

Inaugural Speech – Ross Butler MP



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House of Assembly

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Electorate: Franklin

CONSOLIDATED FUND APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 1) 2008 (No. 32)

Second Reading

Mr BUTLER (Franklin - Inaugural) - Mr Speaker, I am honoured and delighted to be here to support the bill before the House. I believe the most important part of the Budget is the \$34.8 million allocated to improve literacy and numeracy levels of Tasmanian children and adults. In the context of historical perspective, since the State's legislative initiatives in public education in the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, those levels are now of course extremely high. In the light, however, of the gamut of changes in modern society, especially in employment opportunities, it is a truism that the levels must improve mightily. Most important of all we must ensure that no child is prevented from achieving his or her highest potential in literacy and numeracy because of health problems, medical conditions or social disadvantage that can be mitigated. Morality demands no less of us. This is recognised of course by the provision in the Budget of \$16.8 million for more resources for children with high and additional needs.

Throughout my life I have been conscious of the role played by good facility in language and mathematics in the personal, professional and political success that I have enjoyed. I believe we should always strive for clarity and precision in language because if the currency of language is debased then the basis of thought is damaged. This Chamber echoes to millions of words in the course of the year as members articulate their visions for Tasmania's future and proffer solutions for the problems of the present, and also as they show their Australian humanity in exchanges of wit. I hope that in the months or possibly years available to me in this Chamber I will be able to make a worthwhile contribution through these purposes of language use.

I am particularly delighted to see that \$200 000 will be provided to support the purchase of musical instruments to enhance school musical programs. Extensive musical activities are vital for the spirit of any school. When in the early 1990s I was principal at New Norfolk High School, we despaired at the time at the paucity of funds for replacement instruments. My solution at the time turned out to be one of the best things I ever did in education. I decided to turn the school band into a community band and thereby blur the boundary between what was the school and what was the community. In particular, part of the aim of a principal strapped for cash was to facilitate the raising of funds for new instruments which of course we would use in the school. Also, what I proposed to do recognised the reality that the school band of New Norfolk High School, performing on Anzac Day, carols by candlelight and in other community functions, was to all intents and purposes at the time a community band. From that small administrative push grew the outstanding Tasmanian and international success of the Derwent Valley Concert Band.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mr BUTLER - While I hate the transformation in our language of the word 'icon' I could almost be attempted to apply it to the Derwent Valley Concert Band.

Members laughing.

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Mr BUTLER - Mine was just a little administrative push which did not take very long at all. I would like to put on record and laud the outstanding musical leadership of the band's director, Layton Hodgetts and the organisational skill of Mrs Belle Pearson and many other citizens of the Derwent Valley and elsewhere who are responsible, 100 per cent, for the band's success.

I would like now to turn to some of the circumstances that led to my being here today. Firstly, I wish to thank my wife, Margaret, who is in the Speaker's Reserve, and my family for their encouragement and support when I decided to seek a fourth post-retirement career in November 2005 by standing as a Labor candidate for Franklin in March 2006. I thank Harry Quick, whose staff members and a small band of friends provided assistance in the campaign; it was deeply appreciated. I thank very much I think it was 1 066 voters in Franklin who made me their number one choice and also the large number from across the whole political spectrum it appears who gave me a sufficiently high preference vote to keep me in the count to be the last candidate excluded.

While obviously in the Hare-Clark system there is strong rivalry and competition for votes between party colleagues, teamwork is very important and can count significantly. I was proud to be part of and contribute to a successful team effort.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mr BUTLER - In the work of schools, teamwork and cooperation, rather than the excellence of one or two individuals, are utterly crucial for a happy and productive learning environment.

