



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**VALEDICTORY SPEECH**



**Mr John McGrath, MLA**  
**(Member for South Perth)**

Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 18 November 2020

*Reprinted from Hansard*

# Legislative Assembly

Wednesday, 18 November 2020

---

## VALEDICTORY SPEECHES

*Member for South Perth*

**MR J.E. McGRATH (South Perth)** [5.31 pm]: The voice of reason is standing now to bring some order to the chamber. To my family and friends up there, this is what it is like all the time—a very unruly place!

I have just found out, Mr Speaker, that I am competing with the third game of the State of Origin—the decider. I had friends texting me, saying, “Do you mind if we don’t watch your speech? We’ve got to watch the State of Origin. Can we watch it later?” I said, “Go for your life.” Queensland has scored the first try, if no-one knows.

**The SPEAKER:** And New South Wales the second.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Thank you.

If anyone had suggested to me 20 years ago that one day I would be standing here after nearly 16 years in this place giving a valedictory speech, I would have laughed at them. My life was completely different back then. I was a journo at *The West Australian*, working long hours, with night shifts during the week, covering sports events on weekends, drinking a few beers after the sports events, and travelling regularly interstate and overseas to cover big sporting events. I had no time for politics. I really was not interested in politics. I had been a member of the Liberal Party back in the 1980s when we lived in Ascot. It was pretty tough out there in Belmont, being a member of the Liberal Party. I remember being at a branch meeting and they were looking for candidates to go to the state conference. I did not know what the state conference was. I said I would go. I turned up at the Sheraton hotel—I was a journo at *The West* and we were supposed to be apolitical—and there was this phalanx of reporters and cameras, stopping the delegates as they walked in. I had to quickly walk past and find another entrance to the conference.

I was always a Liberal. When I was a kid growing up in Hammy Hill, I remember listening to Bob Menzies. I was always pretty inquisitive, but I was taken by his oratory style. We only had a radio in the lounge room down in Hammy Hill. We did not have much money. We would listen to him. He would speak at the Perth Town Hall. Sometimes he would speak at the GPO during the day and at the Town Hall at night-time. We would sit around and listen to him on the radio. I was sort of impressed with him. My dad was a Labor man. I am probably one of the few Liberals to come out of Hammy Hill.

After the career I had, being a member of Parliament is the most rewarding thing I have ever done. I did a lot of rewarding things as a journo. I promoted good ideas, covered big events and tried to make the sports that I was covering better for the competitors and the fans. But the job we all do as members of Parliament is so fulfilling and rewarding when we can help people in our electorate. People think South Perth is a wealthy electorate but a lot of people in South Perth live in Homeswest homes. They battle and struggle. We try to help them whenever we can. That is rewarding for me.

How did I become the member for South Perth? I have not spoken about this much. One day in 2004, I got a phone call from a person who will remain anonymous. They said, “Would you be interested in running for South Perth for the Liberal Party?” I said, “Why do you ask?” They said, “They’re having big problems with their preselection.” It had become very untidy and the state director had to call in the police at the preselection. Bad behaviour does not just happen within Labor circles; it happens over on this side, too. People on the preselection panel were being coerced into how to vote and threatened and all that. They arranged for me to have a meeting with a couple of the Liberal heavyweights—one I knew and one I did not—at a cafe at Scarborough Beach on a Sunday morning. My wife came with me. They said “Listen, we know you’re a member of the party. We’re looking for someone who lives in South Perth. We’re having problems with the preselection. Would you be interested? If state council opened up the preselection again, would you put your name forward?” I discussed it with Karen. Karen knows much more about politics than I do. She had worked for Wilson “Ironbar” Tuckey. She encouraged me to give it a go. We had not long been back in Perth after I did five years in Melbourne—the best five years of my journalistic life. I was sports correspondent for *The West Australian*.

