



Michelle O'Byrne MP

House of Assembly

Date: 30 May 2006

Electorate: Bass

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Ms O'BYRNE (Bass - Inaugural) - Mr Speaker, I have the honour to move -

That the following address be presented to His Excellency the Governor in reply to His Excellency's speech.

To His Excellency the Honourable William John Ellis Cox, Companion of the Order of Australia, Governor in and over the State of Tasmania and its dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia:

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY:

We, Her Majesty's dutiful and loyal subjects, the members of the House of Assembly of Tasmania, in Parliament assembled, desire to thank Your Excellency for the speech which you have been pleased to address to both Houses of Parliament.

We desire to record our continued loyalty to the Throne and Person of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, and at the same time assure Your Excellency that the measures which will be laid before us during the session will receive our careful consideration.

Mr Speaker, in this my inaugural speech I commence by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which this House rests and has met for the last 150 years. I congratulate all members of the House on their election. To my colleague, the member for Denison, Ms Singh, I extend particularly warm congratulations on her first election to this place.

I am not the first member of parliament to be given the opportunity to make a second first speech. It is in fact a reasonably common occurrence for Australians in public office to serve first in the Federal Parliament and then at a State level, or vice versa. I am also not even the only member of this current House to have had such an opportunity. My colleague opposite, the member for Denison, Michael Hodgman, made his mark in both places long before me. Like Michael, I represent the same constituents in this place as I did in the Federal Parliament. It is an honour to serve the people of Bass. It

is also a singular honour to be selected to represent them in two jurisdictions.

This year is our sesquicentenary, the year that we mark 150 years of responsible government in Tasmania. In 1854 a select committee report recommended the creation of a bicameral parliament and suggested that the instincts of the Assembly would be movement, progress, innovation. Tasmania was the first Australian colony to be granted a constitution by the then reigning Queen Victoria.

One of Australia's great statesmen, Neville Wran, has recently cautioned against undervaluing the contribution made by the Australian colonies to our democracy. Like Tasmania, New South Wales is celebrating 150 years of responsible government this year. Mr Wran says, 'It is a mistake to think we inherited a fully-fledged parliamentary system from Britain, much less a democracy'. He notes that when the constitutions that delivered responsible government to the colonies of Tasmania, South Australia and New South Wales were drafted, 'the parliamentary and cabinet systems were still taking shape, even at Westminster'.

In our sesquicentenary year I encourage Tasmanians to reflect on the significance of our achievement. Put simply, we live in one of the oldest democracies on earth. Of course, the form of parliamentary democracy enjoyed when this House of Assembly first sat in 1856 was not one that we would recognise today. For men, property and educational qualifications defined the franchise. Women were excluded altogether. Adult universal franchise did not become a feature of our democracy until the first decade of the new century. Women were not permitted to stand for election to this House until 1922. Since 1856, Tasmanians have elected 540 people to this Assembly - 521 of them have been men. Lisa Singh and I are just the eighteenth and nineteenth women to sit in this Chamber, so we have a lot of catching up to do.

Why should the flaws in our democratic experiment be discussed alongside our achievements? Because democracy is a work in progress and we in this place are its guardians.

The first responsibility for each of us is respect for democracy itself. We have a special responsibility to ensure we leave this place with the democratic foundations of our State strengthened. I am not alone among members of this Parliament in experiencing the pain of an election loss. I had the honour of representing the people of Bass in the Federal Parliament between 1998 and 2004. My defeat in the 2004 election was a blow to the Labor Party. It was also a blow to me, but it did not shake my belief in the people of Bass. They had the right to elect me in 1998 and in 2001 and they

had the right to elect another candidate in the last Federal election. Nor did the experience shake my confidence in the electoral system that has governed the rules of my election and my defeat.

When participants in the electoral process attack undesired outcomes with calumny and conspiracy, our democracy is diminished and we are diminished in the process. The responsibility to respect democracy rests with each of us. A special responsibility rests with party leaders to whom others, inside and outside of this Parliament, turn for direction and guidance. The consequences of undermining faith in our democracy are not hard to discern.

I joined the Australian Labor Party because I believed it was the only political party capable of advancing the interests of working Tasmanians and their families. I have maintained that belief and am very proud to join a Labor government that is its living embodiment.

Under the leadership of Jim Bacon and Paul Lennon, this Government has rebuilt our State. Labor has presided over the creation of 32 000 new jobs and a rising work force participation rate. Three thousand new Tasmanian businesses have started. Eight hundred and fifty million dollars in tax relief has been delivered to Tasmanian businesses and families. The number of Tasmanians undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships has risen by 150 per cent. Public sector debt has been paid down. Our population is growing. The cloud of despair that hung over Tasmania for much of the 1990s has been blown away. Responsible economic management has meant that Labor has delivered opportunity to the Tasmanian people, opportunity that only Labor can deliver.

