



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Hon Brian Follett Walker, MLC**  
(Member for East Metropolitan)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Thursday, 27 May 2021

*Reprinted from Hansard*

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## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

### *Motion*

Resumed from 26 May on the following motion moved by Hon Pierre Yang —

That the following address be presented to His Excellency the Honourable Kim Beazley, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the state of Western Australia and its dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia —

May it please Your Excellency: We, the members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our most gracious sovereign and thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.

**HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan)** [2.02 pm]: President, my sincere congratulations on your appointment to the chair. My sincere congratulations also to all who enter this Parliament for the first time. May we all contribute to the body of work before us.

I take special note of the wise words of His Excellency Hon Kim Beazley earlier this week when he swore in the new members of the Legislative Council of this forty-first Parliament, and particularly his earlier comments on areas of health and wellness, and other matters reflecting on the democratic rights of Western Australians and questions of electoral reform. These issues are dear to my heart. I also make mention of the excellent inaugural speeches made prior to my first speech, which I was forced to extensively rewrite at short notice in response to the uniformly high standard displayed by my honourable colleagues. Members, I stand in awe of you all.

Some among you may question why a medical practitioner represents a platform of cannabis law reform. A recent newspaper article described us as arguably the most controversial and unusual MPs to sit in the WA Parliament, but we appear decidedly normal, do we not? According to the research staff in the Parliamentary Library—an excellent library—I am the first medical practitioner to be called to the Legislative Council since Hon James Hislop, who was elected in 1941. We celebrate the eightieth anniversary of his election this year, alongside the fiftieth anniversary of his retirement from the chamber in 1971. This year also marks the fiftieth anniversary of my cohort’s graduation from Scotch College in this fair city in 1971.

That being said, you may have heard from my lilting tones that I am not entirely born and bred in Australia. From across this chamber you have heard the dulcet tones of Scotland, some of which had to be translated for the benefit of my colleague. “Wha’s like us? Gey few, and they’re a’ deid” was a fine example, and I will add to that the famous saying from Scotland, this time in the language of Scotland, Gaelic. My apologies to Hansard! The words are “céad mìle fáilte”, which translates as “A hundred thousand welcomes”. Truly, I can say that this traditional welcome has been expressed in the warmth and friendship shown to us in these early days. Indeed, I am sure I speak for all here when I say that I have felt welcomed into this august body.

My first language was not English. I spoke Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa kebangsaan di Malaysia, and by the age of four I spoke a mix of Bahasa and English without realising they were two different languages. How did that occur? My father flew as a fighter pilot with the Royal Air Force in Burma. My mother served in the Navy at Scapa Flow during the Second World War. The losses they experienced surely guided their sense of adventure, and, as survivors, they knew that every

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breath drawn was to be thankful for life. I owe them everything. The war formed them but it also marked them. They were veterans who knew the fleeting nature of life and so they lived every day that was given to them.

After being demobbed in 1946, my father wondered what to do with the rest of his life. He knew how to fly planes and kill people but he had only a high school education, so he did what any sensible Scot would do on returning from a tropical climate to the cold of Scotland and looked for a job in more tropical climes. He settled in Malaya, as it was then, to work as a plantation assistant manager, being shot at by the terrorists who were keen to follow in the footsteps of Chairman Mao. Indeed, he was shot, his side being ripped apart by a shotgun blast, but at least he survived; his manager the previous week did not. I have vivid memories of him being brought back by Gurkha troops, blood all over the bed, a very worried mother trying to keep her cool, while I, as the older brother, simply marvelled at the sight. If that was not bad enough, my mother informed me that when he was discharged from hospital in Singapore some weeks later, he failed to return at the appointed time. The return road was, of course, a target for the terrorists, and he could have been waylaid at any moment—such was our life back then. He did rock up after midnight rather the worse for wear after carousing in the RAF mess. I understand that a wife in that state of anger can be more fearsome than any terrorist threat! He certainly did not repeat that action, at least as far as I know.

Our family was sent to Perth in 1965 for schooling and as a place of retirement. As I said, Scottish weather is not the most conducive, which may account for the rather fierce nature of our reputation, and my parents had made the decision to better their lives by settling in Australia. If the truth be told, I became Australian in a short time, absorbed into the realities of Perth in the 1960s. How our city has changed since then! I grew from childhood into the cusp of adulthood in Perth, and it was here that I realised my future path in life.

You may well note that much of my attitude is that of a healer. I have known I was a healer since the age of 13. My parents are no longer with us to see what has become of their son, but they approved of my resolution, even if my attitude to schoolwork was lacking in endeavour, as I spent much of my time as a surf lifesaver at City Beach. The naivety of youth also led me to plan by the age of 15 to volunteer for Vietnam. My parents found that choice less appealing, so they returned to their homeland, causing us, the children, yet again to emigrate, leaving behind a major part of our lives, good friends—Tom Giles, I am looking at you—and a love of this great country.

