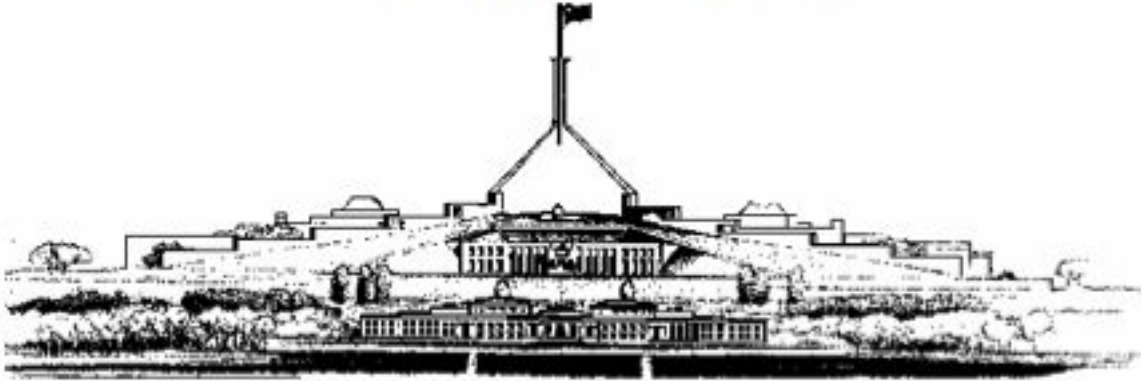




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Tuesday, 11 March 2008

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SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Irons, Steve, MP

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Mr IRONS (Swan) (5.57 pm)—As I rise to speak today, I congratulate the Speaker on his election and all the other members on their success in the 2007 election. I would like to thank the people of Swan for putting their trust in me, and in return I pledge to represent you with the same determination as I and my dedicated campaign team of volunteers displayed during the campaign. I will ensure your voices are heard loud and clear on this side of the Nullarbor and, most importantly, in parliament. Last week I was fortunate to hear the former Wallabies Captain John Eales speak, and he reminded me of some good advice I received from friends before I entered the political arena: be yourself and don't change. I will do that today and give you some of my and my family's history and the values and beliefs that have helped lead me to be here today.

I would like to put on record that I actually live in the electorate I represent and that I am extremely proud to represent the federal seat of Swan. I acknowledge all the previous members of Swan—particularly the three previous members: Don Randall, the member for Canning; Kim Beazley, a former Deputy Prime Minister; and Kim Wilkie—and recognise their contributions. I am going to tell you about the electorate of Swan and, with respect to the other new members who have spoken before me, I will state that the electorate of Swan is a great place to live in. The people who live there are fantastic and as diverse as you will find in any electorate in Australia. I will not lay claim to the electorate being heaven or paradise but there is no other electorate that I would rather live in or represent in this place.

The electorate of Swan is east of Perth and takes its name from the famous river which forms one of the electorate's boundaries. The Swan River was the birthplace of European settlement on the western coast of Australia. It is the scene of much cultural and community activity, the site of festivals and concerts and a meeting place for family and friends, with sailing, skiing, restaurants and barbecue and picnic areas along its foreshore. Swan has many landmarks, institutes and buildings that add to its character and give the residents plenty of opportunities for various education, entertainment, lifestyle and family recreational activities. We have the Belmont and Ascot racecourses; the Perth Zoo; the Burswood Casino; the Curtin University of Technology; the Cannington

greyhounds; the Clontarf Aboriginal College; three golf courses; the Perth Football Club; more than 50 primary and secondary schools, including a TAFE college and three Islamic schools; the Perth domestic and international airports; the state tennis centre; and many more clubs and associations that the constituents in my electorate participate in. Another popular waterway, the Canning River, provides a natural border on the southern side of the electorate, which spans over 108 square kilometres and encompasses a variety of industries, small business and professional offices.

