



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Christine Sharp, MLC
(Member for South West)

Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 10 June 1997

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ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

Consideration of Tabled Papers

HON CHRISTINE SHARP (South West) [8.05 pm]: Mr President, I address the Council for the first time.

I feel very privileged that so many people from the south west have put their trust in me to become a member of this historic thirty-fifth Parliament of Western Australia. I hope that I will be able to live up to the faith that has been placed in me and that I will rise to the challenge of being able to keep my own integrity intact while caught up in the whirlwind of community, media and parliamentary pressure that bears down on all of us.

The main work I wish to undertake in my time in this Council is to foster the notion of ecologically sustainable development. I believe it is an idea of fundamental significance to Governments throughout the world and, in particular, exactly the kind of work that this Council should address if our debates are to be of relevance to the great questions of our time.

I will touch on the work that I have pursued before entering this Parliament; that is, practical work that has focused on seeking to foster ecologically sustainable development in Western Australia. I am referring to my work at the Small Tree Farm, my home in Balingup where, with my partner Andrew Thamo, I have spent many years researching tree farming. Of course, anything to do with trees tends to take years. We have been battling on the farm for almost 20 years since changing course in the mid-1970s from being forest conservationists and city activists to taking a more proactive and practical direction. We decided back then that we wanted to get away from the reactive critique that makes much environmental work quite soul destroying.

Many people who know about this work have wondered why on earth we called our place the Small Tree Farm. It is true that our property is small by today's standards, but that is not the reason. In 1977, just before buying our farm, I had the honour of bringing Dr E.F. Schumacher to Western Australia to make a film about the plight of our native trees, both clear felled in the forest and overcleared on farms. The film is called "On the edge of the forest", and I will make a copy of it available in the Parliamentary Library should other members wish to look at it. The film turned out to be Fritz Schumacher's final statement, because he died a few weeks after his working visit to Western Australia. I dedicate this speech to him because his ideas continue to inspire me and many other people throughout the world. Some members might be familiar with Schumacher's work through his best selling economics book *Small is beautiful*. Hence, we came up with the name of the Small Tree Farm.

Our work on the farm has been following in the work of Schumacher's economic ideas. Dr Schumacher was a seminal thinker. For example, he was the first person to make a distinction between renewable and non-renewable resources. Just a few decades later, this concept has become so commonplace, it is hard to imagine its absence.

Schumacher's critique of conventional economic thinking was profound, and today it is as timely as ever. I will quote a little from *Small is beautiful* which states -

. . . one of the most fateful errors of our age is the belief that the problem of production has been solved. This illusion, I suggested, is mainly due to our inability to recognise

that the modern industrial system, with all its intellectual sophistication, consumes the very basis on which it has been erected. To use the language of the economist, it lives on irreplaceable capital which it cheerfully treats as income. I specified three categories of such capital: fossil fuels, the tolerance margins of nature, and the human substance. Even if some readers should refuse to accept all three parts of my argument, I suggest that any one of them suffices to make my case.

At the time I met Fritz Schumacher to invite him to Western Australia, he had become greatly interested in the economic potential of tree crops for the future wellbeing of this planet. On our farm, that has been our inspiration, too. For instance, our latest research - the fat eucalypt project - is developing new strains of eucalypt which are amenable to an agro-forestry silviculture, capable of producing high quality hardwood saw logs in revolutionarily short rotation lengths.

We hope this work will make a positive contribution to rural areas with a dynamic land care industry, to help the plight of the farming community by providing a more labour intensive and high value tree crop than Tasmanian blue gums and a design of farm forestry which sits more compatibly with traditional farming pursuits, so that the fabric of rural communities is embellished, rather than depleted by intensive tree cropping.

The economic misfortune of the farming community is horrendous. Australia has already lost 200 000 farmers in the past 20 years. It is still losing them at the rate of 30 family farms going under each week and, apparently, the federal Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, John Anderson, tells us that another 24 000 farms are unlikely to survive.

