



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Bill Johnston MLA
(Member for Cannington)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

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Motion

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington) [8.18 pm]: Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to congratulate you on your election and look forward to working with you as we learn how to participate in the processes of the Parliament.

I feel very privileged to rise in this place today to make my inaugural speech. As today is 11 November, I should make comment on the contribution to Australia of our service personnel. There is no doubt about the importance of our service personnel to securing our nation. It is true that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance and the sacrifice of our service personnel is a mark to that vigilance. I recall the striking feeling of walking into the commonwealth war cemetery on Ambon Island in eastern Indonesia to view the thousands of graves of Australian and allied service personnel; many of them died so very young. There is no doubting the sacrifices these people made and the loss to their families, but our freedom is the reward for their efforts.

I commence my speech by recording my heartfelt thanks to the people of the Cannington district for supporting me to be their representative in the Parliament. I am proud to be the first member for Cannington.

Cannington is a community of people who are making their own way in society. It is a community with many migrants and Indigenous Australians. It has families that are contributing to our nation's future as well as many people who live alone before raising a family or after having raised a family. There is no greater honour in life than to be granted the privilege of parliamentary service. I am very grateful to the people of Cannington for placing their trust in me to represent them in this place and to fight for their rights and benefits. My number one task is to provide the electors of Cannington with the representation that they deserve. I promise to do my best to work on their behalf in all that I do.

I would like to thank a number of people who have assisted me on my path to Parliament. I start with my campaign team, particularly Scott Cowans, Pablo Campilos, Fiona Sterle, Vivianne Truscello, John and Helen Bissett, David Ashton and the Rowe family, as well all those who helped in hundreds of ways on so many occasions. I would not be here today without their support and assistance, and I thank them all for their help.

I also thank my kids—Rebekah, Zoe and Liam. They have put up with a lot and I hope they understand that I love and care for them deeply. I must give special thanks to my most special

friend—namely, my wife, Kate. Of course, we have a unique partnership, and I want to record how much I appreciate her love, encouragement and support. I also thank my extended family, particularly my sisters and brothers—Mary, Andy, Margaret, Stephen, Clare, Bert and Jo—and their respective partners, children and grandchildren. We are a big clan that is spread out over the whole of Australia. Despite the fact that they could not be physically present today, I know that every one of them is here with me in spirit. On that score, I must single out my nephew Albert Eichholzer, who followed in his uncle’s footsteps by becoming president of the ACT Young Labor. He flew all the way to Perth to hand out how-to-vote cards on election day. I also thank my wife’s family.

I acknowledge Keluarga Sumawiganda, the family with whom I lived in Bandung, Indonesia, during my AFS exchange in 1981-82 and the friends I made both at SMA2 and among the exchange students. It was a powerful experience for a young bloke and it still lives with me today.

I also thank the people with whom I have worked at the party office over the years, including former secretaries Mark Cuomo and John Halden, former assistant secretaries Hon Dr Sally Talbot, Ruth Webber, Lois Anderson and Simon Mead, and the various staff with whom I have worked, particularly Hon Carolyn Burton, Sue McGiveron, Fran Laine, Sam Rowe, Charlene Farmer, Graham Pearson, Fiona Henderson and Ron Sao.

I would not be standing here today if it were not for the support of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, the union that represents workers in the retail industry. It was a rare privilege to work on their behalf over a nine-year period. It was a very enjoyable and rewarding experience working to achieve fairness. I have very fond memories of good wins in workers’ compensation and unfair dismissal cases and of ensuring that employers who had treated their employees unfairly gave them proper restitution. I would particularly like to thank Joe Bullock, Mark Bishop, Martin Pritchard, Bill McIntosh and Stuart Mclean, with whom I worked closely during my extended time at the union. All of them remain my friends.

I must say a special thank you to Jim Maher, who invited me to work for the SDA and who led me to Western Australia 20 years ago. On that score, I want to thank the unions of Western Australia, whose support for the ALP generally and me in particular is so important. In particular, I specifically acknowledge the Transport Workers Union, the Australian Workers’ Union, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, the National Union of Workers and the Food Preservers Union, all of which have backed my activities in the party.

I also thank many Labor members of this and the federal Parliament with whom I have been privileged to work during my 11 years of working full-time for the Labor Party and during my 25 years of party membership. It is always difficult to thank some and not others; however, I particularly thank Dr Geoff Gallop, Senator Glenn Sterle, Stephen Smith, Gary Gray and the member for Willagee, Alan Carpenter.

Finally, on what seems like a shopping list of “thankyous”, I thank my good friend Senator Stephen Conroy, his wife Paula Benson and their special daughter, Isabella. Stephen and I have been friends since 1974, before we became pimple-faced teenagers and long before we believed it was possible to enter Parliament. That we are still mates after all that time is an important part of my life. I thank him for more than 30 years’ of friendship, support and encouragement.

