



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC
(Member for South West)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 24 May 2005

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Motion

HON DR SALLY TALBOT (South West) [7.40 pm]: As I rise to introduce myself to the house, I must start by congratulating you, Mr President, on your election. Both you and I have inherited a bar set very high. John Cowdell will be a hard act to follow both as President and as member for the South West Region. John represented the diversity of interests in Peel, the south west and the great southern with the dedication and skill those communities now rightly expect from their member of the Legislative Council. He has also of course been a fine President for the past four years. Many of the changes he has made around this place will be a lasting tribute to the first Labor parliamentarian to hold that office. There is one big difference between us, though, Mr President. Your experience and your proven ease with the customs and practices of this place lend all your actions an authority that make you a fitting successor to John. I still have to find my place in the scheme of things, but I know I can look to you for help and advice in making my way in this new world.

There are lots of different traditions and expectations relating to first speeches by new members of Parliament. Historically, some chambers have expected new members to sit quietly for years as a mark of respect to their elders and betters. Others prefer that new members wait to speak until they can address a piece of legislation that particularly interests them. Within the living memory of this chamber, new members were rostered to speak on whatever matter came up on the notice paper, which led to one unfortunate person having to frame his first speech in terms of the onion bill. Our modern tradition, however, is to allow new members of Parliament some leeway to introduce themselves to the Parliament and to the community of Western Australia. The idea in a first speech is to describe a moment that is both a summary of our life experience so far that leads us to take a seat in this house and a kind of launching pad for the agendas we want to pursue now that we are here. I am sure that I am not the first and I will not be the last new member to find that life does not condense quite as neatly as we thought into this kind of story. What I want to do tonight is link the “why am I here” question about agendas with an account of where I have come from and what it is I have pieced together along the way that I can bring before members today.

In one sense the “where have I come from” question has a very straightforward answer. I was born into a Labour Party family. My two grandfathers were shop stewards in their respective unions.

One was a toolmaker and the other was the father of the chapel in the print union. My parents were active members of the British Labour Party before becoming virtually the only members of the local British Labour Party when my family moved to the second safest conservative electorate in the whole of Britain. From my earliest memories, our kitchen was campaign headquarters at every national and local election. My mother was the candidate, my grandfather was the campaign director and my father was the campaign manager. My three brothers and I made up the rest of the campaign team. As soon as we could write, we were sat down at the kitchen table in a production line of folding, stuffing and addressing envelopes, while weekends were spent tramping around the district's letterboxes. My brothers and I learnt to watch mum's face as she appeared on the town hall steps after the count, the four of us and our little band of supporters solemn among the cheering Tories. One day she came out beaming all over her face. We were sure that she had won the seat. In fact, what we celebrated was the first time that Labour had not lost its deposit in a general election.

I started to find my own feet in the Labour movement when I was 16 years of age and left school to go to the Royal College of Music in London. I got a letter from the education department congratulating me on getting a place at the college. The letter went on to note that I was too young to qualify for any financial assistance with my studies. It was the Musicians Union that came to my rescue when it not only gave me a study grant, but also made sure I got work playing in the local pier and seaside bands to help make ends meet. Thinking back, a 16-year-old cellist who had no idea how to busk a bass line to the waltz from the *Merry Widow* was probably not high on the union's list of priorities, but I experienced my first taste of professional comradeship on these gigs and I will be forever grateful for that.

I spent about 15 years working as a musician in both the United Kingdom and Australia before getting my first chance to work directly in politics. I was already studying at university when in 1983 the Australian Labor Party won both the state and the federal elections within two weeks and I was offered a chance to go on the staff of a federal member of Parliament. As many members will remember, they were momentous years to have been involved with the ALP federally; years during which Australia came of age economically, culturally and socially. There are still contested accounts of the economic legacy of that decade. Perhaps our economic coming of age should have been tempered with a more realistic appreciation of what it is like to be one of the cogs in the deregulated wheel. Culturally and socially, however, there can be no ambivalence about measures such as the accord, Medicare and the Sex Discrimination Act. These reforms, along with many others, put a spring in the steps of Australians who wanted to see their society become more inclusive, fair and tolerant. I cannot lay claim to any direct role in implementing these measures, but there was great satisfaction in helping to keep our ships in Canning and Brand on the right course for the seven years I was part of those teams. It was during this time, and more recently working with Kim Beazley, that I got to know many of the communities in the South West Region that I now represent. Mandurah, Murray and Collie were all part of the electorate held first by Wendy Fatin and then by Kim Beazley. We worked hard to help those communities thrive and prosper, and I am very proud now to be part of a government that is committed to delivering first-rate services to the people of the south west. I should mention at this point that the recent election of Paddi Creevey and David Smith as the Mayors of Mandurah and Bunbury respectively opens up very exciting prospects for those communities, and I look forward to working with both David and Paddi to ensure that we keep moving ahead in the most constructive way possible.