Briefly, I would like to add my voice to the recognition already given by other members to the outstanding work over many years by Paul Lennon for the Franklin electorate and all Tasmanians.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mr BUTLER - I thank Paul for his example of commitment, hard work and political skill. These I will strive to emulate in serving the people of Franklin. Paul Lennon and I were never close to one another in the union movement or politically. In fact our trajectories represent and reflect differences in a period of Labor and union history from the great split in Labor of 1954 through to the late 1980s. Thankfully, this period of divisiveness, ideological combativeness and futile waste of energy which hindered unions from focusing fully on the needs of their members and hindered the ALP from focusing solely on good policy and the interest of the community, is now ancient history. While in politics groupings have always formed to promote particular causes and causes within causes and probably will continue to be so formed, it is heartening to see the ideological virulence of the Left-Right factional battles from 1954 to the late 1980s at an end. The complex nature of the social, political, economic and environmental problems facing humanity, the animal kingdom and our very planet requires solutions based on rigorous scientific analysis and modelling derived from objective, factual evidence. Perspectives from visionary speculation and ideological systems cannot contribute productively to the required solutions. *Mutatis mutandis*, the selection of political candidates and the filling of political office must, if society is to be best served, be based on objective assessment of a candidate's qualities and experience and not on factional loyalties or mateship.

As a teacher for 38 years, it would be reasonable to expect that on most occasions I could be quite loquacious, but probably not eloquent, in speech. I enjoyed didactic talking - that is, teaching - in the classroom with the purpose of clarifying a precise point of French or German grammar. I found it easy delivering the traditional and typical homilies of a school principal, trying to leaven them with a little humour, which I usually found would aid the effectiveness of the delivery of the message to the students. In council meetings of the teachers' union there was always specific policy on which to focus in marshalling particular arguments and facts. As Teachers Federation president, I also enjoyed using a touch of the art of the demagogue when in 1987 I advocated that teachers take strike action. Members at that time,

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I was delighted to say and still am, did endorse strike action which, by the way, was not over salaries but far more important things. Since then, all Tasmanian governments have listened very closely to what teachers say.

However the prospect of my inaugural speech filled me initially with not a little apprehension because being a very new member I obviously did not have the time or knowledge to prepare a detailed speech on a particular piece of legislation, the bill before us, and to address a specific objective issue external to myself. Then in talking to colleagues, I discovered that in an inaugural speech it is acceptable to range widely and freely over many things and I understand that it is traditional to talk about oneself, one's formative experiences, one's motivations, one's philosophy of life and how one came to be here in Parliament.

Mr Speaker, on Wednesday 11 June the call was heard that a stranger was in the House. I was quickly seized, brought before your Chair and required to say the appropriate things to become a member of this Chamber. I trust that members may appreciate knowing a few things about me that perhaps they may not at this stage know. I was born in October 1943, a few weeks after the opening of the floating bridge designed by Lindisfarne resident Alan Knight, linking Lindisfarne and the eastern shore to Hobart. My father lived in Lindisfarne his entire life and the sleepy village of his youth was quickly transformed, as was the whole eastern shore of course in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s of my childhood and youth in Lindisfarne. It was transformed by the opportunities in residential development made possible by the opening of the old floating bridge.

I attended Lindisfarne Primary School, which is on the site of the present Lindisfarne North School, and then Hobart High School, from which I hope to make one day a final exit. That was from 1955 to 1959 -

Members laughing.

Mr BUTLER - Not too soon, I hope, Mr Speaker.

Members laughing.

Mr BUTLER - Then at age 16, in 1960, I headed off to the University of Tasmania, where some of the faculties, including Arts, were still located in the lovely old buildings on the Glebe. My Bachelor of Arts degree of German, French, History and Political Science was completed in 1962 at the Sandy Bay campus. Lindisfarne was and still is a delightful and safe place in which to grow up. Apart of course from family, major influences in my life were the Lindisfarne school principal, Ted Phillips, whose widow, Mrs Celia Phillips, is aged 90 and who you sometimes see writing letters to the paper. I was delighted over recent years to have her frequently as a taxi passenger. Other influences in Lindisfarne were the St Aidans Anglican Sunday School and the Lindisfarne Football Club, which I represented in an under-17 TFL Grand Final match - and losing, I assure you, still hurts.

Members laughing.

