



Lara Alexander MP

House of Assembly

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Electorate: Bass

[2.48 p.m.]

Mrs ALEXANDER (Bass - Inaugural Speech) - Mr Speaker, I stand today to address the parliament and the people of Tasmania for the first time. I am grateful to the people of Bass for this wonderful opportunity to be here today. As their elected representative, I am looking forward to representing their interests and identifying opportunities to make a positive contribution to Tasmania.

I hope to be able to tell enough about myself to convey just how much of a sense of wonder I have to be in this Chamber as an elected representative of the people of Bass.

Though I do not know the background of members sitting in this place, I hope I am safe to assume that all of you here today were born and raised in a western liberal democracy and have lived with a Westminster system of government since childhood. Even if some of you may not have taken an active interest in politics at a younger age, the totems and tablets of parliamentary politics were around you everywhere - from conversations with parents and other family members, to the television and radio news, or overhearing strangers talking in public places.

As you grew up, you would have begun to formulate and articulate your own ideas of what represented good policy and how things should be. By the time young people reach adulthood and register to vote, they will know their way around a political system.

Taking federal and state governments together, people know that every few years, the premier or the prime minister will call an election. There would be a field of candidates to choose from: Liberal, ALP, Greens and independents. Whether people go to the polling booth with a spring in their step or dragging their feet, mark the ballot and go home, it all happens naturally because of growing up knowing that voting in elections is something that everybody just does.

My experience growing up in socialist Romania was different. There was only one party. Voting was something more for form rather than with any intention of meaningful change. The country had one leader who always was voted in with a 99.99% majority. There were no electorates with fields of candidates from which to choose. There were no town hall meetings, no T-shirts, no hats, no signs, no television ads or radio interviews. All of these things were missing.

What was also missing was any sense that you had a right to participate or have a say in the political process. Communist regimes are not really into customer feedback.

You never had a sense that when you voted for that one candidate you were actually helping to shape your own, or your country's future.

In Australia we all have the opportunity to do just that. Too often we do not consciously realise that when we vote we are each putting forward our own view in how things should be done. Having always lived with a right to do so, we do not realise how liberating it is to complain, if we feel like it, about our politicians. Australia is a terrific country. Our own corner of paradise here in Tasmania is the best part of it.

As someone who has not always had that right to participate in choosing how and by whom I am governed, I believe the most important thing that I can do each and every single day I am in this place is to remember what a precious gift we have in having a right to choose, thanks to our democracy. As someone who has not always had that right or that ability, I promise that I will remember every single day that I am here on behalf of the people of Bass. I will remember that their feedback and concerns are far more important than their good wishes or congratulations. At the core of every concern there lies the beating heart of democracy.

I have always found it interesting to listen to those people who live in a free society demand that we embrace communism, or its equally ugly relation socialism. I cannot help but notice that the most ardent proponents of communism, socialism or socialist ideas have never experienced what it is to live the Marxist dream, or has ever said, 'I would love to live under communism as a worker or as a peasant'. In the version of communist utopia they call for, they always assume to be the ones making the rules for others to live by. Winston Churchill once said:

No-one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, apart from all other forms of government that have been tried ...

As someone who grew up in a country governed by one of the other forms that have been tried, I can heartily endorse that sentiment. When you live in a democracy you expect things to make sense. You expect to be able to talk freely and to be able to chart the course of your destiny.

In a socialist country you do not do this. In socialist Romania, in about year 11 or 12, you had to undertake a full medical examination to determine if you had any illnesses and any disabilities that they considered may prevent you from performing a job. The medical report would highlight in fine detail what jobs they felt you were unable to do. Therefore you could not select any tertiary education that did not match your determined abilities. That report was paramount to your application for admission at university. If you had any disabilities or illnesses, you were not free to choose your career, unless it just so happened that what you wanted to do also coincided with a medical recommendation. Luckily, in my case, the requirements to study economics were not too onerous.

