



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Janine Freeman MLA
(Member for Nollamara)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 12 November 2008

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

MS J.M. FREEMAN (Nollamara) [4.33 pm]: Mr Speaker, please accept my congratulations on your election, and I congratulate all members elected to this Parliament. I thank the parliamentary staff for their warm welcome and assistance.

I would like to acknowledge the Nyoongah people, the traditional owners on whose country we meet. I am mindful of the rights and obligations they have to this land and the ongoing spiritual and cultural connection they have to the south west.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the people of Nollamara for the faith they have put in me and the honour they have afforded me so that I have this privilege of making my inaugural speech as the member for Nollamara. I acknowledge the good work of the past members in the area: Hon John Kobelke, Margaret Quirk and Hon Bob Kucera, and not to forget that community campaigner Ted Cunningham.

The new electorate of Nollamara includes the suburbs of Alexander Heights, Nollamara, Mirrabooka, Koondoola, Westminster and a section of Dianella. I appreciate the generosity of the different communities in Nollamara, as they have invited me in and shared their joys and disappointments during and since the election. I look forward to applying my energy and skills to working in the Nollamara community to build a better future for them and for Western Australia.

The fundamental responsibility of a member of Parliament is to listen to the people, represent them and seek commonsense outcomes in such a way as to advance their interests and the common good. Part of this responsibility is to work with the federal government and local governments to ensure efficient and effective government, to be clear about what we are responsible for and to work together for the public interest.

The Nollamara electorate is rich in diversity, with people from all walks of life and from all countries that can be walked. It has a large Indigenous community. The dominant language spoken, other than English, is Vietnamese, and the area has a secular diversity and cooperation that would be sought after in many countries. The goal of our community should be to ensure that such a rich cultural heritage is celebrated, that tolerance and acceptance are valued and that the vibrant community they deliver is enjoyed. I would like to congratulate both the City of Stirling and the City of Wanneroo for their development of this area to promote and develop its wellbeing.

The Nollamara electorate has a relatively young population, with 30 per cent of the population under 19 years of age and 22 per cent under 14 years of age. Therefore, quality education is vital. It has indeed been a pleasure to visit the schools in the electorate to witness the dedication of the staff and the enthusiasm of the children. The schools in the area have an outstanding calibre of teaching

and support staff, who strive for the best learning and social outcomes. I was particularly impressed during my visit to the Koondoola Primary School and the integrated services centre, which is funded from the Department for Communities' Office of Multicultural Interests. Through this innovative, whole-of-government program, onsite assistance with health, social and trauma issues can be directly and quickly addressed to the benefit of the children and the community as a whole. A recent report to government on this pilot project found it to be effective and recommended ongoing funding for this facility and its extension to other schools.

Special congratulations should also go to the Department of Health for its funding of the Happy Kids program that runs at Mirrabooka, Nollamara, Dryandra and Westminster Primary Schools. The program celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, and the dedication of the deputy principal at Mirrabooka Primary School in driving this program, along with his colleagues, is to be commended. My thanks also to the staff and parents at other schools in the electorate for the warm welcome they have shown me.

The work of these great primary schools and their teaching staff is continued at Mirrabooka Senior High School, which embraces and celebrates its diversity. The school has over 55 nationalities and language groups represented. While celebrating and catering for the challenges this creates, the core commitment of the school is to ensure that all students reach their full potential. I had the honour of witnessing this commitment at their recent graduation ceremony, where all the students entering year 12 graduated, many with awards attesting to their high level of academic and vocational achievements. That may not seem so surprising, but many of them started off in English language centres before they began their high school studies.

It is clear to me that education is the foundation of the health and prosperity of our community and our state. The source of this obligation to the community is the development of our children. This makes the provision of community services, quality child care and the role of early childhood education vital. The importance of early education and socialisation has been demonstrated in Nollamara with the Communities for Children program. CFC programs increase learning outcomes for children, ensuring the successful transition from home to school and throughout life. I first heard about this exciting approach to the health and development of our children at a conference on crime prevention in 2005. Without exception, at this conference presenters from police to polities all emphasised that the critical period in preventing crime is in our children's early years of development. If we truly want the best for our children, programs that support our communities, such as CFC, must continue to be funded.

