

Inaugural Speech – Rosemary Armitage MLC



Hon. Rosemary ARMITAGE MLC

Legislative Council

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Electorate: Launceston

DISABILITY SERVICES BILL 2011 (No. 20) Second Reading

Resumed from 14 June 2011 (page 55)

Mr DEPUTY PRESIDENT - I have given the honourable member Rosemary Armitage the call. I remind members that it is the honourable member for Launceston's inaugural speech and as is the tradition of this place, the member's inaugural speech is to be heard in silence. I would ask members to extend the usual courtesy to the new member for Launceston.

Mrs ARMITAGE (Launceston - Inaugural) - Thank you, Mr Deputy President. Although I rise on this, my first, occasion to speak to the House on the Disability Services Bill 2011, I am delighted to deliver my inaugural speech today. It is both a privilege and honour to have been elected as the current member for Launceston and I sincerely thank the people of Launceston for their belief in my ability to represent them. I will do all in my power to be a worthy member of this House. I acknowledge and thank you, Mr Deputy President, the honourable members and all the staff of the Legislative Council for the warm welcome, help, friendship and support provided to me since my election on 7 May.

I take this opportunity to publicly pay tribute to the former member for Launceston, the Honourable Don Wing, who retired after 29 years. Don has been an outstanding member and has made a significant contribution to this State. I share many of his views, including that the Legislative Council must remain an independent House of review and that its role is to ensure legislation is fair and reasonable. I wish Don well in his retirement and have no doubt he will continue to be an active member of our community for many years to come. I thank former Legislative Council members Ray Bailey, Ray Shipp and Robin McKendrick for their encouragement in my standing for this seat.

I also extend my congratulations to the honourable member who was elected unopposed, Ruth Forrest, in Murchison, as well as newly elected Tony Mulder in Rumney and Craig Farrell in Derwent.

It would not have been possible to win this seat without the huge amount of support I received from a very large number of people who assisted me in countless ways and I thank them most sincerely. While everyone helped me enormously, it would be remiss of me not to mention Peter Emmerton and the McCormack family who, over two election campaigns, walked marathons tirelessly helping me to deliver brochures week in, week out. My campaign team in particular put their lives on hold for at least six weeks, got blisters from banging in star pickets putting up signs, electric shocks from standing too close to the fence with the cutters in hand and were abused on occasions, one occasion coming to mind when an elderly lady said she could not possibly vote for a woman as that 'Jillian Gillard' had already ruined the country.

Team Armitage members included Mandy Beveridge, who was invaluable in undertaking many tasks and giving wise counsel; dynamo Sue Freeman, who consistently managed the impossible - from designing the posters to embroidering 'Vote 1 Armitage' T-shirts late into the night; Theresa Hatton, who kept me on track and never let me get ahead of myself; Amanda Mahar with her infectious personality keeping us all laughing, particularly while handing out brochures in the freezing cold; and Chris Williams, who brought us back down to earth with his commonsense approach that we so often needed. Thank you all so very much for your belief in me.

Everyone's contribution was outstanding but special mention must be made of Barbara Youd and her husband, Leonard. Barb has been a rock and this was especially appreciated and noticeable following my defeat by three votes in the Launceston mayoral election in 2009. She worked so hard then and I was amazed that she was ready and willing to do it all again in 2011 for the Legislative Council seat of Launceston. Nothing was impossible for Barb, whether it was decorating Bruce's four-wheel drive for Agfest, and thank goodness he did not see it, or finding me an office to do a radio call for the ABC in amongst the noise of the Agfest crowds. Where? In the soundproof cab of a shiny new tractor and when the salesman wondered what was happening, Barb, as only Barb can, told him it was fine; I was simply doing an interview. Barb and Leonard also undertook the unenviable task of scrutineers, vowing to never do it again following the extreme stress of the many recounts of the mayoral vote but when the time came, they were there for me again at close of polls.

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My partner, Bruce, was absolutely committed to the cause and, along with my four sons, has always been there for me. This is not a task one could readily take on without family support and I sincerely thank them for assisting me to follow my dreams. Since the election Bruce has also become my driver, giving freely of his time to see me ensconced in Parliament while he selflessly spends hours in the Maritime Museum, shopping and visiting friends.

My mother, Nancy, found a new calling. After one afternoon's doorknocking with me, mum decided this was something she could do alone and headed off, brochures in hand, to let the electorate know why her daughter should be the new member for Launceston. Thank you for being a wonderful and devoted mother.

