



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Ms Christine Maelisa Tonkin, MLA
(Member for Churchlands)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday, 5 May 2021

Reprinted from Hansard

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 29 April on the following motion moved by Ms L. Dalton —

That the following Address-in-Reply to His Excellency's speech be agreed to —

To His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, AC, Governor of the State of Western Australia.

May it please Your Excellency —

We, the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign, and to thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to address to Parliament.

MS C.M. TONKIN (Churchlands) [3.37 pm]: Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your elevation to the office of Deputy Speaker and also join other members in congratulating Hon Michelle Roberts upon her election to the position of Speaker. It is most fitting that we have a woman fill this role in this hundredth year since the election of Edith Dircksey Cowan, MLA.

Today I acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional owners of the land on which the district of Churchlands is situated, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I am truly in awe of the ancient culture of the Whadjuk people and the thousands of years of their belonging in this special place.

I am privileged to be part of the cohort of new members that includes the 100th woman elected to the Western Australian Parliament. For this reason, I honour the memory and contribution of Edith Cowan and that of all the women who have followed her.

About Churchlands: the district of Churchlands is a beautiful place. It includes the important wetlands of Lake Monger, or Galup; Herdsman Lake; and Jackadder Lake. It is very close to Perry Lakes and the adjacent Bold Park, and is also blessed with magnificent beaches. These natural features are treasured by the locals.

Lake Monger is a special place for me because I have been visiting it since I was a small child. When we would go to see my grandparents, after a lavish Sunday lunch prepared by my grandmother Margarete Tonkin, we would walk to the lake. Since I now live down the street from the house that was my grandparents' house, I am still going to the lake. It is the place I love most in the world and the place I first visit whenever I return from my travels.

The district of Churchlands includes significant parts of the suburbs of City Beach, Floreat, Wembley and West Leederville, some of Doubleview, and the entire suburbs of Glendalough, Churchlands, Woodlands and Wembley Downs, as well as a little slice of Scarborough. It is always tempting to characterise Churchlands as being part of the leafy western suburbs, but the lived reality of people in Churchlands is something quite different. In fact, the character of the electorate is changing. It contains pockets of extreme wealth, as well as socio-economically disadvantaged areas, and everything in between. It is ethnically diverse and includes people who have come to Australia in recent years as refugees.

Even without much campaigning effort, Labor has achieved respectable swings in past state and federal elections, and now no-one can take the political loyalties of the people of Churchlands for granted, least of all me. I am very privileged to have been elected to represent the people of Churchlands in this place, and I am also conscious that I won by only 408 votes. As such, I will strive to understand and represent the interests of all sections of our community, not only those people who voted for me.

Although I am the first Labor woman to hold the seat of Churchlands, Dr Elizabeth Constable, AM, who held the seat from 1996 to 2013, was the first woman. She was succeeded by Sean L'Estrange, who ably represented the district as a member, a minister and a shadow minister for two terms. I wish him and his family well as he pursues new endeavours.

Upon entering Parliament, Edith Cowan identified herself as an old woman. At the time of her election, she was a mere 59 years old. I am also an "old woman", having had my sixty-fifth birthday two days after election day. I wear the badge of old woman proudly, because I have some experience and perhaps have gained a little wisdom.

Becoming a member of Parliament represents a significant career change for me. In making this change, I am inspired by my aunt, Sister Bernice Tonkin of the Brigidine Community. Bernice had a distinguished career as a teacher and a school principal, and many local people recall Bernice's time as principal at Newman College in Floreat. After retiring, Bernice commenced working with refugees in the United States and Central America, and upon returning to Perth worked with refugees who are the victims of trauma and torture. Bernice grew up in Wembley and continues to reside there. I am proud to be her niece and her local member and to be making a later in life career change like her.

For most of the past 20 years, I have been working internationally in the field of public procurement and on its reform. Having based myself in Brussels while undertaking research, I was offered a secondment from the Queensland government to the Department of Finance in the Republic of Ireland. For a year I worked with 11 civil servants who had little or no background in procurement, helping them develop their capabilities in modern procurement management and practices. From Ireland, I was recruited by the United Nations Development Programme, where I held a director-level post for three and a half years. While based in Copenhagen, my work supporting UNDP offices took me all over the world. Subsequently, for two years, I worked to establish and make operational the procurement and contract management functions of the United Nations–African Union peacekeeping mission in the Darfur region of Sudan. From there, I took up a post as the director of the Office of Procurement Services at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. After retiring early from the UN system at the beginning of 2013, I continued my work in public procurement as an international consultant under UNDP contracts in Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Eswatini and the Philippines, and for the Asian Development Bank in Papua New Guinea and Bangladesh.

My background in public procurement management gives me some confidence that I can make a useful contribution to supporting the government's agenda to drive more local content through public sector procurement. Apart from this, my international experience has also taught me many things about working with people from diverse backgrounds and with often very differing and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the resolution of common problems and concerns.

