



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Mr Roger Cook MLA
(Member for Kwinana)

Address-in-Reply Debate

Legislative Assembly

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

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Motion

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [5.10 pm]: Firstly, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election to the position of Speaker. I note that you are a member of the Murdoch University alumni, like me, and welcome the ongoing success of former Murdoch students. I also pay my respects on this Remembrance Day to those who gave their lives in wars. I attended the service this morning at the Kwinana Returned Services League and pay tribute to those members of the Kwinana community involved.

I begin by acknowledging the Nyoongah people, the traditional owners on whose country we meet. I acknowledge their connection to this country, their rights and obligations to care for the south west and the ongoing spiritual and cultural life they share with this region.

This afternoon I make my inaugural speech with a great sense of humility and resolve—a sense of humility because I am indebted to the people with whom I have shared the political journey thus far, and a sense of resolve because I know my work has just begun and I am of a single mind to work tirelessly in making a contribution to help make Western Australia a better place for everyone to live.

I draw some of my inspiration from the life and work of H.C. “Nugget” Coombs. A great and quiet servant of the public, Nugget was once dubbed Australian of the century. His conviction that government has an obligation to participate positively in the economic and social life of the community to protect, raise and advance the lives of people and the economy is a valuable central guiding principle. Later in his life Nugget served as adviser to the Aboriginal leadership and sought to provide what skills he could bring to bear to assist them to meet their aspirations as first Australians. I never met Nugget but have tried to emulate his approach when working with communities, and it is his commitment to make a personal contribution to the lives of the most disadvantaged in our community that guides my sense of service.

I believe the measure of any society is the way it treats its most disadvantaged and defenceless. The wealth of a few is worthless if, for others, the basic human rights they deserve are being undermined by laws, economic systems, or political and social policies, or simple indifference. Human rights are the building blocks of a democracy. In the case of Aboriginal people, their rights as citizens are also qualified and extended as first peoples of our lands.

My convictions on the rights of Aboriginal people are informed by the principles that were instilled in me by my magnificent parents, Hugh and Lynne. Their guidance in life was never sermonised but rather offered and constantly reinforced by behaviour. They taught me the importance of principle and the often inconvenient but important paths this takes in one's own life decisions. Mr Speaker, I want to share with you the image of my family marching with seven young kids along seemingly endless beaches to reach fishing holes that would probably be easily accessed by car. Upon reaching that fishing hole my family would catch only the amount of fish that was necessary for the next meal and leave, even when the fish were still biting. Hugh and Lynne offered the lesson that the journey travelled is often more important than the destination reached. Whether it was attending a rally or engaging in debate over the dinner table, they taught me that passion is an important furnace that should be constantly fired in all our bellies in seeking social justice. I am also indebted to Hugh for the knowledge and support he provides in my shadow portfolios.

These lessons were also ably supported by my siblings, David, Gillian, Veronica, Helen and Doug, who all carried me, cajoled me and demonstrated the important life principles handed to us by our parents and, in the case of Doug, these principles were often supported with a healthy shared passion for sport and adventure. I would also like to pay a short tribute to my late brother Richard, who left us well before he should. He parted our company before I could ever appreciate him properly as a person but left, as a big brother should, as one of my childhood heroes.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge my family, Carly Lane, Tobias and Isabelle. I acknowledge their love, strength and support, as well as their capacity to keep my feet firmly on the ground.

In 2000 I joined an organisation called Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. I sought ANTaR out through friends because of the legislation being considered at that time by state Parliament to limit the full rights Aboriginal people should enjoy under the principles and laws of native title. Working for Senator Chris Evans, who at that time was chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Native Title and the Indigenous Land Fund, I was appalled by the attacks on Aboriginal people by the state government of the day. ANTaR provided me with life-changing perspectives on the struggle for social justice. As one who previously had very limited exposure to Aboriginal culture, I was able to reach out to Aboriginal experiences within a methodological framework that was sympathetic, supportive and culturally appropriate. I met and worked with a community of people that brought together conviction, faith, professional principles and academic rigour for a common cause of supporting Indigenous rights. I would like to acknowledge local ANTaR activists Theo MacKay, Stephen Hall, Carol Innes, Carolyn Betts and previous national president Phil Glendinning, and ANTaR national directors, David Cooper and Gary Highland.

I am also indebted to ANTaR, as it was my role within that organisation that gave me the opportunity to work at the Western Australian Aboriginal Native Title Working Group and with great colleagues, such as Patrick Dodson, Brian Wyatt, Peter Yu and Dennis Eggington, and, later work in Aboriginal rights with Larissa Behrendt, Glen Kelly and others. I remember attending early meetings of WAANTWG and being struck by the Indigenous leadership's strength of character, intellect and political analysis. These experiences were reinforced during my time at the Yamatji Marlpa Bana Baba Maaja Aboriginal Corporation and the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council.

Glen Kelly, in particular, has guided my thinking on the application of human rights principles in public policy, and I acknowledge the friendship, support and love of Glen and Donna Oxenham and their daughter—my godchild—Tahlia.

