

[Thursday, 31 May 1990.]

DR EDWARDS (Maylands) [10.30 am]: I am proud and privileged to have been elected to represent the people of Maylands in this House. My win in the Maylands by-election last Saturday was a magnificent victory for the Australian Labor Party. It was a resounding vote of confidence in the current Labor Government and an affirmation of the competent leadership provided by the Premier.

In the past month, I had the opportunity to meet the people of this electorate in their homes and in their communities. Three messages came through loud and clear: First, the recognition that Labor Governments put people first; and second, Labor Governments are committed to improving the lot of all men and women and to improving family living standards.

In electing me, the people of Maylands have demonstrated that they wish this Government to remain in power. The third message was that the people of Maylands are impressed by our Premier. They admire her strength and resolve evidenced in her first 100 days in office. Their statement is: Give her a go; let her get on with the job.

Government members: Hear, hear!

Dr EDWARDS: I am inspired by how sophisticated the electorate is. We now face thinking voters who recognise that the problems confronting society are complex and that there is no quick fix solution. However, the problems we face are not seen as insurmountable and there is a willingness and a commitment to work together towards achieving solutions.

The people of Maylands are fed up with threats to block Supply. They are annoyed at the possibility of instability, disruption and chaos. They are definitely not interested in returning to the polling booth having been there three times in as many months. On the doorsteps, in the streets and in their homes, they reiterate that they want the Government to be allowed to get on with the job of governing.

The Maylands electorate runs along the Swan River from Maylands to Bassendean and stretches north to include Ashfield and parts of Bayswater, Bedford, Embleton, Inglewood and Morley. Compared with the rest of the metropolitan area, the electorate of Maylands has a greater than average number of households with low incomes. It has more tradespeople and labourers than managers or professionals. The unemployment rate is also high. A significant section of the electorate is aged 55 years and over. Maylands also continues to be a multicultural area and has strong Italian, Dutch, Polish and Vietnamese communities.

In representing the people of Maylands in this Parliament, I will work towards achieving a just and fair society. In measuring this, I am influenced by my background in medicine and my work as a health professional. I know from my background that health and illness do not occur randomly within or between groups of people. Health is a product of the social environment. Throughout history, those who have occupied lower hierarchical positions in the social system experienced more ill-health than those in more privileged positions.

In Australia, there is now overwhelming evidence that people's chances for life or death, health or illness are linked to their socioeconomic status. This determines their access to goods and services such as income maintenance, education, housing, food, transport and a hazard-free environment. Access to these services impinges on their health.

In relation to death, men in the lowest social grouping compared with men in the highest social strata are one and a half times more likely to die from cancer and heart disease, three times more likely to die early from chest disease and accidents and four times more likely to die from brain and nervous system diseases.

In Western Australia, babies born into families of unskilled labourers are twice as likely to die around birth as the children born into families of professional men and managers. People in lower status occupations suffer a higher rate of recent illness, chronic conditions and days of reduced activity than do men in higher status occupations.

Women engaged in "home duties" as their usual major activity consistently report higher rates of disability than do women in the paid work force. There is a similar pattern for disease risk factors such as high blood pressure and high blood fats, obesity and cigarette smoking. These are more common among people with low levels of educational attainment. Less money is spent on fruit and vegetables in lower income households. However, a

high level of calorie intake is more common in people in lower socioeconomic groups. Smoking and the consumption of alcohol by men follow a similar pattern.

It is apparent then that disease, ill-health and health vary among different socioeconomic groups. These social inequalities are real and, although factors such as access to services play a part, that does not explain these differences in health status. It is only when we examine our social structures that we get more insight into this problem.

The differences in health status correspond to three divisions in society. The most important division is between those in the labour market and those out of the labour market. In Australia, the basic cause of poverty is not receiving a labour market income. The greatest poverty, therefore, is among the unemployed, sole parents, pensioners and housewives. In its worst form, it manifests as a 20 per cent increased early death rate among the unemployed regardless of their previous socioeconomic status.