Swan has about 21,000 businesses—far more than any other electorate in WA—which include the intrastate and interstate freight and transport terminals, both road and rail. These are vital to the Western Australian economy, as are all businesses in our great state. After being involved in small business for more than 25 years, I understand the commitment and sacrifice that the small business people of Australia make to strive for and achieve their goals in life. They are a major employer in Australia but are treated with indifference by the vast majority of Australians due to the demonising of them by the ALP and union advertising during the election campaign and past decades. No doubt the new government will wind back the clock to make it harder to run your business, with draconian compliance regulations and the reintroduction of unfair dismissal laws, which will act as a disincentive to employ staff. As an ex-small-business man, I know that just means small business men will work harder and longer hours to make sure they do not have to bear the risk of financial ruin under unfair dismissal laws, which is exactly what they will be—unfair. The Liberal Party in opposition will continue to support small business in Australia and fight for them to ensure the government provides the necessary framework for them to prosper and run their businesses with a minimum of interference.

The demographics in Swan are broad, with diverse ethnic groups: Asian, Middle Eastern, European and Indigenous Australians. The issues in Swan are just as broad: crime and antisocial behaviour, road infrastructure problems, health care, mental health care, aged care and protecting our unique waterways and natural environment. These are the major concerns which feature prominently across the electorate. On the matter of health: the state Labor government is planning to close the Royal Perth Hospital,

which services many of my constituents. There is a groundswell of support to prevent this from happening, and I have joined that fight. The airports and access highways could be described as infrastructure bottlenecks due to the lack of commitment from a state Labor government bursting at the seams with budget surpluses. The airports and highways in Swan are the gateways to Perth and Western Australia for both interstate and international visitors and can only be described as inadequate when compared to those of other cities around the world. I urge the government to bring forward the commitment it made to Swan during the election to upgrade the Great Eastern Highway.

During the election campaign, as I have in my life, I met people who inspired me and helped shape and mould my values in life. In the gallery today as my guest is a gentleman I met during the campaign. In 2007, this man had his and his father's medals stolen from him, and they were not recovered. I approached the Minister for Defence of the day, Brendan Nelson, to replace them. He arranged to have the medals reminted and then personally presented them during a visit to WA. This man's name is Fred Harper. He lives in the suburb of Redcliffe in Swan, and he is a remarkable man.

Fred was born in South Australia on 4 April 1907. His family moved to WA, and, at the age of seven, he was removed from his family by the state and placed in the Clontarf Boys Home. Fred tells me that he escaped from Clontarf with another 25 boys and, once they had been found, he was placed with the Christian Brothers. Fred served with the ADF during World War II and left Fremantle in 1941 on the *Queen Mary*. Fred was stationed in the Middle East, serving in Palestine and Egypt. He also served in Java and Ceylon. Fred has many stories which I would love to tell the House, but maybe he should put them in a book as he seems to have time on his side. Fred and the men and women of Australia who laid their lives on the line so that all Australians could continue to live the lifestyle and have the freedoms we now enjoy are the true heroes of this nation and must never be forgotten. I honour you, Fred, and it has been a privilege to have been able to bring you to the Australian Parliament House. Please enjoy the rest of your trip and your visit to the War Memorial and museum.

In a similar vein, at the tender age of six months I was removed from my family, placed in a babies' home and made a ward of the state in Victoria until I reached the age of 18. Nearly 50 years on, it is remarkable to reflect on just how far we have progressed as a nation in our short but proud history and that I can stand here amongst Australia's leaders as an equal. It has set in concrete my belief that we are the land of a fair go, where we are not afraid to back the underdog

with that sense of hope that he or she may achieve something special. I know that not all people who have been through an experience similar to mine and those of the Fred Harpers of this world during their childhood will go on to stand in federal parliament, but these experiences in life should not stop anyone from achieving their goals in a nation such as ours. I hope that our stories can inspire young children going through the same experience now that they can still achieve great things with their lives and that there are plenty of good people out there willing to back them.

My first priority as the member for Swan will be to pursue the Rudd-Gillard government to make good on all the promises it made to the Swan electorate during the recent election campaign. These include upgrading Great Eastern Highway; more than \$1 million for crime prevention initiatives in the city of Belmont; the installation of lights at EFTel Oval, home of the mighty Demons, who won their first premiership in 1907, the year Fred Harper was born; funding for the restoration of the historic Old Mill in South Perth; and a Medicare office in Belmont.

I was born in Melbourne as the sixth child of 10 in the Dix family. As I mentioned previously, my mother and the state had me placed in a babies' home at the age of six months. Two of my elder siblings were also in foster care and a younger brother was adopted out, who, to this day, I have never met. I did not meet my father until I was 23 years old and some of my siblings until I was 35. I was fortunate enough to be fostered by the Irons family at the age of three. My foster father, David, was a church minister and went on to be a social worker, and my mother, Mary, was also a social worker. Because of their commitment to helping people who were going through tough times, I was given a start that many other children in my situation never had.

