



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Dee Margetts, MLC
(Agricultural Region)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Council, Wednesday 23 May 2001

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

HON DEE MARGETTS (Agricultural) [7.40 pm]: I will start by acknowledging that this Parliament stands on Nyoongah land. I will begin with a brief explanation of what led to my being here. In 1983, or perhaps early 1984, a mentor of mine, Elaine Michael from Bridgetown, asked me whether I would consider standing in the federal election in support of Jo Vallentine, who went on to become the first senator for nuclear disarmament on the planet. At that stage, I thought it was an honour to be asked, but I was not ready to participate. It was not until 1988 that the issue came to the fore again. I have to put on the record my thanks to David Parker who was the Deputy Premier at the time. The reason members have to thank David Parker - or perhaps otherwise - is that he gave a talk to the local nuclear disarmament group in Fremantle on uranium mining, among other things. He so incensed the local group for nuclear disarmament that it said that something must be done about this man and they wanted a candidate to stand on such issues as industrial development, nuclear disarmament, uranium mining and the Petrochemical Industries Co Ltd plant - not just for its financial situation but for its environmental problems, which were not getting into the media at the time. A meeting was held in Fremantle. About 35 people turned up and they were all very keen to stand a candidate. I think everybody else took a step back, and I found myself standing there and eventually was nominated to be the candidate for the state seat of Fremantle. At that 1988-89 election, Chris Bridge - as Christabel Chamarette was then - was the candidate for the South Metropolitan Region. The next year was a federal election. I got a similar knee in the back and discovered that I was standing for the seat of Swan in the federal election against the then Minister for Defence, Kim Beazley. Being an antinuclear activist, it was a good opportunity to put defence and antinuclear issues on the agenda. We even had a hustings in Belmont to which 200 people turned up. That was the only defence hustings in that whole election, so it brought to the fore some of the issues that were otherwise not being debated at that time.

In the next year, with a similar knee in the back, I found myself a candidate for mayor of Perth. We did quite well with about 9.5 per cent of the vote in a Melbourne Cup field. The stocks for the Greens (WA) - if one can believe the polls - went from about one per cent across the State up to almost eight per cent across the State. That was only because the mayoral election had a Greens candidate. By that stage I thought that I was okay at campaigning, and I voluntarily put my name down for preselection leading up to the 1992 state election. I was preselected for the Greens for the South Metropolitan Region. At the same time, a number of people - one at least

is in the gallery tonight - suggested that I should also preselect for the Senate. I kept asking people what I should do, but they would not tell me. It was six of one and half a dozen of another, but nobody would tell me, until I was also preselected for the Senate; then all the phone calls came at once. I was told that they wanted me to stand for the Senate. Why did they not tell me that in the first place! I found myself preselected for the Senate. As it happened, the state election occurred first and the rest is history. Hon Jim Scott was preselected for the Greens (WA) and he won a seat. Once again I got the phone calls saying, "Gee, I bet you're sorry you didn't stand for South Metro." As a Green, I leave it to the cosmos, and the cosmos did provide. Not only did the Greens win a seat in the South Metropolitan Region, but also in the election the following year I was elected as a member of the Senate. Six years later, the cosmos did not provide quite so well, but there is always a reason. Having felt disappointed not to have held that senate seat - the Greens will win it back at the next election - I also felt extremely relieved not to have to get on the aircraft every two weeks to fly to Canberra.

In the meantime the Greens developed as a party. We came together in 1990 and Jo Vallentine, who had been the first senator in the entire universe for nuclear disarmament, became the first senator for the Greens (WA) in 1990. The Greens (WA) has a lot of history. I would like quickly to remind members that the Greens stand on four basic principles: peace and disarmament, environmental sustainability, social justice and participating in democracy. They are, and always have been, the four principles upon which the Greens base their policies and actions. Ironically, right now, I feel more right in this position than I could possibly express.

I would like to explain briefly why I believe we have an important job to do and why I feel excited and honoured to be in this situation. I will refer to the first speech I made in the Senate in 1993. It was a day similar to today. It was the second day of the Senate and the budget had just been put down - the now famous 1993 Labor budget - and I was in a hurry. I was involved with at least half of the Greens' legislation and with being a major spokesperson on economic issues. I will quote briefly from what I said in 1993 -

I will speak out, wherever possible, about the lunacy of a blind faith in the benefits of financial and economic deregulation.

I am horrified at the prospect of Australia being a signatory to the Uruguay Round of GATT. We in Australia do not even have a register of the ownership or control of our primary resources. Further, there is little, if any, scrutiny of the public resources which are used to subsidise industry by way of royalty deals, infrastructure, subsidised electricity and other resource use.

