



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Tom McNeil, MLC
(Member for Upper West)

Legislative Council

Address-in-Reply: Third Day

Thursday, 4 August 1977

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Motion

THE HON. TOM McNEIL (Upper West) [4.45 p.m.]: Mr President, may I commence by offering my congratulations to you on your election to such high office. No doubt the 24th May, 1977, will remain in your memory for quite a number of years for not only was it the day on which you were elected President of the Council, but you also are the first President in the history of the House to be elected from the floor. On behalf of the Leader of the House, the Leader of the Opposition, Ministers, and members who have been returned, and new members coming in such as myself, I congratulate you and hope that you have a long and fulfilling time in this House.

At this juncture, I would like to pay my respects to the late Hon. Jack Heitman. Whilst I was not a personal friend of Jack I realise, from my tour of the electorate, the high esteem in which he was held and the fine work he carried out on behalf of the people in the Upper West Province. The manner in which he carried out his duties to his constituents was always uppermost in his thoughts.

I have not previously been involved in politics or local government but I have always been closely associated with people through business and sport. I like working with people and when the opportunity arose to stand as a member of the National Country Party I was more than happy to do so, as I firmly believe in its platform and policies for the running of this State.

I do not profess, as do some members of this House, to be an expert on farming, the agricultural field, or fishing, but I do realise that we have problems within those areas in the Upper West Province. My party has reiterated its determination to allow the farming industries to decide their own marketing policies because I believe that this is their fundamental right.

The season that we have just come through, and obviously the seasons ahead, are going to be particularly difficult ones for the farming community. The drought, the rain-making efforts, the crops—all these things have been discussed by members previously and I am aware of them. I hope that somewhere in my involvement in this House we can do something to alleviate the problems of the people on the land.

The main central area of the Upper West Province, of course, centres around Geraldton, and the farming and fishing industries are very important to the economy of the region. The fishermen, whilst not having had a wonderful year, were helped over a difficult period by the good prices of rock lobsters and it is to be hoped that in the seasons ahead they will once again achieve the catches which are so necessary to the viability of the whole district.

I think it would be inopportune if I did not make some reference to the small businesses that are associated with agricultural areas within the country, to the rural areas, and to the fact that they have to dispense credit to carry the farmer through a poor season. I appreciate that our Government has the small businesses council established under the Industries Assistance Plan. Its utilisation no doubt will assist small businesses to flourish.

The National Country Party has committed itself to upgrading the standard of education and I am sure that an increasing number of people will recognise the problems that the party highlighted in its election policy. Education is extremely important and the Government must see that all sections of the community and the country are attended to.

I personally welcome the addition of a new primary school at Tarcoola which is within my electorate. I also note that the funds which have been frozen by the Federal Government have done nothing to assist the improvement of the education system in our State. However, I am hopeful that this is only a temporary measure and as time goes on we shall receive the benefit which we feel is due to us.

I must make some comment on decentralisation. Representing a country electorate as I do, I feel that decentralisation should not be a lip service. People in the country areas have a difficult enough task meeting the higher costs involved in living in the country. When we consider the rail freight increase, the fact that we have no fuel equalisation, and the higher water charges and transport costs, we realise that the people in my province are justified in feeling that they are being beaten with a big stick.

I do not propose to say anything at this juncture on the Mullewa–Meekatharra railway line. I have no official confirmation as to what is taking place and if I can believe the Minister for Transport, Cabinet has made no decision along those lines. Therefore I will let the matter rest.

I can understand, however, the consternation of the people in that area north of my electorate. It is natural that people, who believe they are once again being deprived of some connection with the metropolitan area, see this as a blow to decentralisation and, naturally enough, we can understand and appreciate their feelings.

One of the main problems in the country, I believe, is the lack of medical services. The drawback that so much money and time are involved in making trips to Perth, without any compensation whatsoever, to enable our families to receive the medical treatment they require, with the consequent cost of travel and accommodation—none of which is tax deductible—gives no incentive to people in this State to make their home anywhere further than 50 miles from Perth.

I asked a question the other day of the Minister for Transport regarding the Westrail bus system. It crossed my mind that if there was a bus travelling from that area to Perth, on which there were empty seats on occasions, perhaps some consideration could be given to people who have been referred to the medical services in Perth. Perhaps they could fill those seats if the bus was making the journey. Obviously there would not be any extra expenditure on the part of the Government.

The tourist industry offers increasing benefits in my area, and underlines the present need for accommodation at economy rates. The upper portion of the Upper West Province has many tourist attractions but quite a number of them need commercial development. I believe that a regional collation of tourist material should be prepared and the necessary steps taken to develop these projects so that the people who travel north will have a satisfying tour in that area.