Competition at key universities was fierce with, as an example, medicine counting sometimes up to 75 applicants for one place. You had to prepare for your admission exams at least two years in advance. The emotional and psychological toll was high on many applicants, but there was no mental health or counselling support.

For boys who failed admission at university, military service was compulsory for 12 months away from home. If they secured a place at university it was still compulsory but only for nine months. I remember in year 12 all the boys were ordered to spend part of their summer holiday doing their patriotic duty as labourers building the canal between the Danube River and the Black Sea. So they went and laboured for free.

Mr Speaker, let me also explain how government controls information in a socialist totalitarian state. We had two hours of television a day, dedicated to news about the glorious achievements under the guidance of the Communist Party and its leader. For some form of sanity and connection with the outside world, we relied heavily on VCRs and video tapes smuggled into the country at great personal risk to the smuggler. We shared these tapes on the quiet, surreptitiously watching foreign movies and television serials. *Poldark* was particularly popular.

Freedom of movement was obviously a no-no. After all, why would you want to leave the socialist dream behind? For the few who had the opportunity to travel out of the country, your passport had to be returned within less than a week. Under no circumstances were you allowed to keep your passport at home. If you were caught in possession of more than US\$10 there were consequences.

Freedom in its full entirety is a precious gift. You realise how much you miss it when it is no longer there. Simple day-to-day activities could land you in big trouble when you live in a totalitarian regime. Rules are enacted with no logic, no sense and served to the people with no explanation.

There are many of these crazy, mad and irrational decisions my father shared with me from his early life. In the 1950s as a young medical student in his first year at university, he was summoned to the office of the intelligence officer of the faculty of medicine. Every workplace, school, office has an intelligence officer ready to report any saboteurs or subversives. He was questioned harshly about being in possession of subversive western literature. 'A corruption of the mind', he was told. My father was stunned and said he had not done anything of the kind. The officer then reached into the drawer and slammed the book on his desk saying, 'We searched your room and we found this'. The book in question was *Gone with the Wind*. Dad was let go with a first and final warning that if he was to commit any other similar offences he would be expelled from university, never to be allowed in again. He was asked to go to the toilet and tear each page apart and flush it down the toilet.

He also shared with me another story that for me, being an animal lover, upset me deeply. In the late 1940s or early 1950s, an order came through that all village households should not be in possession of more than one dog. The family had to make a choice and my dad said goodbye to two of his furry friends as they were shot.

Totalitarian regimes will inflict as much emotional, physical and mental pain as one cannot possibly imagine. They will keep you in fear and uncertainty, they will make you turn away from family values and distrust those around you. You will be asked to comply or else you will be labelled as a 'traitor' and dealt with accordingly. They will know everything about you and you will know nothing about them. When people know everything about their government it is called democracy. When

government knows everything about you it is called tyranny. Romania may have been the starting point on my 54-year journey to this place, but there were a number of stops along the way between Bucharest and Bass. If at times I may confuse my nominative with my accusative, it may be because English is my third language following behind Romanian and French.

As I have said, I have the good fortune to be the daughter of a doctor and my mother was a history teacher. I was born in Bucharest and when I was four my father was sent to Morocco as part of a contract between Romania and the Moroccan government. There were many of these contracts in the early 1970s and this was a good source of foreign currency for the government. In addition to the direct contract funding, each specialist was also asked to pay a quota of their salary to the embassy on a monthly basis. My parents believed in education and despite having to pay a portion of their salary to the Romanian government they still found the money for me to attend a French Catholic school in Fez. There was no lack of children's books, which they purchased for me with regularity.

The revolution which deposed Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 had left Romania in turmoil, as revolutions are wont to do. I can certainly confirm that after relentless days and nights of tanks on the move and heavy machine-gun fire, you become emotionally exhausted. Even if you place your hands over your ears in a desperate attempt to dampen the noise, it is still there and keeps you awake night after night. You learn quickly when approaching checkpoints randomly set up around the streets that you do not know who holds the gun or whether they have ever received proper training, so the best thing to do is to put your hands up in the air and advance slowly. In the end you try very hard to understand who is fighting who, such is the confused state of revolutions.