Incidentally, this was not the first time that I had been approached to throw my hat in the ring. Back in the 1990s, Wilson Tuckey and a fellow named Andrew Peacock, whom I am sure all members have heard of, spoke to me about standing for the federal seat of Swan, which was held by Kim Beazley. The margin was diminishing for Kim and he eventually went to another seat. They said I should run for Swan. I had lived in Belmont for 20 years, I had

a reasonable profile in the media and I was well known in the racing industry. They thought I would be a good candidate. At the same time, my career at *The West* was moving forward. I had been moved over to cover AFL; I was originally a racing writer. They put me onto footy. They obviously identified that I knew something about the great game. I covered the Eagles' two premierships—1992 and 1994. My journalistic career was going pretty well, so I declined.

When the opportunity for South Perth came up, the situation was different. I had been living in Como for about 12 years. I had returned from Melbourne, where I was basically my own boss, and went back to the old *West*, where people I used to be senior to were calling the shots. My mail was getting sent back to Melbourne because they did not know I had come back. I thought that maybe it was not the place I wanted to be, so I took it up. My colleagues at *The West* could not believe that I was going into politics. When I left, they said, "You're going into an early retirement." Nothing could be further from the truth because politics is a busy job; it is a tough job.

I went into politics from a job where I had been sports editor. I covered two Olympic Games and 14 AFL grand finals; I voted on the Norm Smith Medal in 1993, won by Michael Long; and I covered more than a dozen Melbourne Cups, five Australian Open tennis tournaments, a couple of Grand Prix in Melbourne and numerous international golf tournaments. Why would I give up that life to go into politics? I sometimes ask myself that question.

My experience in politics, as I said, had been almost non-existent. The only university I had attended was the university of hard knocks. I went to John Curtin High School until I was 16 and then got a job at *The West* as a copy boy. I was interviewed for the job by the late Tom Burke, who had lost his job in federal politics. *The West Australian* had given him a job in what was then called the staff office. I reckon Tom would have seen this young bloke from Hammy Hill and said, "He's caught two buses to get up here for this interview; why not give him the job?" I got a job as a copy boy, went to night school, and the next minute got leaving English and another subject and I got a cadetship in journalism. That was the start of it.

I won the preselection from a very big field. It included a couple of former members of Parliament who saw South Perth as a good seat. My campaign committee included Karen, my wife; my good friend Phil Bruce, who is here this evening; a work colleague, Barry Farmer, who used to be chief racing writer at *The West*, a good Liberal; and advertising guru Keith Ellis. Our treasurer was Liberal Party stalwart Ted Gray.

When we were planning our first fundraiser, Keith Ellis, the advertising guy, said, "Why don't you have a fundraiser for a legend of South Perth in sport, and part proceeds will go to a junior sporting club in South Perth?" We had the first fundraiser, and it was so popular that we have had one every year since. We have inducted people like Lyn McClements, a gold medallist at the Olympics. She grew up in Manning. Many of the champion footballers grew up in Manning. Three hockey players grew up in Manning. Andrew Vlahov, who went to four Olympics, grew up in South Perth and went to Kensington Primary School. It was just a good local thing to do. I am really pleased that we have done that. I want to thank Phil Bruce and Steve Loxley. The great Allan "Chubby" Stiles is here. He won a Simpson Medal playing football for Western Australia. He is a good friend of mine. He still has not forgiven me, because in my first ever campaign I vowed to the people of South Perth that I would deliver underground power to the whole area. Chubby lives in part of Kensington that still has not got it, so he reckoned that he was going to run against me.

There was another time when Geoff Gallop retired. I got on well with Geoff Gallop. He was in an adjoining seat, Victoria Park. We were looking for a candidate. We know what happens in politics. We always say we can win the seat. I said, "Can we win it?", and I was told, "Oh yes, we can win it." So I said to Chubby Stiles, "Chubby, I've got something for you." He said, "What's that?" I said, "You played for Perth. You were at Lathlain Park. Everyone knows you. You're in the movie industry. Why don't you put your hand up and run for Vic Park?" He said, "I've got a better idea. Why don't I run for South Perth and you run for Vic Park?"

Anyway, on 26 February 2005, I was elected to the thirty-seventh Parliament as only the fourth-ever member for South Perth. Members might wonder about that. South Perth did not become a district until 1950. Before that, South Perth was in the City of Canning, because back before 1950 it was bushland all the way out through Manning. In 1950, it became the seat of South Perth. I am the fourth-ever member for that seat and the second-longest serving.

