



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VALEDICTORY SPEECH



HON BOB THOMAS, MLC
(Member for South West Region)

Legislative Council

Adjournment of the House — Special

Thursday, 23 November 2000

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HON BOB THOMAS (South West) [12.16 pm]: If I had known that so many people would be saying so many nice things about me, I might have left this place earlier! Since the beginning of 1997, I have turned my mind increasingly to my valedictory speech and have come up with a lot of profound things that I want to say today. However, the House will be pleased to know that I have not written down any of those things and cannot remember them; so my comments today will be more brief than had I written down those things. It is just over 11 years since I gave my maiden speech in this place, but it seems to me as though it was just yesterday that I stood here and ever so nervously read out the speech that I had written at midnight the night before. While I was reading out that speech, I kept saying to myself, "What on earth have I done to myself? I have put myself into some pretty risky and difficult situations in the past, but this would have to be the most nerve-racking thing I have ever done."

I felt that way partly because it was my view that a maiden speech should be about 15 minutes' long, and that I should say a bit about myself and how I came to formulate my political philosophy, and talk in passing about a couple of important issues within my electorate. Therefore, I had prepared a speech that I thought was about 15 minutes' long. However, at Caucus the morning that I was to give my speech, Hon Joe Berinson came to me and said, "Bob, we need you to make a long speech. We need you to speak for 45 minutes and take your maximum time." I think someone had not had a briefing and we needed to delay the debate on a particular Bill. I was nerve-racked. If I had phoned my wife and said, "What can I do; I have to give a 45-minute speech and I have only prepared a 15-minute speech?", she would have said, "Tell them about your vasectomy; that usually takes two hours, and you don't get any questions."

Those members who were in this Chamber when I read out my speech would probably have noticed when I was holding up the pages that written across the top of them were the words, "slow down." As it turned out I spoke for 15 minutes, but I am just as nervous today as I was then. I am a pretty ordinary sort of bloke of about average ability, but for me to have been a member of this Chamber and a member of Parliament in Western Australia for 12 years has been an absolute privilege for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it has been a privilege to represent the Labor Party in this Parliament as a person with a strong commitment to equity and social justice and a desire to make the Western Australian community a fairer, more equal society in which people can advance themselves based on their ability and willingness to do hard work rather than rely on the affluence of their family. I am proud to have been in this Chamber and to have participated in those debates in which our philosophy has been needed. I have listened carefully to people who have put forward a different point of view and have listened to them expound their philosophies in this House. I have spoken to many of those people opposite in social situations and I have not changed my philosophy one iota. It is my view that Parliament is the clearing house of political tension in Australia; we resolve our conflicts on the floor of the House rather than at gunpoint as they do in other countries. Therefore, I make no apologies for standing and arguing about issues in this place in the same way that members opposite would not make any apologies for arguing their views. I hope that I have made some form of valuable contribution in the time that I have been here.

It has been a privilege to represent the South West Region; Albany, Denmark and Walpole would have to be the most special places in the world, and the rest of my electorate, the west coast, Manjimup, Collie etc are not far behind and are great places also. Again, to have represented the South West Region, the most dynamic area in this State, in this Parliament has been a privilege for me.

I also would like to say that having worked with Hon Joe Berinson in this place is something that very few people would appreciate the value of. I do not want to demean the contribution and the value of other members in this Chamber but, in my view, Joe Berinson would have to have been one of greatest parliamentary performers in any Parliament in the world. I recall the enormous pressure that was placed on him in our last term of government. However, the special memories that I will take away are of how Hon Joe Berinson used to listen to a debate from the other side and then stand and demolish those arguments by quoting the classics, contemporary literature and contemporary movies. He could talk about any of the Acts of Parliament as if he had a photographic memory and he had a wit that was unsurpassed this place. As much as I have enjoyed working with everyone in this Chamber, Joe Berinson would have to have been the greatest and it was a privilege to work with him.

It was also a privilege to have worked with the wonderful people of Parliament House. I refer to the officers of this Chamber, the switchboard, the kitchen, the cleaners, the Leader of the Opposition's staff, your own staff, Mr President, and the staff of the Leader of the House. I am talking about everyone in this Parliament. Almost everyone is more intelligent than me and has had far more interesting life experiences than me. I have really enjoyed working with those people, and feel I am a better person for my contact with them.

