



Will Hodgman MP

House of Assembly

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Electorate: Franklin

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mr WILL HODGMAN (Franklin - Deputy Leader of the Opposition - Inaugural) - Mr Speaker, in speaking to the motion it is a great honour and a privilege to have been elected to this Parliament to represent the people of Franklin and to serve the Tasmanian community.

I would like to thank those who voted for me and I intend to repay their faith. I would like to also congratulate all members newly elected to the Parliament and to those re-elected and I must extend my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker, I am pleased you have returned to the House so I could do so in person. I concur with the sentiments, Mr Speaker, expressed by the Leader of the Opposition this morning, in noting your willingness to inform, to advise and to make welcome new members to this Parliament.

Mr Speaker, the landscape of this Parliament has, of course, changed significantly following this year's election. It would indeed be inappropriate and ungracious for me not to acknowledge or fail to note the achievements of the Government in securing an impressive vote of confidence from the Tasmanian people, and to the Greens also, in dramatically increasing your vote across the State; your appeal to the broader community is obvious.

Mr Speaker, I will always accept the views and trust the judgment of the Tasmanian public at election, not the least in accepting how this year's election result has reflected on my own party. I have taken some heart from my personal electoral success and also that of my Liberal Party colleagues who stemmed the tide and survived a severe drop in party support.

My colleagues and I are now encumbered with a huge responsibility to restore credibility to the Liberal Party but more importantly, to present as a credible opposition and from this base position we can start to rebuild, to regain support and to win approval. For now we are small in number, in a position of numerical disadvantage, even perhaps a position of adversity, but in the words of the eminent politician, lawyer and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, 'Prosperity is not without many fears and distastes; and adversity is not without comforts and hopes. Prosperity doth best discover vice; but adversity doth best discover virtue'.

I will not presume to advise the Premier or the Government on the risk of becoming complacent, indolent or even arrogant, but I will declare that while we, the loyal Opposition, may be small in number, we are rich in spirit, enthusiasm and hope -

Liberal Opposition members - Hear, hear.

Mr WILL HODGMAN - and we are, contrary to wishful thinking, a cohesive and unified outfit.

The Parliament now also features a new breed, a new generation of parliamentarian. The people of Tasmania have clearly expressed a view that they want new people with fresh ideas and a different approach in their Parliament. I believe they have grown tired of negativity and cynicism. They want ideas and solutions, productivity and initiative and greater representation from their elected parliamentarians, irrespective of which side or which end of the House they sit in.

Of course, in opposition we face a challenging task and that is to achieve a delicate balance. We must serve as a responsible outlet for the expression of legitimate and constructive criticism yet we should not appear overly negative or cynical or to be criticising for the sake of it. We are to hold the Government and of course our colleagues, the Greens, to account without leaving an impression that we ourselves are devoid of any substantial contribution. We must present our own ideas and credible alternatives that engage and appeal to the community and we must convince the public that we are a genuine, thoughtful and effective opposition, that we are in fact a viable alternative government, or at least one in the making.

I would hope that the public, and more so the Government, will appropriately extend credit where it is due. It is not, under the Westminster system, for the Government to simply stifle valid criticism, scrutiny or examination; to do so is in fact arrogant and dismissive and is to ignore a legitimate and worthy expression of those who may take issue, may appreciate an alternative way or may, dare I say, even disagree with the Government.

Conversely, of course, the Government should not be subject to meaningless obstruction and it is not my plan to adopt that sort of approach. In fact, Mr Speaker, much of my campaign was based on the premise of making a positive contribution and providing a fresh approach. Another key aspect to my campaign involved making a concerted effort to travel my electorate and meet as many people and community groups as I could and importantly, to listen to them and find out what they think. Throughout my parliamentary career I intend to continue to seek out, to consult, to listen and to understand before I try to represent, but above all I intend to make a positive contribution.

Mr Speaker, I would like to briefly acknowledge those who played a significant role in my election success and who are of course, far more importantly, a significant part of my life. Firstly, to my wonderful wife Nicky, who five years ago made a brave decision and a great sacrifice in leaving her home in England to come to Tasmania to make a new life with me. She has always been a great support and an encouraging influence. She enthusiastically joined me on the campaign trail and we walked the electorate doorknocking, letterboxing, attending community functions and meeting the wonderful people of Franklin. We took with us our lovely son and my inspiration, William, turning what could be at times a lonesome and tiresome venture into an exciting, challenging and rewarding experience for our young family.