My message would be that it does not matter how high you aim; if you are committed, dedicated and passionate to the cause, you can achieve great things. Ability is what you are capable of, motivation determines what you do and attitude determines how well you do it. Born and raised in Launceston, I attended St Thomas More's Catholic School through primary and secondary years followed by a year at the Technical College School of Commerce. I worked in various fields following my school years but I believe that my time as an electorate officer for Kevin Newman, as firstly Minister for Repatriation followed by Minister for Environment, Housing and Community Development in the Fraser Government, and then as the superintendent's executive assistant at the LGH in the late 1970s early 1980s gave me an awareness of community needs and health issues in northern Tasmania, which are still equally important today.

For approximately 20 years I was a stay-at-home mother to my four sons until the opportunity arose for me take on the part-time position of executive officer of the Northern Division of the Tasmania Branch of the Australian Medical Association, a position that I hold to this day. This position has also enabled me to have a greater understanding of the problems facing our doctors and their patients.

I was also employed for a number of years in the field of oncology, followed by several years as a real estate agent. Working in oncology one sees true strength from people often facing the inevitable and you realise what is really important. My real estate training was a good basis for politics. It taught me to never leave people in doubt and keep them informed. I stood for local government as I was disillusioned by councils' performance. I believe rather than complain about something that you do not like, you should do something about it. I was elected as an alderman in 2005, deputy mayor in 2007 and missed out on mayor by three votes in 2009.

While I hold no university degrees or diplomas, what I believe I have is far more important. I am in touch with my community, I have a degree of commonsense and I have a determination, dedication and passion to help people and the community as a whole.

I have been described in the past as radical but I believe that the word is 'passionate'. I thrive on hard work and the feeling of success that comes from making someone's life a bit better and brighter by assisting them with various issues that are often of great concern to them. I stand by my election promise of being available at all times and of being committed to doing the very best that I can during my term in office. The electorate of Launceston is a diverse area. It was briefly known as Paterson between 1999 and 2008 when fortunately sanity prevailed and the electorate was again named Launceston.

I am delighted to be elected an independent member. I have never been a member of any party and will never be a party puppet. It is my strong belief that the Legislative Council must remain an independent House of review and it is our role to ensure legislation is fair and reasonable. During my election campaign I found overwhelmingly that there remained a real belief among voters that the upper House is a place for independence of thought and speech, free from party policy constraints. It is difficult to understand how legislation can be reviewed without bias by party members as obviously they must always follow the party line. To me that negates the whole purpose of the House of review.

The same issues kept coming up again and again with voters during the campaign - particularly concerns about funding for the Launceston General Hospital, soaring power and water bills, lack of availability of natural gas, adequate police numbers, law and order issues in the city's heart and the sorry state of the once proud Tamar River. However, with the Tamar River falling within the electorate of the member for Rosevears, the Honourable Kerry Finch, I am sure that he will continue to seek ways of removing the silt to return it to the jewel in the crown of Launceston that it once was.

The cost of living is becoming increasingly more difficult for everyone. It starts with families. They are the cornerstone of our community; they bring up our youth, our future. Our young people need a good basis to build upon: sound education, steady employment and affordable housing. If they must leave to further their careers, we need to have a place they want to return to with their families. But our elderly must never be forgotten. We owe them a huge debt. All too often this group is neglected and I am sure that we all know of aged people who cannot afford to turn on their heaters and shiver and freeze during winter. Safety in our homes and on our streets continues to be an issue as well for many. While our police do an incredible job in ensuring law and order, we must support them and ensure that their efforts and results are not downgraded by budgetary

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constraints. This would be a truly retrograde step and a false economy. With budgetary short-term gain and certainly no long-term vision, crime would inevitably climb, thus costing the community more in other areas.

Speaking on the Budget, the size of our bureaucratic empire concerns me. For example, look at the new sewer and water corporations and the likelihood that charges will double - no additional service for most, just twice the price.

Now, especially for the member for Windermere, the Honourable Ivan Dean, recently I received a congratulatory message from a friend working in the area of heart disease, which I would like to share. She added, 'Perhaps the Giddings Government can give Health the uselessly spent fox eradication money to help us eradicate heart disease. What do you think?' We do evidence-based stuff. Fox eradication is like looking for weapons of mass destruction; they must be there.

That brings me to the issue of health. We have been fighting for a fully funded and resourced Launceston General Hospital that returns to local autonomy with clinical governance and control in the north for far too long and I am so very pleased to see that the Government has listened to the people and delivered on their promise for a local hospital network for the north of the State.

On 14 May 2004 we had the Richardson report, a report of the expert advisory group review into key issues for public and private hospital services in Tasmania. In response to that report, a report was commissioned by the honourable member for Nelson, Mr Jim Wilkinson. While there were 11 conclusions in the executive summary dated 24 November 2004, I think conclusion 1 sums it up well. The Richardson report highlights a variety of difficulties within the Tasmanian public and private hospital systems in great detail. It avoids serious questions over funding. Its recommendations are basically rearrangements of the current system. It notes that 32 factors are impinging on its recommendations and most contributors to the report are cynical about its value and strident about the need for increased funding.

