



Legislative Council

Drug Summit Hansard

Extract

12/05/99

Page:56

DRUG SUMMIT

The Hon. J. J. DELLA BOSCA (Special Minister of State, and Assistant Treasurer) [12.54 p.m.]

(Inaugural speech): I move:

That the Legislative Council agree to the following resolution:

- (1) That this House, recognising the problem of the use of drugs in the community and its impact on society, agrees to hold a Drug Summit at Parliament House, involving members of both Houses of Parliament and invited community representatives, in order to:
 - create a better understanding by members of Parliament and the community of the causes, nature, and extent of the illicit drug problem, particularly in New South Wales;
 - better inform members of Parliament through a forum bringing together a range of drug experts and community representatives who reflect the spectrum of views on drugs;
 - hear and consider the views of young people;
 - examine existing approaches to the illicit drug problem and consider new ideas and new options in a bipartisan forum;
 - consider evidence regarding those strategies that work and those that do not, and, in particular, to consider:
 - the effectiveness of existing New South Wales laws, policies, programs and services, and
 - the effectiveness of current resource allocations in the drugs area;
 - identify ways to improve existing strategies and services that work and identify gaps and needs in programs and services;
 - build political and community consensus about future directions in drug policy; and
 - recommend a future course of action for the government to consider.
- (2) That the services of the Parliament of New South Wales be provided for the hosting of the Drug Summit from Monday 17 May 1999 to Friday 21 May 1999, with plenary sessions in the Legislative Council Chamber and working groups convening in the various meeting rooms.
- (3) That the summit be chaired by the Rt Hon. Ian Sinclair and the Hon. Joan Kirner, AM.
- (4) That members of both Houses attend as parliamentary delegates and fully participate in all proceedings in accordance with the proposed summit rules to be agreed on by the summit.
- (5) That non-parliamentary delegates and associate delegates, as invited by the Premier, be admitted to participate in plenary sessions and working group meetings in accordance with the rules to be agreed on by the summit.
- (6) That this House request the summit to provide a communique outlining an agreed framework and directions for the Government to consider.

Madam President, let me first congratulate you on your election as President of the Legislative Council. I join with other members in wishing you all the best for a successful term in that position. Given that I am the Deputy Leader of the Government in this House and a Minister in the Executive Government, it is with a great sense of privilege that I make my maiden speech. In doing so I recognise the unusual circumstances surrounding such a speech, but I would be grateful for any courtesies the House might extend to me during my speech.

In convening the Drug Summit the Government acknowledges that it faces one of the great challenges to it, the Parliament and the community. We must be realistic: there are no easy solutions, single approaches or magic cures to the problem of drug abuse or addiction. The summit will debate the key questions and popular issues. It will discuss at length the concern about heroin trials, the possible provision of free injecting rooms, and similar matters. The drug problem poses some of the most complex challenges in a community that is changing and shifting in values, and we must come to grips with that.

The pervasiveness of this problem throughout society reminds me of previous history and concerns about governments and leaders trying to come to grips with previous plagues. When King Philip VI of France asked the medical faculty of the University

Page 57

of Paris for an explanation for the black plague - later known as the bubonic plague - the doctors turned not to physiology, cures or methods of what we consider physical science but to the stars and the calendar. They came to the unanimous conclusion that the blame for the plague lay with the date: 20 March 1345. The great scientists concluded that on that day a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars had occurred in the fortieth degree of Aquarius. Apparently that was a bad omen!

The physicians admitted also that there may be causes "hidden from even the most highly trained intellects", but amongst intellectuals the crossed stars theory became the accepted explanation throughout Europe for the Black Death plague. Indeed, that theory was not confined to Europe; the pamphlet produced from the meeting of Parisian physicians was translated from Latin into the various vernacular languages and widely distributed. Eventually it was adopted by the great

Arabic scholars of Cordoba and Granada as the official explanation for the black plague.

One thing that occurs to me about that anecdote is that we need not necessarily be comfortable when all the experts agree about a solution. It seems to me - and it may well be true - that the great plague was caused by a conjunction of the stars. However, if there had been a debate about other more earthly causes, including domestic hygiene, the prevalence of rats and other pests, perhaps the experts may have had other matters to consider and a great deal of suffering might have been prevented.

Another thing that follows on from such an observation is that answers may well come from unexpected quarters; the application of commonsense and a little bit of simple thought about a problem may well result in a better solution than one involving complex theories. But, again, this demonstrates one problem that representative government and Executive Government face, not only in Australia and in New South Wales but throughout the world.