My next venture took me onto the staff of Murdoch University - a path well trodden before me by certain other Labor figures in this town - where I spent the time teaching philosophy and wearing a T-shirt stating, "Please do not ask me about my thesis". Eventually, the thesis turned itself into a book and I am here to tell members tonight that owning up to having published something called

Partial Reason: Critical and Constructive Transformations of Ethics and Epistemology is a great conversation killer, especially when I then have to admit to being a politician.

The most recent part of my history is the only part recognised by those in the media who like to accuse the ALP of drawing on a narrow skills base to fill these benches. Following in John Cowdell's footsteps then, as now, I was elected as Assistant State Secretary of the WA Branch of the ALP in July 2001. My past four years, in common with everyone else on this side of the house, have been spent working for the re-election of the Gallop Labor government. There can be no doubt that this government deserves its second term. This is only partly because of the fact that, as we heard in His Excellency's speech, we delivered the essential services that governments are elected to deliver - the police, teachers, nurses, schools and hospitals, which provide the levels of safety and excellence in our health and education systems that our community deserves and expects. It is also because we delivered in our first term of government a program of social reforms that overturned some of the divisive, exclusionist practices that only Labor governments seem prepared to address. One of the most significant of these was undoubtedly the gay and lesbian law reform. The legislation went a long way towards dismantling some of the prejudice and misunderstanding that destroys families and lives when left unchecked. I look forward to being part of the Labor team in the thirty-seventh Parliament as we continue to work to make our community a place in which fairness is not reserved for those who are members of majority groups.

That is basically the story of where I have come from. When it comes to the question of why I am here, I draw on every aspect of my life experience so far to distil my answer. Once again I find that things are not quite as readily condensable as one might expect. Reading the inaugural speeches of some other members of this house, I feel quite envious of those whose professional experience and skills translate directly into a set of legislative priorities. I have a feeling that, if I start to talk about politics in terms of Plato and Aristotle or even Bach and Beethoven, some members will find the solitaire game on their laptops irresistible. Instead I will talk about why I think it can be constructive to approach the subject of agendas in a broader way than is sometimes expected.

It is a fact genuinely recognised among progressive social philosophers that we live in an age of uncertainty. The past few decades have seen the collapse of old ways of understanding communities and relationships; the collapse of old ways of making sense of the world and of the good society and of what it means to be good. Yet, as my friend Eva Cox has noted, talking about uncertainty is risky because the word itself may send a frisson of fear through people. In 1996, John Howard forecast that Australians would be relaxed and comfortable on his watch. Instead, we are captive to a toxic mixture of uncertainty and the fear it generates. It is this that gives rise to what Cox describes as the worrying social phenomena of excessive demands for order, loss of public trust, self-interest, fear of strangers, increased litigiousness and forms of fundamentalism and terrorism. Visit any electorate office, Mr President, and you will hear people giving voice to this phenomenon. They feel ripped off by banks, by governments, by drug companies, and by the providers of everything from phones to roof cladding. They are inundated by accounts of corporate greed and mismanagement and horror stories about child abuse and pollution of our air and water.

I remember listening to talkback radio in September 2001. Australians had already been shaken to the core by the collapse of Ansett when the World Trade Centre attacks happened. A young woman who had just lost her job as an Ansett employee rang the radio station sobbing. "Nothing is safe any more", she wept and everyone listening to her knew what she meant. It was as if there were an Old World order that said these things could not happen; that there were still jobs that were jobs for life; and that ordinary people could avoid direct encounters with terrorists.