I got through my first election. I was fairly new to the area, but I got a 52.87 per cent primary vote. In 2013, which was a different year, I increased that primary vote to 66.97 per cent. That was the highest primary vote of any Liberal member that year. I remember mentioning that in a speech, and the then Premier, who was sitting down the front, said that it was not a good career move to remind people that I got a better vote than they did, but I did.

Other members of the class of 2005 on this side of the chamber were Troy Buswell, who is very well known, John Castrilli, Murray Cowper, Dr Graham Jacobs, Tony Simpson, Gary Snook, Trevor Sprigg and Dr Steve Thomas. Sadly, I am the only one from that time who remains in this Parliament, although Dr Thomas has come back and is now in the upper house. I especially say sadly because in January 2008, I lost my very good friend and roommate here, Trevor Sprigg, to a heart attack. It was one of the saddest days of my life when I got a phone call from someone in the media saying that Trevor had died in Fremantle Hospital. Trevor and I were like minds. We both loved East Fremantle footy club. He had been a premierships player at that club. Both of us did not mind a bet on the horses.

An old lady in South Perth said to me one day after I was elected, “Mr McGrath, they tell me you’re a punter.” I said, “I tell you what, Mary, it’s not illegal. Understand it’s not illegal.” It is funny how people think that about a person who is punter. I mean, it is a legal thing.

Trevor’s wife, Lyn, asked me to deliver a eulogy at the funeral at East Fremantle Oval. I guess some Labor members would have been there. After the eulogy, East Fremantle Football Club came to me and said, “Trevor was a co-patron. We’d like you to take over from him.” I am still a co-patron of the Mighty Sharks. We do not like South Fremantle that much, Minister for Transport.

When I came into this place, I made a commitment that I would do my best for the people of South Perth. But also, because of my journalistic background, I wanted to try to make the state a better place. I remember that as a journo in Melbourne, after footy matches at the MCG I would see kids run out on the ground and they would all be kicking the footy with their dads and their mates. At Subiaco Oval in Perth, they were not allowed on the ground. So I wrote a column and said what a disgrace that at the MCG, which is one of the great stadiums of the world, kids could go on the ground, but our kids in Perth could not do that. That was a no-brainer. It was not long before the West Australian Football Commission said that kids could go on the ground. I have always been inclined to want to make the world a better place, if I can, because that is what a lot of journalists do. We look at things and we write columns and thought pieces. I really believe that in my own small way, without having any decision-making responsibilities in government, I have made a difference in some areas.

I will talk about a couple of those things. My first portfolio was seniors; racing and gaming; liquor licensing. Some of my colleagues very unkindly suggested that that was a natural fit for me. I hope it was not seniors; I would prefer it to be racing and gaming. In my first ever shadow portfolio position, I shadowed the man who is now Premier, the member for Rockingham. I thought the member for Rockingham might be an easy target. I did not know much about him back then and he probably did not know much about me. I certainly did not know that he would be Premier one day. I thought he did not know much about racing, so I used to try to trick him with questions across the chamber, but I did not have much luck with that.

I take my hat off to the member for Rockingham—I have always believed this—because he was responsible for my first big challenge in this place when he brought in legislation to introduce small bars and allow liquor stores to trade on Sundays. He is the first person I knew of—maybe Herb Graham was the previous one when he brought in taverns in the 1980s—to take on the Australian Hotels Association, which is a very powerful group. I agreed with the legislation, but I had a problem. My party members had been lobbied very heavily by the AHA, which said that small bars will send clubs broke. It also wanted to hold onto the monopoly over Sunday trading for takeaway liquor. It was a difficult time for me, because I was not experienced in taking legislation through our party room. When we walk in, we do not know whether half a dozen members are waiting to blindside us or ambush us. That happens. The thing about this place is that we learn on the go. We have to make mistakes. I would have been a lot better member if I could have turned the clock back 16 years, but it does not happen that way. There is no rule book. We do not get tuition along the way, because all our fellow members are busy doing their own thing. That was a difficult time, but the deadlock was finally broken when Paul Omodei, our leader back then, made a captain’s call to support the government’s legislation. I have to say that I became a bit unpopular with the AHA. I notice the Premier now is boy number one with it! I do not know how he patched that one up with Bradley Woods. I have not seen too many pubs close because of that legislation.

