

[Tuesday, 27 May 1997.]

HON L. RAVLICH (East Metropolitan) [8.02 pm]: Mr President, I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election, and to say how proud I am to have been elected as a Labor member for the East Metropolitan Region. I am proud to stand on this side of the Chamber because I believe in the Australian Labor Party and its guiding values of equality, democracy, liberty and social cooperation. The Australian Labor Party is committed to meeting the aspirations of all Australians for a decent, secure, dignified and constructive way of life. It is a party about looking after the interests of ordinary people, and recognising their special needs and aspirations, regardless of sex, religion or race. It is a party about promoting social justice and giving people a fair go. It recognises the role of the trade union movement in taking forward the struggle of workers against the injustices of the extreme right wing forces.

I believe in the importance of history as a source of avoiding making the mistakes of the past and providing a direction for the future. The Australian Labor Party has both a very rich history to draw on and a very bright future ahead. It is a party to which I have always been proud to belong and I am now extremely honoured to represent it. My success at the last election would not have been possible without the support of a wide range of people. I thank my constituents for electing me to represent them over the next four years. This honour carries with it many responsibilities and challenges which I undertake to meet at all times with enthusiasm, hard work, honesty and integrity. My thanks must also go to Mr Kevin Reynolds, Mr Kim Young and Miss Karla Tucker from the Builders Labourers, Painters and Plasterers Union. My thanks also go to Mr Jim McGiveron, Mr Rick Burton and members of the Transport Workers Union. Thanks must also go to Mr Glen Anderton and Mr Don Bartlem of the Australian Workers Union. I also acknowledge the support of Mr Gavan Troy, Mr Colin Campbell-Fraser, Mr Eric Ripper the member for Belmont, Mr Julian Grill the member for Eyre, Miss Bronwyn Croghan and Mrs Darinka Ravlich, all of whom have provided encouragement and guidance over many years.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of my family with whom I have shared an incredible journey, taking me from the Croatian village of Kozica to this place. I extend to my brothers, Mladen and Joskan, and sisters, Jasna and Marijana, and their families my sincerest thanks and appreciation for the inspiration, support and love they have shown me, which over many years has bonded our hearts. Finally, and most importantly, I express gratitude to my father Ivisa and late mother Ljubica for the extraordinary sacrifices they made so that, in the words of immigrant songwriter Eric Bogle, "Their children would not have to taste the bitter bread of poverty". They left the familiarity of their village, their friends and extended families to move to an unknown frontier. In the words of Bogle again, "They each took with them a brave and willing heart and two strong arms". I salute my parents and all other migrants alike for their enormous courage, strength and foresight. I stand in this place in honour of their contribution to this State.

The 1960s were a time of great growth and optimism in Western Australia, leading to a call for migrant labour. In the interests of providing a better life for his family, my father took up this call in 1962 and came to this country. The remainder of the family followed a year later. So that members do not speculate about my age, I advise that I was five years old at the time. They can do their own arithmetic! Thirty years ago there were far fewer support services for people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and many new Australians were left to cope as best they could. Large numbers of them experienced a sense of isolation and alienation because they were different in presentation, language and culture. It is within this context that I developed a real appreciation of the struggles and aspirations of all minority groups within our community. In view of my own journey, I intend to bring to this place a perspective built upon the first-hand experience of the struggles and aspirations of all people, particularly minority groups, indigenous Australians and ethnic peoples in Western Australia.

This perspective is significant, as the 1991 census figures show that 28.9 per cent of the State's population were born overseas. Of these, 11.8 per cent were born in non-English speaking countries. A further 23.3 per cent of the State's population are Australian born with at least one parent born overseas. Together these two groups account for more than half the population of Western Australia. Irrespective of their backgrounds, migrants from all over the world have vested their main allegiance to Australia and have accepted the structures of Australian society. It is, therefore, surprising to discover that I and all other migrants stand accused by Mrs Hanson, the federal member for Oxley, of destroying the Australian identity by forcing our culture and values on others. We stand accused of contributing to this State's level of unemployment. We also stand accused of transferring the problems of our way of life to Australia. Furthermore, in her view we are not a part of mainstream society, and will not be until such time as the policy of multiculturalism is abolished and billions of dollars are saved. These assertions represent a narrow and bigoted view of multiculturalism which the good people of this State should not have to defend. Using Aboriginal people and ethnic minority groups as a scapegoat for a plethora of complex economic, social and political issues is a very dangerous pastime indeed. The simple fact is that Western Australia is a multicultural society built by the efforts of all people, including

indigenous Australians and migrants from all over the world. Their combined contributions have defined, and will continue to define, this State's unique character.