My life until then had been one of relative affluence in Malaysia, but also near poverty once here. My father had been forced to leave Malaysia after the race riots with a fraction of his pension at a time when Harold Wilson in London had devalued the pound. We have experienced the effects of political decisions heavily impacting on our lives, taking us into near ruin. As you can imagine, this facet of life coloured my opinion of politics and politicians to a large degree. On returning to Scotland, my father found himself uneducated in anything beyond flying planes and killing people, tropical plantation management and selling real estate in Australia. He started out again from the beginning and took a job that would normally have been occupied by a youth fresh from school. Both my parents worked hard, but we experienced significant deprivation. As ever, love and harmony overcame difficulties. Then my dearly loved father died. He had barely reached the age of 50. My mother became a single mum, supporting three children on an income half that of a man doing the same job. In applying for a grant to supplement my university education, bureaucratic red tape required me to declare my dead father's last year of income, forcing me to rely on his future income for the entire length of my education—six years. Short of the funds, as many students are, I turned to the Army for the steady income derived as a part-time soldier while studying. I served as a Territorial Army soldier, a signaller and a bagpiper, ready at any moment to drop my studies and head for the front should war break out, as we feared would happen at any moment in those strange days of east-west divide.

I was speaking to a real veteran about the benefits of cannabis and other currently illegal drugs in managing the scourge of post-traumatic stress disorder. He looked at me on hearing my story and laid on me the title of veteran as well. He said that anyone who has pulled on a uniform and stood ready to serve is, he assured me, a veteran. I do not deserve that title; I have not a medal to my name, but I am honoured to be seen in the same company of those men and women who have served.

So, I continued the family taste for adventure and on qualifying, I did what any sensible young man does. I emigrated again—to Germany this time. What followed was periods of work as a doctor in Germany, the Soviet Union and Scotland. Standing at Callanish on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis in August, the rain coming down parallel to the ground, 12 degrees Centigrade, once again forced me to question what I was doing. So once again adventure beckoned, leading me finally to spend 12 years in Hong Kong and China, from where my long-suffering wife told me it was time to settle down. I came home.

I have spoken with the language and accents of Australia, Scotland, Germany and Russia before resuming the tones of Scotland. I have experienced different politics in all those countries. It is my experience that one can only truly understand a country once one lives there and speaks the language. At that level of experience, you begin to understand the culture—I mean truly experience the culture. You can read about Nazi Germany and study all you want, but when you sing in a choir shoulder to shoulder with soldiers who served with the Waffen SS or Wehrmacht, and hear their stories told in the same tones as my family related to me how they in turn flew over Berlin to bomb it, or strafed Japanese positions near Mandalay, and you see the different bricks of the church that was bombed killing relatives of your current patients, then you begin to experience life as a native of the country. You connect. The songs take on a new meaning. The foods become meaningful. The rituals required to fit into normal life become a part of your identity.

When you see me greet you with a hand on my heart, that is from Malaysia. On toasting you over a glass of schnapps, I stand and greet you in the German way. My language choices reflect an Asian heritage. I am a third-culture child. The key to culture is language.

I have worked in the Kimberley and the Pilbara. I attended the needs of First Peoples in Noonkanbah, a place revered as one of the first places where real and successful protests led to the return of power and sovereignty to a people all too recently treated as slaves. I could see that reflected in the old Museum of WA. I have seen the destruction of the Martu people who were permitted to move closer in from the desert, supported by a neighbouring tribal group that saw the need to open boundaries to support a tribe in need. But they have suffered loss, as has every group.

In common with all of my travels in such areas I see the loss of language. Once you lose language, you lose connection to culture. Once you lose connection to culture, you wander the lands lost, disconnected. You become a ghost in your own home. You no longer belong. The loss is irrevocable.

When we repeat the welcome words of acknowledgement in this place, I feel the good intent, but I see no connection to language or culture, and I welcome every move to regain that connection. The best example I see, a living example, is how the Jewish people have reconnected with Hebrew and made a dead language live again, in a modern context. I see the same effort in Scotland, where Gaelic-medium education is helping Scots reconnect with a language that was physically beaten out of them in the schoolyards up to the 1960s in an effort to destroy the Highland culture, to make the natives look and sound like the conquerors. Let us not repeat that here in this glorious land.

