



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Dr Tony Buti MLA
(Member for Armadale)

Legislative Assembly

Premier's Statement

Tuesday, 12 October 2010

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PREMIER'S STATEMENT

Consideration

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale) [5.31 pm]: Mr Speaker and my fellow members, I am proud and very humble today to rise in this place for the first time as the member for Armadale. I begin by acknowledging the Nyoongah people, the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

It is a great privilege to be elected by the good people of Armadale to be their representative and I bring their hopes and aspirations to this house. The electorate of Armadale is close to my heart. I have lived there for most of my life and it has been the setting for most of my life experiences. Whilst the responsibility and duty is daunting, I approach the representative task with all that I have because the people of my electorate are my people. I am one of them; their stories and experiences are my stories and experiences; their concerns and hopes are my concerns and hopes. Together, I hope we can achieve much.

ALANNAH MACTIERNAN

There is great precedent to this task and lawyers, of course, love precedent. My predecessor, Alannah MacTiernan, was a model of representative energy and political integrity. I thank her for all she has done for me, the Armadale electorate and Western Australia, and I know that she will contribute in new ways. I will do my best to build on her legacy.

Alannah's political career was the catalyst for our friendship. I first met Alannah in January 1993 at the law firm Dwyer Durack. She was then a partner of that firm and I was a lowly articled clerk fresh out of law school. It was not long before Alannah was elected to the Legislative Council. I casually remarked to a colleague that I was interested in helping out with the election campaign. Within half an hour, Alannah was in my office and within 72 hours I was doorknocking with her for the election of Kay Hallahan to replace the then retiring Bob Pearce as the member for Armadale.

If I say so myself, I was quite good at doorknocking. My doorknocking abilities had been honed in Seattle, Vancouver and Toronto in the mid-1980s where, as a young backpacker travelling the world, I worked for Greenpeace going door-to-door selling membership to that organisation. I commenced work with Greenpeace a day after the French secret service bombed the *Rainbow Warrior* in New Zealand.

There has been no greater fighter in this house for my community than Alannah. As I campaigned in the by-election, I was constantly reminded by the voters and told time and again that I had big shoes to fill. Indeed, I do, but it is a challenge that I relish.

ARMADALE

As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued, one's objective beliefs are determined or influenced by one's needs and Armadale's needs are no different from the needs of all Western Australians. It is just that on occasions we are required to fight that little bit harder for our fair slice of the cake than some of the good folk in other areas of the metropolitan region.

I will work as hard as I can to ensure that the 11 suburbs that fall partly or wholly within the boundaries of Armadale get their share of the state cake.

In his inaugural speech in this house, my friend and former University of Western Australia colleague Hon Christian Porter made mention of the imaginary Mason–Dixon line bisecting the Narrows Bridge, but sometimes it seems more real than imaginary. For example, Armadale is a fast-growing regional centre but our police are housed in suboptimal accommodation, but in an answer to a question on notice from the member for Girrawheen, the Minister for Police stated today that a new police station for Armadale, which would serve as a district hub, remains on the unfunded project list for this government.

However, I will do my best to ensure that in the corridors of power, all are fully aware of the needs and concerns of my electorate. I invite all those within the electorate of Armadale to join me in the quest because it is only by presenting a united front with a concerted and well-planned strategy that we can succeed in fighting for our people and for ourselves.

THANK YOU

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the support and efforts of all those who have helped me on the journey that brings me to this place today. It is always dangerous to single out individuals as one invariably omits some people who should be acknowledged. Therefore, I say thank you to all who have supported and guided me along the journey. But having made this collective thank you, I cannot resist the temptation to make mention of some individuals. I thank Gavin Crockett, Michael Heath, Bob Maumill, Gordon Hill, Reg Gillard and Jim Sharp for their long-term friendship and support. Likewise, I thank Stephen Price, Joe Bullock, Jim McGiveron and Graeme Geer who have supported me and who have been great stalwarts of the union movement and the rights of workers, which we in the labour movement hold as a high priority. I also add the name of Kevin Jolly, president of the United Firefighters Union, who has a great commitment to his members and to the safety of all Western Australians. He is passionate about protecting Western Australians from the threat of fires and bringing to the attention of the public potential bushfire hazards and the need to provide support for the great work done by not only his members but also the volunteer firefighters who serve the public so well. But because he dared to do so during my by-election campaign, he is now facing sanction from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. This is so wrong; this is so un-Australian.

