



**PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**



**Mrs EDITH DIRCKSEY COWAN, MLA**  
(Member for West Perth)

**Legislative Assembly**

**Address-in-Reply**

**Thursday, 28 July 1921**



# Legislative Assembly

*Thursday, 28 July 1921*

---

## ADDRESS-IN-REPLY.

### First Day.

**Mrs. COWAN (West Perth)** [4.00]: I move —

That the following address be presented to His Excellency in reply to the Speech he has been pleased to deliver to us —

“May it please Your Excellency. We, the members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and to thank Your Excellency for the Speech you have been pleased to deliver to the Parliament.”

I have much pleasure in submitting this motion. I stand here to-day in the unique position of being the first woman in an Australian Parliament. I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind hon. members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home. I have been sent here more from that standpoint than from any other. You, Mr. Speaker, are aware that everybody said when the elections began that there were three old women putting up for Parliament. I am the only old woman who got in, but then I am the only genuine one of the lot.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: There was a nice young woman defeated at Claremont.

**Mrs. COWAN:** I am very sorry she did not get in.

Hon. P. Collier: We are all very sorry.

**Mrs. COWAN:** I only desire to say that I am here ready to help hon. members to these ends. That is all I came here for, and it is also my desire to seek the help of hon. members, because that will be most necessary if woman's opinion is to have any effect in this Parliament. It is a great responsibility to be the only woman here, and I want to emphasise the necessity which exists for other women being here. It will be remembered that one of the things that made men, as well as women, realise the need for having women in Parliament was that a Parliament like this, consisting entirely of men, was able, clearly without thinking what it was doing, to pass an amendment to an Act not so long ago—the State Children Act—by which any child that was convicted before a State Children's Court would be a State child until it reached the age of 18. When we found that out we felt that it was more than time that someone should come into this House just to remind the men sometimes that these questions should be given more consideration. There are many other things that will crop up during the session in connection with which I feel sure I shall be able to give some help, and I feel certain also that hon. members will be only too pleased to give me their help—for I will need it—whenever they have to be reminded of these necessary things that I shall probably have the honour of submitting to them, and in connection with which I shall have to seek their assistance, if the outcome is to be successful. Then, again, the Scriptures tell us that it is not good for man to be alone. I appreciate the honour that was conferred on me in asking me, though not the youngest member in this House, to move the Address-in-reply. I look on it as an honour conferred on the women of the country, and I therefore thank the Government for it.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: They only wanted your vote.

**Mrs. COWAN:** It is all the more necessary, therefore, that I should make it clear where I stand. I am a Nationalist, and I belong to no party in this House. I was sent here to uphold law and order and constitutional government, and it will be my desire to assist in carrying out these objects in a proper and satisfactory manner; while in the discharge of my duties here I shall be responsible only to my own constituents. That plank was inserted when the fighting platform of the Nationalists was drawn up, and I think the Premier will grant me that he himself was one who helped to draw up that platform. There are too many here to-day who are possessed of the old party spirit which seems ever to exist, but I cannot see why we should drag party into things that concern the whole of the State. We want every member in this House to realise the mistakes of the past in this direction. I think, too, it has been fairly proved in this House to-day that women can and do stand by women, and will stand by women in the future if it is only to help to get rid of some of that painful party spirit so frequently evinced on questions on which it should never be brought to bear. I must also add that, while a Nationalist, and while supporting a Nationalist Government, I shall always reserve to myself the right to criticise suggestively and candidly any legislation brought forward, and will do everything in my power to remedy any mistakes which may seem to me are being made.

With regard to the deficit, I do not propose to deal very much with it to-day, as an opportunity will arise later. We all regret that the country is obliged to have a deficit. I suppose no country can live without more or less of an overdraft. We certainly have a large one, and it will be a bad day for us if it should be suddenly called up from Europe or anywhere else. Therefore it is a good thing to see that the Government have been putting their house in order. With regard to the Arbitration Court, which has not helped to solve existing difficulties, I would like to make the suggestion that a trained economist, or commercial man, and a Labour man should be appointed to investigate each year the existing economic conditions, get a knowledge of work to be undertaken, and then set wages in any calling. This would help any Government.

Member: Where would you get the economist?

**Mrs. COWAN:** What do we have professors of economics for in the universities, if they are not going to be utilised in such a direction? Reverting again to the deficit, I am glad to say that it has not been appreciably added to by the advent of a woman to Parliament. I was told that the election of a woman would involve an expenditure during the present session of £300 or £400, owing to the necessity for making alterations to a portion of the building; but none were made, and I might add, owing to my moderation, and the care of the Speaker, such an expenditure has not been incurred. As a matter of fact, the cost to the country has been about £20, and the deficit will not be added to, to any extent worth talking about.

Mr. Lambert: Will you invite us to see how the money was spent?