I now briefly turn to the issue of financial management. I believe all Western Australians are hurting under the Court Government's policies. Since coming to office the Court Government has promoted a record of strong financial management which has been highlighted by its preoccupation with debt reduction. Privatisation and the sale of government assets have been the vehicle by which debt has been reduced. The Court Government refers to this as its "sale for public benefit policy", with Western Australians being told repeatedly that they will be better off as a result of privatisation, that jobs will not be lost, and that competition will reduce costs and flow through to consumers. This is not so. I do not know of any examples where Western Australians are paying less for key services. In fact, in the recent state Budget, the Government increased AlintaGas rates by an average of 3 per cent, Western Power rates by 3.75 per cent and Water Corporation rates by approximately 4 per cent. In addition, motor vehicle licence fees, public transport fares and drivers' licence fees increased substantially. I ask the Government: Where is the public benefit?

Contrary to Western Australians being better off, privatisation and commercialisation of the public sector has resulted in reduced levels of government spending on essential services, more than 12 000 public servants losing their jobs, government agencies being reduced in size and function, and services to the public being reduced in quality and quantity. All this at a time when the Premier has increased the size of his Department of Premier and Cabinet. All this from a Premier who said in *The West Australian* of 9 January 1993 that "While the coalition would privatise some government services and contract others out, there would be no wholesale reduction in the public sector work force". All this from a Premier who said in a 1993 policy speech that "True" - I do not know what he means by true - "public servants will have nothing to fear and much to celebrate". Over 12 000 public servants are not celebrating; and they are only the tip of the unemployment iceberg that has been created by this Government. To put it bluntly, all Western Australians are hurting because of the Court Government's policies. Privatisation and contracting out has also failed to deliver the much talked about opportunities for small business. Hildyard and Sexton, in a recent article titled "Cartels, Low Balls, Backhanders and Handouts - Privatisation in the UK", argue that -

The theory has been that there will be more competition, more private finance and less bureaucracy. In practice, the private companies frequently act as cartels rather than competitors, combining resources to tackle large scale projects and to ensure that they have state guarantees against financial default.

This scenario leaves many small businesses victims rather than beneficiaries of the privatisation push by this Government. The benefits of privatisation are not flowing through to small business, which desperately requires a restoration in consumer confidence. However, this is unlikely to happen at a time when government, consumer and investment spending is down - a situation clearly not conducive to economic growth. All Western Australians are hurting under the Court Government's policies.

Public sector privatisation and a preoccupation with economic rationalism is having a contractionary impact on economic activity in this State. Western Australia now faces low consumption growth in small business, a depressed housing sector, and low consumer confidence, despite numerous interest rate cuts. Reductions in consumer, investment and government spending are fuelling economic uncertainty and driving consumer confidence downwards, a trend which cannot be allowed to continue.

The future of our State rests with more jobs and better management. That is what the Premier promised yet again in a 1993 policy speech, but that is exactly what has not been delivered. Better management means that all sectors of the economy are managed efficiently and the benefits flow to all sectors accordingly. This is clearly not happening, with some sectors experiencing extreme hardship.

According to page 18 of the document titled "Western Australian Economic Review of January 1997", published by the Western Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry -

Economic activity in Western Australia was fairly subdued over most of 1996. The unemployment rate fluctuated around a trend level of 7.7 per cent for most of the year, retail sales softened and the residential building sector lagged behind even the tardy recovery which began nationally in the later months of 1996. Bankruptcies tended upwards to their highest level in five years.

By September it was clear that WA's economy was no longer the strongest performer of the Australian States. Its overall growth rate had slipped below the national average and its retail sales for the quarter dipped even more sharply than in the rest of Australia.

