



Frances Mary Bladel

House of Assembly

Date: 19 March 1986

Electorate: Franklin

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mrs BLADEL (Franklin) – Mr Speaker and members of this House –

Mr Polley – Hear, hear.

Mrs BLADEL – Michael is here.

Members laughing.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER – The honourable member for Lyons is here.

Mrs BLADEL – I am sorry, the member for Lyons.

It gives me great pleasure to address this House in what my colleague, the member for Denison, Mrs Jackson, has pointed out is a little absurd to call a ‘maiden’ speech, particularly for someone who resigned her maidenhood a long time ago. I will therefore be one of the people who make their first speech to this House.

I would like to congratulate the Speaker on his elevation to what, in my newness to this House, is seen as a most important and significant role. I would like to congratulate all members on their election to this House. I am sure they share the same sense of pride that I have experienced when I look at the number of people who have chosen to elect me as their representative in Franklin.

As a woman in Parliament I realise that, in terms of gender numbers, I am one of a minority group – perhaps even one of a rare species. Yet ironically, I have observed that it is women in the less publicly recognised role in Parliament who do much to build the infrastructure which keeps this House working – in their capacities as secretaries, caterers, administrative and ancillary workers. I would also like to pay some recognition to those invisible workers – the wives – who turn out their husbands, wheel them out here in the morning and then rope them in at night and make sure they are all fitted up. It is out of a sort of envy that I pay this compliment to those good wives because it is something I can never have and I do miss one; I really wish I could have such a wonderful –

Mrs James – House-husband.

Mrs BLADEL – Yes; it is not the same.

I also applaud the Tasmanian people who, by electing my two women colleagues and myself, have demonstrated their belief in the ability of women to take an equal share in the processes which decide how this State will be managed and how its future will be

directed. Whatever qualities I hope to bring to my work as a Labor parliamentarian are those which derive, in part, from my sense of belonging to a great tradition in the democratic socialism of the Labor Party. Labor's historical and present commitment to working towards the building of a more just and equitable society is the guiding principle which has operated to bring about those major social supports which have improved the lifestyle of successive generations of Australian people.

It was also a Labor government – and Labor initiatives under the leadership of Gough Whitlam – which introduced those social changes which have dramatically improved the lot of women and children in this country over the past decade. There has been an improvement not only in the status of women in the work force and the possibilities for women to accept the challenges given by higher education but also in the support services available to women who choose to work as home-makers and who contribute so greatly to the economic life of this nation, although sadly this contribution is never acknowledged and rarely mentioned. There is still a great deal more to be done, now that we have come to the end of the Decade of Women, to bring about a greater equality for women in the work force as my colleague, the member for Denison, has already demonstrated. But it is a challenge which all women will accept and we in the Labor Party will work very hard to achieve.

As a new teacher in the early 1970s, having gained my university education as a bonded student with the Education Department – for which I will always be very grateful because it was the only means then available for such an education for people of the working class – in company with thousands of Australian families I welcomed the opening of universities freely for the highest degree of education possible, again as a Whitlam directive. To the sons and daughters of those less affluent, less privileged members of this society, this democratising of what had been the prerogative of the more affluent was one of the first acts of the Whitlam Government and this act, and the ending of that obscenity of the Vietnam War, will long be a benchmark of the achievements of a government.

My experience as a teacher has always been absorbing, challenging and joyful. My pride in my election to this House has been somewhat dimmed by my sense of loss when I remember that I will no longer be working with children, although – and I hope members will forgive me – there are times when I see those boys I have worked with so patiently over the years and I see the possibilities of their becoming elected members of this House and I am filled with the wonder of it all. I will go to them and say, 'Children, there is a great future ahead for some of you – particularly the footballers'.

My involvement in the Tagari Project, an innovative venture in State education again made possible by the Whitlam Government's promotion of education as a national priority, was a valuable experience which demonstrated, without question, that the real education of children – in training them to think constructive, to develop the ability to question and to choose and to develop a sense of self-esteem – is dependent on far greater inputs than could be provided simply by formal learning and teaching processes. 'Tagari' is an Aboriginal word for family. It is always in the family that the most meaningful education takes place. The Tagari Project physically involved families in all phases of their children's learning and gave these families the opportunity to learn many things together. It also gave much of value to educational research in this State, and my part in that project has left me with a great sense of achievement. Many people

can live all their lives, struggling and working at meaningless tasks and never obtain that sense of achievement. Mine came to me in the 1970s and it was a wondrous thing.

We would all agree that the great treasure in any nation must be its children. I have spent the past eight years working with the children of Bridgewater, in company with a team of highly skilled, highly professional, very warmly human colleagues – people for whom I have great respect. This experience has reinforced those lessons I learned earlier with the Tagari Project. The best means of educating children must bring the family into the climate of positive learning. I would like to believe that all families wish to see their children succeed, yet some families – some individual parents – fail their children, so that education practices and the work of teachers are unable to fight against the odds which overwhelm the child and assure its eventual failure.