The question is: how can parliaments and governments respond to this changed world? How can we, as community leaders, help people make sense of our world? I think there are at least three things we can do. First, we can make sure that we colour all our deliberations with real people. We

need to make sure that when we talk of progress and of reform, we know how to measure that progress with regard to the people whose lives that progress will affect. When reform factors out real people, it plays into that preoccupation of self-interest to which I have just referred. Self-interest is the very opposite of the collective action at the heart of the labour movement. Now, perhaps more than ever before, politics needs to be about promoting the kind of social cohesion that increases people's feelings of security. We need collective action for the common good. If we are to provide effective representation for the real people who elect us to this place, we must resist policies that promote fear and fuel uncertainty. It is fear and uncertainty that undermine collective action and destroy people's faith that there might be a common good worth searching for.

I am not alone in noting that certain so-called reforms being talked about in the national Parliament risk increasing levels of uncertainty and distrust in our community. How does giving employers unrestricted rights to fire employees lessen people's uncertainty and fear? How does gutting the award system, abolishing the national wage case and reducing workers rights to bargain effectively over wages, entitlements and working conditions add to people's sense of security? Surely laws like these risk making life worse for working families. When political leaders lose sight of the real people they are leading, we all end up poorer in spirit. It does not have to be this way. The union movement has not lost sight of the real people it represents. In the face of threats like this, Labor governments should be using every resource they can muster to help people restore their trust in themselves, their relationships and their world.

This leads me directly to the second thing I think we can do to respond to our changed world. It is about turning threats into opportunities. In earlier times in a simpler and more certain world it was not so hard to map out what constituted progress or to measure the effects of reforms. Let us take some of the great social reform agendas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, three momentous legal reforms relating to women meant that we were granted property rights in 1883, equal access to education from the end of the Victorian era and, in Australia, the right to vote from 1894. I am not saying that these measures were uncontroversial. We all know what a road to ruin we risked by giving women the vote! As to the right to an equal education, a group of medical doctors during Victorian times were reflecting not only popular but also royal opinion when they issued the following advice: if women have access to education that includes studying science and maths instead of needlework, it will inhibit lactation, cause atrophy of the uterus, produce infertility and bring on nervous breakdowns. These are not opinions likely to have avoided controversy. My point is that in those days it was easier to identify what shape reform had to take and how progress could be measured.

The question about what reforms matter now is less easy to answer. The great social reforms in the past, such as those I have just mentioned, came about because of sustained collective action, and sorting out the threats from the opportunities was fairly straightforward. Sadly, too many agendas on the non-Labor side of politics promote self-interest and destroy the spirit of collective action that sustains us on the left of the political spectrum. This means that the challenge for progressive politics is to help people see that some of the things that appear to be threats might be transformed into opportunities by changes of focus or emphasis. For example, globalisation is seen as one of the biggest threats to local community identity. Yet the globalisation of our communications technologies means that people power exists on a scale never dreamt of previously. Systems that can transmit millions of computer viruses an hour can also rally thousands of people to a cause in that time. Corporations that have literally acted behind closed doors now have their dealings on virtual display 24 hours a day. Debates on the morality of corporate practices fill talkback radio shows and the letters pages of newspapers. It is often said that Paul Keating taught the community to talk economics. Perhaps it is also true that the age of uncertainty is teaching the community to

talk ethics. Moving beyond self-interest means learning who can be trusted. It is a debate that every community leader, including every member in this chamber, needs to be part of.

