

THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE

Speaker: Carol Martin MLA

On 1 April 2009, we were privileged to be addressed by Ms Carol Martin MLA for the Kimberley, the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to any parliament, State or Federal, in Australia. She had rushed to our meeting as soon as the day's parliamentary session had closed, and she was still recovering from a trip to India where she had been invited to address a women's forum (at no expense to the Australian taxpayer). In a laid-back introduction to the talk, we heard how she was so stressed by cuddling from a wayward elephant's trunk during her visit that it seriously challenged her recent resolution to quit smoking. But the imminent birth of another grandchild, so imminent, in fact, that Carol was due to act as midwife that evening, was a big incentive to stick to the resolution.

On a more serious note, Carol spoke of her birth in Subiaco, her childhood in Perth, and how she became a ward of the state at the age of twelve. Four years later, she moved to Broome to be with her mother. Her passionate commitment to family and the younger generation was forcefully articulated. Not only have she and her husband Brian raised two children of their own but they have "grown up" fourteen others from her extended family and her social work contacts.

Carol's pre-parliamentary career saw her involved in social work for 19 years, and, in that time, working in the child protection area, she had no qualms about seeing that indigenous children were taken from their families if such a step was in the child's best interest. She is a strong believer in early intervention where there are problems, and she has had to apply the "tough love" principle on numerous occasions. There are, however, too many instances in which no help, or too little help, is available. The high rate of suicide amongst young Aboriginal people in the Kimberley has seen Carol attend funeral after funeral, and she is glad that intervention is finally starting to reduce the toll of young lives.

The "tyranny of distance" accounts, in part, for Carol having become the Member for Kimberley. Her decision to stand, back in 2001, resulted from the frustration that she and her fellow Kimberley residents felt in making their voices heard by the people who make the laws in the south. She is passionate about presenting her constituents' views and, in the process, setting the record straight about many of the things that affect them.

Before Carol left parliament on the evening she spoke to us, agreement had (almost) been reached on the site of the proposed gas hub at James Price Point. In discussing the extensive negotiations that preceded the tentative agreement, she paid tribute to the Premier, Colin Barnett for his bipartisan approach. She is enthusiastic about the economic and employment benefits that both the gas and the recently-approved second phase of the Ord irrigation scheme will bring to the Kimberley and to its Aboriginal people in particular. Broome TAFE is currently training people for marine and agricultural careers but, with construction imminent, training relevant to that industry will be offered.

The potential benefits that Carol sees in having a hub in the Kimberley include the creation of 7,600 jobs (for two shifts of workers) during the construction phase. On the choice of James Price Point for the site of the proposed hub, she stressed the importance of the indigenous people having agreed to go forward with that site, rather than with others that had been short-listed. She also feels that its distance from Broome affords a safety factor in the event of an explosion.

While strongly supportive of the idea of having a hub in the Kimberley, Carol is just as strongly opposed to the idea of a single hub. She believes that it poses a terrorism risk as well as an unacceptable risk for the economy should anything disable it. Another unwelcome aspect, she says, is that the focus on a single hub has destroyed opportunities for progress that might have been enjoyed by other Aboriginal communities. The desire to have development on the Maret Islands, for example, was voiced by the traditional owners and was not, as public perception has it, a push by Japanese interests. As far as Carol is concerned, the abandonment of that plan, in favour of piping the gas to Darwin, was a bad move. The notion of a single hub appeals to the government, and perhaps to industry, because it will keep down the cost of infrastructure. Yet, she says, both sides of the Kimberley would have benefited from two lots of infrastructure.

With most of the evening given over to a lively two-way discussion, plenty of topics had an airing. Jim Anderson asked about the potential for bringing the gas in through King Sound and was advised that investigations had shown that the vortex there would make that approach too dangerous. Bringing the gas down the peninsula adjacent to King Sound was touted as another possibility but the traditional owners did not favour that idea.

Jim also asked whether Carol saw any prospect of action being taken to create a "food bowl" at Camballin. While she thought that the work originally done there was one of the best projects ever initiated, she was also aware of many things having gone wrong. For example, local people ensured that the barrage stayed open and could still be used to hold water in the dam catchment. If the project were to be restarted, millions of dollars would be required for any reconstruction of the levees; and then there is the question of whether it is appropriate to dam the waterways. Carol believes that it is not appropriate. Another change is that, today, a proposal for a project of that type would have to be assessed both on heritage grounds and in terms of the traditional owners' native title rights.

Kevin Kenneally asked Carol to comment on the bauxite tenements on the Mitchell Plateau, and, in particular, on how Aboriginal people would view any proposal for strip mining in that area. The response was essentially that, while the traditional owners are not opposed to development, they could not reconcile strip mining. While Carol believes that bauxite mining would not be viable, she made the point that the tenement holders are obliged to continue their exploration. She also remarked that opposition to that work, and to any future mining, tends to come not from the traditional owners but from people who want to protect the environment. Going further, she commented on another situation where measures introduced to protect the environment cut

across the interests of indigenous people. After centuries of collecting plants and seeds for food and cultural use, those people are now required to have a plant collecting licence before they take plant matter from the bush!

In touching on another aspect of people's lives, Geoff Vivian, who has worked at Halls Creek and retains a strong attachment to the place, commented on the situation there. The indigenous leader Peter Yu had at one time remarked that people working in government departments have not had a proper relationship with Aboriginal people at Halls Creek. Carol described that situation as "structural racism" — people arrive, try to cope, burn out, and then leave without making enough progress to deal with the problems.

In commenting on media coverage of the problems faced by many Aboriginal people, Carol condemned the generalisations that are made. As she pointed out, the vast majority of her people live sober and "ordinary" lives connected to the world's oldest continuing culture. The media, however, largely ignores that reality, preferring to highlight the problems that blight the lives of the minority. That approach ties in with, and makes much of, the controversies that surround the application of remedies involving imposts on entire communities in the Kimberley and elsewhere. Adamant that prohibition has never worked, Carol would prefer to see the imposition of selective liquor licensing controls abandoned in favour of remedies that target the problem families. The funds and services for that sort of assistance are badly lacking, and the situation is made more complex by Aboriginal people being too proud to ask for help to deal with addiction. Nonetheless, with only about 300 people needing help, mostly in Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing, the situation could be handled through the implementation of appropriate social intervention.

Despite having to deal with many difficult and sometimes depressing situations as a politician representing Kimberley people, Carol retains her sense of humour and enjoys the diversity of other people. She does not let Labor ideology get in the way of fairness, and she is quick to praise good works done by others (regardless of their political persuasion). In that area, the work that Kimberley Society member Elsie Archer does for the community came in for a mention.

While the need to travel frequently between her home in Broome and the parliament in Perth takes its toll — part of the "tyranny of distance" — Carol puts the travelling time to good use. When she is not dealing with paperwork, she relaxes and does artwork. She brought several of the delicate but vibrant pieces along to the meeting and donated one as a prize for the evening's raffle. Needless to say, the winner was delighted with the attractive work.

Hamish McGlashan and Cathie Clement