PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH

Ms Colleen Egan MLA

(Member for Thornlie)

Legislative Assembly

Address-in-Reply

Wednesday 30 April 2025

Reprinted from Hansard

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday 30 April 2025

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from 29 April 2025 on the following motion, moved by **Mrs Lorna Clarke**:

That the following Address-in-Reply to His Excellency's speech be agreed to —

To His Excellency the Honourable Christopher Dawson AC APM, Governor of the State of Western Australia.

May it please Your Excellency —

We, the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign, and to thank Your Excellency for the speech you have been pleased to address to Parliament.

Ms Colleen Egan (Thornlie) (12:57 pm): I acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the great Noongar nation and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. I pay my deep respect to all elders, past and present. I particularly acknowledge any Aboriginal people who may be watching and listening or may read this speech in the future.

This inaugural speech is a multidimensional experience. I have now viewed this chamber from three different angles: as a political reporter up there on the press bench above us; as a ministerial adviser to the former Attorney General—who is at the back of the chamber—down in the bowels of the building; and now as a member of the Legislative Assembly, thanks to the people of Thornlie, Gosnells, Maddington, Martin and Orange Grove who entrusted me with their votes.

My election on 8 March was a collective vote of confidence and trust in Roger Cook and his team and the eight years of stable and effective government by WA Labor. I am proud to have been a small cog in that wheel for six of those eight years as chief of staff, and I am humbled to have been chosen to represent the party in Thornlie, the Labor heartland, when the vacancy arose. My life experience, my career in both journalism and government, and my commitment to justice and equality, are the building blocks for the next four years of advocating for the people of my electorate.

Mr Speaker, to understand why I am here and what drives me to advocate for Thornlie, I need to explain where I have been.

I was born in Armadale and grew up in working class Roleystone, the youngest of seven children of parents who had recently emigrated from England and Ireland. My father was partially blinded in an explosive accident at work and for a time there was not enough money for food. The policies of the Whitlam Labor government enabled my mother to attend night school and graduate from teachers training college. She started her first job teaching at Sacred Heart Primary School on Tonbridge Way in Thornlie. She taught at that school until she retired 22 years later.

My mother's opportunity for education provided by a Labor government changed our lives, as did her teaching career in the suburb of Thornlie. But I did not take my first opportunity of education. I dropped out of high school when I was 15 years old and went north, working on fishing trawlers and as a barmaid in Carnarvon, Port Hedland and Darwin. It was a period that defined me and has stayed with me until this day. It was during those teenage years that I lived, as one would say, on the margins of society—a life that would probably not be a common

experience for a lot of us here. I gained insights into the social justice issues that have driven my journalism, much of my work in the Attorney General's office and my presence here today. Between the ages of 15 and 19, I learned a lot about home insecurity, dysfunctional relationships, sexual harassment and worse—grist to the mill for any young woman in that life at that time. I was aged 16 or 17, floating many nautical miles off the coast of Carnarvon, the only female sharing sleeping bunks on a prawn trawler with some interesting deckhands. Well, let us say it is not easy to forget.

After a particularly scary trip that involved wielding a kitchen knife, I vowed to remain on dry land. I worked behind the bar at the Sandhurst Tavern in Carnarvon, which was a way out of town. Its clientele was mainly the Aboriginal community. Although things sometimes got a bit wild, the majority of my customers were respectful and often sweet and funny. I much preferred it there to the trawler! Working at the Sandhurst and in similar bars in Port Hedland and in Darwin, I got a taste of what it was like for Aboriginal people up north in the 1980s. During that time, I witnessed firsthand the uneven playing field on which these locals were forced to live their lives, and how both past and present injustices severely impacted their ability to move forward towards a better quality of life for themselves and their children. This deeply affected me and has been a formative experience I have taken with me over decades.

I took the job at the Sandhurst in Carnarvon because, at the time, it included accommodation, and I needed it. Like so many Western Australians these days, including in my electorate, I did not have secure housing in those years. At times I stayed in bad relationships to stay in a house; at other times I was forced to leave because I could not sleep with one eye open all the time. Too many women and children still live this way, in Thornlie and around the state, and there are often complex reasons why they find it hard to leave.

Carnarvon was then known, amongst other things, for heroin addiction. Fishermen would earn big in the season and then head over to the Golden Triangle in Asia for the rest of the year. I had some friends who were addicts; some were kind-hearted and sensitive and were mentally escaping traumas of the past. Substance abuse can also be more complex than it appears on the surface.

