



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Lorna Harper, MLC (Member for East Metropolitan)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply

Tuesday, 25 May 2021

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 13 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 LORNA HARPER (East Metropolitan) [8.36 pm]: I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Congratulations President and Deputy President on your election. Congratulations, also, to my Labor comrades here and in the other place. It is truly an honour and privilege to be here today as a representative of the East Metropolitan Region. It is an area of Perth I have lived in since coming to Australia. I have lived in Bayswater, Bassendean and Maylands, and now reside in Aveley. What a place to live! The Swan Valley, the hills, the culture and the people—an amazing eclectic group.

As you may gather, I was not born in Australia. I come from a small town with a big history called Largs. It is situated on the Ayrshire coast, overlooking the River Clyde, “doon the watter” from Glasgow.

In October 1263, the army of King Alexander III of Scotland fought and defeated the Vikings at Largs. It was a battle that changed the history of Scotland and led to the signing of the Treaty of Perth in 1266. Largs was also the birthplace of Sir Thomas Brisbane, after whom the city of Brisbane is named. It was at a school named after him that I had my first real act of collective action. Brisbane Primary School was opened in the late 1970s at the foot of the hills. It was not uncommon for sheep to wander onto our playground. The school had a large red blaise pitch that the boys played football on. The girls—well, we were not allowed on it during our playtime or lunch. To me, this was unfair and unjust. We played football as well, but all we had was a small concrete area to play on, so we went on strike. We got some of the boys to support us and refused to return to class until it was resolved. We won! To be honest, I did not like playing on the pitch after all, but that was not the point.

It is from my parents that my brother Graham and I got our sense of justice, fairness and community. My mum, Liz, was the eleventh of 12 children and the youngest girl. Her brothers fought in World War II. Her father was a steelworker. Her mother got a break once a year by travelling back to Ireland to spend time with relatives. My mum grew up babysitting many of her numerous nieces and nephews. My father’s first job was as a butcher boy at the tender age of nine. You see, my pop was injured somehow during the war and they needed the money.

Both my parents come from proud working-class backgrounds. My mum, in particular, encouraged us to ask questions; my father, to call out injustice. We lived in an end terrace, two up and two down house, which had a communal backyard. We shared the back garden with 14 other

children. We had some wonderful adventures. I remember climbing up onto the roof of a hut with Tricia and jumping off, shouting “Geronimo”. Our mothers did not think it was as good an idea as we did, since we were four at the time. As kids, we had the freedom to play and roam before the lights came on, being told off by whichever adult was nearest. It was such a sense of community. We truly were being raised by a village.

I have vague memories of the general strikes in the 1970s. I recall one winter when we had regular electricity blackouts. We were okay, as we still cooked with gas and had a coal fire. Some of our neighbours were not so fortunate. I remember nights when we were squashed into our living room to keep warm. Our parents did not have much, but neither did the other families. We shared what we could.

I do not feel that I had a deprived childhood. My parents worked hard and went without to support us. They encouraged my brother and me to go on to further education. I was only 17 when I packed my bags and headed to Edinburgh to attend college. The idea that we know what we want to be at that age is now absurd to me. College life was not for me. I wanted to have fun, to explore and to live life, not be stuck in a classroom.

I first came to Australia in 1989. Perth looked very, very different back then. What a momentous year that was: Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Thatcher’s introduction of the poll tax in Scotland.

I was an active member of the Scottish Labour Party back then. I doorknocked, letterboxed and stuffed many an envelope during my time. Of course, I was fundamentally opposed to this Tory tax. It was a tax that targeted the working class. It was meant to replace housing rates but it was not based as much on how big your house was or what it was worth but rather on how many people over the age of 18 lived there. It tripled what my parents had previously paid. They still lived in a two up, two down end terrace.

So, on a cool but dry day, on 1 April 1989, I joined 45 000 other concerned Scottish citizens to peacefully march and voice our concerns about how unfair this tax was, from the top of Leith Walk to the Meadows in Edinburgh. Of course, Thatcher ignored this. The Conservative government ruling from London had already decimated the shipyards, the steelworks, coalmines and car factories in Scotland. Again and again, they have tried to bring the Scots to their knees. Again and again, they have been unsuccessful. We are a feisty, belligerent and stoic race. As we say in Scotland, “Here’s tae us! Wha’s like us? Gey few, and they’re a’ died.”

I spent six months here in 1989. That first summer was an experience. My mum and I would open the windows to let the breeze in and only used the aircon at night to cool the house. We learned fast.