I talked about the costs and benefits which were untested, uncosted and unaccounted for at the same time we were making major policy changes which would affect certain sectors and not others.

I have to say that I did try to make the issue of the social and environmental impacts and potential problems of globalisation one of the major themes of my term in the Senate for six years. At the end of that I felt, in that I had wanted to make people understand what those issues were, that I had failed. It is ironic that in the meantime, after two years out of the Senate, in Australia and in this State we are beginning to have a debate - an in-depth debate at times - on the impacts of globalisation. We are beginning to talk about the impacts of globalisation on labour conditions and rights, and its impacts on communities and societies. We are beginning to debate the impacts of globalisation on the environment and on our future.

Now that I am in the Legislative Council, I feel excited that there is an opportunity for me to work further to try to bring this debate about in a real way within the Legislative Council so that we can move on and find a direction to go. I do not want only to say that globalisation is a

problem, but to say what are the problems of globalisation and how we can address them as a state Legislature.

That is not the only reason that I am happy and proud to be in this situation. During my years as a senator, I found particular satisfaction in working and developing relationships with communities in such areas as Geraldton, Esperance, the Avon, the Gingin coast, Lancelin and so on. Those relationships are very important. Perhaps the most important part of the work of a parliamentary representative is to reach those people who otherwise find it difficult to have a voice within the parliamentary system, to represent their issues and values and to bring forward their concerns in the parliamentary process.

No doubt a large range of issues exist in the Agricultural Region for me to work on in the next four years. Some relate to coastal planning processes that are incomplete, faulty or just plain wrong-headed, and some are constantly recurring issues relating to roads, heavy haulage and other forms of transport - themes that members will hear about often from Hon Jim Scott. The people in some areas of the Agricultural Region have extreme concerns, relating particularly to decisions on heavy industry. For many years past and present, Governments have put much effort into attempting to pick winners in particular areas by finding large resource projects and providing them with large amounts of assistance and subsidies in particular areas.

In the past two years I have researched some of those decisions to see whether in the end the community and the economy have benefited from the decisions taken to support large resource projects. Many issues relate to the effects of past and current - I emphasise current - overclearing of forests. Those issues include salinity, rising water tables and the impact of flooding on rivers and wetlands when rainfall patterns do not follow past patterns, but are most likely due to climate changes. Many issues of privatisation and deregulation are felt most keenly in regional Western Australia. The further the distance from Perth - perhaps Esperance is a good example - the more communities and local shires are able to clearly articulate the impacts on them of privatisation, deregulation, global free trade and such policies as the national competition policy. Bureaucrats and state politicians cannot explain the impacts, but the people in places such as Esperance are able to give chapter and verse on what is happening.

There are many employment and population issues in regional Australia, particularly in the Agricultural Region, and issues relating to the diversities of employment opportunities and the local economy; that is, the relationship between economic activities and the feeling of self-worth and confidence in a community. That is related to a decrease in population in many areas in which there are fewer opportunities now than in the past. It is the right time for the House to have this debate at a state level now that globalisation is recognised as a real problem. That does not mean that we can, or intend to, cut ourselves off from the rest of the world. People may ask whether we, as a nation, believe in competition. That is not the issue. The issue is whether the way we are progressing is beneficial or harmful, which groups in the community benefit and which groups are harmed, and what we can do as responsible parliamentarians to deal with those issues. First, we must recognise them; second, we must deal with them in a realistic and fair way.

I am pleased that I have been asked on many occasions recently to explain my view on the impact of globalisation on the Australian economy to groups in the community, including the Western Australian branch of the Economic Society of Australia and to people in university business courses and so on. I am pleased that this debate is happening at an academic level and that those people then explain to other people in the community how the economy works. My thesis of the past two years, which I hope to complete soon, relates to that issue and the impact on the public interest of the national competition policy and state agreement Acts in Western Australia. I looked at the concept of the national competition policy and state agreement Acts, and put them in a room together to see what they do to each other. The answer is that each

shows some of the major problems in both. I believe it can be proved that there are fundamental flaws in the way the national competition policy was put together and implemented. Because it is such a large and complex issue to grasp, most public administrators and parliamentarians do not understand what they are dealing with. That is no real criticism of parliamentarians. I have written a thesis on it and it is an extremely complex issue. However, most decision makers do not understand what they are dealing with, and every time one tries to find the reasons for the problems, someone shifts the blame. The States say it is a problem with the Commonwealth; the Commonwealth says it is not its fault, as it is now being administered by the National Competition Council and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission; the ACCC say it is merely administering the legislation; and the National Competition Council say it is doing merely what it was told to do under the national competition policy agreements. However, nobody is prepared to take responsibility for the problems of inequity and implementation that are occurring.