You learn these things very quickly when you are only 22 years old. For those who believe revolution is a romantic act of freedom, let me tell you that when the 24-hour free-to-air reports have concluded, and it is not newsworthy any more, what follows is less romantic and it is called a power vacuum. It is messy and dangerous but fertile ground for those who have waited in the shadows - and there will be many of them, unfortunately.

In 1993 I left in search of time and space to breathe and perhaps find a normal life. I went to New Zealand where I spent five beautiful years, mainly in the South Island, enjoying working for a tourism company. The vast majority of our customers were international tourists from all over the world, with a high volume from Japan, South Korea and Europe. While many of these customers had queries and demands, not all of them could speak English. Such is the way that these things seem to happen, my Kiwi colleagues decided that because I had a foreign accent I would automatically be able to understand all other foreign languages, be it Japanese or German or all points in between. Quite often the situation was that the tourist actually struggled to understand the Kiwi accent. I remember one American tourist being absolutely confused over being asked to check in and demanded to know why he was being asked about a chicken.

From New Zealand I landed in Western Australia and there began my more than two decades-long association with the not-for-profit sector that has encompassed the St

John Ambulance, Save the Children, Cancer Council of Western Australia and the Western Australian Fire and Emergency Management Authority.

While I was with Cancer Council in Western Australia, my husband, who had spent a year in Tasmania in the early 1990s, suggested we drive across the country and spend a month in Tasmania. He promised I would love the place, and he was right. Three years later we were on our way back and it has been our home ever since. We have lived in this beautiful and unique place since 2010. Shortly after arriving I commenced working in aged care with Presbyterian Care Tasmania until 2018 when I was appointed CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Tasmania.

We in this Chamber are all a product of our lived and learned experiences. We might differ in our opinions about priorities and approach but I firmly believe that every single member of this House holds a commitment to their convictions and has one goal: to improve the lives of every Tasmanian.

Much is said about partnerships between various sectors. In my experience we achieve better outcomes when government, the private sector and community organisations work together. In one of John F. Kennedy's most famous quotes he said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.'. My version of President Kennedy's line is 'ask not what our communities can do for us, ask what we can do for our communities'.

When we talk about spending taxpayers' money, let us not forget that it is the small amounts, such as well-targeted grants placed in the hands of community organisations that are the boots on the ground, that can make a real difference. The eyes and ears of their members will see a need and will address that need.

Given my long history in the not-for-profit sector, many people approached me and asked me why I was running for the Liberal Party. The answer is because my lived experience in Tasmania has demonstrated to me that this Liberal Government truly does care about those in need in our community. As an example, I would like to talk about an issue close to my heart: reducing homelessness and helping those at risk of homelessness. Last week, the Premier, the Minister for Housing and I announced the bold plan to spend \$1.5 billion to supply 10 000 new homes, a great initiative and one that I wholeheartedly support. Importantly, it is a prime example of collaboration between the state government, private sector and community organisations that best delivers these projects and addresses the needs.

Community organisations can bring significant additional knowledge to the bricks and mortar partnership, ensuring that people who move into homes have, when required, access to wraparound services and supports so they can remain in their homes and retain the roof over their heads. This is paramount.

In a research paper prepared by Vivienne Skinner and Phillippa Carnemolla in May 2021 titled *Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless: An International Scoping Review*, they analysed 100 international studies about prioritising permanent housing as a solution for homelessness. Their research revealed secure housing improves outcomes for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness in four key areas.

Number one was health. Every study analysed in the paper saw a drop in accessing health services once an individual was permanently housed. Physical and mental health saw improvements.