In September 2007 along with pensioner Ray Marsh I organised a public rally in the Launceston Civic Square attended by more than 5 000 people. This was said by many to be the turning point and showed that people in the north really cared about their hospital. In late 2007 we formed the LGH support group, an apolitical body constituted by concerned citizens, community groups and other organisations who came together to seek to maintain the Launceston General Hospital as a primary tertiary referral training hospital operating on a fully funded, fully staffed and fully equipped basis within the contextual, contemporaneous and demographically appropriate model.

In December 2007 Paul Lennon advised that there had been no downgrading at the LGH and that his Government remained committed to the LGH as a teaching and research hospital. In February 2008 Dr Christine Bennett, who was at that time the Chief Medical Officer for private health insurer MBF and former head of Australia's largest teaching hospital Westmead, was appointed Chair of the Health and Hospitals Reform Commission set up by the Federal Government in an endeavour to develop a blueprint to heal the nation's ailing healthcare system.

On 5 March 2008 the Honourable Ivan Dean, the member for Windermere, moved that a select committee be appointed to inquire into and report upon the State public hospital system. In 2009 the State Government reintroduced the three-area hospital service system, which was supported by the then Health minister and now Premier Lara Giddings. This immediately improved the management of the LGH and the regional hospitals in the north of the State. I believe we must maintain this organisational model and include primary health under this umbrella.

On a visit to the Launceston General Hospital in 2010 Prime Minister Rudd stated that front-line staff compared to State bureaucrats know best and that the Launceston General Hospital is the logical centre of a hospital network.

There are more reports here than on the Tamar River silt and it is essential that we do not just get lip service and that at the end of these inquiries real and beneficial changes are made.

Good health care is a right, not a privilege. The Launceston General Hospital caters to more than 48 per cent of the Tasmanian population who live in the north of the State. The Launceston General Hospital must be a stand-alone unit with local autonomy and control. Hospital staff who are working hard to provide the people of the north with first-class health care must be consulted and supported and not pressured by State bureaucracies. They should be spending their time treating patients and not having to fight bureaucracy.

In late 2010 I coordinated the Northern Local Hospital Network Support Group which included members of parliament, both State and Federal, local businesspeople, clinicians and representatives of the AMA, St Lukes Health, the *Examiner* newspaper, local government, the Launceston Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Independent Retirees. The group campaigned hard for a financially autonomous local hospitals

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network, being firmly of the view that local means local and a single hospital network for the entire State was clearly inappropriate. It was agreed that as a guiding principle administration and management should be located as closely as possible to where care is delivered with budgetary authority to determine resource allocation at a local level.

The State naturally falls into three population centres and each has significantly different challenges in healthcare delivery. Three truly local hospital networks finely attuned to local needs will have the best chance of addressing the unique demands and difficulties of each region. This is about the health and wellbeing of our community and north and north-west Tasmania have some of the worst health outcomes in the nation. A local hospitals network with clinician and consumer input devolves the decision-making process to the locals rather than having it prescribed by distant bureaucracy. The local clinicians and community representatives are best informed as to the needs of their community, as well as how and where to provide it. This does not negate the collaboration, communication and support we currently achieve with our northern hospitals, public and private, as well as with Hobart and the occasional interstate tertiary referral. We also maintain statewide advisory committees in all the major disciplines. We do not need new, or more, administrative committees.

On 13 December 2010 Health minister Michelle O'Byrne said there will be three local hospital networks and the local hospital network would be accountable to the Parliament and to the people to make sure that the services they provide are according to the needs of each of those communities. The minister also said the local hospital network would be responsive to the needs of the local community.

I repeat - I am delighted to hear that the Health minister and government are standing by this commitment to the community and I congratulate them on this decision. However, I will be cautiously watching with interest, as obviously the devil will be in the detail. It is widely accepted that meaningful reform of Tasmanian healthcare delivery is desperately needed and this decision should build on the early success of the three area health services and lead to improved patient experiences.

This is a rare opportunity to fundamentally reform health delivery in this State and on behalf of the people of northern Tasmania I thank Minister Michelle O'Byrne and the State Government for abiding by its original commitment to the people of northern Tasmania.

Mr Deputy President, I am sure the road ahead will not always be easy, but I look forward to the challenge, as well as working alongside yourself and the other honourable members, and I can assure you I will always have the best interests of my constituents at heart.

In conclusion, I support in principle the Disability Services Bill 2011 which aims to respect the inherent dignity of people with disability, the freedom to make their own choices and their right to independence.

Members - Hear, hear