My father, the member for Denison, who until now has never looked over my shoulder –

Members laughing.

Mr WILL HODGMAN - and I am not completely comfortable with him sitting directly behind me - is a tremendous role model and a great source of love and motivation. Throughout my life, my professional career and my more recent political pursuits, he has not sought to intrude or influence or to play any greater role than that of a supportive and proud father, and for that I am extremely fortunate and immensely grateful. In return, I was immensely proud to see him achieve such a momentous victory at the recent election - a tremendous effort which was really against the odds. I am thrilled that we will sit in this Chamber together, not to continue some sort of family tradition but because I unashamedly believe that our Parliament is the better for having people like my father in it and if nothing else, I hope I can display the same level of passion, commitment and service to the community that my father has displayed over many years.

I am also conscious of the role my late mother played in shaping my character and I attribute much of who I am to her influence. To my two sisters who endured me, their baby brother, and have provided guidance and encouragement throughout my life, and to my extended family - my wife's family far away in England - I thank them for their generous love and support and their preparedness to trust my judgment. I am indeed very fortunate to be part of such a large and close family network and I am aware of and greatly appreciate the significance and the value of the family as a fundamental social institution, but I am conscious of the fact that many people are not as fortunate as I am. There are many disadvantaged and alienated people in our society and I am motivated by the prospect of being able to make a difference, to change things and achieve a better way of life for all Tasmanians.

I must also thank my campaign team and most notably my campaign director, James Green, who generously gave hours of his time to assist, encourage and humour me. To all other helpers and Liberal Party volunteers, I am immensely grateful for your efforts and pleased that we achieved such a rewarding personal result.

Mr Speaker, I am currently the only Liberal member representing the fine electorate of Franklin. The electorate is a dichotomy divided by our beautiful River Derwent; a blend of city, suburban and rural, featuring the most extraordinary natural beauty and areas of wilderness, battling and affluent, developing and struggling, yet full of great potential and wonderful people. Franklin is a microcosm of Tasmania.

Mr Speaker, I consider myself extremely fortunate to live in this wonderful State and indeed this fantastic country. I have been equally fortunate to have lived and worked overseas, spending time in the United States and also the United Kingdom. Not the least for having met my wife abroad, I found living overseas extremely rewarding, enlightening and often challenging. The experience certainly gave me a greater appreciation of my home but also exposed me to the realities of a bigger, faster and tougher world. It gave me a greater sense of perspective and a wealth of memorable and valuable experiences. Like so many young Tasmanians I was anxious to leave our island State to explore the big wide world and to pursue dreams and adventures. Yet unlike so many, I did come back. So many do not and of course there are so many young Tasmanians happily living interstate, often with no intention or inclination of returning home. In many cases they are deterred or even prevented from returning as a consequence of lack of opportunities.

Mr Speaker, we do, of course, face the problem of a declining population, a problem that cannot simply be pushed aside with occasional news of a minor shift in statistics. It is essential that we address this pressing issue with a degree of urgency. It is critical to the efficiency of our economy and our ability to generate employment opportunities and it is a significant factor in our social and cultural development. This issue is obviously far too complex for me to appropriately address today, but it is of such importance it must be addressed in detail within the term of this Government.

Mr Speaker, I was especially pleased to have been presented with the responsibility of being shadow minister for education. Education is, of course, the most fundamental component of our community and our culture; it is the soul of our society. To take the words from former British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, 'Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends.' That is in no way overstating the case. Education, or perhaps more accurately, the education of our society, is a resource to be utilised, developed and improved upon. Our children, our young and also our adults are pursuing a course of life-long learning. Liberalism or liberal philosophy, I find, sits comfortably with many of the objectives and the benefits of education: the transmission of core values, the promotions of rights, freedoms and equal opportunities for all people. It seeks to nurture and to encourage individuality, to promote personal exploration, initiative and enterprise and broadening of the mind, to produce contributors and responsible citizens. Education transmits culture and provides alternative views of the world and the way we live. Our Government, of course, plays a major role as primary service provider and I am encouraged by the fact that it is widely held that our country contains a top quality education system.