Poor parenting, neglect and physical and spiritual deprivation are not geographically located by any means but are to be found in any suburb at any level of family affluence. However there are large numbers of people living on or below the poverty line – which many single-parent, unemployed or pensioner families are forced to do – and sets the parameters in which they and their children will experience the world and for many the impoverishment of social experience will dictate the choices or lack of choices they have in life and will also influence the development of their sense of personal worth.

I do not want to dwell on the degradation of lives without choices, but I must in fairness draw the attention of this House to the plight of people who try to maintain their dignity – the dignity to express themselves as individuals of worth – in the context of the limitations on their ability simply to choose where and in what kind of social environment they will live.

Some years ago I moved from a flat I was occupying in Marieville Esplanade, Sandy Bay. It was very pleasant – the beach was there, the yacht club and so on, a nice shopping centre and nice old houses; a very pleasing environment. I was forced to move because of the sale of the house I was living in and I deeply regretted having to leave that area. I looked carefully around for a house to buy – it was my first house; and I still have it and it is very small. The constraints on my ability to choose were of course financial ones, as they are for everybody. However I had plenty of choices. Years earlier when my child was small and I was working as an office cleaner with a very difference income level, I had very few choices. Most of the offerings to a single parent and her child are best described in degrees of ‘hoveldom’ – there are superior hovels and low-class hovels. The cockroaches looked the same but the rents were different.

Now I had a choice. I could look critically at any dwelling I fancied, examine the neighbourhood and make a choice based on any other considerations which operated in my order of preference. The very least we as human beings ask, I am sure, is decent accommodation in a pleasant environment. We must have something for the eye because it is that something for the eye which feeds the spirit and gives us the encouragement to go on, perhaps in some of the meaningless tasks in which we find ourselves engaged.

For thousands of Tasmanians there are very few options in regard to a preferred environment. For countless numbers there is no housing. I believe that both sides of

this House must mutually establish priorities in terms of meeting the urgent needs of housing for these unfortunate people, many of them adolescents without family support who are living somehow in varying degrees of desperation – especially homeless teenagers without the support and sustenance given by shelters such as Annie Kenney or Summerleas. Many young people, many of them victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence, would live out young lives in misery and despair. Very recently a child who lived in such a family, and who had been sexually abused, took her life at the age of seventeen. This is not the first case and it will not be the last. I ask members if there is not something this House, in cooperation, should be addressing when we lose young people, who have not begun their lives, in such a tragic fashion.

The Housing Department receive greater numbers of requests for housing than it can meet. Much of the older public housing stock is worthy only of demolition. Many aged or infirm people are living in early model pensioner units where the daily hazards they face are breathtaking. In small bed-sit units possessing only one entrance, with kitchenette/stove jammed into one corner, serious accidents to elderly people without dexterity and restricted by the common ailments of old age – such as rheumatism – are quite possible.

There is also a loss of dignity, and this has come to me several times when I have been visiting people in these units. Several elderly ladies have said to me, ‘How dreadful it is that when the doctor calls I have to see him in my bedroom. I don’t have a separate room’ or the bed is in such a cramped space that the doctor has to squeeze himself in to make the necessary examinations. It is very humiliating. It is a tragic thing for so many Tasmanian people that old age means a loss of personhood in some sense or another.

I cannot help bitter feelings when I get requests for help with housing from supporting mothers, for instance, who have to separate from their children because of a lack of housing, or from people sleeping in cars or overcrowded houses. I understand the angry and resentful response which arises from the dereliction of duty by this Government which prefers to spend millions of dollars building luxurious hotel accommodation for the privileged and even sets aside more millions to extend an irrigation system by building a dam which will benefit a few people, when it has been demonstrated that it is not a viable proposition. The Government would prefer to spend that money there rather than to address the desperate need to house those whose only means of help is through public housing.

This Parliament must address this problem which is, to quote a colleague in another place, the greatest social problem in this country. I do not deny or attempt to denigrate the efforts of the Government thus far to increase the volume of public housing, and thankfully for Tasmania the Federal Labor Government has made those efforts possible. It must be a great relief to members in this place at this time not to have a sustained Federal government bash. I guess they are all getting bored by it so I will not go into it.

However, in attempting to cater for the volume of housing required, let us not overlook the role of the Housing Department as landlord as well as the builder and maintainer of its housing stock.