Some of the major issues in this State echo many issues in the other States and relate to the implications of the legislative review. Even as a federal parliamentarian, I had a great deal of difficulty finding out the details of legislative reviews of major pieces of legislation; for instance, who participated in those reviews and what was happening. Some members may have heard a few questions asked in this State Parliament about a review of state agreement Acts. These reviews took place in secret. I therefore found myself writing a thesis and trying to find out what was taken into consideration in the review of state agreement Acts, which give a great deal of public assistance to major resource development projects, and whether they were indeed anticompetitive. I found that nothing has ever been published to indicate what was done; these are therefore secret reviews. This is a situation in which large corporations were treated differently from the way in which dairy farmers or members of the community were treated under the national competition policy. Across Australia something like 2 000 pieces of legislation were reviewed, many of which were required to be amended, repealed or otherwise altered. Yet, special arrangements with big business that might appear to be most anticompetitive escaped unscathed.

A range of changes relate to globalisation. The average person, particularly in regional Australia, can see - like the nose on his or her face - that different parts of the economy are treated in different ways. The average person in regional Australia can see that large supermarket chains are treated differently from dairy farmers and that big business appears to have benefited at the expense of small business. Some businesses have prospered by gaining more business when local contractors have lost bids for contracts under the rules imposed by the national competition policy. Ironically, the impact on consumers has not been studied. I do not mean by that whether people can buy a greater range of personal computers or mobile phones but whether, as consumers, they have to wait longer for services and whether they can buy the range of goods and services they used to be able to buy. As a stress management activity, I make a lot of my own clothes. I find it very difficult to find a shop that sells haberdashery. I may be peculiar, but I believe other people want to buy those goods and services. It is not that there is no market for those goods and services, but that there is not a sufficient market. My belief, although I do not think it has been checked, is that we can buy many ranges of goods that have a very high turnover. However, it has been more and more difficult in the past few years for consumers to find the range of goods and services they need, even if they need them only once or twice in their lifetime. If we ask regional communities about the services and the range of goods they get and how far they must now travel to obtain them - I believe that in urban areas consumers have not necessarily been net beneficiaries - what would be the response? I imagine the response would be that they have not benefited, but have, in fact, been more disadvantaged. When we have put together a range of policies and introduced deregulation, which supposedly encourage the market, on the assumption that, in the end, as a community and even as

consumers, we are all net beneficiaries - even if there are losses, there are gains that bring us to be net beneficiaries - that assumption has not been tested. Is it fair when farmers are required to deregulate their marketing arrangements because they are anticompetitive and somehow a farmer must negotiate prices at the farm door with some of the country's largest supermarket chains? I do not think so. In the end, if it means that we lose the ability to produce, say, fruit and vegetables and our own fresh milk supply in our State and end up being dependent on powdered, frozen or ultra heat-treated milk from the eastern States or overseas, how will we, as a community, particularly as consumers, benefit? How will the regions benefit? Many of those questions have not been asked.

What are the impacts on the young? The environment is seen as a commodity, and in many ways it has been put to the market test to see whether it can pay for itself. Clearly that is a ridiculous assumption and does not take into consideration the cost of neglecting the environment - the huge cost to which I referred earlier of neglect and overclearing over many decades, and which we are now beginning to think about in trying to repair the damage. Along with those considerations, we forget that the environment provides many services, which people are now beginning to count. Those services are noticed mainly when they have gone, when the spread of many diseases occurs that we have not had before and when there is an imbalance. We find out that the cost is real when we think about what we can do about the problem. However, we must talk about that and repair the damage. Those are the issues that are not dealt with effectively or adequately under policies such as the national competition policy.

What are the impacts on the young? We have decided we are a competitive society and that, rather than cooperate, we must make it on our own. In many cases, the concentration has been on downsizing. It has been almost impossible for young people to get a start in traineeships and apprenticeships. In many cases, young people do not know what is their future. They do not see that the world is offering them something or they do not know how certain their lives will be. A certain amount of alienation will result from our using the young simply as an economic extra - as something that is not part of our plans for economic rationalism.

There are impacts in general on local employment, wages and conditions. Of course, if anything, most literature is on the impact of wages and conditions of employment in relation to globalisation because the concentration has been on downsizing of organisations. I do not think this Government is an orphan in that. I am concerned about what is happening as an immediate consequence of getting rid of many public servants at the beginning of the Government's term and trying to work out the impact later.