**Mrs. COWAN:** With regard to the water supply for the metropolitan area, that is a matter that concerns every household, and it is satisfactory to see that the Government are attending to it. There is a reference to the matter in the Speech, and it is to the effect that the question is receiving consideration. I trust it will be possible to have a board appointed at no distant date to deal with it. It is most necessary that we should have some outside authority appointed and something done in a more practical way towards improving the existing condition of affairs. It has been brought under my notice that there is another scheme on the tapis and it is one which might receive early consideration. I am not aware that the Premier even knows the details of it, but it is a scheme that was submitted some years ago by Mr. Shields, who is an engineer possessing qualifications in advance of those held by any officer in the Government departments. I contend that that gentleman's scheme is worthy of serious consideration, and I hope the Government will give it that consideration, even if they have to do so by appointing an outside board, in order that a fair decision might be arrived at as to the merits of that and the other schemes. It is a proposal, too, which I understand will cost a third of the others which have been propounded, and therefore, in the interests of the ratepayers, and particularly the women who have to use water for cooking, washing, and other domestic purposes, something should be done to ensure the cheapest supply. A suggestion has also been made to the Government that the temporary supply might be increased from the lakes around Perth. That, too, is worthy of serious consideration on behalf of the ratepayers. If hon. members lived in West Perth they would know what the people there had to suffer last summer; and we pay highly for it. Therefore we are all gratified to learn that the question is at last going to be dealt with, and, it is to be hoped, in a satisfactory way. With regard to education, naturally one will support all that makes for efficiency and that which will help the children of parents who are in the country. We have far too many families in our towns, and we require to give people every opportunity for realising and enjoying the beauties of country life without the loss of this advantage. I judge by the report which has been handed in, from the little one has seen of it, that possibly more may be done in that direction and done better than has been the case in the past. I honestly hope so, because it does seem to be an anomaly that we should be able to spend £1,400 on a gymnasium in the city while some of our teachers outback are living in canvas bedrooms containing at one end the season's supply of bonedust. I wish to specially draw the attention of the Minister for Education to such anomalies.

The Premier. The Minister for Agriculture?

**Mrs. COWAN:** Perhaps both of them. It should be possible to have that condition of things altered, for how can we expect to get satisfactory teaching in country districts when the teachers sent out are treated like that? In regard to the State Children Department, I have plenty of suggestive criticism to offer, but not now. It will keep until another day. However, I do deprecate, and I know that the men and women in my constituency deprecate, the expenditure on the new Receiving Home. The women, I am sorry to say, were not in any way consulted in regard to that. Apropos of this! I hope that when the Government again bring in the Architects Bill they will make it easy for women to become architects. We shall never have satisfactory homes and Government buildings until women have a voice in planning them. It seems to me that had we been consulted, much better use could have been made of £12,500 than has been done, and I trust that in future we shall be consulted in such matters. Then there is the question of probation officers and a proper scheme of probation, which should receive serious consideration here whenever amendments are being made to the State Children Act. There is no mention in the Speech of a home for mental defectives. That will create a good deal of discussion whenever it does come up, and I trust that every member will qualify himself for that discussion by reading something of the subject and realising what it means to our national life, unless we deal with the question wisely. As usual I was to a certain extent misrepresented in the Press on that subject, but I feel it is my bounden duty at all times to support anything which may be done for the

improvement of those who are going to spoil our national efficiency unless we do something to prevent it. I also suggest that we should have a woman on the Price Fixing Commission. At present mutton is sold wholesale at Brunswick at from 4d. to 5d. a pound. That is what the grower gets for it. Yet we in the city have to pay 1s. per pound. In the Eastern States the retail prices are much lower than they are here. I commend that anomaly to the consideration of the Country Party. There are many measures to be dealt with during the coming session. The Municipal Act is to be one of them. When that comes before us I trust that those of us who think that something should be done for old age and invalid pensioners will get the support of hon. members generally. Let me read the following short extract from a letter which I received only a day or two ago: —

Please will you allow me to call attention to the fact that under the various laws or Acts governing the making of rates and taxes there is no power given to any public body to exempt or to lower any valuation on any rates struck in favour of an invalid or old age pensioner. I think, Mrs. Cowan, you will admit that it is very hard to hear, for old people. Take my own case for example: I am allowed an old age pension of 14s. 1½d. a week and my wife gets the same amount. This year's rates were over £8. We have still £2 or more to pay for rates struck on our home, and we have nothing else.

If that does not make members realise that there should be some further consideration given to the old and incapacitated, I do not know what will.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: The local authority need not enforce payment.

**Mrs. COWAN:** They do, anyhow. There should be something definite in the Act to prevent the enforcement. Then again, the Electoral Act is to come up. I hope we shall be able to have something done in regard to compulsory voting. It seems to me an absolute farce to make people place their names on the roll and not follow it up by making voting compulsory. If we did so, people would take a much greater interest in elections than they do. When they understand that if they do not vote they will be fined there will be plenty of voting, for it is when a person has to pay for something that he begins to regard it as of value. I have been asked to help to secure proportional representation.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: Do you believe in equality of votes, one vote one value?

The Minister for Mines: This is not question time.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: You cannot have proportional representation without it.

**Mrs. COWAN:** We have one vote one value now, for this House.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: No, we have not.