A stroke of luck, or perhaps divine intervention, visited me at the age of 19. In a dead-end relationship, by that time having very little belief in myself, I got the luckiest break of my life. I had a motor vehicle accident that left me with serious leg injuries. That was my luck. Stranded in Port Hedland, facing many months on crutches, I was unable to work in a bar, I was unable to hitchhike, and I had to go home, so I went back to school. At age 19, I went to Canning College in Bentley and then studied journalism at Curtin University. My life-changing education was also made possible by a Labor policy providing university study for students who could not pay up-front. I believe in second chances, particularly for people living on the margins—and third and fourth chances. I got lucky, disguised as an accident, but I also had the ability to make the most of that luck. I had English as a first language, white skin, a supportive mother and a natural ability to communicate, which enabled me to use my experiences for a greater purpose, first in journalism, then as a staffer in a Labor government, and now here in Parliament.

Over 25 years of journalism, I learned a lot about standing in someone else's shoes and a lot about how there are two sides to a story—until you listen to the third, fourth and fifth side. I sat in people's homes and heard their tales of tragedies, struggles and perseverance, and I tried to give a voice to the voiceless. I drew on some of my experiences from living on the margins, and I often thought of how things could have been so different for me if I had not got lucky—if I had not got my second chance.

In 1998, I began work on what would become the defining story of my career and my life—that of a man named Andrew Mallard, who was sentenced to life in prison for a murder he did not commit. Andrew was convicted after police claimed he had confessed to a brutal murder in a Mosman Park jewellery store in 1994. Reading through transcripts from Andrew's trial

and watching his so-called confession on video, I began to feel a burning sense of injustice that a mentally ill, homeless, hapless young man had been interviewed without a lawyer, tried without a competent defence and jailed for life. The further I looked into the case, the more I could see what was happening. He was a marginalised person in the control of powerful players protected by their place in the system. Andrew was deemed guilty long before he reached a courtroom, and he did not have the ability and resources to hold those people to account.

This sense of injustice became all consuming for me. I knew an innocent man was sitting in Casuarina Prison, and the system refused to accept that the case put before the jury did not contain the whole truth. For eight years we fought to prove that they had got it wrong. There was a strong resistance to change and the establishment did not want to admit that it had jailed an innocent man. I found out many years later that I was originally approached about this case because Andrew's first appeal lawyer, Mark Ritter, who had attended Kelmscott Senior High School, knew where I had grown up. His Honour Ritter, now a District Court judge, told a podcast in 2018 that he thought that because I, too, came from the wrong side of the tracks, I might have the sort of scepticism in the authorities to look into it.

To the people of Thornlie: sometimes you may feel powerless in the system and that no-one within the establishment is looking out for you. I promise that as my constituents, I might not be able to fix every problem, but I will be fighting in your corner.

Andrew served 12 years before his conviction was overturned by the High Court and he was released. Very soon after, it was discovered that a British man named Simon Rochford actually committed the crime. The whole time Andrew was in jail, the whole time we had been fighting to convince authorities to listen to the facts, there had been forensic evidence sitting in storage that could have proved Andrew's innocence. A palm print lifted from the glass of a jewellery cabinet from the day of the Mosman Park murder in 1994 and preserved for the whole 12 years Andrew needlessly spent in jail was fed into a fingerprint database in 2006 and instantly matched the real killer.

Andrew, vulnerable, living on the margins, was a victim of a system that would not admit its faults. Sadly, despite a large compensation payment, Andrew did not live to see a happy ending. He never recovered from the trauma of being in maximum security prison, treated like a murderer and locked in a cage, and he died in an accident in the United States in 2019. I pay tribute today to Andrew and to his beautiful mum, Grace—rest in peace—and his incredible sister, Jacqui, who remains a friend today.

Members would all know that a former member of this chamber, then Labor MP John Quigley, joined the fight for Andrew in 2002 and was pivotal in his eventual release and exoneration. At the time, I was sitting up there on the press bench as a political reporter for *The Australian*, looking down here on the government benches where I am now standing, where he was then standing. John immediately saw what I saw and felt the same sense of outrage and injustice. His passion and his razor-sharp forensic brain were crucial to the outcome. As a government backbencher, John's inspiring advocacy for Andrew when he did not have much else showed me what can be achieved by a local member of Parliament.

