HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 February 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr EDWARDS (Cowan) (1.24 pm)—It is indeed a privilege to return to this 40th Parliament and to be able to take part in this debate on the address-in-reply. From the outset, I want to thank the electors of Cowan for their continuing faith in me. I was returned to this place with a healthy increase in my vote in an election which did no favours to the ALP. I want to thank those who contributed to the campaign, particularly the ALP members who, as has well been identified, are indeed the true believers. I want to thank the many volunteers—the workers—who manned pre-polling booths, delivered pamphlets and letters, and staffed booths so well on the day.

I particularly want to thank my office staff—Maurene, Tim and Simon—for their dedication to the responsibilities of my office over the past three years and for the very professional and committed way in which they have dealt with our constituents in the electorate. It is very pleasing to me to go out to various places in the electorate and talk to various people and to be constantly receiving compliments about the way in which my office is run and the way in which my office staff deal with constituents. I also want to thank my wife, Noelen, and my daughters, Kerryn and Jaynie, for their love and support—qualities without which this job would be untenable.

Over many years I have been a strong supporter of Kim Beazley. If there is a tragedy resulting from this election, it is that Kim Beazley will not be the Prime Minister. Kim Beazley is a man of courage, character and intellect and his qualities of leadership, vision, compassion and a sense of Australiana are qualities which are sorely needed at this time in our nation's history, yet qualities which are sadly missing from our nation's top office.

I want to congratulate Simon Crean and his frontbench team. They are a good team and I am pleased, indeed thrilled, to see some of the younger members—that is, the class of `98—get their chance in this parliament to move to the frontbench and tackle many of the challenging issues confronting this nation and I know that they will do well. I am particularly pleased to have been appointed parliamentary secretary to the shadow minister for defence and parliamentary secretary to the shadow minister for veterans’ affairs. Senator Mark Bishop is a talented and hard-working member and I know that in the short time he has been in the portfolio area he has covered much ground and received many briefings on the issues confronting veterans. I look forward to working with him in these areas. I also have a high regard for Senator Chris Evans and I look forward to working with him in the years ahead. Chris Evans has a big task in front of him and the shadow responsibilities of defence could not have been put in better hands on this side.

I congratulate Mr Speaker on his well-deserved re-election to the highest office in this parliament and I wish him well in his duties, as I do to the deputies: the members for Page and Scullin. I know that Mr Deputy Speaker Jenkins will not mind me saying that he is held in high regard in this parliament, not just by members on this side of the House. One of the requests I do want to make to Mr Speaker is for him to revisit the issue of dress standards in this place. Some members will recall that in the previous parliament I raised this issue and I had listed a motion which suggested that collar and tie without coat should be considered a suitable dress for this chamber. This European dress standard is a nonsense in Australia. To have to come into this chamber in the middle of summer with a collar, tie and coat is a nonsense and it does absolutely nothing to reflect the Australian way of life. It is time we had a bit of reform in this area, and I know that there are people on both sides of the chamber who actually support that.

Speaking to the address-in-reply gives members the opportunity to focus on issues which they believe are important to their individual constituencies. There are many issues important to the electors of Cowan: the issues that we campaigned on—health, education, aged care and so on. But there are also many local issues such as the current fights to preserve existing planning structures in some of the suburbs like Greenwood, Kingsley and Woodvale—all central residences and neighbourhoods in the electorate of Cowan. I want to congratulate those members of the public who have recently taken up the fight against the City of Joondalup who put forward a concept to change the nature of these suburbs. There have been two requisition meetings held in the last week. At the first one there were almost 3,000 electors. At the second one, which was held on Monday night—unfortunately, I was not able to attend—there were in excess of 2,000 people. Such is the depth of feeling that ratepayers and residents have about their areas. It would pay the City of Joondalup well—their councillors
and their staff—to heed the very strong messages that they have received from ratepayers at these requisition meetings.

Other planning issues such as those in precinct 64 in the suburb of Landsdale—an area just to the east of my electorate office—continue to drag on. One such issue involves a Telstra site, and hopefully it will be resolved to some degree in the not too distant future. I raised the issue of Telstra when I was first elected, and I am pleased that things have moved on and there have been some changes. However, the whole site has undergone another change since I last spoke on the issue, and that change relates to two satellite ground stations which will be installed by Telstra in an area which is about to become more urbanised. I want to quote from a media release from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of 16 October 2001, headed ‘Satellite ground stations: Australia-Japan joint venture’. It reads:

I am pleased to announce that two satellite ground stations will be built at Telstra's Perth International Telecommunications Centre under a contract between the National Space Development Agency (NASDA) of Japan and a Telstra joint venture company ‘Xantic’. The ground stations will communicate with six Japanese satellites, two of which will have a scientific, research, and commercial function, while the other four are information gathering satellites.