**Mrs. COWAN:** We all have the same vote for this House, anyhow. What we want is proportional representation on the lines of the Denmark system, which has proved the most satisfactory. In regard to immigration, it is most necessary that we should select only the right class of immigrant. We earnestly hope that proper examination will be made of immigrants before they come to the State, and that we shall have only the best possible type. To be sure of that we should watch the English ports and also the port of entry here. I have been asked to draw the attention of the Minister for Railways to the fact that by charging a shilling for every perambulator put on a railway train he is militating against the very best class of immigrant, namely, our own children.

The Minister for Railways: I will withdraw it at once.

**Mrs. COWAN:** It has been suggested that a sort of court-martial should be held to inquire into this question, and that the Government should be asked to make the punishment fit the crime; the suggested punishment being that the Minister for Railways should be made to parade the streets of Perth for the whole of one afternoon with a heavy infant on one arm and a bag of groceries on the other. If that is done it is thought that it will serve to draw the Minister's attention to the very great handicap which is placed upon mothers who wish to come into town to do some shopping and who cannot bring a perambulator, for the simple reason that they cannot afford to pay the railway fee of 1s. It may be suggested that the fee was imposed with a view to inducing the mothers to stay at home. I do not think it will have that effect; they must go out to do their shopping, and since the Railway Department insist upon their leaving the perambulators at home and carrying heavy infants, those mothers do not feel very kindly disposed towards the Government. I hope that before the close of this Parliament we shall see something done for child and maternity endowment. Lately I read an interesting article in the "Sun," a Sydney newspaper. I hope hon. members will read that article, for the suggestions contained therein are well worth considering. Under those suggestions women and children would have an endowment which would prevent much bitterness and unhappiness that at present exist. Also we could ultimately get a more satisfactory basic wage. The basic wage for a man with his wife and three children is not satisfactory and never will be, because there will always be far too many receiving money for thousands of children which the State will never get. I hope members, especially those opposite, will look into this matter and see whether it would not be more in consonance with their ideas as expressed in their suggestions in regard to child and maternity endowment. They endorse the principle of endowment, thereby recognising the service rendered to the community by the mother in the care and nurture of the

child, such payment to be a charge on the whole community and recognised as a right, and not associated in any way with the economic circumstances of the husband and father. It seems to me the suggestions made in that article in the "Sun" come nearer to that than anything else I know of, and nearer also to what women have asked for during many years past. One wonders whether it is not possible by an amending Act to bring in the right for women to vote in the unions. Many a strike would be prevented if the women had the right to vote

Mr. McCallum: And they would have to pay for it later on.

**Mrs. COWAN:** It is most unfair that a strike should be called simply at the word of mainly the single men, when they would be far better off without the strike.

Mr. McCallum: And quietly submit to the domination of the boss.

**Mrs. COWAN:** It would not be so bad for the mothers and children if it were not that the children, 16 and 18 years of age, and not the mothers, are allowed to vote on the question of a strike.

Mr. McCallum interjected.

**Mrs. COWAN:** The women should have a voice in all these matters. Numbers of women in every section of the community would welcome something on those lines if it were possible to make it legal. I think it should be quite as legal to give a woman a vote in the union as it is to give the men a vote. As a woman I desire class consciousness of every kind to be eliminated.

Mr. McCallum: Start on those around you.

**Mrs. COWAN:** I am willing to do that. I have always stood for having no class consciousness amongst us. What is there that is socialistic about class consciousness? There is no socialism in that; it is anti-social. Better far to get on all together, and work for the whole of the community, than to be talking about class consciousness in an age and time like this. There are other matters upon which I would have liked to touch but the hour is getting late and I am therefore debarred from saying a great deal that I should like to say. Other opportunities, however, will be afforded to me in which to speak. I am very proud to be here this afternoon. I thank hon. members for their kindness to me, though I feel it is perhaps a little hard on them as members of the House that I am here, because my presence has meant the withdrawal from the Speech of the word "gentlemen" as applied to them. There is only one way of remedying that. I cannot personally do so, but hon. members can all help women at the time of the next general election by having elected a sufficient number of them to enable the House to again be addressed as gentlemen, with the addition of the words 'ladies and.' I feel sure that the greatest kindness and tolerance would be displayed each to the other by the two sexes in this and all Parliaments. The views of both sides are more than ever needed in Parliament to-day. If men and women can work for the State side by side and represent all the different sections of the community, and if the male members of the House would be satisfied to allow women to help them and would accept their suggestions when they are offered, I cannot doubt that we should do very much better work in the community than was ever done before. I want hon. members to recollect when speaking and thinking of these things that we should all be wiser if we realised the truth of Kipling's lines —

There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right.

We do not always remember this principle. People are apt to think that the point of view of men only must be right for men, whilst we women think that the point of view of women only must be right for women. That of course does not necessarily follow. What we should aim at is to get a *via media*, so that we may work side by side; the women working along with the men, and thus there will come to us "self knowledge, self reverence and self control, for these three alone lead men to sovereign heights," and to the achievement of those aims which should be sought by all Parliaments—the peace and happiness of those for whom they legislate.