Here at home I have worked in Derby, Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Newman, with spells in Tasmania and Queensland, and a considerable time in the Wheatbelt at Kununoppin—

the centre of civilisation—caring for the residents from Beacon, Bencubbin, Mukinbudin, Kununoppin, Trayning and Nungarin, looking after the hospital and four general practitioner clinics where once the famous Dr John Radunovich practised for 51 years. You can see his life featured in our new WA Museum Boola Bardip. He and I shared a distaste for the medical bureaucracy enshrined in the WA Country Health Service. We described WACHS by quite different epithets, but more of that I am sure in future sessions.

I have experienced the heights of privilege and the depths of despair. I reflect on the great tragedies that have shaped my life. The death of my father when I was just 17 caused me to question why, to look for the meaning of life. The passing of my little brother, now three years ago, focused my anger at a health system that had simply failed to provide good medical service. The tragedies I experience every day in clinical life cause me to seek solutions, rather than just making medical diagnoses alone. They lead also to the bigger questions of how we, as a nation, can address the causes of suffering and distress. I have come to believe, especially considering more recent tragedies, that the issues are those attributable to systemic failure. This is something that every one of us who work at the coalface of health and wellness can readily attest to.

These are big questions, but for many here in this chamber the focus on this medical practitioner is surely about his belief in the place of cannabis in society. Members have heard me speak of my life, which is surely not one of normal experience. By definition I am abnormal. But can a doctor be so abnormal that he favours cannabis as a medicine, as a social and socially approved drug? Has anyone previously in this house used that word so often? Cannabis? Now you know a little about me, and still you must surely be wondering why someone such as I have been associated with cannabis. That is a reasonable question. The answer pertains very much to the electorate to which I have been elected—East Metropolitan Region.

I have sat in my clinics in Serpentine and elsewhere and listened to many patients detailing their pains and concerns. Many I can deal with, even if that means accompanying them through inevitable suffering to the doors of death. Of course, there is much joy in medicine—the laughter of someone who is relieved of symptoms or who has survived against the odds. But I have also sat and held the hands of those dying in their wrecked cars. I have cut down the lifeless body of someone who found life too much to bear and comforted the relatives who found their loved one hanging behind the cupboard door. I have stood in helpless anguish at the bedside of an infant now cold and blue and heard the howl of a mother in deepest agony. I have held the fading body of a car crash victim as life inexorably ebbed away.

Indeed, I have also survived being held hostage with a knife at my neck for what was only 30 minutes but felt a tad longer. All of those emotions I have experienced. The emotion that haunts me to this day, however, is the sense of futility and despair when I am confronted with the impossibility of managing, relieving, removing or in any way improving the situation of those who are in helpless distress due, not to their disease, but to the psychosocial depravity of a system that refuses effective input for these people. I have sat in that room, unsupported, neglected by the bodies that purport to care for my interests, unsupported by a system that exposes my patients to horrors of deprivation—disrespected, disenfranchised, unsupported, unrelieved, unacknowledged, suffering physically or mentally destroyed.

Where you might see statistics, I see a face; I see the faces of the family. We have heard of the reassuring statistics of improvements in the mental health system. I tell you, as one of those who stood on that front line, and still does stand there, that the mental health services are grossly inadequate in every way. I do not say this to cause scandal or to complain. I merely tell you what actually is happening, every day, in our communities. Those statistics that you see, I see as faces.

Take, for example, the statistic of our veterans of the armed forces, one of whom commits suicide every two weeks. Such a veteran honoured me by calling me a veteran based on my seven years

of Territorial Army service. They did not send me into harm's way as we sent them, to withstand the bullets and bombs of an enemy, to show courage in the face of death, and to return broken in mind and body to a society which reveres them once a year for half a day, and then proceeds to neglect them on a daily basis. I am here for them, and if I am angry on their behalf, I make no apology for that anger.

What of those who are self-medicating their ills and woes caused by domestic violence?

To whom do we refer for real help? When we look to find accommodation for those cast out into the cold, tired and hungry, is there much of a solution? Tell it to the doctors who sit in their rooms prescribing benzodiazepines for anxiety, antidepressants for their distress, other soporifics to send them to sleep in their distress, antipsychotics to manage the consequences of years of stress and distress. I am here for them, and I make no apologies for offering an alternative pathway.

Does anyone here consider the mental health services adequate in our state? Referring to psychiatric centres that are too busy to accept patients, being seen in emergency departments where doctors are flooded out by a tsunami of human distress, including those who seek some measure of relief with alcohol, methamphetamine, opiates, opioids. Self-harm events, lifestyle associated heart attacks and strokes—we have a sickness industry, not a health industry. We are treating the results, not the causes, and it is costing us billions of dollars, and untold lives of misery, pain, destruction, turmoil and increasingly a destruction of the very fabric of society. I am here for them, and I make no apology for raising their plight here in this place.