There seems to be universal agreement in this place that we are committed to communities. My experience is as a volunteer board member of the community legal sector for the past 20-odd years. It is with great respect that I have witnessed many dedicated workers deal compassionately and competently with some of the most complex and distressing cases of disadvantage and difficulty. I would also like to recognise the commitment of those in the front-line services of government such as housing, health, child protection and police. These people work with issues in our community that many of us have limited appreciation of or exposure to. Community services are vital to ensuring that we build an economically sustainable, inclusive and cohesive Western Australia. As policymakers, we need to acknowledge that such services require sufficient funding to deliver the resources required for success. For too long governments of all persuasions have contracted out these services to the community sector without meeting the full costs. Although the cost benefit to government may look good on the balance sheet, the cost benefit to the community is often negative. This is no more evident than when unemployment is at an all-time low and workers leave the community sector, taking their knowledge and capability to higher paying industries. Those who stay because of commitment have to deal with rising costs and decreasing ability to deliver an appropriate level of services. It is clearly time to stop the cost shifting from government to the

community sector and to ensure that the funding of the sector reflects the real cost of providing these invaluable services to the community.

Building community cohesion and collective involvement goes across all sectors of our society, including playgroups, P&C associations, police and community youth clubs, sporting and youth clubs, branches of the Returned and Services League of Australia and ratepayers associations. Organisations such as the Koondoola Ratepayers and Tenants Action Group and seniors' clubs in Balga and Alexander Heights demonstrate to me the ongoing commitment and effort needed to develop our community. Given this particular day, I would also like to acknowledge the Nollamara State Emergency Service. In many ways these organisations are reliant on finding volunteers, something that has become progressively more difficult in WA as we have seen hours of work increase markedly in recent years. These work hours eat into our leisure time and affect our capacity to participate in school fetes, sporting clubs and our community.

For me, working hours is a critical issue that impacts on volunteering and community participation and is a matter that needs addressing by policymakers. This is especially so when governments and organisations throughout Australia profess a commitment to work-life-family balance. Work-life balance is dear to my heart, as it was through the support of my previous employers that I was able to build my career while participating fully in my family life. I was one of the lucky one out of three women in Australia who received paid parental leave, a critical factor for all women in their continued participation in the workforce and, therefore, contribution to the economy and wellbeing of their children. However, work-life-family balance is under threat, as around two million Australians, the highest proportion of any country in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and second only to Korea, work in excess of 50 hours a week each and every week. I congratulate the previous Labor government on establishing the review into extended working hours and the adoption of the working hours code of practice in 2006. However, we should go further and establish clear regulations on what constitutes a working day and working week, parameters that are vital to establishing a clear foundation for work-life balance and proper compensation for working additional hours or overtime.

I would like to thank those people in the Australian Labor Party and the labor movement who supported me as the candidate for Nollamara. In particular, I would like to thank the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union: the president, Nina Devlin; the secretary, Dave Kelly; the assistant secretaries, Carolyn Smith and Kelly Shay; and all the executive, staff and members who have supported me. I am a proud "misso". In addition, my thanks go to all those at UnionsWA for their support. I acknowledge the responsibility that this position entails in defending and reinforcing the values of the Labor Party and the union movement, with its principles that encompass compassion and value human worth. I am a firm supporter of Labor's core belief that a fair society is one that ensures that all its people are cared for and have fair access to the wealth of the state and nation. In addition, for me, Labor values have their foundation in the belief that society functions at its best when it acts together collectively, not when it focuses on individual gain and blame but when it values the need to participate and the right to dissent. This commitment to the working people at the heart of Labor values is a core belief that I bring to this place.

Being an employee of the "missos" was a rewarding experience, as the LHMU is a union dedicated to its predominantly low-paid members by bringing about positive social change that improves workers' lives. The LHMU is a union with approximately 70 per cent women membership, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Its members are found in a wide range of industries, including cleaners, health workers, laundry workers, security guards, carers, and hospitality, manufacturing and early education workers. During my time as a misso I experienced firsthand the ravages of the previous Liberal government's workplace agreements legislation as an organiser in the contract cleaning industry. I watched vulnerable people have their wages bargained

down by companies driven by margins and a system that undermined any capacity to pay decent wages. Many of these employers were as much a victim of the race to the bottom as were the workers, as tender processes undermined the award safety net. Having witnessed this process and the distress of workers, whose only solution to a reduction in wage rates was to increase their working hours, I became committed to exposing the fallacy of the rhetoric that workers had a choice to make individual agreements with their employer. The subsequent federal WorkChoices legislation, which was modelled on the previous Liberal government's workplace laws, was exposed for what it was, and the Australian people reinforced their strong commitment to fairness for workers in November 2007.