It was our work on Andrew's case that brought me into the McGowan Labor government in 2017 and that has led me here to this seat in this chamber. Six years as chief of staff to Attorney General Quigley showed me what can be achieved by a reforming minister and a Labor government. I am proud to say in this place that I was part of the Quigley team that brought true reforms such as lifting the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse survivors, ending imprisonment for unpaid fines, mandating calls to the Aboriginal Legal Service for Indigenous people taken into police custody, and finally bringing into Western Australia a modern and humane system of dealing with mentally impaired people in the criminal justice system. I saw from the inside how policy is made, how laws are drafted and how the lives of people in communities can be changed

by the levers of power being pulled in the right direction. From the outside as a journalist, I had no idea how many dedicated and talented people spent so many thousands of hours to bring legislation into existence. It requires meaningful policy choices, technical legal advice and the exact usage of words by Parliamentary Counsel drafters.

When we got into government in 2017, victims of historical sexual abuse had been campaigning for years for the statute of limitations in civil cases to be lifted. Their hopes had been raised by a private member's bill by a Liberal member of Parliament, only to have his own government refuse to support it. Almost immediately on coming into office, pressure came from outside. Where was this reform? Where was this bill? I understood why; I would have been writing those stories, too, outraged that we had not yet delivered. After all, lifting the statute of limitations was just a few words in a bill—right? But we did take longer, and as a result the Quigley bill produced nation-leading laws that provide people with a pathway to successfully sue the churches and resulted in million-dollar payouts and the provisions being copied in other jurisdictions.

Also when we came into office in 2017, we found that former Attorney General Michael Mischin and former Minister for Police Liza Harvey had rejected an offer for federal funding to establish a custody notification service. This service is a critical safeguard against miscarriages of justice like the one Andrew Mallard suffered. We established the CNS and now every Aboriginal person taken into police custody is entitled to a call to the ALS, saving lives and ensuring early legal advice for vulnerable people for whom English is often a second, third or fourth language. The ALS told me recently about recent cases, including an eight-year-old, a nine-year-old and a number of different domestic violence victims who ended up in far-flung police stations. Phone calls were made, advice was given and they were released. There has not been a death in police custody since the CNS was established.

As I look up to the press bench from down here, I still believe in the importance of journalism in our democracy. Journos cop a lot of flak but the job has been made much more difficult and they have fewer resources. The business model was smashed by the loss of advertising to digital media. It meant that we could no longer afford to properly staff newsrooms. Investigative journalists who had been able to range free and chase stories and leads down rabbit holes no longer have that luxury. At the same time, the voracious appetite for 24/7 news forced us to file quicker, be faster and less considered, and get only one or two sides of the story instead of four, five or six. It stole time to think, to ponder, to examine and to investigate. With those challenges, the working media landscape was dramatically reduced in diversity of ownership, with diminished independence. I know there are good people with true intentions who remain in the media, and I wish you the best in navigating such difficult terrain.

To my friends in the media—the storytellers, beat reporters, producers, presenters and researchers, photographers and soundos, doco makers, columnists, subs and artists—I hope you can keep giving a voice to the voiceless. Great journalism matters, perhaps more than it has ever done. Strive for it when you can, and on those occasions may the wind be at your backs.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I close and give thanks to my supporters and loved ones, I will give some more context for the things I have said today about my teenage years on the margins. As rough as those times were, I did not have to deal with the pervasive and public nature of social media, with its 24/7 pressures, judgement and stress.

(Member's time extended.)

Ms Colleen Egan: Sometimes I wonder whether I was safer on a prawn trailer at age 16 than kids today in their own bedrooms hooked up online. Anxiety, depression, bullying, predatory behaviour, often leading to school refusal and social exclusion, are the issues kids need help with today in my electorate of Thornlie. It is what principals are dealing with in high numbers. It is hard for governments to keep up with the exponential growth of need for adolescent mental health and related services. It is hard, but we need to keep trying.

As a single mum of two amazing young adults, I know there are parents, teenagers and young people in my electorate who are struggling. My focus in Thornlie is on the schools, sporting clubs, parents, kids and teachers, making sure they have the resources, support and understanding they need. That is why I focused election commitments on schools; sporting clubs, including Little Athletics, footy and soccer; and community supports such as the men's shed, women's refuge and legal centre. I can empathise with kids and teens who feel they have no future, but I believe they can have a second chance—and a third or fourth. I look forward to working with Thornlie Senior High School to deliver a $5 million election commitment to build a new administration and student support building. I look forward to working with the principal of Yule Brook College in Maddington, where they are delivering the Big Picture program, which tailors the education of students who are at risk of leaving school to their interests in the hope of keeping them there and helping them to find their niche in the workplace. The program has also been run at Thornlie Senior High School to great success.