Sitting suspended for 6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Mrs BLADEL – Many social problems exist where large numbers of people, many of whom possess few social skills or a workable level of education, are grouped together in an environment which they did not prefer and where they are removed from family support groups or friendship networks. The most obvious victims of this kind of alienation are women who are frequently alone and often have more than one small child. In such areas of public housing it is not unusual to find young women in their early twenties with two or more children; in fact, I know one young woman of nineteen years of age who is expecting her fourth child. Life is very difficult for such people.

It is also very difficult for older and infirm people who live close to families where parenting and social skills are undeveloped and where the recognition of the rights of neighbours to live peacefully and privately goes entirely unrecognised. The response of the Housing Department in such instances is limited. I am not criticising the Housing Department in this statement but, when complaints of harassment are received, it would be worthwhile for this Government – through its Minister for Housing – to undertake a thorough review of the ways in which the Housing Department operates with a view to developing more efficient mechanisms to deal with the kinds of social problems which often lead to violence, family breakdown or nervous disorders.

The kind of situation to which I am referring involves elderly people who live next door to families where there are many young children and where stones are thrown on the roof night and day, where there is name calling or where there are fights between families with young children. Very recently one of my ex-students – not from Bridgewater High School but from another school – was sentenced to four months in gaol because of an offence which arose from this kind of harassment in the neighbourhood.

I do not want members of this House to assume that Housing Department areas are devoid of the patterns of living which are assumed to be the normal mode of life for Australians, either in family groups or as single people. Indeed there is a great deal of enterprise and vigour in people who, through circumstance, find themselves in situations where choices have been largely removed. But government will always have to accept that traditionally there has been and will always be a percentage of people who cannot cope with ordinary living without the intervention and assistance of government agencies.

During the past few days much has been said by various members in the course of their beginning speeches. Some quite amazing responses have been given to questions by some ministers, and these have interested me greatly as a bipartisan observer. The most heated and dramatic utterances have been associated with the question of the use of land – whether to conserve it or to exploit it. From the earliest times in recorded history, perhaps even before the time when Cain decided to remove his brother Abel from the line of succession, rivalry over possession of land has provided a flashpoint for much human drama. We have recently witnessed the remarkable occurrences at Farmhouse Creek. I happened to visit that creek with my colleague, the member for Lyons, Mr Llewellyn. The series of events has been treated by our friends in the media as being – in their assessment – the most newsworthy and momentous since Archduke Ferdinand dramatically left the scene at Sarajevo.

Whatever could have been said about the actions at Farmhouse Creek has been said. Accusations of long-haired layabouts, use of taxpayers' money, whether the police did or did not, are not central to my argument at this time. I think the subject has been canvassed pretty widely, albeit perhaps erroneously and very prejudiciously at this time. Farmhouse Creek is simply a metaphor; the reality is the land itself.

Let us move a step away from the fragmentation of that total reality which occurs when we talk about woodchipping, sawlogging and such things. Let us rather address the question of who owns the land on which this exploitation occurs. That land is held in common under the Crown. The answer is obvious; the land belongs to us on trust for our future generations. How then should we, as trustees, address this responsibility? We could say that God created the land and gave humankind its custody to use, work and live upon it and to draw sustenance from it. We must therefore acknowledge that He gave the land to all humankind for ever and implicit in this custody is wise stewardship.

I believe the farmer's advice to his family is to leave the land in a better condition than it was in when it came to them. What advice does the custodian of the public land – the Government – give to those who work upon it and draw their sustenance from it? Shall we in this highly consumptive, highly mechanised age leave the land in a better condition than we found it in this generation? How long will those who exploit this land in honest pursuit of their livelihoods be able to continue that exploitation unless the resources of the land – its timber and its fish species – are maintained? If members think I am stretching the metaphor, there is land under the sea. I believe one of the great issues facing the Tasmanian people is how to shift those environmental arguments from a series of running battles to address the real need – that is, to change the system of exploitation which is slowly destroying our environment and placing at risk the jobs of those workers who depend on its resources. We must all accept that wilderness issues are economic issues and essentially these issues are involved in woodchipping, agriculture, conservation, water resources, forestry and recreational uses.

I was impressed with the Minister for Education and the Arts last night when he was extolling the virtues and the beauties of our environment. I think we are all proud of Tasmania; I think we all recognise its unique qualities and are all glad to live here. Yet the true and sensible conservationists – those people with real understanding of the nature of this environment which is based on true and expert knowledge – are constantly abused and denigrated in this House. I think that is a terrible shame and a waste of the intelligence of the members who constantly indulge in that practice. Sadly we in Tasmania are far from the development of a broad analysis of the true nature of the economics of land use because it has been preferable for this Government to climb to power on its ability to foment conflict, dissent and hatred while never attempting to come to grips with the real issues. I do not pretend that coming to grips with these issues is easy but it is worthwhile and necessary.