Labor's responsible economic management has delivered unprecedented resources to our hospitals and schools. Labor in government called a halt to the previous government's hospital fire sale, brought the lay-off of nurses to an end, repaid funds pillaged from charitable accounts and began the task of rebuilding our State health system. But make no mistake, there is more work to be done. That fact is acknowledged by the Government's decision to commit additional resources to our health system - another \$450 million each year - over the life of this Parliament.

Labor's investment in public education has delivered lower class sizes and improved school facilities. Again, we recognise there is more to be done. That is why, in this term of office, additional resources will be made available to improve early literacy, bring down class sizes in years 2 to 6 and help students make the transition to high school.

But, Mr Speaker, no economy - no matter its strength - can deliver uniform outcomes for all its citizens. Government has therefore a particular responsibility to ensure that the most vulnerable of our citizens share the reward of economic prosperity and I am pleased to say that this Government has not neglected that responsibility.

In the area of housing a strong State economy has delivered vastly improved housing prices for home owners and, in many cases, windfall returns for investors. But these same circumstances have raised the entry barrier to home ownership for many Tasmanians and priced many others out of the private rental market. The Government's focus on affordable housing is one of its proudest achievements.

Under Labor, the Affordable Housing Organisation will continue to facilitate the availability of affordable housing in Tasmania. The adequate provision of affordable housing is one of the hallmarks of a fair society. Its continued availability is one of the issues to which I will devote my energy over the life of this Parliament.

Mr Speaker, I have experienced few prouder moments in political life than on 18 March this year in listening to the Premier acknowledge his re-election and commit his Government - our Government - to take further steps on the path to reconciliation. The passage of legislation to hand back Cape Barren and Clarke Islands to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people was one of the finer moments of the last Parliament.

Labor's re-election and the personal commitment of the Premier means there are more fine moments still to come. The Government's plan to acknowledge and address the enduring pain of the stolen generations has my strong support and it is my hope that the Tasmanian Government's actions will go some way to delivering the healing that is the essential step on the path to reconciliation and today I pledge myself to that cause.

Mr Speaker, on social policy this has been a brave and fearless government. Labor has recognised that it represents people who are compassionate, caring and advanced in their thinking and expect their government to govern accordingly. A suite of social reformist legislation under Labor has transformed our State.

The Relationships Act encapsulates the boldness with which the Government has reflected the good sense of the Tasmanian people in its legislative program. The bill enacting this reform was groundbreaking, fearless and mature, just like the Tasmanian people themselves. I am proud to be part of a government that is prepared to enjoin with its citizens in conversation about subjects that other governments choose to ignore.

Mr Speaker, one subject on which this Government has not been afraid to engage with its constituents is the threat posed to their standard of living by the Commonwealth's takeover of industrial relations. Tasmania's industrial relations laws have been the subject of an attempted coup by the Commonwealth. The fight to protect these laws is not over and I am pleased to be a part of a government that is challenging the Commonwealth's takeover in the High Court.

So what is at stake? Well, in part, it is the future of the federal compact between the States and the Commonwealth and that is important but it is not the issue that concerns the Tasmanians that I was elected to represent. They are concerned about the reduced wages and conditions ushered in by the Commonwealth's extreme regime.

Just last week we heard the news of how one employer is trading away workers' pay and conditions worth up to \$90 per week for a lousy pay rise of two cents an hour. This is the brave new world of industrial relations under the Commonwealth's extreme changes. It is not a world that Tasmania workers want to join and it is one of the many reasons that Labor was re-elected on 18 March this year.

Reduced wages and conditions are not the only outcome that workers should fear from the Commonwealth's extreme workplace laws. One of the most fundamental rights of all - the right for workers to organise - is under assault. I am not a new participant in the debate about workplace relations. I began my working life organising with the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and I remain a proud unionist today.

Many Labor historians believe the Australian Labor Party was born under the Tree of Knowledge in Barcaldine during the 1890s but, whatever the place, there is no doubt that the struggle of workers for a fair deal was the catalyst for our party's formation. The recent poisoning of the Tree of Knowledge is a sad metaphor for the Howard Government's current attack on workers' rights.

The Liberal Party's attempt to poison Australia's industrial relations system will not kill the Australian notion of a 'fair day's pay for a fair day's work' nor will it diminish the determination of the union movement to defend workers hard-won pay and conditions. As the Premier said at the rally against the Howard legislation in Hobart, 'If you know me for one thing, you know I am good for a fight.'

Mr Speaker, I do not expect that the play list at Kirribilli extends to British folk but if it did the Prime Minister would be well served to spin a tune by my favourite British troubadour, Billy Bragg entitled 'Which side are you

on? ' As Bill says, 'It'll take much more than a union law to knock the fight out of the working man' - or indeed out of the working woman because women are among the most vulnerable under the Commonwealth's extreme workplace laws. In Tasmania, women comprise almost half the work force and many hold down part-time casual jobs. Under the Commonwealth's new laws, their wages and conditions - including family-friendly working arrangements - are at risk.