That brings me to my third and final point about what I think we can do in this Parliament to help people make sense of the changing world. It is the novelist Ian McEwan who said that a good society is one that makes sense of being good. In other words, we are good when it makes sense. Clearly, for many people in our community, the world has stopped making sense. What used to make sense has been replaced by that toxic mixture of fear and uncertainty I talked about earlier. It is perhaps a natural reaction for people to try to reintroduce a sense of meaning in public life by emphasising things like family values and using so-called educative laws to enforce certain community standards. Instead of using the law to protect people, we want laws to control people's behaviour. In Hugh McKay's terms, we try to force people to behave in ways that were once considered the province of personal morality. That might be an understandable reaction to what I am calling the age of uncertainty, but I think it is a misuse of the power that resides in the parliamentary system. It seems to me that there are two ways we can use the power that is accorded to us as members of Parliament. We can use that power to force people to be obedient; we can regulate to bring about a climate of suspicion; we can send people back behind the barricades of self-interest by withdrawing the basic infrastructure that helps people make sense of their lives - affordable education and health services, job security and a decent level of support for people whose circumstances put them at a disadvantage. That is the assumption we have often seen operating on the non-Labor side of politics, and it is to be hoped that we do not reap the full destructive force of that approach as it takes control of both chambers of the commonwealth Parliament. However, state Labor governments both here and around the country have shown that there is another way to use the power that is given to us. It will always be my objective - I know it is an objective shared by my colleagues on this side of the house - to use whatever power I have to help people without power. Empowering people is not about forcing obedience or pretending we can regulate for human decency and care; it is about keeping the practices of government open and transparent; it is about helping people have the courage to make choices about the sort of life they want to live; it is about building relationships of trust and cooperation, where might does not necessarily make right and where freedom and fairness are not distant ideals but the web from which we weave the fabric of our public and our private lives together.

These are the thoughts that emerge from a life spent immersed in politics, playing the cello and writing philosophy. One common thread occurs to me at this point. You, more than anyone in this chamber, Mr President, know that as parliamentarians we have to work long and we have to work hard to get it right. In the same way, a musician or a philosopher has to work with an intense degree of application to achieve an effect that may be almost undetectable to the uninitiated. This takes an unshakeable commitment, but one that is sustained by understanding how very great, even momentous, the effect of such application might turn out to be. As a musician and a philosopher, I have had the immense privilege of playing passages of music and explaining complex ideas in ways that made people feel their lives were richer. I know that it is possible to make a difference to people's lives by our work in this place, and my commitment to make that happen is as strong now as it ever was to play the Elgar Cello Concerto or deconstruct the categorical imperative.

I will close my first speech tonight by acknowledging some of the people who have made a difference to my life. I have already talked about the challenges involved in following in John Cowdell's footsteps. I owe John a great deal. He has been my mentor, teacher and friend for nearly 25 years. That has been a great privilege. He really did not have to bequeath 12 years of bound *Hansards* to the walls of my new office to make sure I do not forget him as he moves into his new life.

My friend Nan Plummer never stopped making me feel I was good enough to try anything. As local director of music, she gave me my first promotion as a young cellist when she put me on the front desk at the Christmas carol concert. She is my internal voice of encouragement and support to this day, and she lights up my life with true friendship even though we live on opposite sides of the world.

Without Dr Patsy Hallen I may not have ended up in this place. At a particular crossroads about 20 years ago, she was the one who reminded me that there are people in politics who care as much about changing the world as the social reformers in universities. She was right about that, as well as about so many other things. Patsy lived what she taught, and my life would have been infinitely poorer without her.

State Secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, Jock Ferguson, has not only been a tower of strength during my four years at the party office, but also shown me how to juggle dozens of competing demands while never losing sight of the need to make life better for working people. Jock is one of those leaders who inspires both respect and affection and it is a privilege to work with him.

To the people of the south west who have supported me personally and politically over the years, I owe special thanks. Illya and Susan Cenin, Enid and Ian Conochie and Ursula and Will Richards in Denmark and Albany; Greg White, Roy Scaife and David and Treslyn Smith in Bunbury; and Paddi Creevey, Lynn Rodgers and John Hughes in Mandurah are just a few of the people who have made the south west feel like home over the past 20 years.

There are so many people who, in giving me their friendship, have given me more than I can ever adequately thank them for. Amongst them are Gill Lowe, who constantly strips me of any airs and graces I try to acquire; Jon Ford, whose passion for politics means we never run out of things to talk about; and Margaret Duff, who knows she will never truly be a "former" staffer.

My parents have been a constant source of loving support and encouragement. It is a joy to have them here tonight, but I will not say too much or dad will cry. To Wendy Fatin and David Talbot, I just want to say that I will always hold you closest to my heart. I hope you will continue to be as tolerant as you have been in the past when I forget to demonstrate that to you every day.

Thank you, Mr President.

[Applause.]