Despite the monetary value of our agricultural production being \$4.3b a year, we are losing topsoil at the rate of at least a tonne per hectare per annum; we are facing the loss of between three million hectares and six million hectares of farm land to salinity - that is, between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of the entire landscape in some valleys; and our rural communities face great hardship. This is where the work of ecologically sustainable development begins; not in airy-fairy idealism, but rather in confronting the hard-core problems of our time.

Many members will know that the term sustainable development was coined by the World Development Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission after its female chairperson, Ms Gro Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway. Its famous report entitled "Our Common Future" was published a mere 10 years ago. Around the same time in my region in the south west, before the formation of the Greens (WA) party, which I now have the honour to represent, in our small way we were inventing the same type of approach when we fought the 1989 state election on a platform which I developed for our candidate Louise Duxbury entitled "Green Development". I thought we were being original, only to find that the United Nations had beaten us to it. The most oft quoted definition of sustainable development comes from the Brundtland Commission. It states -

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

A distinctly Australian contribution to the international sustainability debate has added the additional ecological refinement to the sustainable development concept. It serves to remind people that there can be no sustainability without an ecological component. This expanded concept was the foundation of the Labor Government's process of devising a national strategy on ESD formalised in 1992. This federal process continues through an intergovernmental working group.

Some of the key working elements used in sustainability work throughout the world include managing human impact on the biosphere to a level that is within carrying capacity; maintenance of biodiversity; intergenerational equity; social and global equity; the precautionary principle; limiting the use of renewable resources to rates of renewal; and incorporating natural resource and environmental values into economic accounting.

All these notions are contained within the one phrase - ecologically sustainable development. When we refer to the word "ecological" in a phrase, we are talking about caring for the place in which we live. As a member for the South West Region, I stand in this Chamber not only representing 140 000 human beings, but also as the member for the jarrah forests, the tingle trees, the wildflowers, the wetlands, the wading birds, and all the community of species and life processes which make up the ecology of that beautiful region. What is occurring is an expansion in the notion of political representation. As our sensitivity to our place is growing so, too, is our awareness that we must respect the biological integrity and the assimilative limits of our environment. In the simplest of terms this means that in the long term we cannot take more from the country than it can produce, nor put upon it more than it can receive.

We all know that this is not the case presently with the land, water and air of our State. The severity of the environmental problems which we face are, in fact, hard to face. Many people prefer to switch off from the enormity of environmental degradation, both local and global. Others are exactly the opposite; they cannot switch off. Many Western Australians actually live with a pervading sense of despair. Others are different again; for them the environmental problems which we face are a source of resolution to action and empowerment. I suppose more usually all those different reactions are to be found within the individual person at different times.

How do members feel when I reel off a list of some of the more intractable problems? For instance, despite all the government programs and private effort, approximately two and a half times more land is being cleared than revegetated in Australia. Did members read last week that Australians make the third highest carbon dioxide contribution per capita to global greenhouse gases? Do they know that 22 per cent of all the remarkable diversity of Western Australian plant species are listed as threatened or in need of special attention; that commercial fishing from trawling Western Australian waters kills and dumps between about 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the catch as non-target species? It is just wasted. Do members know that about half the logs taken from our hardwood forests are reduced to woodchips and of the less than half which are milled, only about one-half of the clear trunk is converted into useful timber? Do members know that 75 people die in Perth each year from health conditions caused by poor air quality? That puts air pollution on a par with heroin and road traffic accidents as a killer in our society.

Have members switched off yet? If members would prefer to sit quietly digesting their dinner rather than listen to all these grim facts they should remember that the food they ate - if it was grown in Western Australia - was probably sprayed four times before it got to their plates.

The second of these three meaningful words is sustainable. Sustainability is about time. It is about living as if there is time. On her recent visit to Western Australia Joanna Macy talked about how the modern world is in fact behaving as if it were atemporal. As for the past, we have abandoned the traditional wisdom of our elders; but what of the future? Our political and economic decisions are so notoriously short term that if one calculates further ahead than three years one is considered a visionary - further than 10 years and one is dismissed as a loony.