It is not good enough for me to say I recognise there are major issues within the Agricultural Region, many of which are very intense. The most difficult job will be to work out where to go from here and how to work with community groups in relation, for instance, to the impact of the privatisation of water. We must decide how we will deal with some of the major problems that will result from putting our eggs into one basket and hoping the market will fix things from here. How do we work with communities to re-establish diversity? How do we revalue the concept of "community" itself? How do we put economics in its place as simply a way of describing how we meet our needs as a society rather than being something that rules us in every aspect of our lives? The onus is on us at the state level.

It is true that in 1995, following the Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a national Government in Australia signed up to national competition policy. The preparations of national competition policy involved linking up with the signing of the Uruguay round of GATT. The States all signed up to that brand of economic rationalism. It is also true that, at the time, the States, even the conservative States, were not exactly enthusiastic. However, the Keating Government raised a bucket of money in front of the States until they signed up. Few in the States who signed up for that agreement had any real inkling of the

implications of those decisions. It is also true that none of us will know the entire implications of what happens when we sign up to something as major as a policy change that says, "It's the dollar or it's the economy, stupid" rather than, "It's the community, the environment and the welfare of every citizen in the communities within which we live." We have a lot of responsibility. We were all part of this decision. We were all perhaps dozy in the 1980s and 1990s and let it happen without understanding much of what would happen to us. However, in the Legislative Council we have the chance to be a real House of review, with the chance to challenge those decisions. I guess that puts us in the hot seat.

I must acknowledge my colleagues Jim Scott, who has done so much good work in this Chamber since 1992, Giz and Chrissie - I am sorry, I should have said Hon Jim Scott, Hon Giz Watson and Hon Chrissie Sharp; I will refer to the issue of "honourable" later - and also, of course, my colleague Hon Robin Chapple. We now have an opportunity and a responsibility to bring an alternative viewpoint to the community about the steps we take to where we want to go rather than to just go along with the flow. It is often hardest to work out the vision for where we need to go and how to push the process.

I referred to the term "honourable". I formally announce that I will not use that term in relation to myself. I will not use it on my stationery or on the door of my office. I will not expect or require people to refer to me by that title. I did some research on the subject, from which I understand it was introduced around 1893. The ability to use it was considered important at the time. I am not trying to denigrate anyone or to be holier than thou. I feel very uncomfortable calling myself "honourable" because I believe it is something we should earn by our actions; it is not something we should put on like a garment. Therefore, I do not mind what people call me but I do not feel comfortable about calling myself honourable unless I have earned it. I ask, if possible, that the title not be used in reference to me. It is time that members realise that those types of archaic titles distance us from the community. We are members of the Legislative Council and that is a form of title in itself. I believe we have a responsibility to try to be more realistic about what the community wants from us and that respect is not something we can give ourselves by conferring titles upon ourselves.

I thank all those who worked so hard to create the Greens (WA) team, and especially those who helped me in my election to this place. We have achieved the best result from any State election by having five Greens legislative councillors. I thank all the Greens members and supporters, my friends and my family. I thank my mother and brother who are present tonight. In particular, I thank my partner, Nick. Without them, I would not be here.

I especially thank the electors of the Agricultural Region. I do not think they knew exactly what they were getting. To those people who, at times, make derogatory remarks about Greens or minor party representations, I would like to tell them to look at the vote. The voting patterns were very deliberate. I was extremely nervous in the run-up to the count and I could hardly bear to count the number of people who voted on a non-ticket vote. I noticed that the potential flow to my vote could have been in the order of 1 500 votes from the National Party. The potential flow from my side of the equation was about 5 300 non-ticket votes. As a result of the count, my vote increased. I got more flow from 1 500 votes from the other side than that which flowed from my side of 5 300 non-ticket votes. That is not a rah-rah to me. I want people to understand that more and more people are making deliberate choices in elections. They know for what they are voting. They may not know what they were getting, but I am darn sure that they understand they have got a representative who will listen to them and work for them. At the end of four years, they will understand that the Greens exist to be with the community. We will not get the changes we need within our society unless farmers, producers, coastal dwellers, teachers, occasional workers, children and the general community work with us and we work with the community. I look forward to the next four years. I have no doubt that it will involve a great deal of hard work. I thank the electors of the Agricultural Region and all those people who

played a part in enabling me to be here through their work through the years in various ways. I thank them for their trust and support and I hope I can be worthy of them.

[Applause.]