I welcome the Government's formation of a water resources council and eagerly await the implementation of its recommendations.

Mr President, to lead a happy and full life is I believe the right of every Western Australian. The focus of government, at all levels, should cater for the individual, and endeavour to give him the facilities and the opportunities to achieve his maximum potential. We realise that the needs of health, shelter, and security are basic. However, the need to feel worth while within one's self and within one's community is also essential and this should be fulfilled in the areas of work, recreation, and leisure. This is essential if people are to utilise their time and their freedom in the best possible manner. Adequate recreation is important for the health of the individual, both physically and psychologically. There is a need for long-term planning in the setting aside of areas earmarked for the various aspects of outdoor recreation.

At the local club or community level it is essential that the Government should be providing adequate facilities, coaching opportunities, leadership training, and any other assistance which will benefit and encourage the volunteer and the amateur along the lines currently being employed by the Community Recreation Council.

At State association and regional level the need includes specialised training facilities, the dissemination of the latest technical information, and access to the latest coaching. I believe sincerely that it is the responsibility of the State Government to look after our State representatives and I do not draw the line at any particular sport which may be encouraged with each individual.

There is a need for the Commonwealth Government to pick up the tab when it comes to international and national events, and I believe that the benefits of a sporting nation are many. We have always prided ourselves on the performance of our athletes when they competed in Australia's colours. Because of ever-increasing costs and the lack of adequate financial support, we are no longer the dominant force that we once were. More and more of our young people are turning to sedentary pastimes, and the promising athletes in sport are looking for other means with which to carry on and, in all probability, these are found on the other side of the world.

A recent survey conducted by the Confederation of Australian Sport revealed some very startling statistics. Most of the national associations in Australia are forced to rely on player contributions, affiliation fees, levies, and such like in order to obtain the necessary finance to continue. Amateur fund raising with chook raffles and two-bob lotteries is outside the law, and it is obvious that with this sad lack of sufficient finance some aspects of sport are being pushed to the background.

The Federal Government admitted its responsibility to national sport following our dismal showing in the last Olympics, and a task force was appointed to consider and advise on the Federal Treasury's role in assisting sport in this country. Although the task force was quite emphatic on the need for the Federal Government to financially support sporting associations, the Government has not up until this stage acted on this advice.

If we draw a comparison between Australia and Canada, we can get a picture of the insidious situation that has developed. In Canada, the Canadian Government last year allocated \$3.5 million to be spent on general recreation, and it also gave \$8.5 million in direct grants to sporting organisations. Our Federal Government last year allocated \$356 000 for sport and recreation, of which a paltry \$5 280 found its way to sporting organisations.

The Federal Government has rightly made itself a patron of the arts within this country, and last year placed \$32 million under the heading of "Arts Australia". But what about sport? This too has a vital role in the culture of any country and it is time that the Federal Government accepted its vital role as patron of sport, with regular financial provision in the national Budget.

At this juncture I would like to quote some figures involving sport, at both the national and State level. Sport in Australia employs 8 754 people in the manufacture and sale of sporting goods. Those figures do not include the hundreds of golf, football, squash, and tennis professionals. During the past financial year the Federal Government gained \$35 million as a result of sales tax on sporting goods.

A sum of \$14 million was paid out in salaries and wages by sporting goods manufacturers. The total retail figure for sporting goods during 1976–77 was over \$200 million. A sum of \$18 million was collected by way of sales tax, and a further \$5.3 million in custom duties. A sum of \$158 million was involved in sales of sports clothing, boats, caravans, and bicycles.

Sport also assists the economy of the country through travel, accommodation, and increased employment opportunities. The income tax derived from the people involved in sport also assists the economy. Sport also attracts millions of spectators who, in turn, generate millions of dollars in the food, drink, and clothing industries.

I now turn to the last topic of my maiden speech, involving a matter which is very close to me. I refer to the wonderful game of Australian rules football. Very few people realise the extent to which the administration of our national sport has been applied to the disadvantage of country clubs and country players. The autocratic management of football has completely destroyed the players as individuals.

Prior to 1971, country football clubs and players decided their own destiny, and the country football clubs received some equitable return when their champions were taken down to play in Perth and utilised by the Western Australian National Football League. In former days payment to a country player was usually in the form of the player being approached in an attempt to entice him to try his luck in the big time. The benefits which the country club usually gained were perhaps a set of guernseys or a few free passes to a grand final. The player concerned made the final decision, and would go to the club of his choice.