We listened to the first speaker in the debate on the Address-in-Reply launch a personal attack on the Independent member for Denison. Was this the first impression that member for Bass really wished to give to this House? What prompted him to make those remarks? Does conflict and abuse replace rational debate? I do not wish to debate the rights and wrongs of the battles I have referred to but simply to ask when this

Government will begin to take a more thoughtful and analytical stance in relation to these issues rather than abdicating its responsibilities for a series of ‘bovver boy’ charades directed at the incitement of conflict and discord within the community and displays which it seems to be able to call up with the ease and practice of a two-year-old in a temper tantrum. By keeping to this climate of confrontation the Government has deflected the public’s attention from so many real issues – for instance, the role the national parks might play in coming to grips with problems on a regional basis and forming part of a management committee to attack the problems which confront each region.

Let us also look at the things which have been happening to forestry workers, the people who have been caught up in the struggle for possession of the land. Since 1973, 1 800 jobs have disappeared at Associated Pulp and Paper Mills Ltd; more that 91 sawmills have closed with the loss of 1 400 jobs; more than 1 700 bush working and log transport jobs have been lost. In fact one-third of all forestry jobs which existed a little more than ten years ago have been lost while the volume of timber which has been used has increased by more than 50 per cent. It is no wonder that the burning question for timber workers is, ‘What will I do next year?’ while for loggers the question is, ‘How will I pay for my truck?’ In fact, it is the loggers as private individuals who have to bear a heavy burden by carrying high capital costs which will mortgage their futures as the big companies decide to close down operations as Australian Paper Manufacturers Ltd did in Geeveston in 1982.

The imminence of mechanical harvesters for forestry work is a serious threat, not only to the proper operation of culling and therefore to the forests themselves but also to the livelihood of these forestry workers. How long can the forests support the demands of supply placed upon them? More to the point perhaps, in the context of the wider debate, is how much longer Tasmania will be used as a colonial resource by multinational companies whose interests in this State are decided merely by the share market which will dictate the time and manner of the shift of their interests from the State.

It is time this Government turned its attention to the creation of new jobs for workers in the forest industries. At present more than 60 per cent of all wood cut in Tasmania is exported as raw woodchips, yet paper making in Tasmania employs about eight times more people per tonne of wood than exporting it as woodchips. Will the large companies – Associated Pulp and Paper Mills Ltd, Tasmanian Pulp and Forest Holdings Ltd and the like – ever process the woodchips they currently export? Perhaps it is time to learn from our customers, the Japanese, who are voracious consumers of our forests. They refuse to put their forests to such an exercise as woodchipping.

The big companies will continue to cut jobs unless there is action from those with most to lose, the workers in the industry and their representatives in government. I believe it is with the assistance of these workers that carefully devised conservation practices will be carried out to bring about the balance between conservation and exploitation which those who work in the forests truly desire.

A love of the forests and a desire for proper management practice is not the sole domain of wilderness groups. People who work with a material invariable respect that with which they work. Where forest industry is a traditional way of life, such as in the Huon and Esperance municipalities, there is a dependency upon the forests which may

involve a whole family back through several generations. The present dependency is part of that whole mystique. This threat to the forest tradition is a question with which conservationists and timber workers alike must come to terms.

How can the Tasmanian people come to terms with the dichotomies of usage and conservation? What measures will this Government take to address the real issues of environmental protection and management of renewable resources? How will this Government address the necessity to protect the fragile environments of native wildlife and plant species as well as coastal environments? This necessity does not end only with the protection of wildlife but also with stronger and more responsive laws for welfare of animals used in our agricultural practices, scientific research and even in domestic situations.

My great concern is that the Parliament must find a measure of cooperation in order to bring about a better way of life for all the Tasmanian people. What planning processes must be undertaken to take an economically sound Tasmania towards the year 2000? The Leader of the Opposition has demonstrated his willingness to cooperate with this Government by sharing with members of this House an outline of economic planning which will point Tasmania into new, exciting and rewarding directions. The lamentable fact that the Premier and a great number of government members left the Chamber during his address in this debate – and I am not commenting on the ill manners of such behaviour – can only be taken as indicative not only of the closed minds and personal limitations of the Government but possible of the great fear that new directions of such value and import will be pointed that it, as the temporary custodian of the welfare of the Tasmanian people, will have a moral obligation to examine carefully these directions and in doing so re-examine its own philosophies, priorities and perspectives.

Finally I would like to remind all members of this House that we are almost a quarter of the way through the International Year of Peace. How much peace are we to bring to those people in these troubled areas to which I have already referred? How much peace and charity are we to indicate to the Tasmanian people when we say our prayer at the beginning of each sitting? What involvement does the Government intend to take in the International Year of Peace? Unless the Government decides to have an input into the International Year of Peace, very soon peace will go on without the Government.

Opposition members – Hear, hear.