Mr BUTLER - The Lindisfarne Rowing Club was also important. My father gained Kings Cup selection in 1946 from the Lindisfarne Rowing Club, from which I had two seasons of school and club rowing, the highlight of which was being a member of the 1958 four-oared Hobart High School crew which won the inaugural race of the Knight Cup donated by Alan Knight. I do not know whether that is still competed for, but I would like to look into that.

In 1961 I was in the Tasmanian University Eight for the intervarsity rowing carnival in Brisbane, where we managed to beat one other university, Melbourne University. To be strictly honest, Mr Speaker, I should add that Melbourne finished with only seven men in the boat.

Members laughing.

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Mr BUTLER - It diminishes our performance a little bit, but still, we beat Melbourne.

'Get something useful to do' was a fairly frequent admonition from my mother to her son. My mother was a Moonah girl, one of seven children of a zinc works labourer, who had a happy childhood, despite the fact that she was 12 years of age before she had a pair of shoes of her own which had not been hand-me-downs from older sisters. So I got something useful to do as a child, selling old newspapers to the greengrocer for threepence a pound, finding purchasers for the surplus eggs from our back yard fowls, and collecting cordial bottles on Opossum Bay Beach where we had a shack, after the *Cartela's* Sunday picnickers had left.

Other useful things were Sundays spent alone behind the counter looking after my grandparents' seven-day shop and newsagency, which was where the Mission to Seamen is just along the road at 33 Morrison Street. There is a completely new facade there. I mention that because today you would not believe a 12-year-old looking after a shop with all the armed robberies and so on, but anyway, that was something that I relished doing for my grandparents. I also sold shoes after school as a teenager in the Shoemart store, which was managed by my father.

Mr Speaker, after 38 years as a teacher, my small business instincts came to the fore again, as I successfully sold real estate for Roberts Eastern Shore from 2001 to 2003, and I am delighted that my manager then was able to come today. Then for a few months I sold sickness disability insurance, before driving a cab for three-and-a-half years, which I think was one of the most enjoyable and enlightening jobs I have ever had. This experience in private enterprise was augmented by my five years' service on the board of directors of the Teachers, Police and Nurses Credit Union, followed by six years on the board of the Retirement Benefits Fund. During this service, I successfully undertook the company directors course at the Australian Institute of Company Directors to be designated a Fellow of that body. I also did the courses of Deakin University's diploma of financial planning.

Mr Speaker, still following my mother's advice to get something useful to do, in Canada I worked as a barman in Alberta and also as a labourer helping to repair the carbon brick linings of a paper pulp digester plant in Port Alberni, British Columbia. That was in between two teaching appointments in Alberta and British Columbia between 1967 and 1970.

I believe I have absorbed many lessons on the dignity of labour - that is with a 'u' - in whatever form it takes and learnt many valuable lessons for life working with a wide range of people. On the day of the announcement of Paul Lennon's retirement from politics I caught the tail end of some radio speculation on who might replace him as the member for Franklin. I did not hear the full radio conversation or the context of the remark by a prominent academic commentator on local politics but the latter's observation, if I understood it correctly, was something to the effect that I would bring little relevant experience to a role in Parliament that was under discussion on the radio. Well, Mr Speaker, clearly, I would reject such a view and believe that through the balance of my public service and experience in private enterprise I will have, I hope, valuable insights to offer in quite a few matters.

Mr Speaker, resuming my teaching career in Tasmania in 1970, I commenced over 25 years of service to the Tasmanian Teachers Federation as an executive member, treasurer, president for two terms and council delegate. Still following my mother's advice, I was in the 1970s chairman of the board of directors running the Ingomar Hotel and I also completed a Master of Education degree. Concerning my early political education, nothing was overt or inspirational. Perhaps the jocular giving to me by some of my high school teachers of the nickname 'Doc Evatt' - because as a 13-year-old I did look remarkably like a younger Dr Evatt might have looked - might have swayed me towards Labor. When I joined the ALP in 1963 I suspect that the predominant influence was the power of ideas and rational thought garnered from my university studies, especially from history. I probably felt at the time that the left of the political spectrum was a more natural home for progressive ideas but I do not ascribe exclusivity there. The story of the development of political liberty and social equality from Magna Carta, the seventeenth century Bill of Rights and England's Glorious Revolution when Parliament first chose the King, through the philosophical writings of the Enlightenment