There are all sorts of trends similar to the increasing problem of illicit drugs with which we have sought to come to grips. Some of those trends - described in different ways, depending on which point of view one adopts - are understood in different ways. We talk of economic globalisation, cultural globalisation and the mind-boggling array of economic and social changes being brought about by what we describe in shorthand as "information technology" and "telecommunication technology".

A new millennial trend has started. It is a coincidence that this is all happening at a time when the calendar is literally changing to a new millennium and once again people are starting to use terms such as "revolution" with increasing frequency. People who are concerned talk about conspiracies, some of which are dark and some of which are benign. The common language of both politics and popular culture is often couched in terms of catastrophic events. One need only think about debates relating to ecological catastrophes, let alone recent additions to the cinema or popular culture involving comets yet again arriving from the skies to destroy all civilisation.

I expect three things to come out of the Drug Summit. The first thing is an information base - something that the Premier has made clear on a number of occasions when dealing with this issue. It seems that the elementary facts about drug addiction or drug abuse elude most people. Indeed, they elude some or all members of this House. There are facts, many of which can be put simply and in a straightforward way, which give the community a much better understanding of the scope of the problem and perhaps enable people in the community who have more commonsense than all of us put together to start addressing the issue in a way that allows us to move forward.

We need to put aside the two models that have dominated public debate about this issue. All of us have become familiar with those two models, and across the Chamber there are probably radically different views about them. Those two models are so-called harm minimisation and so-called zero tolerance. I use the term "so-called" because there are probably many legitimate points of view in between. The two models of harm minimisation and zero tolerance, while very useful to summarise, eventually become terms of abuse by one side or the other. They eventually become models that take away from a real understanding of the problem. Similar to the way the Parisian doctors were distracted by the stars in their theories about the way the stars worked, people can become distracted about the models they apply to understanding political and social problems.

So we must accept that the summit will not necessarily provide an answer based on one of the models but may well start the process of breaking through both of the models as a way of understanding the ability of the community and the Parliament to get on top of the issues. On the other hand, people need to think about a rational discussion in the context of the drugs summit, in the

Page 58

community and elsewhere. I have already said that we need an information base. Do we need a reduction in the level of passion? No! We need a transformation of that passion into solution-oriented passion rather than zero-sum passion, rather than expecting that someone will win the debate and there will be free heroin and free injection rooms or someone will lose the debate and there will be a greater concentration on total prohibition. I hope that all of us would not necessarily want that to be what the summit is about - supposedly a solution presented in a neat package.

All of us, whatever degree of attention we have concentrated on the problem, know that one thing is certain: a neat package will not deliver the answers. Rather, working through the problems is more likely to deliver solutions-oriented actions rather than a single policy prescription. Everyone must be prepared to listen. One thing we have all learnt - and I have learnt this, especially during my career in politics - is that everyone has a point of view. Even people with which one might violently disagree from time to time have a point of view that needs to be heard. That means that we need to open the ears of people who have become so tired and intolerant that they can no longer associate with the problem except when they are personally touched by it. Unless a family member has become an addict or a victim of an addict, or unless one has a personal or vocational reason to be associated with the problem of drug addiction and illicit drugs, one probably just wants the problem to go away.

We all need to understand - I think all members of the House understand this - that the problem will not go away while people in the community take that view of it. The only way we can play our role as leaders in the community is to ask people not to look to us, the politicians, as those who should make the decisions. The community must accept some ownership of the problems and look across government, voluntary institutions, churches, homes and, indeed, families for a solution. One course of action is to try to get a consensus. I think "consensus" has become a dirty word in politics; it used to be a very positive word in politics from another point of view and in another context. I certainly would not want a consensus like that arrived at by the physicians of King Philip VI.

We want a consensus that addresses as many issues as possible from the context of an information-based rational debate and a solutions-oriented set of outcomes, rather than expect the Drug Summit itself to solve the problems. The fact that we come up with the right questions may well be all the progress we make at the summit. The fact that we have even a modest group of agreed facts may be all we achieve at the summit. I do not know that anyone in government can say what will come out of the summit. However, it is important for all of us to concentrate on the fact that the summit will deliver a set of principles which we must deliver to the community. Then we expect the community to work with us towards a solution.

As I have already noted, this is my initial speech in the Parliament and I intend to continue to take

liberties with the House and follow the convention of dealing briefly with some general principles and my views about politics. I should like to make some personal observations. However, I must stray from the conventions a little because most of my personal and party convictions are locked fairly closely together. I seek not to offend anyone by being partisan, but unavoidably both my professional and personal backgrounds require me to accept a sense of partisanship in dealing with both my personal values and political career.

