



SPEECH

DATE: Thursday, May 13, 2010

SUBJECT: **Western Australian Council of Social Services Conference (WACOSS) opening.**

This transcript is produced for information purposes only. Although all care is taken, no warranty as to its accuracy or completeness is given. It is the reader's responsibility to ensure by independent verification that all information is correct before placing any reliance on it.

COLIN BARNETT

Thank you very much, and good morning, and can I also thank Colleen for her welcome to the country and pass on my respects to the traditional owners. Can I say, Colleen, your extended families sounds like a Dockers' training list.

[laughter]

Also, to Francis Lynch, the Acting President of the Western Australian Council of Social Services; Sue Ash, your CEO and to all the various constituent bodies - some 300 or more groups that together make up WACOSS, I thank you. I thank you for the work that you do in your individual areas, and I also thank you for the way in which you work cooperatively through WACOSS.

I also acknowledge Lisa Baker, representing the Opposition, and some other Members of Parliament that I know are either here, or will be coming during the course of the day.

First, can I just take a... broader view of our economy. I know it sounds, probably, a long way away from where your thoughts might be, but there is no doubt that, if the economy is strong, and if people have jobs and opportunities, the demands, I would think, on your sector would be that much less. For the variety of reasons that I do spend a lot of my time on trying to make sure that the Western Australian economy is growing and is successful and provides opportunities for education, training, housing, income and all that goes with it.

But I am also very conscious that there are and there always will be groups within our community through no fault of their own, perhaps through a mental health condition, a disability, or just simply bad luck and misfortune, who find themselves isolated and in need of help, in need of compassion. And while I might be seen as somewhat of an economic dry - and I am, I guess - I would assure you I would hope that this government. In fact, any government, it is known also from a... caring, compassionate government. And that is something I stress to all the ministers, particularly those that work in the areas of social policy. We have to make sure not simply share the benefits but also participate in the prosperity of this state.

We've just been through a pretty difficult economic time, the so-called global financial crisis. It's not entirely over, including the boasting around at the moment about how successful Australia has been. Australia has certainly done better than most developed

economies, but there are also parts of the Australian economy and parts of the West Australian economy that still are... struggling. It's not all beer and skittles by any means. However, I think the economy is coming out of a difficult time and I look forward with a fair bit of optimism to the years ahead.

But when you have a downturn, as we've had over the last 18 months, again it dislocates many people: they lose their job and there's less opportunity and as has just been stated, the... the ability of organisations to raise funds or receive grants and assistance – whether it be from government or from the private sector - also get constrained. So, I guess you see a double-whammy of an increase in demand for the services you provide and often a reduced capacity to provide it. But it is a sort of sad economic irony that the sector of the economy that needs assistance when things go bad finds it even more difficult when things go bad.

So, we're not out of that. And, the State Government will next week produce its Budget, our second Budget, and while I think that will show an economy turning around, it will also continue to put some burden on the community. It is a shared burden, it's within government, it's within industry and it's within the community sector and household sector.

I am very conscious that there have been very large increases in utility prices, particularly electricity, and there will be increases in water prices as well, and they do have a very direct impact on household budgets and they are felt by those on lower incomes. We are doing all we can to ameliorate that through hardship grants and the like. Nevertheless, I acknowledge there's a... a substantial burden there.

There isn't a lot I can do about that. I need to make sure the essential services of this state are properly functioning, and the power supply and the water supply and the sewerage and the gas and the public transport systems all continue to operate and are viable. So, there's still a bit of... a little bit of pain to go.

In terms of the community sector itself, your conference theme is 'gearing for change', very appropriate theme and change is always with us. But it's my observation, at least, that in this century change will tend to become more quickly. The world has changed. It changed on September 11, and it changed with the global financial crisis.

Governments, whatever their level of government might be, tend to take larger and bold decisions and get on with it. I think you'll see less analysis, less reviews, less committees and more decisions being made, and that's something Western Australia is and will need to continue to move with.

As far as the State Government is concerned, we have a broad policy position and one that was, I guess, reinforced through the Economic Audit Committee. We happen to believe, as a government, that services for people - human services - are often best delivered by community-based organisations. It's a philosophical, but it's also a practical view, simply because community-based organisations... tend to be far closer to those that they are assisting. They tend to be more adaptive, more flexible, able to respond to huge changes in circumstances and they are also far more successful than government in bringing in broader community support, whether it's through corporate support, volunteers, family members or whatever else.

I know in going down that path - which we are - that some people will say, 'Oh, typical cheap government, trying to get out of their responsibilities and trying to shift the burden from government departments and agencies onto the non-government sector.' I... recognise that this is reaction. All I can say is judge us on what happens, and I would say to the wider community, judge the delivery of services to people in need on how we've done.

As a government, we will spend more and more money on community services. And while we, like other governments, will continue to spend more, the real challenge will be to spend it better, and that's what this reform and change is going to be about.

If you look within the services provided through the West Australian Government, the Disability Services Commission is a stand-out performer. Something like 60 per cent of all government spending in the disability area is channelled through non-government community-based organisations. That leads the nation and is a model that I would like to see replicated across other areas of government service.