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leading to the French and American revolutions and our modern freedoms, is mankind's greatest story. It certainly generated in me a general interest in being a member of a political party. To be frank, the accident of friendships can be just as significant in leading one towards one political party or another. Also, by age 19, having virtually known only one Prime Minister, Bob Menzies, it was natural for youth in the 1960s to reject the status quo and those in authority.

It is quite fortuitous that I now have the opportunity to serve the people of Tasmania, and especially those in Franklin, as a member of the House of Assembly. Having been for 17 years between 1977 and 1996 a vice-principal or principal of schools in Lyons and having been a field umpire of Australian Rules in the Tasman and Oatlands Associations from 1994 until the present, I had given idle thought to standing in Lyons. But, the Labor Party already had a most formidable team in Lyons and it was only very fleeting, let me assure you, and I am not pursuing it any further.

Members laughing.

Mr BUTLER - But in Franklin no-one seemed to be forthcoming to fill for Labor the fifth spot and to join the equally formidable existing Labor members and Daniel Hulme who had already nominated. I was approached and agreed to do my bit for the party of which I have been a member for 43 years. But I stressed at the time to David Price that I would not spend more than \$10 000 on my campaign and I knew then that that would be insufficient to have a chance of winning and that I had insufficient time to get well enough known in the electorate. Knowing the number of posters I bought, the amount of *Mercury* newspaper advertising and the cost of printing of about 30 000 pamphlets, I suspect that on behalf of some candidates in the vicinity of \$150 000 was spent and possibly more and probably for most candidates in southern Tasmania an average of over \$50 000 or around that. I have noticed recent newspaper reports of thoughts in Federal and New South Wales State politics to curb the cost of electioneering and to diminish the influence of corporations and unions in elections by limiting the amount of donations by such bodies. I believe the time has come to consider a form of public funding of election campaigns in Tasmania, combined with restrictions on the amount of money that can be spent by candidates and parties. At present fundraising capacity or individual wealth poses a severe barrier to the seeking of political office.

Mr Speaker, it is clear in the Budget before the House that the importance of education for Tasmania's future is recognised. I hope that I will be able to make a contribution in this place to enhance the learning opportunities of the children and to facilitate the work of teachers. I think it is well known that my last job was as a taxi driver. It is an industry that is vitally important for our tourist industry and crucial for the quality of life of many older Tasmanians and others, who in increasing numbers find they cannot afford to own a car or for various reasons are unable to drive a car. Taxi drivers work very long hours for very low remuneration and most struggle to make \$10 to \$12 per hour. Consider that the boys in Pizza Hut - 15-year-olds - make usually about \$17 or \$18.

I believe the time is right to have an inquiry into many aspects of the taxi industry with a view to improving the efficiency of that industry for owners, operators and drivers and to improve the level of service to the public. One thing that could be done immediately would be to create in shopping areas and outside medical practices a considerably larger number of three-minute dropping-off spaces. This would obviously need to be done in conjunction with the councils, I presume, to help the drivers, whether public or private, to get elderly people out of their cars. There is many a time when I have gone on to the footpath or blocked traffic and simply made them wait until I got the elderly lady out with her walking frame. The streets are so clogged with traffic that drivers are frequently breaking that kind of law and other road laws.

Finally, Mr Speaker, embarking now upon my fourth job in retirement, may I say that my life is not entirely getting something useful to do, as my mother urged. For recreation I umpire football, I catch fish, and I play sentimental old tunes on a piano accordion - at least the cat

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appreciates them. I read as much as time will allow. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, 'I cannot rest from travel. I will drink life to the lees'. I believe, like Ulysses, 'how dull it is to pause, to make an end, to rust unburnished, not to shine in use'. I thank members for their indulgence and courtesy.

Members - Hear, hear