When I worked on the Your Rights at Work campaign, I was always encouraged by those I spoke to in the community who would acknowledge the importance of protections for workers, the right to bargain collectively and the need for fairness and equity in our workplace laws and regulations. It is interesting to note that most people believe that legislators legislate for the benefit of all people. This was made very clear to me when campaigning against WorkChoices. I was asked, "Why do you have to argue about this? Why can't you sit down and talk with each other?" It was disheartening having to explain that the government refused to negotiate with the union movement and therefore we needed to campaign. This is an important message for governments of any persuasion: if they are not in dialogue with the Labor movement, they are not talking to a great number of people in WA.

Prior to the September election, the previous Labor government also recognised the importance of ensuring equity for cleaners and agreed that workers employed to work in government buildings, whether directly employed or employed through a contractor, would be recognised for doing the same job and paid the same accordingly. I call on the current government to honour this commitment, as it is only fair and reasonable that workers be paid according to the work they undertake, not at a rate less than that because their work is outsourced by government to contractors. If it is good enough to increase teachers' pay, it should be good enough to increase cleaners' pay.

In my 15 years in the Labor movement, I also had the opportunity to be the assistant secretary of UnionsWA to argue for pay equity and a fair minimum wage, was appointed as a member of the WorkSafe Western Australia Commission and the WorkCover board, and represented workers on two industry superannuation funds. I was honoured to work with the Indigenous committee on the campaign for compensation for stolen wages. I call on the current government to continue to ensure that this historic injustice is remedied.

My experience has exposed me to many instances of unfairness, but none is more outdated than the age discrimination perpetrated in the Workers' Compensation and Injury Management Act 1981. Section 56 of the act provides that workers' weekly compensation payments cease at age 65. When a worker is injured just prior to 65 or after, he or she is entitled to only a year's compensation. This provision directly conflicts with the Equal Opportunity Act. In our society in 2008, in which 50 is the new 30 and workers are not required to retire at 65, placing workers at risk of not receiving compensation if they are injured seems inconceivable. The argument should not, and cannot, be about age, but about medical fitness.

The clear opportunities I have had reinforce my fundamental belief that economic independence is a cornerstone of a healthy community and the economic stability vital to the wellbeing of our state. Having represented workers who suffered workplace injuries and were unable to return to employment, I have personal experience of the devastating effects that unemployment has for people. The capacity of our economy to deliver the lowest unemployment rates in history over the past few years should be recognised as the crowning achievement of the previous Labor government and of the current Leader of the Opposition, as the previous Treasurer. Further, I applaud the

Hawke-Keating government's establishment of universal superannuation and the establishment of industry funds that operate for the sole purpose of beneficiaries and provide economic independence in retirement.

I recognise the fear that currently surrounds the global financial crisis and agree with the Prime Minister that the excesses of capitalism have not served us well. My experience as an economics undergraduate in the 1980s taught me only too well that the doctrine of neoclassical economics and the rule of the market dominated to the exclusion of all other economic theory. However, I was never convinced by the supply and demand tables that would assume away other factors in our economic environment. It is clear to me now that faith in the free market has failed. Therefore, achieving real gains for the economy and alleviating disadvantage can be realised only by a resourced public sector, active regulation and application of the tools of government expenditure.

Many Western Australian citizens are doing it tough. This is evident certainly in the electorate of Nollamara where, in the 2006 census, unemployment was five per cent. The median individual income was \$407, almost \$100 less than the \$504 minimum wage at that time, and significantly less than the 2006 average weekly earnings of \$879.

These figures have serious implications, as outlined in the recent Australian Institute of Family Studies report on social inclusion. That report found that areas of concentrated income poverty impact negatively on children's wellbeing and life chances. Although the areas I represent are not in the country, in many ways they are regional and remote from the experience of other Western Australians, and providing services to them to ensure their development is vital to the wellbeing of the whole Western Australian community.