PROUDLY LABOR

I am very proud to stand here as a member of the Labor Party. There is no doubting the enormous privilege that is granted to anyone who receives the support of the Labor Party to enter Parliament. I despair sometimes when I hear a Labor member of Parliament complain that he did not get a certain benefit or that he missed out on a certain advancement. We always owe the party more than it owes us, and we should not despair when we are not granted an extra opportunity; rather, we should rejoice in the incredible privilege that we have received.

It is no surprise that I stand here representing Labor—it is the way I grew up. I remember in 1992 when the leader of the federal Liberal Party, John Hewson, told Australians that one could tell rental homes because they were the ones with unmowed lawns. I grew up in a house with long grass, a rough garden, plants recovered from the tip and a couple of cars parked in the front yard. I was one of those kids who would play out in the street. It is not that my mother was not house proud, because she was. Rather, it was that she did the best that she could. Renting a “govie” house—what Western Australians know as a Homeswest house—was my mum’s only option. Using flower cuttings scavenged from the tip was the only way she could have a garden. I received a considerable education on flora and was told which plants she wanted and which ones were not worth taking home from the tip. Every Labor MP is supposed to be able to tell a story about growing up poor. That is a cliché. I grew up with great privilege. I had the privilege of having a father who proudly served Australia in the Royal Australian Navy in World War II. I would have liked to have known him, but he died when I was two. I had the privilege of taking turns wearing his medals on Anzac Day. I also had the privilege of Legacy every second Friday night at Legacy House and every Easter at the four-day camp. I always had a great time. I had the privilege of growing up with seven older brothers and sisters. They all gave me their love and support, except when they were picking on their youngest brother! I had the privilege of being raised by a strong woman who did her best with her eight kids on the war widows’ pension and the low-paying jobs she could find. I had the privilege of receiving a good education at a Catholic school, because my mum wanted us to hear about the God to whom she prayed while getting the education that she missed out on. One of my great regrets is that Carmel Johnston, my mum, did not live to see me enter this place.

I simply cannot understand why anyone would criticise people who try to make their best of what life has given them. Sometimes Labor loses its way. Sometimes we do not do our best. But at heart, we on the Labor side are always in favour of those who are trying to make the best of the hand that life has dealt them. I intend to use my time in Parliament to represent all people who are prepared to have a go with the opportunities that life presents them and to ensure that the state grants ordinary working people every opportunity. That is what Labor is about.

POLITICS IS A NOBLE CAUSE

Politics is a noble cause. We always need to consider how we can improve the circumstances of our constituents. We should be prepared to examine how politics is conducted. We are very blessed to have inherited the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. Sometimes the process of government itself is attacked, often for narrow, sectional interests. Some people say that democracy would be better if other people did not vote. I find it strange when people argue that too many people participate in our elections. Compulsory voting is the process through which we make it clear to all citizens that we want them to participate. It says that we value everyone’s views and that we are a better democracy because everyone participates. I support compulsory voting because I want everyone to participate and because I value everyone’s views.

We should rejoice in the strength of the system of representative democracy. No-one here received the unanimous support of his or her community. However, we are all here with majority support. We are our constituents’ representatives. There are other alternatives, such as citizen-initiated referenda. Supporters of CIR would have us believe that that system is about empowering the community to make laws when we, the elected representatives of the community, fail to adequately perform our function. There are successful examples of citizen empowerment. The example most often quoted is that which exists in Switzerland. However, the Swiss style of government is very different from ours. It is not about grafting CIR onto the Westminster system; rather, it is about a whole structure of citizen engagement.

I am happy to have more engaged citizenship, but citizen-initiated referenda are not part of that actual debate. The most well known examples of CIR are in various states of the United States.

However, CIR in the US is actually an advertisement for our current Westminster system. CIR in the US is the preserve of special interest groups that have the resources to organise the very expensive campaigns that are involved. The role of the ordinary citizen is to be a bystander in the CIR process, not to gain empowerment from it. The actual involvement of ordinary citizens in CIR is no more than their involvement in the successful Westminster system. It is not as though the laws that result are somehow superior or better than the laws created by a Westminster representative system. There is no better example of the problems of CIR than the Seattle monorail project. This was a worthy idea to extend public transport to more areas of the city of Seattle in Washington State. The project commenced in 1997 and died only at the beginning of this year. Although well-intentioned, the monorail proposal is a demonstration of the pitfalls of a simple yes-no CIR vote. The process included half a dozen votes, hundreds of thousands of dollars of campaign expenditure and millions of dollars of wasted taxpayers' funds to develop a proposal that would never be financially viable. Despite all the pitfalls of the proposal, it won a very narrow vote in 2002 in a campaign funded by merchant bankers and construction companies. When the original supporters of the project came to realise that it could not proceed in the manner originally conceived, they could not change the project to better meet the real world situation because they could not amend the proposal except by further citizen-initiated referenda, which were defeated. The reality is that representative democracy serves our community very well. Opponents of our system of decision making need to make a case for how things will be better; not just how they will be different. I hope that I will be part of addressing that challenge in this Parliament.