Here I must make a complaint about the current Government. Although I will be very conscious not to blame the Government for this whole big picture, my complaint is about the speech that I heard on 6 March that the Governor had to read out at the opening of Parliament. It was in a time warp. It was as if the Government were cheerfully ignorant of the horrendous problems that we face, as if it had no inkling that almost all of the economic development activities of which it is so proud are of questionable sustainability. Whether Major General Jeffery agrees with what he was obliged to say is not the issue, my question is rather: When are we going to stop denying economic development which disregards environmental values or social equity does not deserve to be called progress? It is development without a future. Many would say it is going backwards.

For instance, it is now generally considered that the availability of cheap oil supplies will peak within about five years and after that it is estimated that every 25 years oil supplies will halve. Yet we design our cities as if the age of oil is timeless. However, in 25 years' time we will sorely miss the oil that will be burned motoring through the infamous Northbridge tunnel. It may be needed for harvesters if we are still mechanically to crop wheat and vegetables.

The only Western Australian industry that has even begun to talk in terms of sustainability is the timber industry. This is only because of constant pressure for 25 years from the green movement. However, when one analyses beyond the rhetoric, this Government's Scientific and Administrative Committee 1993 report chaired by T. Meagher under conditions set pursuant by the Environmental Protection Act into the allowable cut in the jarrah forest reveals that even on the most charitable of reckoning we are currently cutting down the jarrah forest at a rate that is 67 per cent above its sustainable yield. My own calculations in this regard suggest that we need to reduce the allowable cut to at the very least one-third in jarrah and to one-fifth of current rates in the karri forest systems. In my report on sustainable forestry "Using the Forest" published by Murdoch University in 1995 I quote the comments of a retiring Bunnings mill manager a few years ago when he told the local Manjimup newspaper that -

We've seen a few changes over the years. When I first started we were cutting between five and six logs per day to produce 150 cubic metres of sawn timber. These days we still produce 150 cubic metres but we have to do eighty to one hundred logs to do the same volume.

That is the history of the timber industry in a nutshell. In the past decade this overcutting has intensified. No wonder that people are camping up trees at Giblett block!

Development is the last term in the ESD trio. Development is about change, and change is about life. Development does not have to mean unlimited growth - growth of population, production and consumption. Unlimited growth is incompatible with the earth's assimilative capacity. Nevertheless, all six billion of us produce, populate and consume. What change is required in the direction of our production system so that it can cater for this scale of demand within the context of diminishing resources and overloaded environments? I remind members of the quote from Schumacher, "The problem of production has not yet been solved."

What do we value? What direction do we want to move towards? Members must remember that we are facing a challenge not just of an era, but of our civilisation. Hardly any human society to date has achieved a sustainable society. The fact that humans have continued to proliferate in the past has largely been due to the fact that we were able to move on to exploit new wildernesses. Now there are no new frontiers. In his book *A Green History of the World* the British historian Clive Ponting maintains that the only human societies which have continuously occupied and lived off the same piece of country are the Chinese and the north west Europeans. However, in both these cases sustainability has been linked to colonial expansion.

When it comes to learning to live within our long term environmental limits the indigenous people of Australia must command our greatest respect. When the Aborigines first settled this continent they caused widespread impacts on the flora and fauna and a wave of extinctions of the mega fauna. However, after this initial wave of degradation they have successfully conserved the ecology of this land for between 60 000 and 120 000 years. That is a remarkable achievement. Let us hope that we can do as well as they have done. A good place to begin is by listening to them and to their knowledge about the management of this country.

Where is this Legislative Council at? Is it comfortably complacent, untouched by the human story, deaf to the call of the future, or rather is it caught in the disempowering web of politics and traditional policies, unable to respond? Is not it time that members of the

Legislative Council of the changing millennium undertook some of the most significant and independent work that a House of Review could do - that is, to encourage the Government to look to the longer term?

