



Brett Whiteley MP

House of Assembly

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Electorate: Braddon

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Mr WHITELEY (Braddon - Inaugural) - Mr Deputy Speaker, I am delighted to be able to make my first speech in this House, a House with such strong tradition and one which provides leadership for our State. I too offer my congratulations to all elected members and especially those new members to the Parliament. I congratulate the Premier on the return of his Government and acknowledge the democratic message sent to the Parliament which is now highlighted by the make-up of this House.

I am proud to be representing the electorate of Braddon which, Mr Deputy Speaker, must be amongst the most beautiful of any electorate in the nation. The magnificent Bass Strait coastline that represents the boundary of Braddon provides a welcoming environment for now an increasing number of visitors to our region. Braddon, as you would all know, has a strong rural emphasis. It has a deep-seated Christian heritage and has numerous niche-market industries making their mark on the world. It is an electorate seeking due recognition for its contribution to the State and an electorate that has suffered enormously from centralist ideology. It is an electorate always willing to fight for its identity, an electorate that is generous and an electorate that is very proud. From the tip of the far north-west to the idyllic beaches of Hawley and Port Sorell, the ruggedness of some of the west coast and the isolation of King Island, Braddon is the home of people with passion and traditional values. People who desire to be heard above the noise of more densely populated areas and, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is an honour to serve them in this place at this time.

At this point I would like to thank all those people who assisted me in getting to this position. Firstly, I would like to thank the voters of Braddon for placing their confidence in me. Secondly, I need to thank the many people who assisted me in my campaign - not just the most recent campaign but also the election of 1998. To each of these special people, your dedication and encouragement will never be forgotten. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unswerving support and their belief in me. Their willingness to travel the political journey with me through thick and thin is a testimony to their own character and their values. To my wife of nearly 20 years, Sue, you have been a tower of strength. Your wisdom, your discernment, your faithfulness and love have provided me with the inspiration to follow my dreams even through the most difficult of times. To my three children, Joshua, Jackson and Jessica - I treasure each and every one of you. To my mother Margaret, brother Lee and sister Amanda, thanks as always for believing in me and standing with me. To Sue's parents, Alan and Elsie Dyer, you will never know the encouragement that you have been. Mr Deputy Speaker, to those influential people who have gone before me, especially my father who died only weeks prior to the 1998 election, I want to pay sincere public tribute.

Mr Deputy Speaker, families are so important and provide tremendous support structures for us. That is why family is often referred to as the cornerstone of our society, the foundation on which we can build healthy communities and that is why government should be designing policies that are continually promoting stronger families. I would like to speak a little more about that later in my speech.

I would now like the liberty to share briefly a little about my personal heritage and personal story in Tasmania, then I would like to try to encapsulate the dreams, aspirations and concerns of the people of Braddon.

I represent the sixth generation of Whiteleys in the State of Tasmania. My great-great-great-grandfather Michael Whiteley reached Tasmania in 1838 under the most adverse conditions. The next generation gained a grant for an area of virgin forest on the plateau of Mother Cummings. The next generation subsequently acquired the adjoining land, the largely uncleared western end of the land. The area was partially cleared and made into a working farm which they named Greenbanks. It was into this family that my grandfather and mentor, David, was born in 1908 and he passed away only two years ago aged ninety-two. My grandfather married Thelma Milton. They lived a simple life struggling in difficult surroundings. They quickly made their bleak, humble cottage habitable and together they set about making the land productive. It served them well until they could afford to build a nice home on the property and start their family. They had two children which obviously included my father, Daryl. My grandfather was able to buy a larger but run-down farm on much better land at Kindred, in what is now my electorate of Braddon. The respect that he generated both as a farmer and businessman ultimately led to an invitation to become a director of Farmers and Graziers Proprietary Limited. I spent nearly all my school holidays with my grandparents working on their farm and I earned my first thousand dollars picking brussels sprouts. But for the record, I still will not eat them.

Members laughing.