To my campaign committee led so professionally by Simon Mead and assisted so well by Cassie Rowe, you were great. Thanks to Rod Clark, Sarah Thurgate, Liz Phillips, Jamie MacDonald, Melanie Archer, Ljiljanna Ravlich and Linda Savage for their help and assistance over the past few months. Likewise to Tina White and Judith Lewis, you are unbelievable with your support and friendship. I cannot forget the reliable help of Roma Jefferies. I could not have asked for more from you, but when I did, you gave me more. To my Charlie's Angels, you have been so wonderful, as have been the members of the Armadale branch of the Australian Labor Party, members of the wider party, Eric Ripper and my new colleagues on this side of the house. I sincerely thank you all and thank all my wonderful friends and supporters, too many to mention individually, but many of whom are here this afternoon.

FAMILY

As my colleagues of all political persuasions can confirm, our families have to endure so much for our decisions to run for political office. I am blessed to have the love and support of my lovely wife, Mandy, and our three gorgeous children, Alkira, Paris and Tennessee. See kids, now you have made it into *Hansard*! Whatever challenges we may face, we will always have each other and for that I am truly thankful.

We are all creatures of our formative years during which our families play a major role in our development and the formation of our ideas, philosophies and passions. To that extent I acknowledge the sibling support and influence on my life and say thanks to Jenny, Josie and Robert and their families. Of course, there are my parents, Mimma and Andrea. You have given me so much love and instilled in me the importance of hard work, good manners and respect for others. Thank you Mum, and I only wish Dad was here to see today.

My father arrived in Perth from Italy in 1952 as a 21-year-old single man. Much has changed in our state and nation since then, and I am glad that is the case. No longer would one expect a young, good-looking man from Tuscany to be reprimanded by his boss for speaking to a young female co-passenger while travelling on a bus south of Perth. The newly arrived immigrant was told he was a dago and should know his place. No longer would one expect an Australian-born boy of Italian ancestry to run home from primary school crying because he was being teased and constantly referred to as a slippery, greasy ding. No, we would not expect that today. Somewhat ironically, many things Italian became cool and fashionable as we entered the 1980s. But what is the situation today in relation to immigrants and refugees that come to this country from non-European countries? I hope they are being treated with respect and friendship.

DISABILITIES

In respecting the human dignity of our fellow human beings, I challenge all of us here to particularly consider people with disabilities, their families and carers. Much progress has been made in this area but much more needs to be done. Unfortunately today we still have a situation where a 12-year-old girl with a disability can be denied entry to a high school even before she has been assessed by the principal, purely on the basis that she has a disability. This is despite the fact that her primary school reports show that she is well behaved and does not disrupt the class. Thank God for this little girl there are schools in this world like Mercedes College and people like Sister Vedette who believe in providing respect and dignity for one and all.

Not so many years ago I was sitting in a comfortable lounge in the foyer of a major office building on St Georges Terrace waiting for a friend. It was only days after a state election. A prominent politician standing nearby was discussing possible ministerial portfolios with his advisers. Maybe the Premier would give him education, health or mining and resources. He seemed to be happy with any of these areas of responsibility. Then one of his advisers, with a grin, mentioned the possibility of taking on disability services. The politician seemed to think this was a joke, and joined with his advisers in having a good old laugh at the prospect. Would the Premier really give him, a senior and prominent politician, such a marginal and insignificant ministerial portfolio as disability services? Surely not! To the relief of the politician in question and his political advisers, he was not anointed with the disability services portfolio.