In areas like child protection, the figures are probably around 25 per cent. Across all areas of human services in government, the figure's probably about 18 per cent. Now I don't have any particular target in mind, and I'm not going to in an irresponsible way rush at handing money out and changing functions. Though more than just a gradual evolution, but rather consistent transformation is what I would have in mind, where we see more and more services delivered by government but through community service organisations.

Now, we're willing to do that as a government. It may vary from area to area, it may vary from part of the state to part of the state. We will respond as you take up that challenge.

Since coming into government - again, judge us not on what we say, but what we do - I and my government and serious about the way in which it approaches this area. We have, for example, one of the best decisions we took: we confronted a small crisis where a disability enterprise basically was losing contracts. So, we reinstated what had been in place and made a preference to employment enterprises, in this case, for helping people with a disability. A small change, but an important change. But more people, in that case, with a disability have the activity, the fellowship and the pride and the respect that comes, and self esteem, from gaining work and having a role. Governments should support activities like that.

We've also established a Mental Health Minister and a Mental Health Commission, and about to employ the Mental Health Commissioner.

The philosophy in mental will be along the lines of that in disability. In the area of child protection, in an area where... I think there was an utter failure across our community a few years ago. I'm not suggesting all the problems are solved, but that is receiving a lot more money, that area, and our children are being better protected and cared for in our community than they were just a few years ago. And those if there is a number one area, I guess it is in the public mind and in the government mind.

Yesterday, in a workshop, Robyn McSweeney spoke and she outlined the proposal to set up a... a family services and family support network in four areas. Again, an example of providing services, particularly to families with children, parenting,

counselling, and working closely, in an integrated way, with community-based organisations.

Brendon Grylls, as Minister for Regional Development, announced that the fuel card... in country areas has been available as, I guess, a substitute for recognition, if you like, that public transport doesn't exist in most country areas, and therefore people particularly in this as age pensioners are disadvantaged. So the providing of a fuel subsidy allows them or their carers and family members to run them around, whether it be for medical appointments or business matters or just too... to meet family and friends.

And that benefit has been very well received in country areas, not surprisingly, and Brendon yesterday announced that that would extend to disability pensioners and some other categories. Again, a tangible benefit being provided.

Now, in addition to that, I'd like to outline some measures that have been incorporated into next Thursday's State Budget. And it's in the spirit of encouraging the growth of the non-government sector to government developing a new and different relationship with the community sector.

Firstly, we're going to establish a Community Development Investment Fund. That will be established initially with a budget of \$10million. It is comparatively modest, but the intention is that it will grow and grow significantly. What that fund will do... it will provide low-interest loans to community organisations so that you can make improvements in capital: physical improvements, for example, to your office. You can renovate, maybe even acquire extra buildings or bring in other organisations. You might be able to invest in IT, refurbish vehicles and the like. There'll be an objective assessment of those applications.

I would hope that that would grow over the years to come. It would depend on your rate of take up and the usage of it, and you might draw a parallel to low interest loans that were introduced for non government schools, which has been the basis of expansion of non-government schools the last 20 or 30 years.

We're also going to introduce again, at a modest level initially a Social Innovation Grants Scheme. That would... start off with \$2million a year and that will be designed to encourage, as the name suggests social innovation, so you as a sector can try out different things, different ways of dealing with homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence and whatever else. So you've got some capacity to work collaboratively, with government agencies, amongst yourselves and try different things and proposals. We need to have innovation in this sector as much as any other part of the economy.

And the third and probably what will prove in the long term to be the most important will be the establishment of the Partnership Forum. That will be made up of about six people from both the community sector and six heads of major government agencies that deal with this sector, so Disability, Housing, Child Protection and the like. It will be chaired by an independent chairperson that will be initially Professor Peter Shergold who's I understand attending this conference at some stage. And Peter's going to do that free of charge. So... and that will release a report to myself as Premier every six months.

Now that Partnership Forum will be charged with responsibility to define the relationship between government, key government agencies and the non-government community sector. Looking at practical list of issues in particular reference was made to a high level of administration and compliance. I've had some discussion with that and ... I've heard of figures up to 30 per cent of grants can be used for administration purposes. That is a terrible, almost criminal, waste of public funds which should be given to people who need it for assistance and support.

So dealing with issues like that, dealing with issues also referred to, the issue of the wage gap between the people working for the government sector and in the non-government. I don't know if anyone's quite sure how that emerged or what caused it but it's there and it does need to be addressed, those practical issues.

Dealing with the structure I guess within the non-government sector, the actual nature of the day-to-day relationship with the government funding entities. And most important, working with government to develop policy.

So during the change it is going to be an era of change, it's not going to be revolutionary and it's not going to be snail-like either. You will move as quick as you are able to move and I assure you that this Government will provide the funding and will change the method of operation within government and will ensure the Government moves properly with you for one simple reason that what money you do spend collectively on those important areas and that we make sure that prosperous Western Australia will provide opportunities and that all members of community share in that prosperity and to live life of the highest quality and the highest level as is possible.

So I'd like to formally open your conference and I thank you for coming and participating, you've got lots of things to talk about lots of outstanding speakers and I wish you an enjoyable conference. Thank you.

[applause].