In her inaugural speech, Edith Cowan set out a vision for what could be achieved through the contribution of women. She said —

If men and women can work for the State side by side and represent all the different sections of the community, and if the male members of the House would be satisfied to allow women to help them and would accept their suggestions when they are offered, I cannot doubt that we should do very much better work in the community than was ever done before.

I look to us fulfilling Edith Cowan's vision of doing very much better work in the community than was ever done before, because we now have close to a gender balance in this Parliament. However, I believe that Edith Cowan was also reflecting a deeper insight—that we work better together when we embrace diversity. Different sections of the community have different insights, aspirations, challenges and resources. When we come together around particular problems or opportunities, drawing upon this diversity provides us with many more options for action and for resolution. As the member for Churchlands, I intend to seek out and embrace diversity within our community, and bring us together to meet the various challenges that affect our quality of life.

During the election campaign, a number of issues were raised and so many people of goodwill have indicated a willingness to work together to address them. There are five issues of particular interest in our community that were repeatedly identified, and I will list them because I think they are important. They are: traffic congestion, traffic flow and road safety; the quality of state school facilities and educational opportunities; the fragile nature of our wetlands and bush habitats in the electorate and its surrounds; issues affecting the quality of life of ageing members of our community; and building constructive and cooperative relationships between the state government and the City of Stirling and the Town of Cambridge around planning and roads issues.

In addition to these very local considerations, two issues with broader community interest were identified; namely, the need for preventive mental health services and support, and climate change, with a focus on green jobs through leveraging technological innovation and local manufacturing. We have invited interested members of the community to come together to plan our actions to address these issues and identify the opportunities that can arise from them. I look forward to supporting the efforts of the working groups that will be formed and doing very much better work in the community than has ever been done before. It is one thing to identify a problem or an opportunity, but it is quite another to invest energy into finding practical options and solutions.

We are very fortunate in Churchlands to have people who are enthusiastic about our community and prepared to make a significant contribution. I would like to acknowledge just a few of these outstanding individuals.

Cory Johnson is passionate about solving some vexed traffic congestion issues in and around the Churchlands area. What I admire so much about his approach is that he would like to work with all relevant stakeholders to find solutions that do not involve shifting the problem further down the road, both literally and figuratively.

Mary Lamb, who is in her 80s, was a nurse. She survived an abusive relationship. Through determination and courage, she raised her children and migrated to Australia from London to provide them with a better life. Mary is one of those characters who lights up your life with her enthusiasm. She helps her elderly friends and neighbours with the same diligence and cheerfulness that she showed when addressing the many challenges that life has thrown at her.

Kane Blackman is the vice president of the Leederville Sporting Club. Kane and other dads from the West Leederville area have become the movers and shakers behind the revitalisation of that club. It has been transformed into a significant community social hub for the Wembley and West Leederville area, with its membership increasing from fewer than 100 to about 450 in the last 12 months.

Samantha Lyon and Paula Kuka of the Lake Monger Primary School P&C are the forces of nature behind the development of a nature playground and outdoor classroom at the school. Many of the children attending Lake Monger Primary come from high-density residential areas and have limited access to outdoor play spaces close to home. The nature playground will make a big difference to the quality of their lives and education.

Ben Jacques is a young man who is passionate about the environment and urgently addressing climate change. He is also very much a friend of Lake Monger, which Aboriginal people call Galup, the place of fire. Ben is keen to work with the community to increase the native vegetation and water quality of the lake, and is moving to form a friends of Lake Monger group for this purpose.

Apart from the immediacy of managing the pandemic, our greatest global challenge is climate change. As Ben often reminds me, concerted action is urgent. Climate change is an issue that is repeatedly raised with me in the electorate. In fact, trust in the McGowan Labor government's ability to take climate action was reflected in a small but significant swing from the Greens to Labor in Churchlands. Climate change is a big topic, with many of the policy levers under the control of the federal government. However, the state government, through its control of the supply, transmission and retailing of electricity, has a major role to play in managing the transition to renewables. The challenge is to not only reduce our emissions, but also remove carbon from the atmosphere. We must therefore transition our state's economy away from its reliance on the mineral and energy resources sectors and into green industries, including manufacturing. For example, instead of exporting minerals, we could be manufacturing green steel and aluminium and transforming these through local manufacturing into the components that become part of sustainable international supply chains.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms C.M. TONKIN: International companies under pressure from other jurisdictions to reduce their carbon footprints are scouring their supply chains to incorporate more sustainable sources. We must also scour our supply chains under our state's major projects and incorporate into our definition of "value for money" sustainability and local green industry inputs. Amazing fledgling companies in this state are innovating in the green space. Those involved in public sector procurement must proactively seek out and understand the operation of these sustainable local supply markets. This will involve a significant shift in the application of proactive strategic procurement management and practices in the public sector. There are people in Churchlands who are passionate about our state's green manufacturing potential. We will be working hard to play our part in fulfilling the McGowan government's commitment to diversifying our economy and creating green jobs.