I was born in 1956, which makes me 42 years of age. My mother and father are present in the gallery today. My mother, Marie Therèse Della Bosca, nee Bourke, started her working life as a postal clerk at a young age. She has done a variety of jobs throughout my life and is currently retired. My father, Reginald Thomas, started his working life in the Juniorate, Scholasticate and Novitiate of the De La Salle Brothers. After leaving there he pursued a variety of jobs around the coalmines and in other areas from his home in Lithgow. He then came to Sydney and pursued a career in health administration.

Members of my generation are in a unique position to look at some of the issues that this Parliament and the community have to deal with. It is my private theory that by accident of my birth date I have been intimately associated with two Australias, two Sydneys and, in a sense, two Labor parties. I am part of a generation that straddles values that are now regarded as those of the old Australia and the old Australian Labor Party. I grew up with people whose parents, and in some cases grandparents, were Kokoda Track veterans or Gallipoli veterans, people who had lived through the Depression. My parents were teenagers during the Second World War, both having been born during the Depression. Most of my friends at school were in a similar position and we grew up in a more innocent Australian where mateship was important

Page 59

to us and egalitarianism involved a more simple view of the world.

Many honourable members spoke to the motion of condolence for Sir Eric Willis, a former member of Parliament, and referred to the importance of his war record. It is a source of enormous pride to me that the Labor Party is probably the only existing political party registered members of which were veterans of the Kokoda Track and the Gallipoli peninsula. No other party can make that claim - with, perhaps, the exception of the National Party - although subsequently many veterans joined other political parties. By that remark I am endeavouring to demonstrate that the Labor Party, my views and my personal life are inextricably bound.

Those old values, which we seem to be moving further and further away from, are about pride in our national characteristics. Those values were associated with a downside that we are all now aware of and it is more fashionable to point to that. They are associated with a sense of isolationism and the politics of bigotry. We came from small communities. Indeed, those of us who grew up in the suburbs of Sydney or in country towns regarded ourselves as being as far away from the bright centre of the universe as we possibly could be. We assumed that anything really interesting - culture, art, literature and intellectual life - was happening in North America, Europe, the United States of America. It was somewhere else in the world, a long way from us, that the really important things were happening.

Most of my political activities and my career have centred around the new Australia, which is a different place altogether. The new Australia is more tolerant and vibrant, and becoming economically stronger. It is becoming global and it is accepting values from all parts of the world. The new Australia is a society relatively free of bigotry, although its sense of values is not so clear. This is perhaps one of the keys to the issues that we must come to grips with, whether it be the consequences of economic globalisation or the consequences of the international plague of drug addiction and heroin abuse. The new Australia also has a bad side and we must accept that some of the old values should be remarried into the new Australia and all honourable members should contribute towards that task.

What I have been saying is summed up perfectly in the paradox of world economic development, particularly in the cinema industry. The newly released movie *The Matrix*, which has been very well received internationally, was produced almost entirely in our city. The theme of *The Matrix* seems to me to represent the millennial concern about conspiracies and paranoias. The other interesting motif is that the height of pre-millennial civilisation represented in that movie is Sydney as it is today. We have progressed from being a long way away from the centre of the modern universe to being the centre of the modern universe, but that progress is accompanied by a great responsibility. I appreciate that the House has other, important business to deal with but I should like to place on the record some additional remarks.

I joined the Australian Labor Party at 17 years of age and my great inspiration was the national leadership of E. G. Whitlam. To many of us on this side of the Chamber he is an icon. He introduced the values of modern social democracy to the Australian Labor Party and then to the Australian body politic. Indeed, many of the important debates on all sides of politics were a reaction to some of his policy initiatives or attempts to build on what his Government had achieved.

I am reminded of my first meeting with the Leader of the Government in this place many years ago. He was arguing with another colleague - he is a public servant and I should protect him by not naming him in this place. It was the third or fourth meeting of the ALP that I had attended and although the current Leader of the Government and I were members of the same branch, he had not attended any of those branch meetings. He had been busy with his work as chief of staff or senior policy adviser to the former Federal Minister for Housing, Les Johnston.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise to some people, although most people already know it, that in those days the Leader of the Government was very radical and our branch was very conservative. It was, in our parlance, what was called and may sometimes still be called a grouper branch. The whole atmosphere of the meeting changed when Michael entered the room, and there were hushed tones and occasional concern that he might acquire some secret information which he would then report back to others.