Shortly, as my colleague Hon Jim Scott has given notice, we will be proposing the establishment of a new standing committee on ecologically sustainable development to take on our share of the work this State desperately needs. Here is an opportunity to bring the work of this Council to the forefront of contemporary concerns and to provide a role relevant to the high community expectations of this new upper House. This is an exciting opportunity for us all. Ecologically sustainable development is one of the most dynamic tools we have. It is not about stopping things; it is about innovative and new approaches. Above all it is about thinking holistically and for the long term: Yes, it is also about jobs. Fundamentally the green economic model is about more jobs. The changes that are required to be made to our economic direction actually offer new green economic opportunities.

This is in contrast to the current economic rationalist approach which is about more profit but fewer jobs. Do members know how many permanent jobs are being created at the new Collie power station at a cost of \$600m? Only 52! By contrast a new solar voltaic plant in Virginia USA has been built for \$42m, while creating 450 jobs. It has been estimated that if Australia were to double its green jobs, by the year 2000 it would be worth \$8b to the Australian economy and 150 000 extra jobs. That is only the tip of the iceberg. By way of contrast the Government's resource development program will provide only 2 000 permanent new jobs.

Ecologically sustainable development is about lateral thinking and new opportunities. One came up in the Estimates Committee hearings last week about organic production methods and new markets. When I first mentioned organic agriculture to the South West Development Authority 10 years ago, the matter was trivialised. When I asked the Director General of Agriculture the same question last week at the Estimates Committee I expected a similar response. Instead it was such a pleasure to hear that the department has recently learnt from the Wheat Board of a strong demand for organic wheat in Japan! Food safety is an international consumer issue and we have a real opportunity to develop a competitive advantage in this field.

Putting the environment and the economy together is a powerful antidote to the problems overwhelming both spheres when they are kept separate and in juxtaposition. Above all it means conscious, strategic, integrated policies to plan our future wellbeing rather than passively expecting Adam Smith's invisible hand of unregulated market economies to create a sustainable society. One could say that ecologically sustainable development is about rationalising economics instead of economic rationalism.

I am not so naive as to imagine that we will solve this great problem by merely establishing a committee to consider it and voila, we have it! No, this is a huge goal that could be achieved only through a tremendous effort from across the political spectrum. I know that at all levels of government people are working towards this goal. This includes the Agenda 21 program for local government and the new management approach being implemented by my former colleagues at the Department of Environmental Protection and at the Environmental Protection Authority. Most important of all, I know also that at all levels of the larger community people are working towards this goal. Together we can achieve the changeover. We fail it at the peril of our society.

Mr President, we are in dire need of a non-adversarial approach, a united effort to achieve development for our State which registers positive on the long term overall balance sheet as well as on short term cash flow profit and loss statements. For that reason I would like to finish tonight with a few words about what my dear colleague, the former Greens (WA) Senator Christabel Chamarette, called "doing politics differently". Christabel was one of the first of a

new breed of politician who has begun to try to define a different approach to parliamentary work, one which could establish a greater integrity and dignity in the political process. For me this objective is about the avoidance of posturing and the adversarial approach. It values integrity above ideology. It implies working cooperatively with everyone who cares to join in common objectives, regardless of his or her party.

Hon Jim Scott has done a tremendous job over the past four years, single-handedly representing the values of the Greens. He has won great respect from other members and from the Western Australian community.

Hon Kim Chance: Hear, hear!

Hon C. SHARP: I am rather struck by the coincidence that not only is the female representation in this Council now far stronger but also that both the Minister for the Environment and the opposition spokesperson for the Environment are women. I hope that this bodes well for the cooperation needed to tackle the tasks ahead.

For myself, I intend to put a positive and honest effort into progressing towards ecologically sustainable development. I extend a sincere invitation to all members to join in.

[Applause.]