I grew up in Box Hill in the federal electorate of Chisholm, then known as Deakin, in what would be described as a middle-class area, with many of its residents working in the manufacturing sector or as tradesmen. There was a perception that bosses, no matter whether they ran small or medium sized businesses, were wealthy and were tight fisted towards their workers. This perception still exists today and is promoted by the ALP and the unions. It was not until I operated my own small business in Perth many years later that I found out just how difficult it was to be the boss. Contrary to what I had always been told, I found that being the boss was not a licence to print money. It was hard work, there were plenty of bills to pay, and every one of your workers' livelihoods relied on the decisions you made on a daily basis. This was my introduction to Liberal politics—where people are rewarded, not envied or chastised, for their initiative

and where enterprise and the rights of individuals are valued and respected, as is the freedom of association.

It probably would not surprise you then that both sets of my parents were Labor supporters. My biological dad was a member of the old painters and dockers union and my uncle, Bob Dix, was actually the secretary of that union for some time. He was believed to be one of the few secretaries of that union who died of natural causes. I am still sure that, even though three of my parents have passed away, they would be extremely proud that their son is now a member of parliament.

After finishing my apprenticeship I left my employer and did various jobs, which included digging sewers, shovelling chook manure out at a farm in Hastings, working a jackhammer at an abattoir in Dandenong and then travelling on the roads for 18 months for the Gas & Fuel Corporation in Victoria. In 1981, I packed my bags and headed to Western Australia to play Australian Rules football for East Perth—a great club steeped in tradition and full of the values and principles that I still carry with me today. While my football career did not end up the way I had imagined, the move to the west has been fantastic. I have enjoyed mentoring and supporting young footballers for the past 10 years in my role as a junior coach at the South Perth Football Club and as the Director for Junior Development at Perth Football Club. It is one way of giving back some of the support I received as a child. I believe sport has an important place in teaching our children the value of teamwork and discipline. With the rising incidence of obesity in our children and throughout the community, I encourage all parents to make sure that their children are active and scoring goals—not just on PlayStation but out on the field of sport as well.

Another epidemic which we must seriously address as the nation's legislators is the growing binge-drinking culture which we have inadvertently encouraged over many decades. When the rest of the world labels us as heavy drinkers, we wear it as a badge of honour and brag about how many we had the night before. We have fostered the development of a culture which looks to the weekend as a time to get smashed. It is a culture that we have accepted as a nation. While most of the community has condemned the use of illicit drugs in society, getting blind on the weekend is an accepted part of being Australian. We might be losing the war against illicit drugs, but at least we are trying to mount a fight. We need a sustained assault on the binge-drinking culture. I support the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill, and I urge the government to make responsible drinking part of its education revolution.

A report released by the WA Department of Health last month found that Western Australians were now drinking 30 per cent more than they did 10 years ago.

According to that report, 3,975 Western Australians died from alcohol related causes between 1997 and 2005—and that does not include road deaths. One of those people who died during that time was my sister Margaret Dix. My younger sister Margaret came to Western Australia about seven years before her death, and we were able to develop a strong bond as brother and sister, which had not been possible earlier. On 12 August 2004, Margaret was drinking at the Rendezvous Observation City Hotel's lobby bar, catching up with a friend from Victoria, before she fell to her death from the balcony of the 15th storey of the hotel. Toxicology analysis indicated that Margaret had a blood alcohol level of almost seven times the legal driving limit. The bartender, bar manager and licensee of the hotel were charged with four counts each of supplying alcohol to a drunken person. A magistrate later ruled that they had no case to answer. Unfortunately, Margaret is not the only sister I have lost to an alcohol related incident. My older sister Jennifer was killed in a hit-and-run accident by an alleged drunk-driver in Victoria more than 35 years ago.

