Australia, from the pioneers of our early days through to the men and women of today, who make Western Australia such a great place in which to live. It is men and women of the calibre of Brian Burke and Keith Wilson who formed the Australian Labor Party and continue its great tradition. For 100 years the Australian Labor Party has fought to represent the ordinary people of Western Australia. It is a party of which I am very proud to stand here as a member. I am confident that history will look most favourably on this period of Labor Governments in Western Australia.

Finally I would like to comment on the State's electoral system. I made mention of the gerrymander which is a feature of the Western Australian electoral system. That our political processes can be rigged to ensure that one political grouping has dominated our Legislative Council since the inception of Responsible Government in 1890 is completely contrary to the Australian ethos of a fair go. The Western Australian Parliament is one of the very few Western democratic Parliaments that has failed to establish a fair system of electoral boundaries. I will give two reasons why we need to adopt an electoral system based on one-vote-one-value. Firstly, it is a basic principle that in Western Australia all people should be seen as equal before the law. If we espouse the right of all citizens to be treated equally, it cannot be argued logically that citizens should have unequal rights in voting to establish the Parliament which makes the laws of our State. If we regard all Western Australian citizens as equal then they are entitled to have an equal vote. Secondly, a system with weighted votes is wide open to gross manipulation by party political interests. I readily accept that certain sections of our community have special needs which Governments must attempt to meet. For a number of reasons, country people have particular needs and problems deserving attention. If this argument is to apply to vote weighting, one would expect it to be done according to some widely acceptable criteria rather than party political advantage.

Past experience shows that political advantage has been the primary consideration. The 1981 redistribution was a classic example. Lip service was paid to the difficulties of people who lived out of Perth and lacked means of communication and access to their members of Parliament. Was it for reasons such as this and not political chicanery that the Kimberley district was expanded to cover a large portion of the State and had its enrolment increased above that of a metropolitan seat? Was it due to isolation and remoteness of electors that Kalamunda was formed into a district a tiny fraction the area of Kimberley and with nearly half the number of voters? Country people do need special consideration but they do not need to be simply used as an excuse for rotting the electoral system.

Between 1983 and 1988 the Government put forward four proposals in an attempt to introduce a system based on one-vote-one-value. All four proposals were rejected by the conservative Opposition. Each piece of legislation was an amendment or a compromise on the earlier Bill in an effort to find some common ground with the Opposition. In the end, the present system was arrived at as a further compromise which, while it did not grant one-vote-one-value, was the only reform which the Government was able to gain with an Opposition which showed very little interest in establishing a fair electoral system.

While the new scheme did not make any major change to the overall electoral imbalance, it did remove the worst distortions in the old system. For instance, under the old boundaries, the largest electorate of Murdoch had some 34 000 voters, while Murchison-Eyre had closer to 4 200; that is, a ratio of 8:1. Under the present boundaries the largest discrepancy was between Maylands with over 22 000 electors and Ashburton with just over 9 000 electors.

Under the present system the ratio is about 2.5:1. Certainly, that is a large improvement. A further advance towards a fairer electoral system was the introduction of independent Electoral Commissioners who drew all the boundaries with the exception of that which forms the boundaries between the metropolitan and the non metropolitan regions. That was established using an existing statutory boundary. This was the first time that the electoral boundaries in Western Australia were drawn without direct interference from any political party. The present Government is again committed this term to electoral reform to establish the principle of one-vote-one-value.

The 1989 general election, to my knowledge, was the first in which the conservative gerrymander did not disadvantage the Labor Party. Regardless of this, the Government is steadfast in its resolve to establish a fair and equitable electoral system. I can only hope that following the recent election the members opposite may be led to reconsider their past intransigence to the Government's proposals and realise that it is in the interests of everybody to have a fair electoral system.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, may I place on record my deep appreciation to my wife and family for the support they have given me. Also, I wish to record my thanks to the staff who have been helpful and friendly in welcoming me to this place.

[Applause.]