Due to ill health, my father, Daryl, left the dairy farm at Kindred and forged a new future in small business, purchasing the general store and post office at Highclere, south of Burnie on the highway to the west coast. My father bought the business in 1959 with the understanding that the highway from Burnie to the west coast would be built in the early 1960s; the highway did not appear for another 20 years. Despite this slight setback, my parents worked very hard to grow the business and provide much needed support for the community. They worked long hours, as the community was dependent on the local switchboard to make their telephone calls. This demanded minimum 12-hour days and placed great pressures on our family.

My first brush with politics, Mr Deputy Speaker, was in fact with the former Labor Premier Eric Reece, as he played marbles with me as a youngster on the floor of our shop. Any suggestion that he may have been the last Labor politician to have all his marbles, would be totally unfounded.

Members laughing.

So Mr Deputy Speaker, this is the environment in which I grew up, with all the benefits of small community where everyone knew each other. Our shop was the central meeting point and I am often reminded of funny instances by locals and also sobered by sad memories that impacted on our community. There were the local dances, the annual bonfire nights where the children would take small crackers and drop them into unsuspecting victims' gumboots - get yelled at and then enjoy a hot sav together over supper. The local fundraisers for those families left destitute from losing their home and possessions through fire. That is what community was all about. I went down the road to the Ridgley Area School until grade 6 and then went on to Parklands High School in Burnie in the early 1970s, when more than 1 000 students were in attendance. The school now accommodates fewer than 400 students, a stark symbol of a changing community under attack of industry loss and population drift. I then enrolled at Hellyer College, leaving there to take up a position with Webster's where I worked with a tremendous group of local identities for 10 years. I worked in the industrial departments of the company and finished my time there in the credit department dealing exclusively with the rural sector.

Moving from Webster Limited, I commenced my banking career. I finished my time with the Trust Bank managing one of the Burnie branches. These years were very rewarding, working each day assisting young couples into their first home and working alongside small business operators as they worked hard to consolidate their position in the local economy paying exorbitant interest rates through the early and later 1980s.

In 1993 my wife made arguably the biggest decision of our lives which was to leave the security of a good job, good career prospects, a good salary to take on a whole new role. Working with two other people, we commenced a Christian training and retreat centre in Sheffield, purchasing the old Roland Children's Home. The centre was designed to provide support and training for local churches right across the State. This was a role we both felt called to undertake and we never regretted the decision and learnt much over the ensuing seven years.

Through these years we had the opportunity to involve ourselves in the lives of a wide cross-section of Tasmanian people, ordinary Tasmanians with amazing stories to tell. And it is only when you journey alongside others that your own life comes into perspective. I believe that my decision to become an elected member of parliament will be no different. I want to journey with others through their struggles and represent them in this place where possible.

The people of Braddon are no different from those in any other electorate. They have dreams and aspirations for themselves and their families and are desirous of a community where employment levels are at the very least the same as other areas and not sitting at the worst end of statistics in the nation as is currently the case; where older people are compassionately cared for and are respected for not just what they have done in the past but for who they are; where access to health services is reasonable and the wait for professional treatment is also reasonable and not an insult; where they live in an environment that bears testimony to wise stewardship of God's gift to mankind; where interstate and international tourists find significant time to spend in our beautiful part of the world assisting with the creation of wealth and providing our people with a variety of cross-cultural encounters; where small communities feel valued and not abused, abused in the sense that they contribute to the bigger economic and social agenda and yet often feel that the ir relationship with government is by no means mutual. Take King Island as a specific example, an island of fewer than 2 000 people and yet they are often forced to fight well above their weight category. Where justice prevails and our communities feel safe from those who seek to hurt and to destroy; where compassion is both experienced and given and where above all else they can enjoy a sense of belonging because when all else is said and done we all need to belong.

Those issues that concern the people of Braddon should be the issues that concern me. What are some of these concerns? Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, the people of Braddon are gravely concerned about the lack of job opportunities, not just for younger people but for people in their thirties and forties. They fear the breakdown and displacement of family structures. I am not just referring to the breakdown of marriage, although this is an issue that brings great sadness and stress to those impacted. What I am referring to is the fact that many people are moving away for employment, leaving their place of birth and in most cases their preferred environment, leaving networks they have built up over many years, leaving memories and leaving families. These circumstances have enormous repercussions for our community life. We often see families left to their own devices during very difficult times, times when they need and deserve support networks close by. We are witnessing children miss out on the special role played by grandparents and sadly many grandparents grieve the loss of emotional attachment with their grandchildren.