Workplace safety for all workers is threatened if unions are denied the opportunity to conduct safety training, an inevitable consequence of the prohibition of such training under the agreements of the new Commonwealth regime. In the light of events at Beaconsfield earlier this month - including the loss of a life - there can be no Tasmanian who fails to understand why workplace safety matters.

Mr Speaker, there is a word for governments that deny workers the right to organise themselves and bargain collectively, and the word is 'undemocratic'. The Lennon Labor Government stands shoulder to shoulder with working Tasmanians in the fight against these terrible laws and if success does not come before the courts then these injustices must be undone at the next federal election.

Mr Speaker, all of us in this place stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. The achievements of the current Labor Government are a continuation of the work begun by Michael Field during his all-too-brief stewardship of our State. The hard decisions taken by Michael and his Government provided a solid foundation for Labor upon its return to government in 1998. Of course, the Government elected in 1998 was led by another great Tasmanian - Jim Bacon. Jim was passionate about Tasmania and Tasmanians, and they were passionate about him. He had an ambition for our State and its people that was unsurpassed and as Premier he delivered the things he promised.

Paul Lennon had the toughest of tasks when he accepted Jim's mantle and he did so in circumstances that no-one would have wished for. The circumstances were difficult but Paul's resolve was clear. He led a good government and the Tasmanian people recognised that fact by re-electing Labor on 18 March for a third term. I am truly honoured by my election and I am thrilled to serve in a majority Labor government. I look forward to making my own contribution to the Government, bringing my own energy and commitment to bear on its good work.

I want to conclude by thanking those who have helped me in my journey to this place. People in elected office should thank the people who help them every day, but special thanks are owed on occasions such as this.

My parents Colleen and Brian O'Byrne have nurtured and guided me through life with unstinting love and unwavering support. They instilled in me a passion for social justice that set me on my path to this place and propels me forward today.

My brothers, Michael and David, are both remarkable men who have shown me the love, if not always the respect, that has sustained me through my whole life. In their dealings with me they have 'never been bound by the conventions of diplomacy'.

My beautiful clever daughters, Eleanor and Sophia, are my inspiration and constant reminder that some things are more important than politics. My husband, Priam, has been a constant source of support and has sustained me through the good times and the bad.

Of course election campaigns are not run by just a handful of people. I want to thank the many party members, supporters and friends who have helped me in past campaigns including the last - thankfully successful - one. All of them celebrated with me when we won elections, even though in some cases it took a couple of weeks to find out, and they grieved with me when we lost. All of them stood by me and gave me the support I needed when I decided to stand at the State election.

There is always a risk when you start thanking people that you will miss some out and I apologise to any one I miss because I am going to take that risk. I want to thank all the members of my campaign team, led by Geoff Lyons: Alan Stacey, Matthew Jose, Mat and Sophie Wheatley, Paul Kindermann, Ross Hart, 'Oh Danny Boy' James, Annie Roberts, Lee-Ann Patterson, Sharon Burnie, Duncan Massey, 'The Baroness' Glenn Chintock, Brian Roe, Captain Dave Webster and all of those marvellous volunteers who put up posters, knocked on doors and filled as many letterboxes as we could find. You all made an invaluable contribution to my campaign and the re-election of the Labor Government.

I want to thank the many unions and unionists who have supported me, including Mick Wickham, Jason Campbell and Dean Summers from the MUA, Chris Brown and his team at HACSU, Rose Parker of the AEU, Doug Stephens and Bill Bolitho of the NUW, Tony Benson of the construction division of the CFMEU, and of course my union and extended family at the LHMU.

Many of my former ALP Federal colleagues accused me of having 14 000 relatives when the election result was published, however some of them were slightly more useful including Kerry O'Brien, Julia Gillard, Simon

Crean, Kirsten Livermore, Martin Ferguson and my Emily's List co-convenor, Claire Moore.

The Australian Labor Party Sisterhood - or ALPS - is an institution in Bass and I thank all the ALPS women for their love and support, including Judith Habel, Cathie McPherson, Beryl O'Connell and Lilah Fitzallen.

I am proud of my association with Emily's List and thank my fellow members for their support, including Suzie Munro, Andelys Jolley, Mollie Robson and the very amazing Emily Lee Ack.

My close friends have carried a special burden through the ups and downs - especially the downs - of my political career. Some of them are in the Gallery today - Katherine Moore, Jodie Campbell and Liz Nast.

I have been fortunate to have some wonderful mentors in preparation for my political life. Included in that list are Joan Kirner, Anne O'Byrne, the late Lance Barnard and my late grandfather, Frank Colin Batchelor.

In closing, may I say that I am more than happy to embrace the expectations laid down by our forefathers on that 1854 select committee which led to the establishment of this House of Assembly 150 years ago. I thank the people of Bass for the confidence they have shown in me in giving me the chance to represent them as they deserve.

I will not let you down.

Members - Hear, hear