In 1971 the WANFL decided to introduce what is unpopularly known—particularly in the country—as country football zoning. The situation was that if a player decided he was good enough to tackle the league he could go to one club only. In 1971 the league, and the eight clubs involved, put their heads together and divided the State into eight zones. I am speaking only about my particular zone in the upper west, being area No. 8. That area was attached to the East Fremantle Football Club.

At this juncture I can say that the East Fremantle Football Club has been very fair, as far as I am concerned, in its dealings with the upper west zone, so far as it is permitted. I do not think any league club would spend any more in country areas than does the East Fremantle Football Club, and that applies particularly when one realises that champions would be automatically sold to that club. It must be very nice for the clubs to be able to sit back and know that no other club can interfere with its players, and that a player would cost them only \$250. That figure was introduced in 1971, against stiff opposition from the South-West National Football League and the Goldfields National Football League.

The fee of \$250 was not really acceptable to any country player, and I am sure members in this place would realise the reason. The people living in country towns take a keen interest in country football and in their players. They like to see their players become involved in the league game, but they realise that their best players are lost to local sport, so a sum of \$250 is small recompense.

The WANFL must have had a pang of conscience in 1976, because the fee was lifted to \$300. That is not a great sum of money, particularly when it is remembered that in 1971 the average wage for a male in Western Australia was \$92 per week compared with the average wage today of \$194—take-home pay—if I can believe the figures which have been quoted. When one compares a sum of \$250 with a wage of \$92, and a sum of \$300 with a wage of \$194, it is obvious that an iniquitous situation has developed with regard to country players.

The conscience of the WANFL must have received another jolt because the amount of \$300 was increased by \$10 for every league game played after the first 20 games. That was very big-hearted! I think every member would realise that it costs more than \$300 to replace a player. The position seems to be that it is open season on country clubs, and sums of money in excess of \$300 are spent in trying to convince a player he should play with a particular club.

When a country footballer goes to Perth he is automatically transferred into a league club for a fee of \$300. I would like to know whether the Towns Football Club at Geraldton would be interested in buying back Jim Sewell for \$300. The player plays his first game in Perth, and on that day his fee is decided.

If after three or four years the VFL chooses a footballer, and that footballer decides he wants to transfer, he can go only if his club agrees. The situation has developed in which during the past 18 months four players have taken out Supreme Court writs against their home clubs. Stan Magro has taken out a writ against the South Fremantle Football Club.

The point I am trying to make is that these players are entitled to a far greater share of the proceeds of the game than they are getting. It is a completely restricted area. As long as his club stands in the way a player has no chance of a transfer to another State as a player and as a clerk. If he transfers he will reduce his future prospects as a player and as a clerk, in all probability.

As I said, four players have taken out writs and I referred to Stan Magro in this State. I can assure members generally that there is no possible chance of that case going to court. The same has happened in Victoria where there is no possible chance of a case in that State appearing before the court. If any member in this House is a gambler I would like to give him live to one that Morris of the VFL Richmond Club will get his clearance.

The point I am bringing up is that this practice is a restraint on players. The VFL, the WANFL, and the South Australian National Football League all realise that this restraint is a very real thing, and that the first time a case goes to court the player concerned will win, and the whole sham will be over.

Before I conclude I would like to refer to an article which possibly escaped the notice of many people in this State. In July of this year the proposition was put to the WANFL directors that any player registered with the WANFL, who obtained a clearance through legal action and outside the procedure laid down by the league, should not be reissued with a permit in Western Australia for seven years.

I was appalled to read of that proposition, and the fact that it appeared in a newspaper. I was appalled to think that any human being could put forward a proposal along those lines. We have all heard the story about the little boy with his cricket bat and cricket ball, but this situation is that of a little boy with his football. I did not think any self-respecting man would have allowed the matter to go any further. However, the proposal was put to the WANFL directors on the 6th July, and they needed a three-quarters majority to carry the motion. The result of the vote was five to three. In other words, had the directors of the dissenting clubs—East Fremantle, West Perth, and East Perth—thought along those lines then any player who took out a court writ would not be permitted to play football in this State for a period of seven years. I think such action should be condemned.

May I thank you, Mr President, and members for being so patient and courteous in listening to me. However, I feel that nothing should interfere with the freedom of the individual to play football with the club of his choice, and I think the Minister for Recreation should look into this matter and decide the rights of people who want to take part in honest occupations; and, if necessary, an all-party committee could be appointed to investigate. I support the motion.

Debate adjourned, on motion by the Hon. W.M. Piesse.