The other thing I have always wanted to see is greater use of the Swan River. I had seen tourist and commuter ferries in Brisbane, and I was always pushing for that. I also came out with a suggestion that the Causeway should be lifted. It is a causeway. We can hardly walk under it. It is so low that only little flat-bottomed and low boats can get up the river. I thought: why not lift it to let bigger boats get into the upper reaches of the river? When I raised the idea, it made the papers and a bloke sent me a text saying, “Why don’t you just lower the water?” But under the Barnett government, through the member for Bateman, who was then the Minister for Transport, I chaired a working group to look at creating more ferries. We came up with the suggestion to raise the causeway, but we also came up with a suggestion that I still believe is a no-brainer: run a fast ferry from the Raffles Hotel jetty to Elizabeth Quay. With all those towers in Applecross, people could walk down and jump onto a fast ferry rather than walk over the bridge and jump on a train that might be half full. That is one for the Minister for Transport, provided she does not become Treasurer. If she does become Treasurer, she has to hand over to whoever becomes Minister for Transport and tell them, “South Perth train station; okay? Keep it high on the list”. I do not want to really lose her at this time, but I cannot stop progress.

I had another idea. One of my federal colleagues, who will remain nameless, said to me, “I can’t get in the paper.” I said that I get a good run in the *Southern Gazette* and *The West Australian* and he said that was because I come up with all these wacky ideas. I said, “Well, maybe you should come up with some wacky ideas.” The tourism industry was going through a difficult time and it wanted the government of the day—I do not know which government it was; it might have been the Carpenter government or ours—to get a “holiday at home” campaign going. I said, “You’ve got all this road reserve on freeways and highways. It’s owned by the government. What about putting up

some billboards with ‘Holiday in Broome’ or ‘Holiday in Busselton’?” It did not go down that well with members of the community who thought it would be a distraction, but I notice that there are now billboards on Forrest Highway and out at the Perth Airport, and there is one as you drive up the freeway here above the Channel Nine building. I do not get distracted by it. In Melbourne, there is a row of them going out to Tullamarine on the Tullamarine Freeway, and it is government land. It is easy. It does not cost anything, Premier.

In 2009, I was appointed chair of a joint standing committee to review the Racing and Wagering Western Australia Act. The member for Darling Range and the Speaker were also on that committee. It was a very high-powered committee!

Several members interjected.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** No, Mick Murray was not on it. He wanted to be on it, but he was not allowed to. They all want to get on committees with me; I do not know why!

I remember that the member for Darling Range did not know anything about betting, so the former member for Kalgoorlie, John Bowler, and I gave her a bit of tuition. We had had lunch at this hotel in Kalgoorlie. We took her into the betting place and told her all about it.

The committee found that the racing industry was in need of infrastructure. It needed a lot of money, because a lot of the infrastructure in the industry was tired and old and had to be replaced. We made a recommendation that the government should reduce the tax on wagering by a sufficient amount to set up an infrastructure fund. Members know what it is like trying to get Treasury to give back a bit of a tax that it has been getting for a long time—it did not happen. I was not happy with that so I gave a speech here and said that the only answer was to sell the TAB, because if we sold the TAB, whoever the successful bidder was, they always give money up-front. Part of that money could be used, which the government was planning, to set up an infrastructure fund. I had so much opposition. The National Party opposed it; the Labor Party opposed it; some of my colleagues opposed it, and they were crossing the floor; and my friends in racing were saying to me that I had sold out the industry that I love. They said, “What are you doing? The TAB is the goose that lays the golden egg.” But I knew that the climate was going to be bad, because more competition was coming from the big boys from overseas. We stuck firm. We tried to get it done but we ran out of time.