Number two was criminality. Studies reported that once permanently housed, less time was spent in jail, with fewer encounters with police and arrests. Housing also provides safety from criminal behaviour, particularly for women and children who live in dangerous conditions. In the 2016 census, one of the fastest growing groups of homelessness was women over the age of 55. This is often due to domestic and family violence.

Number three was quality of life. Housing is an early step in rebuilding identity and restoring a sense of personhood. A Canadian study of Housing First participants found that once settled in housing, participants' lives changed from being survival oriented to peaceful.

The last key outcome is reduction in the use of social services. Studies also revealed that permanent housing created value for communities and taxpayers through a reduction in the use of services such as the justice system, hospitals and health and services for mental health and addiction. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute found that the costs saved to services for a single person in housing would be more than \$1 million over a lifetime. Other areas that saw improvement include education and employment, community participation and reduced substance abuse.

It is my personal experience of how, when we work together, we can achieve amazing outcomes for our communities and especially for the most vulnerable in those communities.

Through my recent work, I have met some wonderful people. There are so many service providers in Tasmania who dedicate countless hours to help those in need in our community. It is my hope as a member for Bass, I can help to support the work of these service providers and community organisations.

Mr Speaker, it is an honour to follow in the footsteps of two wonderful female state Bass MPs - Sarah Courtney and the late Sue Napier. Both women were held in great esteem in the electorate and both served their constituents in Tasmania with distinction and passion. My hope is to emulate their commitment to service and duty to every Tasmanian, and in particular the people of Bass.

I stand here today thanks to the commitment and belief of a number of people who supported me during the election campaign. I thank the Premier for his support and encouragement to join the Bass ticket at the election, as well as fellow Bass member, Michael Ferguson. My Liberal partyroom colleagues have been especially welcoming and supportive and I am looking forward to working hard with them over the coming years.

My campaign team had something of an international flavour - in a sense, reflecting the welcoming spirit of Australia and our diversity. My team included an Englishman, my husband Jason; a Welshman, Mark; two Australians, Rotarian member Andrea and work colleague Bernadette; and my good Persian-Swedish friend, Sherri,

who lives in Sydney and never voted Liberal in her life - she actually voted Green. Sherri was born in Iran, her family fled the revolution and settled in Sweden. Sherri and I may differ in some of our beliefs and voting preferences but we are a perfect example of how society should work.

Respect and friendship should not be hindered by political ideology. We should not unfriend our friends and we should not see life as black and white. Life and people are not about colour or religion or gender; life is more complex than that.

To Sherri and the rest of my team, I could not have done it without you. Thank you to you all from the bottom of my heart. I also thank my parents, who are not here today. My father is in Romania and unfortunately my mother passed away at a young age. However, I am sure that for the last 34 years she has looked over me, and though she may have raised her teacher's eyebrow from time to time, I hope that she is proud of my achievements.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mrs ALEXANDER - Mr Speaker, there is no doubt in my mind that my successes are solely due to the values my parents have instilled in me and the education they have worked so hard to provide.

To the voters of Bass who have placed their faith in me to represent their interests, I will repay your loyalty by listening to you and carrying your ideas and desires forward for consideration by our Government. Thank you.

I take this opportunity to thank the staff at Parliament House, and those at the office in Launceston, who have been very welcoming and provided so much information and support. Nothing has been too hard for them, setting aside time from their busy work schedule to look after me.

Finally, to my husband, Jason, who cannot be here today. I know that he is watching these proceedings and he is supporting me in spirit. Jason is my counsel and my greatest supporter. He has encouraged me in every endeavour and he has always been there for me in times of crisis, doubt and tough decisions.

In the last 10 days of the campaign, Jason helped me with letterbox drops, walking 203 kilometres or total of almost 260 000 steps, at a great cost to himself. He, more than anyone, has my love, affection and thanks.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I believe that whatever title or office we may be privileged to hold, it is what we do that defines who we are. It is up to us to decide what kind of person we want to be and what legacy we want to leave behind. Thank you.

Members - Hear, hear.