I believe I got into Parliament by accident. I worked for the Commonwealth Employment Service in Manjimup between 1985 and 1988. Brian Burke held a cabinet meeting there and was accompanied by my good friend Ted Cunningham, who was one of his staff. I had not seen Ted for a number of years and we rekindled our friendship. I was about to leave Manjimup and move back to Perth for my work, but my good friend Ted, Hon Ed Dermer and Hon Nick Griffiths encouraged me to run for the third south west upper House seat. I did not give myself much chance but, with their encouragement and support, I was preselected. After that, I think I was the only person in the south west who believed I had a chance of winning the seat. I appreciate the confidence they had in me to encourage me to run for the seat.

All retiring members look back over their careers and think about their achievements and regrets. I have always believed that politics is about the people who come through the front door and about getting things done for people. I place great store in helping those who need my help, and I have accomplished an enormous number of things for many people. I do not want to bore the House with the details, but I take pride in the things I achieved in Albany during my 12 years in this place, particularly during the Labor Party's term of government. This Parliament passed the Western Australian Land Authority Act in June 1992. LandCorp was set up in July, and in August 1992 I invited Vince Papparo, the chief executive officer, to Albany. I spoke to him about LandCorp becoming involved in the foreshore development. He then spoke to the combined councils in the area and agreed to fund the project to the tune of \$11m. Some of the other things I negotiated with Vince include \$100 000 for the further upgrade of York Street and \$100 000 for the Albany shire. That was to have been for a bicycle path from Bayonet Head Road to the Lower King bridge, but unfortunately was used for other purposes. Other achievements include helping a local organisation get a grant to carry out work at the south coast community hall, the T/S Vancouver development and the hard but successful work with the surf lifesaving club and the excellent facilities it now has. The list goes on, and I take pride in the things I was able to help various groups in Albany accomplish.

However, there are times when I look back on my career and regret some of the things that happened. As a country member, I have had to live away from home for so long. That has placed an enormous burden on my wife Carol. She has had to do a lot of things she would normally have expected me as a partner to do. I refer specifically to many of those responsibilities in bringing up our children. My wife has done an excellent job, and I am extremely proud of my two girls. However, much of the credit must go to Carol because of the amount of time that I have spent away. It is also a matter of great regret to me that I was not at the graduation ceremony in 1997 when my oldest girl Megan graduated from Albany Senior High School. It may not seem important to other people, but we sat on that day and the plane that I caught home got in late, and I got to the ceremony about a minute after my daughter had graduated. I also have a deep regret that I missed my youngest daughter Bronwyn's graduation from Albany Primary School. My daughter is an actor with the Coco Youth Theatre. She is a very good actor, if I say so myself. Apparently her finest hour was at her graduation. Her class put on a production and she played Steve Urkel, a character from an American television show, and she brought the house down. There were tears all around, and she was at her greatest. I regret that I have missed out on many family things as a member of Parliament. I have gone along and watched many other children accomplish things and be rewarded for their achievements at other schools, yet missed going to my kids' assemblies and sports days.

I also thank the staff that I have had the great pleasure of working with during my career. Ursula Richards worked with me for about five years. Ursula would have to be one of the best operators at putting people at ease. Many people who come into members' electorate offices are anxious or upset. Ursula was marvellous at putting people at ease. Julie Hooper and Pam Stoney have replaced Ursula. They have similar skills; and their computing skills are second to none. I swear they can make their computers talk, they are so good. They are wonderful people to work with. Guy Wroth is my research officer and also a bit of a brake on me. He is very astute. He is a lovely person to work with. Since 1997 I have had a part-time office in Bunbury and have had the pleasure of working with two lovely people there, Terri-Ellen McKenzie and Eileen O'Sullivan. They were fantastic people to work with. Young Greg White, who now works with me, is an extremely competent and valuable member of my team, and I appreciate the work he does there.

I conclude by saying that I wish members opposite the very best. I hope they achieve their ambitions, as long as it is within the context of a Labor Government. I wish members on this side of the House the very best. I recommend that they reach for the stars. I believe in every one of you, and I wish you very well.

[Applause.]