It is family and friends who give us strength to move through these difficult stages of life and without these support networks many people just do not make it. We see an ageing population; we see people left to grow older without the joy of family nearby and sadly, too often, we see them left to die lonely people. There is an ever increasing demand on governments to provide support services which were once provided by strong family networks.

There are very personal issues that impact on all of us and one of them is suicide. Every year in Australia thousands of people sadly choose to take their own life, with Tasmanians figuring highly in the statistics. Any unnecessary loss of life is a tragedy, however the pain of youth suicide in the age group of 15 to 24 is staggering; the rate is horrific and we are amongst the highest in the world. Over the past 20 years the north-west coast has had an embarrassing

record when it comes to youth suicide. Thankfully the position has slightly improved and for that we give thanks. However, there is still much more work to be done and I publicly salute the work of some of the volunteers from the electorate of Braddon as they seek to raise public awareness and provide counselling and support to those sinking under the weight of life pressures. Finding the balance between the optimism that we all normally have and the hopelessness and despair that many of our young people experience is indeed a challenge. Mr Deputy Speaker, it is my role and I believe our role to provide that optimism in their life and to provide reasons for hope in the future. This is just a snapshot of the impact of the lack of employment opportunities and this is a challenge that we should all face together. I understand there is no simple solution but this is a challenge that I personally am prepared to take up.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the people of Braddon continue to question government priorities when it comes to expenditure. In my travels around the electorate over the years, I find that people are often aghast at the lack of funding for fundamental community services and yet they see their government able to find funds for other programs that are commonly perceived to be of lesser benefit. Not enough funds for respite, hospitals, crisis care of children and young vulnerable people at risk. Tasmanians are questioning the ability of their elected members to prioritise the disbursement of limited funding. I understand that governments need to be supporting a wide cross-section of the community but this should only be done after the basic requirements of health, education and law and order have been thoroughly and fairly attended to.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that some people do not want to acknowledge this but the people of Braddon and Tasmania are growing more concerned every day about the negative impact of poker machines. They fear the growing number of machines and the dependence of government on their revenue. I share their concerns and we should be careful not to glibly dismiss their fear.

I note that in the progress report of Tasmania Together released only yesterday, it states the following:

'The issue of problem gambling continues to generate considerable debate throughout the State. While Tasmania has a lower rate of problem gambling than other States the board is concerned that any problem gambling impacts on friends and families of the people affected and increases the level of community anxiety created by this issue'.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I support calls for a comprehensive study into the impact of poker machines on local communities. What is actually happening to our communities as a result of these machines needs to be fully investigated. We need to discover the truth; not the truth according to those with pecuniary interests but the real truth. We often hear so-called experts espousing the view that the number of problem gamblers has hardly increased even though the number of machines has grown significantly. That may very well be the case but it is my firm belief that you do not necessarily have to have an increase in problem gamblers for gambling to be a problem. Small businesses across my electorate of Braddon are suffering as a result of the diminished discretionary spend. They abhor the impact of poker machines in their communities and before anyone jumps to any conclusions, these people are not wowers; they are average Tasmanians, people who are not against a punt but who are growing very concerned about tearing away the fabric of our local communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker, people are concerned about the loss of community. Service groups, sporting clubs, churches and support groups are all struggling to maintain their relevance and commitment. In a society driven by the pursuit of materialism, we find ourselves without the time, energy and inclination for the things that matter: serving our fellow human beings. You do not need to dig very deep beneath the surface of friends and colleagues to discover a genuine longing to rediscover quality relationships and the rebuilding of a sense of community. Couples wanting to build strong marriages in the midst of work and family pressures. Men wanting to be better fathers. Friends seeking more time for recreation. Older people desiring to put back into their communities but not feeling valued or needed. Children wanting to be valued and build up in readiness for adult life. Communities wanting to engage