There is no one reason why society marginalises people with disabilities, but we can put forward some contributing factors. At its most basic level the marginalisation reflects the silence society imposes on people with disabilities. This is especially the case for people with intellectual disabilities. To an extent differential treatment is a product of their physical and intellectual difference from society more broadly. The notion of difference is, however, a matter of construction. A history of intellectual disability is to a great degree a history of language, knowledge and power. It records the language used to describe, classify and thus constitute certain members of society as “disabled”.

An examination of the historical treatment of people with disability also demonstrates an extensive degree of vulnerability. Martin Luther, a figure usually associated with free and critical thought, once wrote, after encountering a person who we might now consider to have an intellectual disability —

If I were the prince, I should take that child ... and drown him.

Luther justified these views by equating the child with the devil's presence. Today, most would reject Luther's views as abhorrent, but not all.

Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher and chair of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values, is renowned for his controversial stance regarding abortion and children with disabilities. Without oversimplifying Singer's arguments, he has publicly advocated for the rights of parents to terminate the life of severely disabled infants after birth. Moreover he has also stated that should he parent an infant with Down syndrome, he would adopt the child out. Singer justified these views by rationalising the essential feature of humanity as being self-realisation. This feature, Singer contends, is absent from a newborn infant and more so from those with severe disabilities. Singer argues that killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person; very often it is not wrong at all. Singer's views have led him to be labelled as the most dangerous man on the planet. His views have outraged large sections of the community, especially advocates for people with disabilities; however, outrage at Singer's views have not been as extreme as one might expect. Indeed in Australia his lectures continue to be well received and attended. The question is: why? I urge all members across the political spectrum to seek answers to this question.

I am not denying that functional impairments limit the opportunities for people with disabilities. However, such limitations are considered and responded to in a powerful social context that more often than not has accentuated the impairments of people with disabilities. As Foucault concludes in *History of Madness*, deviancy from the norm is not a function of the bodies and minds of people with disabilities but, rather, is written onto their minds and bodies by the society in which they live. I challenge my fellow members to better understand the issues and concerns of people with disabilities and their families and carers. Look to the capabilities of these people, not to their disabilities, because people with disabilities have much to offer us all if only we were to engage with them. I hope that one day the Premier of the day will also hold the position of Minister for Disability Services.

EDUCATION

Education is another issue I am passionate about. We need to substantially rethink the way we fund and run our schools and education system. Fundamentally we have to move away from the one-system-fits-all approach. We need to develop educational environments and programs that better take into account the different talents, challenges and backgrounds of our children. For some students it will be better to learn by the historically orthodox way, but for others it would be better to obtain the bulk of their academic learning via an emphasis on the arts, the sports or the trades. Just taking one example, the game of Australian Rules football, students can learn about Australian history, local history, geometry, biomechanics, physics, exercise physiology, anatomy, fitness, hard work, team work, goal setting, leadership, and so on.

We need to better support our teachers and listen to their concerns as they are the classroom experts. We need to raise the societal standing of the teaching profession. This requires imaginative thinking and greater funding. But we should not balk at the challenge because, as recognised by Robert Reich, labour secretary in the first Clinton administration, investment in education is a strong predictor of future national development and prosperity. I cannot overemphasise the need to better support teachers and their assistants.

Teachers are fundamental to the educational outcomes of students and their future lives and careers. I was very fortunate to be taught by Joe Kalajzich at Kelmscott Senior High School. He has been critical to my educational achievements, as has been Professor Bruce Elliott of the University of Western Australia. Teachers at all levels of education are so important; we should treasure them.

RECONCILIATION

When looking at the issue of education within my electorate, one cannot but be struck by the poor outcomes for many of our Indigenous students. Issues particular to Indigenous people are of immense relevance to my electorate—it has the second highest Indigenous population of all metropolitan electorates. When dealing with Indigenous issues one cannot shy away from the concept and goal of reconciliation. I come to the goal of reconciliation from a long period of work on Indigenous issues as a lawyer at the Aboriginal Legal Service, an AFL player agent, and in academia. I wish to acknowledge the contribution and assistance of Bill Johnson of the Louis Johnson Memorial Trust in allowing me to pursue a course of research that has provided me with a depth and breadth of knowledge that can only assist me as a parliamentarian.