I am not a wowser, and I am certainly no saint when it comes to alcohol. I enjoy a few beers on a warm day and a couple of glasses of wine with friends. But I strongly believe that we all have to work together in this parliament, with the states and with the community to make binge drinking un-Australian. Changing the nation's attitude towards binge drinking cannot be achieved in the short term, but it must begin. It will be a long-term battle that has the potential to change the very nature of our national identity, but it will help save relationships, marriages, jobs, sporting careers and lives. I dedicated my victory in Swan last November to my sister Margaret, and I am committed to making sure that all Australians understand the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption.

Someone else who has given me inspiration since the day he was born is my son, Jarrad. Jarrad was born in 1992 during one of the toughest business periods of my life, coming out of the recession we had to have. He gave me a new purpose in life, and since he came to live with me three years ago we have become great mates in our home in South Perth. At a young age, Jarrad has given me great support during the campaign and has been a constant reality check for me since he came to live with me. Jarrad is in the gallery today. I salute you, Jarrad, and I hope that we have many years of mateship ahead and that you achieve all your dreams in life.

I would also like to thank my mother and family for all the love and support they gave me while I was growing up and for the support they offered me during my run for federal parliament. I have heard family mentioned many times in this House and would join in

the chorus of how important families are to Australia and our way of life.

There are many people who I have to thank for their assistance during the long and arduous election campaign. Some of my campaign team and mates are in the gallery today, and I thank them again for their support and for travelling all the way from WA to be here. I am sure to miss some people, but I will never forget the fantastic and enjoyable ride to achieve the remarkable victory in the 2007 election in Swan. My thanks go to Keith Ellis, a small business man with six kids—Keith turns 66 this month; Travis Burrows, also a small business man; Jim Crone, an Irishman who insisted we use the campaign motto of ‘Refuse to lose’; Gordon Thomson—the boss; Richard Basham; John and Karen McGrath; the Tyler family; Adrian Lawson and my brother Rob Dix; Sandra Brown; Anne Jones; Sue Chown; Dawn Stratton; Helen Leslie; Collette Wiltshire; Helen Lesley; Collette Wiltshire; Paul Everingham; Robyn Nolan; Danielle Blain, the Liberal Party State President; Mark Neeham; Jason Marocchi; Zak Kirkup and all the staff at Menzies House in WA; the local chambers; and the CEO, Charles Bellow.

I thank all the federal ministers, members and senators who visited Swan during the campaign—Senators Eggleston, Cormann and Johnston. I also thank Darryl Lathwell and Lindsay Albonico, a couple of mates of mine who are here today; all my mates from the Floreat Aquatic Recreational Cricket Club; all the members of my golf club who assisted with my campaign; Rob Dunn, who mentored me and gave me an opportunity in the early eighties; and the people in the Swan division of the Liberal Party, who had confidence in me as a candidate. Finally, my thanks go to John Howard, Peter Costello and members of the previous government, who left this country in a better shape than when they inherited it in 1996.

On 13 February this year I was in parliament when the apology was given to Indigenous Australians, and I think it was an important initial step in the process of resolving the real problems Indigenous Australians face today. However, I believe this apology disregarded the good that can come from removing children from abusive situations. Perhaps one day we should apologise to all the young children of Australia who were not saved by being removed from abusive or non-caring parents. I mention the case of the seven-year-old girl Shellay Ward, who died last year after being seriously neglected by her parents, and I call on all communities to make a concerted effort to bring cases like this to the attention of the proper authorities. We should have also thanked and congratulated all foster parents and staff of institutions who have cared for these children during the past

century. The efforts and sacrifices they make are underestimated and should be recognised officially. On the matter of compensation, which continues to be debated throughout Australia, I call on the Rudd-Gillard government to establish a compensation fund which all Australians can donate to. This will give the population of Australia the opportunity to show their level of commitment to compensation.

In finishing, I would like to voice my concern about reports that the federal government plans to change the requirements for provisional voters to prove their identity on polling day. Surely a country that sends delegates overseas to observe the fairness of other countries’ elections would not introduce a system where someone could easily vote without proof of identity. Our citizens need proof of identity to get a passport, a motor vehicle licence and many other licences and registrations just to perform normal day-to-day activities. But we have a government that is promoting the idea of ‘Don’t bother to register; just turn up and vote and, while you’re at it, vote early and vote often.’

I look forward to the next three years in this House with a fantastic opposition team with the sole purpose of gaining back the role of government—not because we were born to it; we are just better at it.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the member for Leichhardt, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech and I ask the House to extend to him the usual courtesies.