To me, justice is not just about flaws and errors in the justice system; justice is about fairness, equality, opportunity and quality of life. Justice is about kids at schools and clubs in Thornlie getting the same opportunities and resources as kids in other areas. It is about the people of Maddington having a town centre that they can be proud of instead of a council depot next to the train station. It is about ensuring people of all nationalities and cultures get the opportunity to thrive and flourish, and it is about the elderly being cared for and neighbourhoods being safe. As the member for Thornlie, I will always be in the corner of my constituents, listening to their stories and fighting for them.

Now to thankyous. Thanks to the branch members in Thornlie and to the amazing volunteers who came to support me in the campaign. I will be eternally grateful for the generosity and kindness that you showed me. In particular, I give a shout-out—I know I cannot name everyone—to John, Brendan, Scott, Christine, Tony and Jen. Thank you for being on pre-poll. Thanks to my many friends who pulled on a T-shirt and offered moral support or a glass of wine on the odd occasion! Thanks to my great friend Mick Gooda, to my supportive tarts, to the former staff at the AG's office and the amazing team at Artemis Media.

Thank you to the Labor Party, which has welcomed me since the day I started in the Attorney General's office. In Dumas House, I worked alongside many good, great, passionate people who pulled together when a Labor government needed to do good things for WA. Today, many of them, my former colleagues, chiefs of staff, policy advisers and politicians, have become my close friends and whose dedication to Labor values convinced me in 2020 to become a "true believer" and join the party that I am now proud to represent here today. Thank you to the many ministers and members from across the party who encouraged me to run and offered help during the campaign. Thanks to Amber, Mark, Simone and Carolyn for deciding to put your faith in me, and thanks to the Premier for welcoming me to your team.

I will say a few words about the Premier, if I may. A big factor in deciding to enter the campaign was that in my six years of working in executive government I had got to know Roger Cook. I worked alongside him and his staff during COVID and beyond. Politics can be a bit of an illusion, but with Roger what you see is what you get. He is cool and collected. He is calm and clever. But more importantly, to me, he is kind. He is principled and he cares very deeply about people, and I am very proud to serve on his team.

One of the things I love about the Labor Party is the talented, intelligent and absolutely impressive young people who are attracted to the party and want to dedicate themselves to the cause.

There are no better examples of this than the young women who ran my campaign with whip-smart intellect, compassion and faultless judgement, led by the amazing Harriet Brooke. Thanks also to Sue, Claire, Molly and Karma. Thanks to my electorate staff, Morena, Paul, Nicole, Yvonne and, soon, Karen.

Thanks to my family, Kelly, Ryan, Veronica, Raz, nephew, nieces and my best friend, Kat, and her gorgeous girls.

Thanks to my mother, who is up there in the gallery, who has enabled me to continue my career and pay my mortgage while she helped to raise the children. The beautiful by-product of that is there is a deep and tender relationship that both of my kids have with their Nan, and they look after each other to this day. To Evelyn and Jose, you are the lights and loves of my life. Thank you for patiently putting up with my obsessions and my distractions. While other mothers were telling their kids to put down the devices, I was often checking emails and taking calls, and they were saying, "Put down the phone, Mum!" I always said I was never going to have children, just like I was never going to go into politics! Having my children has been the best, most important and most rewarding thing I have ever done and will ever do. I am so proud of the thoughtful, kind, ethical adults you have become.

A final thankyou to the people of Gosnells, Thornlie, Maddington, Martin and Orange Grove. At the polling booths, I was overwhelmed by the many people who shook my hand, wished me well, gave me winks and nods and told me how much they wanted WA Labor to keep on delivering for the community. Representing this electorate feels like coming home, and it is a wonderful opportunity to give back to an area where I grew up and that relies on good public policy and services. I am incredibly humbled by the voters' trust and support, and I feel inspired to fight for Thornlie every day. I hope I can do you all proud and always act in the best interests of democracy, particularly for those who need a voice in the halls of power. Thank you.

(Applause.)