The 2017 election came—I think we lost that one—and surprise, surprise, the new government, the McGowan government, made an announcement that it was now going to sell the TAB. I felt so vindicated because at last I had got one right. I could have politicised it. I said to the media that this was the biggest backflip in the history of the Parliament of Western Australia. It was probably close, but, you know? However, as I have said in this chamber before, and the Attorney General has mentioned it a few times, in politics, there is nothing wrong with doing a backflip, provided you land on your feet; you do not want to stumble. But if you make a good landing, backflips are fine. I did not make it political. In fact, I supported the government because I knew it was best for the industry. I think I am one of the few opposition members who got mentioned in the official press release, with it thanking the member for South Perth for his support. I did not do it for the government; I did it for the racing industry because I felt it was right. My only worry, Treasurer, is that times have changed. I do not know what the TAB will be worth when we finish COVID-19 —

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** If you had sold it when you first suggested it —

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** If we had sold it when we first suggested it, it might have got \$700 million or \$800 million. I can only hold you guys to account for that.

One of my most difficult decisions was when my government decided to amalgamate the two councils of South Perth and Victoria Park. It was a very difficult time for me. My community did not want it and the people from Vic Park did not want it, because they were going to lose Burswood and Crown, which was a lot of rates—about \$4 million a year. I went on 7.30, which was probably another not very good career move, and said that the people of South Perth had been led up the garden path by my government. I could imagine the former Premier sitting at home in Cottesloe, with no air-conditioning, watching 7.30. To his credit, Colin said, “I don’t mind you talking about your electorate, John—that is fine—but I didn’t like some of the language you used in the interview.” I also went to Vic Park when there was a rally. I remember the now Treasurer was there and he had a T-shirt on saying “Save Burswood” or —

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** “The battle for Burswood”!

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** — “The battle for Burswood”. Kate Doust, the President of the upper house, was there too. I was the only Liberal there, and the media interviewed us afterwards, so it was on Sunday night television. There I was with two Labor members. I am always getting into trouble about things like that.

I think my finest achievement in this place was the stadium. One day, when I was sitting up there as government Whip, I gave a speech. The former Premier was down the front, and I said that the stadium should go to Burswood. My reason that it should go to Burswood was that it was a greenfields site, but I had a bit more information. I had a copy of the Stephenson report from 1955. Who would have a copy of the Stephenson report at home? Who?

Only a bloke like Fred Cavanaugh, one of my workers who is here today. He keeps all those things. He brought it in to me. The Stephenson report from 1955 said that one day there will be need for a stadium to hold 80 000 to 100 000 people in Perth, and the best location is Burswood Island, which was infill and so on. It said that it should be the site of a sporting zone for all sorts of sports. The Premier liked it and said, “Why don’t we push that?”, and the rest is history. The stadium is an amazing project that everyone agrees is really outstanding.

In closing, I want to thank all the people who have worked for me. I want to thank my wife, who is a tower of strength. When I get home at night she says, “Where were you today? I didn’t see you in the chamber.” I say, “Why don’t you get a life!” She is always the font of knowledge and gives me good advice about politics, but I do not always listen. My children, David and Erin, are great supporters of mine. I thank my long-serving staff members, Dawn Stratton, who is here, and Fred Cavanaugh. Dawn was my electorate officer for 12 years. I thank my current staff members, Pierra Sanders and Frank Wright, and all the staff I have had over the years. I have had some outstanding staff. I do not know why, but I think the member for South Perth’s office is a breeding ground for outstanding people. I have had four university students who did law all go on to outstanding careers, including one as president of the Law Society of Western Australia and one as a member of the bar in New York. All these people have come out of my little office in South Perth, so maybe it is not a bad training ground. I thank all those people.

I want to thank the community of South Perth. South Perth people are good people. They do not complain much. South Perth people just get on and get things done themselves. They do not want you to do everything for them. I have had so much support from those people and it has been a real honour to serve them for 16 years.

I do not know where I am going after this. It will be a new chapter in my life. I have had two chapters now—one in journalism and one as an MP. Who knows what the third chapter will be?

I wish you all the best in all your endeavours in the future. Also, to my colleagues at the next election, good luck. Thank you.

[Applause.]

---