Mr Speaker, I am pleased she has returned to the House because I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of our current Minister for Education, Ms Wriedt, and the respect that she obviously enjoys amongst the education fraternity. I share the minister's stated passion for our public education system and endorse her desire to see it become world class. I also acknowledge and support the role of independent education providers, private schools and Catholic education and also the rights of parents who are fortunate enough to exercise choice in where their children are schooled. These schools, to varying degrees, also require support and assistance from our Government and a progressive, responsible government will no doubt acknowledge this fact. It should ensure sufficient support in the interests of all our children, irrespective of the type of school they attend. Mr Speaker, I believe there is much to be taken from the extensive and detailed findings of the consultative Tasmania Together process, a document derived from a caring and concerned Tasmanian public and an expression of fundamental benchmarks. Like the Minister for Education, I firmly believe that we must aim to exceed expectations and benchmarks when it comes to our education system.

Tasmania's isolation or geographical limitations should be no barrier to our becoming information rich and abundant in intellectual capacities and capabilities. We must keep pace with the rest of the world and we are not bound to follow. We can take a leading role in this most crucial and demanding of social institutions.

I would also like to pay tribute to those who work within our education system, particularly our teachers, their aides and their support staff. Their contribution is significant and their responsibilities considerable and increasing in recent years. The demands and expectations placed on teachers and support staff has changed dramatically in recent times and it is imperative that the Government keeps pace with these changes and this rapid transition. I can see that I have, to an extent, detailed an expression of ideals and I am, as I say, aware that there are many who suffer disadvantage in our education system and of course in our wider community: those who cannot or do not achieve an appropriate level of literacy and numeracy skills; those who are failed by our system; and those who suffer inequity and disadvantage, be it economic, social, ethnic, gender or disability based.

I would like to briefly mention, Mr Speaker, in this context the national problem that exists in providing our indigenous communities with an appropriate and effective education system. I understand that we are failing to properly engage indigenous people in meaningful, relevant and effective learning and that we must improve access to services and to participation rates to seek levels that are comparable with other Australian children. Conversely, we must provide all Australian students with an understanding and a respect for indigenous traditional and contemporary cultures.

Mr Speaker, in recent years I have developed a far keener understanding and awareness of the needs of our young and I am sure it has much to do with my recent elevation to the position of parent and proud father. I am certainly more sensitive to the educational needs of our young and that our children must be given support, encouragement and also protection to grow and hopefully achieve their potential. I am acutely aware of the need to protect our children in what can be a considerably dangerous world. There is a frighteningly reported increase in the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Our children confront numerous challenges and hurdles, many dangers and potential pitfalls which may manifest in the horrifying province of alienation and depression, substance abuse and youth suicide. They are subject to violence, stress and emotional trauma. Whilst living in England, I was fortunate to have been employed as a prosecutor in a child protection unit in a region of the country that records a considerable occurrence of child abuse and neglect. I was, as I say, extremely fortunate to have worked in this field as it opened my eyes to the suffering of many innocent children and to some stark realities, to the hardship faced by police, educators and social workers. This issue, this problem, is a priority for all of us, for this Government, for this Parliament, and we must not for a moment be fooled into thinking that it is, a problem we do not have.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a worthy document and is worthy of regular analysis. It is a framework that defines the rights of children and indeed any government's role in protecting, providing for and nurturing our most precious of assets. Under this charter, all governments are obliged to play an active role. Children's rights are no longer an aspiration but are a binding responsibility.

On another plane I consider that much needs to be done in terms of improving the state of our child-care system in Tasmania. I acknowledge the role of the Federal Government in this domain but I believe it appropriate for a responsible, proactive State government to actively pursue avenues and all reasonable means to alleviate this dilemma which has far-reaching consequences, most significantly in restricting the ability of many parents - of course, most predominantly women - to enter or to return to the work force. It reduces opportunities and the ability for families to exercise choice; it retards social and economic development.

Mr Speaker, time does not permit me to dwell on other issues of personal interest such as the law and law reform, protection of our natural heritage and environmental concerns, economic development and our tourism potential. I have, however, identified issues, perhaps of a national or a global flavour, but those that may provide some understanding of who I am and what is important to me - certainly subjects that are a source of inspiration and that provide some explanation as to why I have embarked on a parliamentary career, and some offer insight into what I hope to achieve.