In coming to this place, I have a reputation as an advocate for the Indigenous cause, and this of itself would be a worthy mantle. It is not the Indigenous nature of the cause, however, that fuels my

passion for Indigenous rights; rather it is the fact that the plight of Indigenous people in our society is the most debilitating and urgent of all social justice issues confronting the Western Australian community. In social and economic terms, this is nothing short of a fundamental failure of our society. This is not an Aboriginal problem. While they share the most acute of all social, economic, political, physical and social indicators of disadvantage, we are all diminished as a society—as Western Australians. While Aboriginal people experience a life expectancy 15 years less than that of non-Aboriginal people, we are all diminished. While Aboriginal people continue to live in substandard housing without adequate power, water and utilities, we are all diminished. While so many young Aboriginal people continue to grow up in a world in which they are all too often overcome with despair and take their own lives, we are all diminished. While Aboriginal people are 13 times more likely to be jailed, and while the majority of young prisoners are Aboriginal, while they constitute only three per cent of the population, we are all diminished. While, as Archie Roach recently said, Aboriginal people living in urban areas remain some of the most isolated and remote communities in our society, we are all diminished. While Aboriginal people have so little control over their lives because we have failed to acknowledge their dispossession and provide the recognition of their governance and their inalienable rights as Indigenous people of Western Australia, then, together, we are diminished and fail to fulfil our destiny as a whole society.

On 13 February 2008 the Rudd government issued an apology to the stolen generation on behalf of the nation. This was an important and powerful symbolic act, but more needs to be done. Western Australia should have a constitutional recognition of its first peoples, and this recognition should be backed by a bill of rights that enshrines not only Aboriginal rights but also citizens' rights. This recognition should follow a lengthy and informed debate, negotiation and dialogue with members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. I do not come to this debate as a sympathetic observer; I come to it as an active stakeholder. I want my children to grow up in a country that has reconciled its present social perspective with its colonial historical origins, to participate in a proud society that has confronted its historical circumstances, embraced the differences and is resolving its future together, allowing all cultures to enrich our lives. This is the Western Australia I want.

There is much that needs to be done in Western Australia to improve the physical lives of Aboriginal people and to raise the living standards of many Western Australian communities. For the most part, these physical issues are a precondition for forming meaningful governance models for communities. We cannot expect the community that is so socially and economically neglected to all of a sudden be a model of good governance. Another precondition for any process to rectify the circumstances that a lot of Aboriginal communities confront is to codify the rights they possess as first peoples of the country and to sit down and negotiate and reach agreement on the broad issues of co-existence in our common world.

On this point, I conclude my remarks on resolving this acute social justice issue. There is no single answer for resolving the social and economic issues confronting Aboriginal communities. The answers are to be found in the patchwork of ideas, activities and initiatives that are exploding everywhere around the country. The answers are everywhere and everyone has a stake in the solution. The answer lies in the work of June Oscar, Emily Carter and the other women at Fitzroy Crossing as they fight the impact of alcohol in their community. The answer lies with Charlie Kickett as he works with and mentors young Aboriginal people in Kwinana. The answer lies with the Australian Employment Covenant and its work with Warren Mundine to create 50 000 jobs. The answer lies with the Yorgum Aboriginal Counselling Service, as it provides culturally appropriate family counselling services to people in its community. We need to harness what works and learn from what does not. The solution, however, is not in picking single solutions and suppressing people's rights as humans. It is in listening, hearing, negotiating and acting with resolve and strength.

Listening is an important element of successful communities. Before coming to this place I worked and studied in the area of public relations. I will spend some time discussing this area because I believe that the elements of excellence in public relations, as pioneered by James and Larissa Grunig, underpin the principles of good governance and citizenship. The Grunigs and other academic thinkers discussed the importance of organisations undertaking two-way symmetrical communication. This process involves companies, governments and other organisations that seek a social licence to operate in our community undertaking to inform and be informed by their stakeholders—the people and groups that interact with them. Government in particular has an obligation to shape its behaviour and approach via an open dialogue with the community. It is from this perspective that I am a proud practitioner of public relations. I am not proud of those who have undermined this industry, but I consider the relationships that government and the community keep as being a fundamental part of a healthy democracy. Governments that fail to maintain strong and healthy relationships with their constituencies deny themselves an extraordinary array of experiences, ideas and innovations from which they can benefit. Dialogue and innovation are of course also important principles in creating sustainable communities. Only with a firm focus on the three areas of environment, community and the economy will we achieve something approaching sustainability in our part of the world.