This picture is very different from the one painted by the Premier in his recent Budget speech, which indicated that the Western Australian economy was booming. The simple fact is that it is not, and a major gap exists between strong overall growth in Western Australia's gross state product and weak activity in many parts of the State's economy. This gap exists because much of the economic growth in Western Australia can be attributed to the high level of activity in the resources sector. This activity has brought the State Government a significant increase in revenue at a time when many other sectors of the economy are struggling. The mining and petroleum sector is, as many members would know, a major economic force in Western Australia, accounting for 73 per cent of the State's export income. However, increased investment and production levels in the resources sector

have not translated into better economic or employment prospects, leaving most Western Australians bewildered and questioning the value of a resources boom which is failing to deliver any direct benefit to them.

Clearly, Western Australians are not receiving enough economic benefits, particularly employment benefits, from the resources boom. This can be attributed to factors such as high levels of foreign investment, the capital intensive nature of resources projects, failure to value add, and a local content policy that does not sufficiently protect the interests of Western Australian companies or workers.

Unemployment remains unacceptably high, with Western Australian Treasury papers showing that despite the Court Government's boom rhetoric, employment is not forecast to improve significantly over the next four years. Western Australians are hurting under the Court Government's policies.

Information from the Department of Resources Development shows that during 1996-97, six major projects valued at \$354m were commissioned. These resulted, however, in only 460 construction jobs and 135 operational jobs. Likewise, new multimillion dollar resource development projects coming on line, such as the mid-west integrated steel project near Geraldton valued at \$2.4b, the Australian United Steel Industry project near Wickham valued at \$1.5b, the Mineralogy iron ore enrichment plant in the Fortescue area valued at \$1.8b and the Mt Gibson iron ore project valued at \$750m are estimated to generate approximately 9 000 new jobs during the construction phase but less than 2 000 permanent operational jobs.

All too often, the benefits from major resources development projects for local workers, irrespective of their value, are limited because most construction jobs are short term, mine operations require fewer workers due to their capital intensive nature, and there are no government guarantees that new work will go to Western Australians or that core components of plant construction will be manufactured locally.

It is simply not good enough to export our employment opportunities overseas. A key role for government is to protect the interests of our industry and workers. Western Australians are hurting under the Court Government's policies. Recently jobs have been moved to South East Asia because companies like the big Australian - The Broken Hill Propriety Co Ltd - prefer to pay workers \$2 an hour. BHP's recent announcement of 2 000 job losses at Newcastle by the year 1999 and up to a further 9 000 job losses in allied industries as a result of restructuring must be seen as a potential threat to Western Australian industry and workers because it sets a precedent for other companies to follow, particularly if State Governments do not act. I ask the Premier to guarantee that workers in the Western Australian resources sector will not suffer the same fate.

The Government has a key responsibility to determine why Western Australian companies are not competitive in certain areas and to devise strategies to overcome specific problems. To that end Western Australia would benefit enormously by having a long term economic growth plan, part of which might include a comprehensive industry strategy to drive economic diversification and growth. The economic growth plan might include strategies to ensure that Western Australia has long term infrastructure and capital supply; a skilled labour force; a more targeted approach to the amount and role of foreign investment; and strategies to promote a manufacturing base and import replacement industries.

Western Australia must have a plan to promote downstream processing opportunities across a range of industry sectors, and not limit itself just to the resources sector. We must diversify and spread risk by assessing the potential to establish value adding industries in all sectors. We must promote the establishment of a secondary industry base, rather than continuing to rely on primary and tertiary industries. For far too long high labour costs have been said to prohibit secondary industry development in this State. However, many projects that may previously have been thought to be uneconomical should be revisited for a reassessment of their economic viability. Twenty years ago kangaroo and emu meat for human consumption was unheard of; it was considered that such an industry could not be developed. Yet today both meats are gracing the tables in the finest restaurants in the world. On behalf of all Western Australians this Government must intervene in the marketplace and independently reassess the downstream processing and value adding potential across a range of industries. Failure to do so will leave us at the mercy of international market forces.