The second division in society is among people who are working. It is between those in a strong labour market position and those in a weak labour market position. A strong position results from the opportunity for educational attainment and credentials, being a member of a powerful union and from labour shortages. If, however, one is a woman, young, old, Aboriginal or from an ethnic background, one's occupational and, therefore, health status is likely to be lower.

It is well known in the Maylands electorate and of concern to me that migrant workers are more likely to be employed in production process working positions. These are generally low paid, have poor prospects for promotion and are hazardous. Work-related illnesses and injury are more common among these workers.

Members will be interested to know that, contrary to popular belief, the greatest stress at work is experienced by low-level, unskilled workers. The common feature is a lack of control over one's work, an inability to influence decisions, and a feeling of uncertainty about the future. The final division though is between those who accumulate wealth, either as personal owners of capital, as executives of corporate power or through kinship and marriage. At a time when at least one in five Australians lives near the Henderson poverty line, the top five per cent of the population own more than the bottom 90 per cent put together. Health then is intimately linked to income and socioeconomic status; that is, social power. While the gap between the rich and poor increases, so will disparities in health status. That has not received a lot of attention in Australia; however, in the United Kingdom and the USA it has been noted that the relatively affluent and educated are becoming healthier while the health status of the poor decreases, remains static or improves at only a slow rate. So, although Australia is one of the healthiest nations in the world, it harbours some inequalities in its health status, as I have outlined.

The part played by the way society is structured has been discussed, but I also wish to comment briefly on the organisation of health and medical services. Health care in Australia has generally been practised on a formal exchange basis; that is, practitioners perform certain services in return for a monetary payment. Historically, doctors have been the main players and have consolidated control over this system, giving rise to what could be called medical dominance. This has resulted in the perpetuation of the idea of health as a commodity. It has also fostered a strong medical entrepreneurial approach with a belief in individualism and a strong fear of Government regulation. Such a medical system is, therefore, oriented towards cure rather than prevention, towards individuals rather than structures, and towards victims rather than systems. In general it is unwilling to see the link between poverty and ill health, and views other methods of service delivery, such as Aboriginal medical services and women's or workers' health centres, as alternative, marginal and on the fringe.

Solutions to the problem of health inequalities must, therefore, examine both the individual's needs and how these can be met, plus the structures contributing to health to see how these can be modified to improve health. Bob Connell has said -

A just society has no inequalities in access to health care nor in exposure to controllable health risks.

From the previous discussion it can be seen that in terms of health Australia is, in fact, on the way to becoming a just society. Social justice is helping to redress this balance. This means four things: Equity, access, protection of rights and participation. Social justice implies that there is a fair and equal distribution of economic resources - equity; that there is equal access for all people to services that promote and maintain health; that the basic political, civil and legal rights are protected and expanded; and that people are encouraged to participate in the decisions which affect them and determine their health.

The Australian Labor Party, Labor Governments and the union movement have been at the forefront, demanding and working for equity, access, protection of rights and participation. These sections of the community have fostered the idea and maintained that a social justice health policy incorporates a social view of health; that is, a view that recognises the impact, both direct and indirect, which the physical, socioeconomic and the cultural aspects of the environment have on the health of a community. A social view of health means that we must intervene to change those aspects of the environment which are promoting ill health, rather than simply deal with illness after it appears. A social view of health means that we cannot continue to tell individuals to change their attitudes and lifestyles when, in fact, the environment in which they live or work gives them little chance or encouragement to make such changes. The Labor movement has fostered and developed this approach. Social justice, therefore, looks at both individuals and the society in which they live. It is intimately connected to public policy. A public policy approach encourages the deliberate use of public resources across all Government agencies to maximise good health in the community. Policies in housing, education, agriculture, and technology must be viewed as having a substantial impact on both the environment and the health of the community. This impact must increasingly be questioned. Collaboration across portfolio areas is, therefore, crucial to healthy public policy.