IMPROVING DEMOCRACY

A genuine issue for democracy is how to expand the talent pool available to form cabinets. I suggest we have a system that would allow ministers to be selected from outside Parliament. It is very rare for anyone to go into politics and directly into cabinet. On the other hand, there are many capable people in our community who would be open to the idea of contributing to Western Australia as a minister but cannot or equally will not make the 10 or 20-year commitment that the ordinary process of Westminster politics would require. I imagine that most ministers would continue to be parliamentarians but this proposal would allow an expanded gene pool to form our cabinets, and the state would benefit. Not everyone who is able to be elected to represent a single-member constituency is ready to be a minister. Equally, everyone able to be a minister is not automatically ready to be elected to a single-member constituency.

Another suggestion to improve our democracy is to expand the scope and authority of committees. Committees in the United States play a much more active role in the process of governing. Partly, this is a response to the fact that government is not formed in US parliaments, but it is also a different attitude to the conduct of politics. It is true to say that much of the affairs of any government occur without the intervention of politicians. Committees with a wider brief to review the operations of this vast set of processes without ministers automatically entering defence modes would be of benefit to the community. For example, there is no regular parliamentary process to scrutinise the hundreds of millions of dollars of expenditure conducted by local government. This massive bureaucracy, which spends Western Australian taxpayers' money on the authority of this Parliament, does not receive anywhere near the level of accountability that it should. Also, committees could provide a forum for ordinary citizens to have a greater say on the agenda of government. In the lead-up to each year's budget, committees could take direct submissions from citizens and special interest groups as to their expectations. After budgets, further hearings could be held to allow proper review of the government's expenditure priorities. This would also allow the committee members to question the expectations and assumptions of the people making input to the committees. This would mean that not only the committee members and the government, but also the interest groups and other citizens would have to explain themselves. It would provide an opportunity for genuine discussion about the policy agenda of the state, rather than the facsimile

debate that takes place through the eight-second media grab that occurs today. Committees could hear the view of academics and other experts, such as market economists. They could challenge assumptions of the bureaucratic advice to government. This is particularly important given the comments of the former Under Treasurer that Treasury deliberately provides government with false assumptions. It would also grant a greater direct role for ordinary people in the process and it would allow a greater involvement of the members of this Parliament in the process of policy development and government. The process of open committees reviewing every aspect of the community's expectations and responses to budgets would mean that sometimes members of Parliament would disagree in public with their government. It would be interesting to see whether the media would have the maturity to deal with that greater autonomy for members of Parliament.

Finally, I would like to turn to the issue of caucus voting. It is often said that because only the Labor Party has a specific rules undertaking to vote together, somehow it is the only party that imposes voting discipline. That is simply not true. All parties that form government in this state impose party discipline. The Labor Party and the Liberal Party are not particularly different.

However, this party discipline, in my view, is coming to a point of change. I do not believe that party discipline will end; it will morph into a new phase of its development. We have already seen an increasing range of conscience issues arise as medical technologies expand to make the very question of what is human life become even more relevant. Also, a wider range of issues is being legislated on. Communities now expect much more action by Parliaments than they did in the past. In the United Kingdom, members of Parliament are not expected to vote for every single piece of legislation that is brought forward by their party. Members are expected to vote in favour of legislation that is included in a party's manifesto, but other issues that arise during the term are matters for negotiation between the cabinet and its own backbench. In the United States, party Whips exist but are effectively the party leadership's chief negotiators with their own members. Each and every vote has to be negotiated separately, and party affiliation is no more than a guide to the legislators' general direction in politics. It is only appropriate, however, that electors know what to expect from a particular government, so it is important that members support their party's election commitments. If they did not, citizens may vote for one outcome but actually get something completely different, which is, of course, the fundamental weakness in US politics where nobody knows what they will get after they vote. However, as society becomes more complex and the issues that confront the community more nuanced, my view is that there will increasingly be a greater variation in voting patterns by all members of the community and that will be reflected in the voting patterns of members of Parliament. This change will happen gradually; it is not a question of a revolution. The daylight saving vote in the last Parliament is an example of the thoughts I am exploring. This was a free vote on an issue that did not relate to conscience. The biggest challenge with this development will not be to the established parties which will find many ways to increase their flexibility. The biggest challenge will probably not be for electors either who will be able to be increasingly involved in the process of governing, particularly if it is combined with an expanded role for committees so that electors had a much more direct say in the agenda of government. The biggest challenge, I believe, would be for the media, which would suddenly have to analyse political discourse on the basis of the underlying values of the argument. The media would not be able to resort to stereotypes—there would no longer be good guys and bad guys, there would not be right and wrong. There would simply be valid competing interests on issues that need to be properly considered and conclusions reached. What is more, the media would have a responsibility to present all views on issues in a fair and balanced manner so that citizens could decide issues for themselves. It would be raw politics and the real art of the possible. It will be an increasingly interesting time to have the honour to sit in this chamber.

[Applause.]