When I returned to Scotland, I lived in Glasgow—a city of contrasts, a city of culture, history and architecture within a city of grit, determination and justice. My granny was born in the Gorbals. I lived in the West End. Physically, we were miles apart but, in reality, worlds apart.

I travelled back and forward between Scotland and Australia over the next few years. I worked in a hotel in Largs for many years. The views from the hotel over the River Clyde to the Islands of Cumbrae and Arran, over the Kyles of Bute and to the mountains beyond are breathtaking.

It was at this hotel that I met actors, celebrities, lords, ladies, dukes and travellers from across the world. I learned that people are just people regardless of class, wealth or fame. I returned to studying whilst there. I studied full time, travelled two hours a day back and forth to college and continued to work over 35 hours a week. It took its toll on me mentally and physically.

My mum got me to come back out to Australia in 1996. It was then that I met my daughter’s father. The relationship did not work out. I became a single parent. Jess is truly my daughter. She is intelligent, caring, loving and as fierce as hell. She also suffers from mental health issues. She has given me permission to speak about them. It is close to 10 years now since she was first diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Teenagers attempting suicide is most definitely not

attention seeking; it is the act of those who are in crisis, and have lost hope and meaning. Jess was also diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Jess wants more people to be open about mental health and the struggles that she and others deal with every day. It is from experience that we know an emergency department is an awful place for someone in crisis to be. The noises, the lights, the suffering of others and the general chaotic atmosphere intensifies the feelings and emotions. The McGowan Labor government has been working steadily on how to improve mental health services here in WA but there is still a long way to go.

It is really hard being a single parent but I was luckier than most. I had the support of my mum and my stepfather, Stan. They were the ones who encouraged me and helped me to go out and attend Swan TAFE in Midland to gain further qualifications.

My stepfather is one of the reasons I stand here today. In April 2005, he was diagnosed with mesothelioma. He died in September 2005. It sounds quick but it was not. He endured months and months of terrible pain. He spent the last six weeks or so of his life in Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. My mum visited him every day bar one during that time. At the end, the pain was so bad that he asked the doctors to up the morphine. They did and continued to do so until he died in the early hours of the morning. This is not a way to die. It is not fast nor peaceful. I was enraged when so many obstacles of personal beliefs were put up to slow down the assisted dying legislation. I respect those who do not believe it is for them. However, I do not respect their attempts to stop others being able to make that choice. That and the delay of the industrial manslaughter laws were beyond belief. If companies are doing the right thing, they have nothing to worry about. If they are not, they should be held accountable. Why would anyone want to delay this type of legislation? I was angry, and have always said there should be more women in Parliament. I could not sit back any longer, so I put myself forward for number four on the ticket for East Metropolitan, not expecting to be here but expecting to help others who thought like I did.

I became a member of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, or missos, in 2005. I had completed my diploma in children's services and had begun working as a room leader at a community-based childcare centre. Whilst I was there, I stood with my union colleagues protesting against the local council handing over a public-owned facility to a profit-making company.

Working with children is one of the most rewarding but completely underrated and underpaid professions. Is this because it is seen as women's work or because it is seen as a profit-making business by investment companies? I continued to work in community centres, eventually becoming a director. It was there that I experienced firsthand what it was like to be bullied by senior management. You see, I asked questions and was not always satisfied with the response, so I would ask some more. It ended with me being excluded from meetings, ignored and undermined at every step. So I quit and took them to the Fair Work Commission. I was successful.

I then worked as a director for a few companies that were profit making until I just could not do it anymore. When was it decided as a community that it was okay to make huge profits from our children's education and care? I began working at United Voice in 2012. Dave Kelly was its secretary and Carolyn Smith, Pat O'Donnell and Amber-Jade Sanderson were the assistant secretaries. I was part of the Big Steps campaign seeking recognition, both professionally and financially, of early childhood education and care. The campaign was doing well and achieving forward steps until Abbott and the Liberals were elected.

I then moved to the education team. I also have a certificate III as a teacher's assistant and have worked in classrooms. I witnessed firsthand as an education assistant, and then as a union organiser visiting schools, the essential role of the assistants. Whether it be in kindy or pre-primary, a special needs assistant, a CALD—culturally and linguistically diverse—assistant or an AIEO—Aboriginal and Islander education officer—I saw the damage that was done when their numbers were reduced by the Barnett government. Thankfully, our Minister for Education in the McGowan Labor government has restored hundreds of assistants to WA public schools.