I remember vividly as a young woman meeting Sir Ronald Wilson when he addressed a community meeting. His clarity of conviction was a key motivator for me. His message has remained with me that it is not about equal opportunities; it is about opportunities afforded to people that ensure the equality of outcome. For me, this should be a premise not only simply for social policy, but also for our economic policy.

One of the greatest economic challenges that faces us, however, is the environmental challenge. Our environment is as fragile as it is beautiful and as custodians of it for future generations we need to act. We need to support economic tools that ensure that investment in sustainable technology and manufacturing is prioritised over cost-shifting, environmentally damaging processes. In short, we must put sustainability into the economic models and put a price on carbon. In addition, we need to continue to educate members of the population about their usage of our scarce resources. We need to encourage them to use alternative forms of energy and make it second nature to recycle their waste, restrict water usage, compost their food scraps and get on a bike to go to the corner shop or even, perhaps, work. The 2006 census of suburbs in the Nollamara electorate indicated that they have a greater propensity to use motor vehicles to go to work in comparison with any other areas in the local councils. My anecdotal evidence indicates that they would indeed make greater use of public transport if efficient transport were available to them. It is clear that the residents of Nollamara, as well as the residents of the whole of Western Australia, see public transport and the provision of reliable and efficient transport as a priority in addressing the environmental challenge.

With respect to waste disposal, many residents in the area are concerned about how waste is disposed of and support the implementation of the container deposit legislation.

In closing, I acknowledge and give thanks to those who have supported me to be here today. I am grateful and thankful to my wonderful family, particularly my parents, who have instilled in me the confidence and capacity to know my own self worth while accepting my responsibility to the community. To my dear sister, who has always been my best friend and number one supporter, thank you. To my brother, who worked himself sick to get me elected, thank you. To their supportive partners, I appreciate your contribution to me personally and politically.

Growing up in WA in the 1970s and 1980s, my life was peppered with many opportunities, one of which was access to free university education. At university I discovered the “F” word. Yes, that is right, “feminism”. My commitment to women’s rights was brought home to me when in my first politics tutorial we were advised we were about to learn political history and the “isms” that changed the world—capitalism, socialism, communism and fascism. When I asked whether feminism was to be included, I was dismissed with some considerable disdain as it was explained to me that feminism was not a political theory. Perhaps there is an intellectual argument to be had on this, but there is no argument that the fundamental premise of feminist theory of equality of women in society has changed, and continues to change, the world. I would especially like to thank the women who have inspired, mentored, taught and just demonstrated to me the fundamental humanity in women’s participation in all aspects of society.

I would like to acknowledge the profound impact Helen Creed, Sharryn Jackson and Kathy Digwood have had on my professional development and Anne Giles, Leikie Hopkins, Diana McTiernan and the Bradshaw women on my spiritual development. I would particularly like to honour Senator Pat Giles and Dr Carmen Lawrence who have inspired me in their capacity to achieve so much for their communities with grace, honour and inclusivity. It is also thanks to women like Hon Sue Ellery and Hon Cheryl Davenport that women like me are in this place in numbers to influence policy and bring the diversity that public debate needs to gain policy and legislation that is for all people.

My thanks also to my many supportive male colleagues and my mentor. For the vast network of friends and colleagues who have enriched my life, I thank you, particularly those of you who found the time and resources in your busy lives to contribute to my campaign to become the member for Nollamara. It was a great honour to have you participate, and I thank you very much, especially those of you who hit the pavement, came doorknocking, contributed to my campaign and are in the public gallery today.

The capacity to be part of the community I inhabit has been one of the most cherished things in my life. To my wonderful neighbourhood community, the school community and my book club, I thank you for your support.

I will single out the Nollamara campaign team and assorted other helpers for special thanks. Thank you Danny, Anne, John, Jodie, Shani, Phil, Helena, Ali, Lauren, Jo, Polyn, Kym, James, Karma, the two Fionas, Samuel, Rose and Bob. To anybody I have forgotten, I apologise.

I also thank Hon John Kobelke, Anne, Leida and Ken, Margaret Quirk, Michelle, Katie, Kylie and Tony for their moral support throughout the campaign and their assistance since I have been elected.

To the most important people in my life, John and Thomas, a special thanks for always returning me to the simple truth that at the end of the day I am mum and Janine and the daily routines of life continue.

[Applause.]