After the meeting everyone was having a friendly beer and my friend was talking to the president of the branch, who was making reasonable observations about some of the downsides of the government. The year was 1973 and some of the difficulties with the Whitlam Government were becoming apparent. Michael was dapperly dressed - I think it was the first time I had ever seen a three-piece suit. He arrived late and was giving a hurried report about how well the Government was

Page 60

doing. He argued with the President of the branch afterwards and, although I did not participate in the argument, I do recall that

the penultimate point was when Michael turned to my friend and said, "What you don't understand is that there are 31 Ministers down there working for a bloody revolution." My friend quite sanguinely said, "Well, isn't that the problem, Michael? They are not supposed to be working for a revolution; they are meant to be members of an Executive Government."

That is my first recollection of the Leader of the Government and it demonstrates that revolutions and other things are an important part of what we need to discuss. I might also mention, as others have done, that, my colleague Carmel Tebbutt attended the same educational establishment as I, but ended up with a slightly different point of view.

I want to briefly mention some of my friends: Michael Lee, a member of Federal Parliament, and Steven Hutchins, President of the Labor Party who I leave in charge of the Party organisation from a presidential point of view, as I have completed my period my time as an officer of the Labor Party. I left my position as a full-time official with the Labor Party with some reluctance, but I had been doing the same job for 14 years and had become very used to it. However, I know that I have left the job in the excellent hands of Eric Roozendaal, Mark Arbib, Joanna Woods and others at the Australian Labor Party office.

I am honoured and happy that Anda Mednis, my former personal assistant at the ALP office, has joined my parliamentary staff. I had intended to tell a joke about Michael Costa but time is running out and I will not do so. Instead I mention that I am confident that Steven Hutchins, Ursula Stephens, Chris Raper, Damien O'Connor and Eric and Mark at the ALP office have the numbers to outvote Michael and that the party remains in safe hands.

In conclusion I want to mention some people who have had a profound influence on my personal life and on my career. I had hoped there would be a representative of one group here today, my uncle, Brother Dominic Della Bosca. I have had a fairly long personal association with a religious order with which many people may not be familiar, the De La Salle Brothers in the Catholic Church, who also had a millennial theme. The Brothers of the Christian schools, the Christian Brothers as they are well known everywhere in the world except Australia and New Zealand, commenced their important work of educating the poor and ministering to what we nowadays call dysfunctional families in France at about the same time as the French Revolution. Again, that is an accidental millennial theme. I made scant use of the educational opportunities the De La Salle Brothers presented me with. I was not a great academic or sporting success but nonetheless I appreciate what they did for me and remain indebted to their organisation.

I want to mention particularly some old friends and colleagues from the union movement, Len Darnley, Don Burton and Ron Hesse, three individuals who gave me an important chance which I will not elaborate on today. They know it and I would like it to be recorded. My friend, colleague and former boss, Kerry Sibraa, falls into a category of special friends that have been sponsors and patrons along with Johnno Johnson and Leo McLeay. Unlike some people I have not had a formal patron - that has gone out of style in the new Labor Party and it is probably a very good thing. If I have had patronage, encouragement and support then Leo, Kerry and Johnno have been very important to me in that regard.

I have also been privileged in my previous career to serve with great people as officers of the party. I will not be able to mention them all, but I want to make particular mention of Mr Justice Terry Sheahan, my good friend and former colleague. I also mention John McBean and Paul Keating and one or two others I will not name, in keeping with the spirit of my inaugural speech. I regard Paul Keating as one of the two greatest Prime Ministers of this Commonwealth.

I would not be able to conclude my remarks without speaking of my family and my children, Alexander and Julian. My wife, Belinda Neal, is present in the gallery today. The partners of many people involved in politics know the great strain and stresses which political life places on people. I do not know how many honourable members are in that situation but there is one very obvious example of such a couple on the crossbenches. The pressures place great stress and strain on a family relationship when both people are involved and have a political vocation. Belinda has been my strongest personal supporter and my strongest political supporter. For that I am grateful. I place on record that she remains one of the most courageous and ferocious advocates for individual liberties and community welfare. I am not only grateful in the personal sense that I am married to her, but also I am very proud of what she has done in politics and in her career.

I had intended to finish with something meaningful and thoughtful. I can only finish with the Drug Summit and to return to my analogy about King Philip of France and his rather less successful

Page 61

summit. Perhaps we should briefly reflect on the fact that if someone had worked out the relationship between the pestilence and the proximity of rats considerable suffering would have been avoided. A bit of commonsense and good observation might have been more successful than all of the genius available at the time. I suppose I cannot resist saying that there was also the possibility that they may have been right: perhaps the black plague was caused by a conjunction of the stars on 29 March 1345.