I then moved within the union to the manufacturing and property services team, what I refer to as the heart of the “missos”. Manufacturing and property services was sure an eye opener for me. It was in this team that I first came across Wilson Security. Yes, the same company that profits immensely from the parking at Charlie’s and the Perth Children’s Hospital, thanks again to contracts signed by the Barnett government. Wilson was operating on a 2009 workplace agreement. Their employees were working over a 100 hours a fortnight with below award conditions and penalties. Our brave union delegates took them to Fair Work to have the 2009 work choice–style agreement cancelled and the staff moved on to the award. Wilson was so opposed to this they flew in a barrister from over east to fight it; they lost. They referred to me as belligerent and I have no idea how.

My last three and a half years at the union has been as the health team lead organiser. Public health is a hot topic at the moment. I have my own views on this. I believe that the Barnett government created these separate health service providers to enable future public–private partnerships. Public–private partnership—what is that? Think of Midland Public Hospital, a public hospital being run without a full range of services because of the beliefs of St John of God, or Fiona Stanley Hospital where all support services were signed over to Serco, a multinational corporation making a profit out of our public system. There is also Ramsay Health Care, which runs Joondalup and Peel Health Campuses. These are public hospitals, yet companies are making profits from them or using them as a cover for charitable kudos. The health service providers are run by boards and chief executives. To me it is as though our health system was broken into many small pieces by the Barnett government.

Since the election of the McGowan Labor government in 2017 our Minister for Health has been working to put our health system back together. In August this year, staff employed at Fiona Stanley Hospital by Serco in catering, cleaning and logistics will return to the public sector. In 2023, the Peel Health Campus public hospital will return to the public sector. I look forward to the day we see the other services brought back in. It is also my belief that the current health service provider system needs to be reviewed. Every system can be improved and Health is no exception.

For the last five or so years, I have been president of the Bassendean branch. If only all Labor branches could fundraise like Bassendean. Over the last couple of years over \$15 000 has been raised and donated to both state and federal campaigns. The members of the Bassendean branch are amazing. They have supported me, mentored me and guided me on my decision to run. Being a politician was not an aspiration I held for myself. It seemed others held those aspirations for me. As Robert Burns wrote “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us. To see oursel as ithers see us!”

It is to my branch that I would like to begin my thanks. To Anne Giles, Carol Seidel, Anthea Matthews, Dorothy Griggs and Pam Day, and oh, if you have any doubts about voluntary assisted dying go and talk to Pam; she will set you right. Give this group some wine and they could organise the world!

I would like to thank my mum, Liz, and my daughter, Jess. I would not be standing here today without your encouragement and support. My husband, David—we found each other again after nearly 30 years apart. You are my love, my rock and my safe haven. My brother, Graham: arguing with you growing up has helped me be the mouthy, opinionated person I am today.

My Australian family: Sarah, John, Mateo and Maia. The help you are receiving in your hour of need from relative strangers has strengthened my faith in our sense of community. Our John has been receiving excellent care from the staff at both Charlie’s and now at Bethesda palliative care. You see, Sarah and John were also born overseas, and daily they express their thanks and appreciation at the level of care from these hospitals and in particular the staff.

It is National Palliative Care Week and a campaign has begun to raise awareness of this incredible service—“Palliative Care, *it’s more than you think.*”

To the women in leadership roles who have directly or indirectly led me to here. To Virginia Aden, my mentor for many a year. To Carolyn Smith, Amber-Jade Sanderson and Dr Anne Aly—they are strong female leaders. I admire your strength and determination.

To all of the other Labor women who have come before me, it is because of the work you have done in paving the way, that there are so many women sitting on this side of the house today. We are Labor women; you will hear us roar!

To Pat O'Donnell and the United Workers Union health team for your support and patience. To my union family, the United Workers Union members and staff: once a misso, always a misso—always union proud.

A special thanks to Dom Rose for his patience and support over the years, even though I would go out of my way to wind him up. To Dave Kelly, Matthew Hughes, Luke and the Kalamunda campaign. It is like a different world up in the hills. Go there.

This is part of the story of my journey here. It covers some of my beliefs and my hopes—my hopes of creating a better place for all of the community and my belief that investing in education, the public sector, health, mental health and our communities will sow the seeds of hope for the future. The people of Western Australia have entrusted us to be their representatives and we cannot let them down.

In this age of the pandemic let us be bold and make the changes necessary for our state's future. Thank you.

[Applause.]