I now turn to an area which I consider vitally important to the future of this State - industrial relations. The coalition policy paper entitled "Jobs and Choices" put out in October 1992 stated that the coalition promised to create choice by providing another system of work arrangements alongside the existing award. It said that employees need not fear change; that employees would be free to continue under the existing system. This new choice, it said, would allow employees to take an active and responsible role in setting their own conditions through harmonious relationships between employers and employees.

Since the coalition Government came to power there has been anything but choice and harmony. We have seen a lack of choice, disharmony and a direct assault on the union movement. Tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs, had their wages cut by between 20 per cent and 30 per cent, and had their hours extended and their conditions eroded. Major changes have undermined the effectiveness of unions and the Industrial Relations Commission.

Most recently the Government further undermined the democratic rights of unions and workers by introducing the Labour Relations Legislation Amendment Bill - the Bill of shame. Members opposite know this legislation was politically motivated, is anti-union, discriminates against unions and union members, and in a covert way

aims to create two classes of workers in this State. Those opposite also know the coalition Government's real agenda at this time of immense insecurity in the workplace is to frustrate the legitimate work of unions, which is, and always has been, to protect the wages and working conditions of Western Australian workers. This legislation aims to frighten workers from joining unions and to tie up unions in litigation. It is a vicious attempt to break their spirit and to ruin them financially. However, apparently some members opposite do not know the spirit of Western Australian unions and workers is strong, and neither they nor members on this side of the House will shy away from the challenges required to protect our fundamental democratic rights. We will continue to work until this Bill is off the Western Australian Statute book.

A most disturbing aspect of this legislation is the restrictions on unions to enter a worksite. Historically, as part of the award provisions, unions have had the right to go on site to check the working conditions, wages and other records of the workers. As this will no longer be the case, it has the potential to result in employers not maintaining records, and reducing the working conditions, wages and occupational health and safety standards on sites. I am not alleging that all employers do not do the right thing; there are some very good employers in this State. However, some do look at ways of cutting costs, and occupational health and safety happens to be one of those areas. Under this Bill of shame many breaches will go unchecked, leaving the floodgate open to worker exploitation. Workers' lives will be traded off for profit. Employers' rights and profits will now drive this State's industrial relations agenda.

Only last year I attended the funeral of Mark Allen, a former organiser with the Western Australian Builders Labourers, Painters and Plasterers Union; a young man taken in his prime while he was trying to protect the working conditions of others. As members may remember, in his capacity as organiser, Mark entered an East Perth demolition site only to find major breaches of occupational health and safety. While warning workers of the dangers on that worksite he fell through asbestos sheeting to his death. It was a tragedy that could have been avoided and certainly one that we should have learnt from. Hundreds of workers are at risk every day in their workplace. The right of union officials, such as the late Mark Allen, to enter sites has possibly saved the lives of hundreds of workers. Unfortunately, under this Bill of shame it will no longer be the case. I remember the anger of construction workers across the State at the loss of a son last year. Under this legislation we can expect to lose more sons and daughters. This legislation denies unions a right of entry to investigate breaches of occupational health and safety, particularly when resources to this area have been drastically cut.

More than any other piece of legislation, this Bill of shame has reduced the rights and working conditions of Western Australian workers, leaving the most vulnerable workers in the community at greatest risk. They have far fewer resources with which to protect themselves. Western Australian workers are hurting under the coalition Government's policies.

As the first woman born in a non-English speaking country elected to this Western Australian Parliament, I am particularly concerned about the impact of this legislation on workers from non-English backgrounds. This group often has little, if any, negotiating power in the work force. It is at risk of being further exploited in the work force. Without union protection, the plight of this group is destined to deteriorate. Migrant workers with little or no command of English are less likely to be aware of their employment entitlements, to be able to negotiate a good employment contract, and to be able to seek special employment conditions. Rather, they are more likely to have no choice but to accept whatever work is available regardless of pay or conditions, as long as it provides them with a start in a new country. Migrant workers are often most in need of union representation; yet under this legislation if they have a problem which results in a visit to a work site by a union official or an organiser it may place their job at risk.