We must work towards reconciliation not only from a justice perspective, but also from the viewpoint of self-interest. As former Prime Minister Paul Keating once said, “Always back self-interest, as you know it is trying.” What I mean by self-interest in regard to working towards reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians is that we must all live together and we must all get along together. We all—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—have obligations and duties, individually and collectively, to reconcile our histories and futures. We all must want better social and economic outcomes for all Australians, whether they be Indigenous people or not, because as Ben Elton, the British comic and Fremantle resident, once said, “I don’t want to walk out of my nice home in the morning and trip over a homeless person sleeping on the footpath outside my house.”

ECONOMY

Of course, my fellow members, for all the things we want to do, we must ensure that we have a strong economy. In Western Australia, we have the advantage of being rich in resources and minerals, but the advantages also raise many challenges, much of them centred round a two-speed economy and too great a reliance on the resource and mining sector to provide us with economic fruits into the distant future.

One of the more obvious problems is the growing disparity in wealth between resource sector workers and the rest. I am not begrudging the mining sector workers their time in the sun, as many work in trying and potentially dangerous work environments. In fact, as a supporter of the union and labour movement, I want workers to have better pay and conditions, but I am concerned with the increase in inequality in our society. It is not just a matter of fairness; as usual, self-interest is a factor in my concern. In the recently published book, *The Spirit Level*, it was noted that on almost every indicator of health and social problems—the wellbeing of children; mental illness; homicide; level of trust; and social mobility—the more equal societies of north west Europe perform much better than the less equal societies of Britain and the United States of America. We must guard against the situation that Marcia Langton described, whereby other traded parts of the economy shrink in real as well as in relative terms, becoming less competitive as the resource sector surges ahead.

We must learn from our mistakes and experiences. In years gone by we lived off the sheep’s back, which had some unwanted consequences. We cannot put our feet up and ride on the Chinese dragon forever; even less can we forever rely on digging up non-renewable resources. I want to make it clear that I am a strong supporter of the resource and mining industry; it has allowed our state to achieve great things. But we need to guard against over-reliance on the resource and mining industry to forever be our economic saviour. During the current resource boom, we should bring

into play more upstream processing opportunities. Let us become the clean and clever country. We must ensure that the agricultural sector is not cast aside for the mining and resource industry. This we must ensure for reasons of sustaining a stable domestic food supply, and out of respect for generations of farmers and pastoralists who have an attachment to the land not unlike our Indigenous people. We must grasp the nettle to ensure that all Western Australians benefit from the resource boom and to ensure that the state of Western Australia gains its just benefits.

The current resource royalties scheme does not serve us well. A properly and equitably structured mineral rent resource tax will serve Western Australia better. Our resources belong to all of us, and, as such, we should all benefit more greatly from the resources boom. As long as—I mean as long as—the interests of Western Australians are properly catered for, I urge the federal government to proceed with the mineral rent resource tax that could bring benefits to more Western Australians and assist in diversifying the economy. After all, a vibrant economy is not an end in itself; it is a means to achieve social justice for all and to provide the resources in essential services such as education and health, which must include mental health, employment and social services. It means, above all, equal opportunity for all to share in the fruits of good economic management.

A properly structured and devised mineral rent resource tax is a good tax for Western Australia, but one would not have thought so from the way it was sold before the last federal election. The federal government failed badly in the contest of ideas and the political discourse on this matter, and, as a result, federal Labor candidates from Western Australia were hung out to dry. The federal Parliament and our nation is the poorer for this. The last federal election should remind us all, on both sides of the house and on the crossbenches, that we need to be bold, positive and committed if we are going to engage the electorate. We should not run away from the challenges and difficulties. We will be a better Parliament and government if we, as Sir Winston Churchill said, grasp the opportunities that come from difficult situations and challenges. Whether I succeed or fail in following this vision, I am going to give it my best shot. I thank members.

[Applause.]