each other and work together for the common good. People wanting to ask the hard questions of life and discover the meaning for living.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in a society that is being driven to the extremes of privacy, we risk losing the intended purpose of community. Looking at our culture, we see a relentless move towards greater privacy in every area of our life. Let me stress that there is nothing inherently wrong with privacy but no-one comes to maturity or stays there except through a healthy balance of social interaction and privacy. What is at issue is the excessive need for privacy. When this is unchecked, then meaningful social interaction diminishes and the opportunity is there for us to escape into a world of private projects and private dreams. This is why, Mr Deputy Speaker, the damage being caused by the public liability crisis must be stopped. Local groups who have been the glue in our society are being forced to shut down. They are totally frustrated that circumstances have reached this point.

Social interaction within our communities has been badly wounded and we have yet to see the impact of this crisis. This is why we need to reward those thousands of volunteers serving in our electorates. Per capita, Tasmania provides more volunteers than anywhere else in the nation, currently one in five, people giving their time freely to support groups such as Meals on Wheels, working with those with disabilities, Rotary, the agricultural show societies. I strongly believe that we should be exercising our minds and our will to find ways in which we can further support the development of the Tasmanian Volunteer Network. It is my strong belief that a culture of volunteerism should be encouraged in our children. High school students would benefit greatly from a curriculum that included time spent working alongside community and service groups. It is imperative that we act to develop a sense of community awareness in our young people. This is why we need to value those non-government organisations which provide essential services to our State, social services that are managed and operated by professional and dedicated Tasmanians. These organisations save the taxpayers millions of dollars and should be fairly treated and justly compensated for their contribution to our society. We need to be careful not to abuse these groups because without them our social support structures would be decimated.

These are some of the issues that I believe are at the top of the agenda for the people of the north-west coast and King Island and, I also expect, the State of Tasmania. They realise these challenges will not be overcome overnight but they do expect their elected representatives to turn their energies towards providing solutions. My personal goal over the next four years is to play my part in formulating policies that will directly address the concerns I have just highlighted.

Members are entitled to ask what are the values and issues about which I feel passionate. I have always been uncomfortable with fixed ideological tags, nonetheless there are things that matter to me and I have great respect for those who have shared those things that matter to them over the last 24 hours.

I value human potential. I have been on the receiving end of the contribution of caring and gifted people in my life and it is my desire to draw the best out of others. Politics should be about maximising the great resource of human potential.

I value human life, whether just conceived or just about to leave this life. Human life is a gift from God and deserving of mutual human dignity. I will seek to preserve the sanctity of human life.

I value the role of family. Where possible, children should be raised in a loving environment by two parents, a male and a female, where living in close proximity to family networks is not just a pipe dream, but in fact a real option for those people living in Tasmania. This means we need to be focusing, as I mentioned earlier, on providing the job opportunities for our people, where the ongoing trend of people leaving regions such as the north-west coast is arrested, and in fact reversed. Despite much spin, there is still a long way to go in this area.

I do value faith in God. I believe that almost everyone looks for God. The high achievers who run out of rungs, the low achievers who run out of hope, the elderly who run out of time, and the young who are running out of alternatives, most seek the filling of a spiritual vacuum.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank my parliamentary colleagues for their attention today, and as I move to a conclusion I quote the great Robert Menzies, who summed it up this way:

'Internally my theme is justice. I declare my political creed here and now. It is that the essential end of government is not power or glory, but the good life for ordinary men and women. The ordinary man as I know him asks for a happy life, not a complaining one; for a full life and not an idle one. We must have industrial justice and social justice, industrial security and social security.'

Mr Deputy Speaker, to create an environment in which social justice can flourish, we must encourage the wealth-creators, the great middle Australia, so that we can best support the weakest and most vulnerable in our society.

I began this speech recounting the generations of my forefathers. Politics is also generational. Each generation is a link in the chain of life, each elected member playing out their part that will see them come and go, each politician composing a few more bars in the continuous symphony of democracy.