These issues are of grave concern to me and many of my constituents in the East Metropolitan Region. The people with whom I have consulted strongly believe that this legislation should have been deferred until members elected to the Council took their position on 22 May 1997. How ironic that I, an elected member of this Parliament, was prevented from voting on this legislation while Senator-elect Hon Ross Lightfoot was artificially kept in this Chamber to maintain the Government's numbers.

There are members of the Government who know the folly of this legislation. However, Hon Ross Lightfoot's preselection shows why they must cower before the more extreme elements of the Liberal Party. Unfortunately for all Western Australians, the Government's determination to finalise the passage of the Labour Relations Legislation Amendment Bill had more to do with the internal politics of the state Liberal Party than it did with the State's industrial relations agenda. The ramming of this law through this place was a deliberate act by a desperate Government to force its ideological will on tens of thousands of honest, hard working men and women in this State.

All this from a Government without a mandate to legislate this draconian law that the good people of this State must now live with. It is a law born without consultation - by stealth - and one which will haunt this Government to its demise. It is a bad law. This Government need only look at the latest Westpoll results to recognise the extent of community outrage.

The bloody-minded and arrogant attitude of this Government has resulted in denial of natural justice to Western Australian workers. It weakens the safeguards protecting them. We on this side of the Chamber will not rest

until the Bill is killed. We need only look at economies such as that of the United States of America to see the dangers of allowing the conservative forces to weaken safeguards protecting workers.

In an economy where a preoccupation with individualism is giving way to an obsession with oneself, collective responsibility is increasingly seen as somebody else's problem and workers are left to fend for themselves. It is common practice in the United States for employers to achieve competitive advantage by driving down wages. When one employer does that, others are forced to follow. The net result is a growth in what is known as the working poor. Thirty-six per cent of working Americans are earning poverty level wages. This is a situation we must not allow to happen here otherwise Australia, like the USA, will move towards a plantation economy in which a small but powerful elite will dominate this country's agenda.

I am confident that I speak for the majority of Western Australians when I say that I want to live in an egalitarian society where workers and their families can afford quality health care; where the children of blue collar workers can access a quality education system, particularly tertiary education; and where our senior citizens who have made a major contribution to this State over a lifetime can access good quality nursing care without being fleeced.

Under Court and Howard Government policies our first class health system is in the process of being dismantled. We now have up-front entry fees for university education and changes to the higher education scheme, commonly known as HECS. Under these new arrangements students unable to gain a university place on the strength of their entrance examination will be able to buy their way in if they have at least \$60 000. That will result in an education system based on the capacity to pay rather than academic ability.

Under the Court and Howard Governments the elderly must pay up-front nursing home fees of anywhere between \$26 000 and \$60 000 - the reported figures; some nursing homes may charge more. This will invariably result in a two-tier nursing home system in this State where people with the means will have better quality nursing care and those without must put up with what is available.

Recently, the Howard Government introduced a saving incentives scheme through a tax concession on interest earned, a policy designed to assist those with large sums of money to invest. I know of very few people in the East Metropolitan Region who will benefit from that policy, from which even the Prime Minister is now trying to back-pedal.

Western Australians are hurting under Court and Howard Government policies because they do not meet the aspirations of all people for a decent, secure, dignified and constructive way of life. In fact, under conservative government policies that will be achieved for a small elitist group at the expense of all other Western Australians.

A good friend of mine recently visited the United States of America and on his return I asked him to describe that country to me. The first thing he commented on was the number of homeless people begging in the streets. I am told that the United Kingdom shares a similar problem. The economic, social and political policies that we pursue now will determine, among other things, the society we end up with in the future. I for one never want to see this great State go down that path. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that it does not. I am here because I want to make a difference.

I hope one day to look back and take pride in the contribution I made to this State. For that reason I do not intend to shy away from the difficult issues or to be a shrinking violet in this place. Rather, I look forward with enthusiasm to being an active participant in this Chamber over the next four years.

In conclusion, I acknowledge the people in the Public Gallery who made this a very special occasion for me by being here tonight. I thank them for their time and their kindness. Finally, Mr President, I hope you have a successful career as the President. I know that even on those very rare occasions when you will find the need to bring me to order, you will be acting in my best interests and in the best interests of the House; therefore it will not be taken personally. I thank you for your indulgence.

[Applause.]