In working towards improving the quality of life for the people of Maylands I will be concentrating on a number of particular areas. I will use a social justice, people-oriented framework as my guide. I will use policies of the Australian Labor Party as my paradigm. The first issue of particular concern to the people of Maylands is the environment. It has been said by David Wheelwright that the struggle for a better relationship between mankind and the environment will be in the 21st century what the freedom of democracy was in the 19th century and the desire for economic growth has been in the 20th century. The protection of the environment in the broadest sense is the duty of each and every one of us. Like this Government, I am committed to working towards a cleaner and safer environment. In representing the people of Maylands I shall be working towards protecting the Swan River and its foreshore, maintaining and preserving the valuable wetlands and bird life, and preventing and resolving industrial pollution, which has been a problem in certain areas of my electorate.

I will also seek to work with local governments in my electorate to ensure that the issue of high density housing is explored and that future housing developments both protect privacy and provide an attractive streetscape. In Maylands there is greater than average use of public transport and a higher than average number of people walk to work. In some ways it could be said that it is ahead in the environmental arena. It is my impression that our communities have, in fact, embraced the notion of environmental hope. It is clearly on the agenda of ordinary people who are no longer prepared to hand over environmental protection to scientists and experts alone, but are demanding community input.

I commend this Government's environmental charter with its emphasis on maintaining life processes and optimising our quality of life. It is important to note also that environmental policies can create jobs. In West Germany, for instance, the number of persons employed in environmental protection work has doubled in the past 12 years to almost 500 000. I do not support the notion that economic development and environmental protection are mutually exclusive, but that rather, with an intelligent and thoughtful approach, economic development and environmental protection can complement and sustain each other.

A second area of great import in the Maylands electorate is crime prevention, and in this area I shall be working to help solve the problems arising from crime faced by the people living in this electorate. I will continue to push for an increased police presence and an expansion of both community policing and Neighbourhood Watch schemes. I will be seeking to make more accessible services to help the victims of crime. It is important to remember, however, that this law and order response has a limited effect on the incidence of crime because crime is largely a function of social, economic and cultural factors which, for the most part, remain unaffected by changes to the criminal justice system. It is worthwhile noting also that those groups in society which are most economically and socially vulnerable are the same groups likely to suffer not only ill health but violence and victimisation. Domestic violence, for example, affects women and children. Homeless and unemployed youths and Aboriginal people are most at risk of not only being victimised but also being criminalised and imprisoned. These situations are complex, but a significant part of the answer can be found in social justice strategies, particularly in the provision of income and employment, but also in encouraging participation in all our social and political processes. Therefore, I will be exploring the opportunities, particularly for young people, for continuing education, training, retraining and recreation. I will be endeavouring to ensure that all the people of my electorate have the best possible opportunities.

The Australian Labor Party has a long tradition of caring for people and seeking social justice for all. The Australian Labor Party was born out of the union movement. It has nurtured the poor and oppressed in society.

The Australian Labor Party and successive Labor Governments have been a major force in enabling women to participate more fully in society. I am proud to be the tenth Labor Party woman in this Parliament. I am grateful for the opportunities I have had which have led me to be able to serve the people of my electorate in this Parliament. I acknowledge my parents' commitment to the best possible education for their children, and the sacrifices they made to achieve this end. I am indebted to their example of always working towards things being better for their children, and suspect that a similar sentiment motivates many of us here today.

In getting acquainted with the people of Maylands, I am heartened by the great mass of people who cherish our State's democratic institutions. My victory in the recent by-election has confirmed their trust and confidence in our Parliament and in this Labor Government. The present menace about the blocking, deferring or defeating of Supply, with its attendant atmosphere of tension, can lead only to short term decisions and political expediency on all sides. It can lead only to a diminishing of business confidence and to increasing cynicism in the community. It is malevolent and unproductive, and contrary to a society which I see as wanting to be optimistic and confident about the future.

In concluding, I will quote from Dr Sidney Sax, an Australian health policy analyst, who said, "Politics is a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles." I am clear about whose interests and what principles this Labor Government represents. I look forward to hearing from Opposition members about theirs.

Government members: Hear, hear!

[Applause.]