I am here today because of the goodwill, generosity, strength of purpose and plain hard work of the many people who supported my campaign. I am especially grateful to the members of the western suburbs, Churchlands, West Leederville and Perth Labor Women's branches, who volunteered their time, energy and resources in the belief that this was the very best opportunity for WA Labor to win Churchlands. In particular, I thank Rob Meecham, who worked with me from the beginning as my campaign manager and director. His depth of experience, constancy and good humour kept me focused throughout. He also made sure that there were no gaps in the campaign efforts in letterboxing and coverage at the pre-polls and on election day. He often did so by filling the gaps himself. Thank you also to John Morrissy and Astrid Serventy, who particularly shared with me the joys and challenges of doorstep conversations. They made this aspect of campaigning an absolute pleasure.

Jeremy Mowe took annual leave to organise our efforts at the polling booths, and his diligence ensured that every booth was covered. Lena Hee of the Churchlands branch organised many of its members to help cover each of the polling places on election day. I must also thank Pauline Meecham, Kate Grayson and John Morrissy, who provisioned our booths, and Nick Mayman and Kate Grayson, who organised the daily setting up of the pre-polling places at the Subiaco and Shenton Park Community Centres. During the campaign, so many branch members, volunteers and family members came forward and participated in the various aspects of the campaign, including letterboxing, doorknocking, hand-delivering letters from me to every elector, handing out how-to-vote cards at the pre-polls and on election day, scrutineering and supporting our fundraising efforts.

Mine was very much a low-key grassroots campaign in which every vote was hard won. For that reason, I am going to mention the names of those good people whose individual and collective efforts counted for so much in a very close election race. Please forgive me if I have inadvertently missed anybody. Thank you to Glenn Ruscoe, Wendy Mayman, Kanthi Perera, Jim Crossland, Chris Rumley, Donna White, Rami Lee-Newman, Ben Jacques, Damian Norvilas, Bec Ward, Peter Norvilas, Kirsten Norvilas, Carolyn Tonkin, Charmaine Tonkin, Kevin Tonkin, Hazel Toutounji, Elaine Tranter, Sultan Hazara, Wendy Lloyd, Joan Broughton, Tony Paxton, Paul Bengough, Liam Costello, Ellis Griffiths, Colleen Prout, Eve Morrissey, Kristan Morrissey, Dong Yu, Richard Tarnowy, Jay Weatherill, Melissa Bailey, Neryl Atkins, Angela Perry, Yenly Yenly, Hui Jia, Alison Morley, Qin Wan, Kuen Tsoi, Zhe Li, Kim Morrison, Naomi McCrae, Seda Aygun, Hasnain Ibrahim, Naila Ibrahim, Yew Hee, Tony McDonald, Don He, Anne McCrudden, Kc Liang, Glenice Duffy, Erica Hampson, Alison Morley, Edward Anthony, Leo Li, Steven Zheng, Maxine Isbel, Jincheng Wang, Tuija Heikura, Justin Whitely, Gabrielle Iwanow, Jane Allison, Mike Allison, Mark Reynolds, Eva Chye, Ping Chen and Bev Jowle. I am immensely grateful to all of you.

On a personal note, I would like to say that from the day I was selected as a candidate I had an image in my mind that motivated me throughout the campaign. That was the image of three of our beautiful grandchildren listening from the public gallery to my inaugural speech. Well, today, here I am and there they are. Andie, Louis and Felix, I want you to know how much I love you. I thank each of you for helping make kids' corner at my electorate office a bright, fun and inviting place to visit, and just a gentle reminder that I need more of your colourful artworks for the wall.

Like many families during this pandemic we are separated from our Canadian family. The situation in parts of Canada such as Ontario province is fraught. The health system is overwhelmed because the spread of COVID has been out of control. We have family in Ontario, but our two-year-old grandson, Liam, is relatively safe in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia, as well as the other maritime provinces, have had much less transmission of the virus than the rest of the country because their provincial governments adopted similar measures to those adopted by our own state government. It may be a couple of years before we can give big hugs to Liam again, but until then we can see him grow into a smiling, healthy little boy through regular FaceTime sessions.

My mum, Irene Tonkin, who was 92 years of age, died just a few days before the election. I had not told her that I was running for Parliament because mum's politics were conservative. However, on the day that mum chose palliative care, my brother, Kevin, announced that I was running for Labor. It cheered mum to hear this, and for the next two weeks whenever I visited, mum was interested to hear about the latest twists and turns on the campaign trail. What seemed to amuse her the most was me updating her on my betting odds. I would tell her that there was very serious money to be made backing me for the win, and she would smile! On Sunday evening, 7 March, I was on my way home after delivering some items for the election day kits when I decided to call in to see mum. I was with her when she died about an hour later. I was grateful to be there and I am sure that she knew that I would be elected, and I know I had her blessing.

[Applause.]