These are all elements that come into sharp focus in the community of Kwinana. Kwinana was established in 1952 with the passage of the Industrial Development (Kwinana Area) Act 1952, to service the emerging industry of what is now known as the Kwinana industrial district. The area of Kwinana is a living example of all the genuine tensions of sustainability. According to the Medina Residents Group, the original township of Kwinana was to be located to the north of its current location, nearer the Kwinana industrial estate. The young town planner Margaret Fielman, charged with the responsibility of designing the new township, insisted that the town be located further south in order for the residents to be out of the likely airshed of pollutants brought by the prevailing south-west winds from nearby industry. Since that day, the Town of Kwinana has continued to live alongside industry in a managed, but at times difficult, relationship. Many of the people who moved to Kwinana to work on the industrial strip, including those who came from England and other migrant nations, continue to live there now. It is a tight-knit community with a proud working history and a strong sense of identity. Kwinana is also enjoying a rejuvenation as new families join the community and add to the established suburbs of the Medina, Calista, Orelia and Parmelia, the newer suburb of Leda and, even more recently, Bertram and Wellard. The electorate is also rimmed by the Rockingham coastal suburbs of Cooloongup—or Woodbridge—Hillman and Waikiki.

The Kwinana electorate enjoys high environmental values with many trees and open spaces—a hallmark of Margaret Fielman's work. In the southern and eastern ends of the electorate the community continues to enjoy the semirural settings of Baldivis, Casuarina, Wandi, Anketell, Hope Valley and Mandogalup, which compete for lifestyle and country with the spread of metropolitan Perth down the Kwinana Freeway and the newly completed Perth-Mandurah railway line. The community must be supported to provide a lifestyle that people value. The electorate of Kwinana as a community strongly values the lifestyles offered. It might be horse-friendly property in Wandi, a small farmlet in Baldivis, a new home in Bertram, or an established home in a historic precinct like Medina. Kwinana is a living example of the struggle to provide sustainability in a community. The interests of industry must be acknowledged—many people in the electorate work in the industrial area and know that this is important for the sustainability of the economy and employment. Kwinana industry directly employs 4 800 full-time workers and 2 800 part-time workers, and indirectly employs another 26 000 people. Its output is around \$15.7 billion per annum. It is an intense centre of activity with industry participants working together in a unique way to integrate their operations, work in harmony with local communities, and protect the environment in which they operate.

As the member of Parliament for this unique industrial, environmental and social setting, I commit myself as a strong defender of the Cockburn Sound and surrounding Kwinana and Rockingham environments, and to playing a constructive role with those dedicated industry and community groups, such as the Kwinana Industry Council and the Kwinana Progress Association, toward the creation of a sustainable community in the Kwinana electorate.

The future of the Perth and Western Australian economy is intertwined with the region of the global economic community in which we live. We should not base our future on being a western rump of the Australian economy. Instead, we should be looking to be a pivot for the Indian Ocean economic rim, which will play an increasingly important part in our lives and provide the focus for our economic future. Rather than looking east for leadership and direction for our economic future, we should be leading the nation as an active partner in our regional economy. We should be seeking to be a stepping stone for the Australian economy and a fulcrum for the emerging and established economies of Africa, the Middle East, the subcontinent and South East Asia. WA must move to meet these needs of the regional economic community through a revolution in its educational, cultural and political direction. We must develop our human capital through innovative education opportunities and strong trade and industry development policies. Above all, we must turn Perth and WA into a cultural exchange centre of ideas, art and learning to nurture and develop the relationships that are necessary to promote a centre for international economic and social exchange.

The journey to becoming a member of Parliament is undertaken only with the input, assistance and inspiration of many friends, family and colleagues. I conclude by acknowledging the role of some of my friends and Labor Party comrades who have battled with, supported and encouraged me to progress: Simone McGurk, the Kwinana campaign director; my campaign director, Kieran Cranny; Dave Kelly, state secretary of my union, the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union; Simon Mead, Australian Labor Party State Secretary; Fiona Henderson; and Senator Chris Evans. Of course, I acknowledge the support of ALP local rank and file supporters such as Barry and Jerroldine Gilbert and Kath Gallop whose support has been unwavering along with other members of the Kwinana, Hilton and Rockingham-Safety Bay sub-branches of the Australian Labor Party. I would like to thank Daniel Smith and the team at CPR Communications Public Relations in Perth, and CPR senior management, Adam Kilgour, Josh Williams and, of course, my valuable friend Erik Locke. In particular, I would like to thank my very good friends and comrades Hon Ken Travers and Hon Sue Ellery and the member for Fremantle, Hon Jim McGinty. Sue and Jim have been two of my greatest critics and greatest supporters. Ken Travers in particular has been an extraordinary friend in both my political and professional lives, and I am very proud to serve in the same Parliament as he, even though he had to wait 12 years for me to get here!

The Parliament is a place in which many have invested trust and faith in a few to adhere to important convictions of principle and see them embedded in honest deeds. I am aware that my election as Deputy Leader of the Labor Party and appointment as shadow Minister for Health, Mental Health and Indigenous Affairs has placed a greater onus on me to work hard to promote good policy for and with the people who share an interest in these important policy areas. I commit myself to this task as the member for Kwinana and look forward to working with all colleagues to serve the people of Western Australia.

[Applause.]