When I prescribe cannabis, I know firstly that this is perhaps the safest drug in my pharmacopoeia. Even with the THC component, swallowing a whole bottle in one go will give you an expensive sleep. Swallowing a whole packet of paracetamol will kill you. But we sell paracetamol in the supermarket and look at cannabis with suspicion and fear.

When I prescribe cannabis for insomnia or anxiety, I see a substance that can substantially improve anxiety and insomnia with none of the possible adverse side effects of the usual drugs.

When I prescribe cannabis for pain, I see a substance that is both highly effective for most people but also substantially safer than the heroin derivatives that are often issued without much thought or care. Opiates and opioids are responsible for major issues, including deaths due to misadventure and simply the result of the pharmacology of heroin. And yet no-one bothers me when I prescribe a heroin-based drug, but I have to jump through hoops to prescribe cannabis.

Cannabis is a healthy, healing herb that must be used with respect but which is also much safer than many, if not all, of the currently used medications, and I find that situation simply intolerable in the face of a failing health service, mounting psychosocial damage, the criminalisation of a large subsection of the population with all the social and financial costs that are involved.

My parents instilled in me a sense of respect for all peoples and all nations. That equity, freedom, and fairness is something that we desperately need in these times. They instilled in me a sense of the need to care for one's neighbours, as if they were my brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons, and daughters. They taught me that we are all in fact one family. It is in this spirit that I have developed my passion for wellness. That passion has led me here.

Here I am. I stand before you, an Australian and third culture child, proud to be a citizen of this world—here to serve. Serve my electorate of East Metropolitan Region, the people of Western Australia, my family. I stand for wellness: physical, mental, financial and social wellness.

We leave the causes of immense psychosocial distress and disease untouched, yet deliver to those who can afford it drugs that exacerbate the issues. I can prescribe benzodiazepines, antidepressants, opiates, opioids, anti-inflammatories, analgesics, all of which contribute to an enormous toll of medically exacerbated deaths as well as the consequences of simply putting a small plaster on a huge symptom. We criminalise cannabis, that safest of all of my prescriptions, making it both hard to access and expensive to consume. We readily prescribe heroin and its

derivatives, but we reject cannabis. In the USA there are over 112 000 annual deaths due to the medications we correctly prescribe. Not one of those deaths is caused by cannabis, and yet we vilify it. Does anyone here doubt that a case needs to be made for wellness that includes that healthy, healing herb?

That is why I am here: to stand up for the people not only of my own electorate in East Metropolitan, but for all Western Australians, indeed for all Australians. To demand that we address cause, not just effect. To demand more efficient use of our limited funds to achieve better outcomes with less cost. To demand that we, as a Parliament, become better informed. To hold the system accountable for what passes for normal. To change that normal into a healthy normal. To take seriously the scourges of our society, the domestic violence, the social violence, the loss of a sense of individual responsibility for health and wellness, to scrutinise our laws with a view to enhancing the rights and responsibilities of free people in a free country. To make Australia a leading light for a world in need of solutions.

In closing now, thanks are due. I would not be standing here today were it not for the efforts of Leo Treasure, his father Brett Treasure, the executive of the Legalise Cannabis WA Party, and every party member who worked tirelessly on small commons for the good of the party. An especial tribute goes to Karl Reinmuth, who worked without pause to ensure that every voter in the East Metropolitan electorate knew of our platform.

Thank you to the electors of the East Metropolitan Region, who placed their trust in this simple doctor to make a change for the better, and whom I will not disappoint. And to my patients in Serpentine, whom I still serve when duties in Parliament permit, my sincere thanks. You have less of me at the sharp end of medical services, but I serve you still. Will Safar, the patient and exceptionally skilled pharmacist whom I am proud to call my friend, your support has meant so much to me. Remember always that I am here for you, too.

And finally, and most importantly, my thanks to my lovely wife, Jessica, and to my two beautiful boys, James and Andrew. Everything I have done, I do for you. You are my world, my treasure and my life. I know you are proud of what I have done, but I am immensely proud of you all, Jessica, for being my compass in life, my support, and my best and surest critic, whether in sartorial issues or in matters of life and love. My sons, currently also at Scotch College, I am always there for you, and I will always love you more than life itself. Make the best of your lives and live your highest and best, not what I deem suitable. But if you decide to follow in my political footsteps, I will also not be disappointed.

Now I promised Hon Pierre Yang that I would speak for no more than 20 minutes, and I dare not take more time. My promise to you all is that I will serve you faithfully. I greet you well and thank you.

[Applause.]

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