The first ground station will support the two scientific, research and commercial satellites. The second ground station will only perform a safety function at the time of the launch and positioning into orbit of the information gathering satellites. Once these satellites are safely in orbit, the latter ground station will be dismantled. The permanent ground station will not perform any function in relation to the information gathering satellites.

The Australian Government has agreed to this arrangement as a practical contribution to our relationship with Japan. Our hosting of the ground stations will further strengthen the economic, political and security aspects of our relationship.

I have some concerns about the nature of the scientific research and commercial function, and I wonder if at all that will impact on Australia in those areas. We are all aware of Japan's scientific research into whaling, which has done it no good anywhere. I am concerned about the information gathering aspects of this station, and I refer to an article in the *West Australian* on Wednesday, 17 October 2001, headed ‘Japan plans WA spy base: green light for Landsdale station to monitor six satellites’. It reads:

The Japanese Government is set to build a station in Perth to monitor the launch of four spy satellites.

The Federal Government said yesterday that Japan's National Space Development Agency had been given the green light to begin construction of the station at Telstra's international telecommunications centre in Landsdale.

Japan plans to launch four spy satellites to gather information on regional activities and two commercial satellites over a nine-month period beginning in February 2003.

The tracking station will be operated remotely from Japan and feature two giant radar dishes. One of the dishes will be dismantled once the spy satellites are in orbit. The other will monitor the commercial satellites.

A spokesman for Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer said the deal would strengthen Australia's economic, political and security relationships with Japan. He would not comment on whether information obtained by the spy satellites would be shared with Australia.

The spokesman also denied that the satellites would be used to spy on Australia.

“The Japanese Government has said that the satellites are for gathering information for their own security and we accept that,” he said. “We have a close and friendly relationship with Japan and we share a national interest in maintaining regional stability.”

Defence analyst Professor Des Ball, from the Australian National University's strategic and defence studies centre, said the satellites would be capable of capturing digital images from every corner of the globe, including Australia.

But he said it was likely they would be used to monitor only countries nearer Japan's borders, such as North Korea, China and the former Soviet Union. China had similar satellites in orbit.

“All countries in this region are rapidly building up their intelligence collection capabilities, including Australia,” Professor Ball said. “We've got our own (spy satellite) that has been designed and will be ready for construction soon.

“This is the end of the Cold War—it's everyone for themselves.”

I guess I was not too concerned at that stage about these things, although I did have a briefing at this site and I must say the issue of information gathering capacity was not provided at that briefing by Telstra. But it
is interesting to move from there, post September 11, into this current environment and read an article in the *Australian* today under the heading 'Spy claims shake ministry'. I will quote part of the story:

The Howard Government was in disarray last night, over allegations it used phone intercepts provided by a spy agency to defend its controversial asylum seekers policy. Defence Minister Robert Hill was forced to issue a statement denying that the Defence Signals Directorate had been used to spy on communications between the Maritime Union of Australia, the International Transport Federation and the MV Tampa. But Senator Hill's statement was further at odds with earlier statements from Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott.

An editorial in the same newspaper under the heading 'Canberra must answer spy allegations' says:

'I don't think any government could get away with that.' At least Alexander Downer admitted the Howard Government will be in dangerous territory if it is proven it spied on Australians during the Tampa affair. For who can trust a government that authorises a spy agency to listen in on the private conversations of its own citizens, and then uses the intelligence for political purposes in the heat of an election campaign?

In another article in the same paper today under the heading 'Indefensible breach of privacy' there is a subheading of 'Australian citizens were spied on in a saga that constitutes one of the most absurd overreactions in our maritime history, argues Scott Burchill'. I will quote part of the article:

The revelation that the Howard Government deployed the resources of the Defence Signals Directorate during the Tampa crisis last year to confer upon itself a political advantage constitutes much more than a breach of public trust. The first effect will be to undermine the integrity of the DSD, which is only supposed to pass on the details of the signals intercepts of Australians (including phone calls faxes and email) in cases of a serious criminal offence, a threat to the life and safety of Australian citizens, or if there is a suspicion that an Australian is acting as an agent of a foreign power.

Federal minister Tony Abbott's claim yesterday that the DSD would only have been acting 'in the national interest' is a pathetic and inadequate defence of what appears to be a clear breach of the law.

These things not only undermine the credibility of the DSD but also further undermine the credibility of the government. Where I might have been able to some time ago take their word for things, I am no longer prepared to do that. I want some answers, and so do my constituents, about the full nature of the equipment which is being installed at Landsdale. I want to know what the nature of these four information gathering satellites is. Will Australia share in that information? Is there a military aspect to this information? If so, does this have anything to do with the war against terrorism? Does it have anything to do with President Bush's axis of evil? We have already heard the suggestion from the *West Australian* and from defence experts that these satellites will be able to spy on North Korea, which is one of the countries named by President Bush as being part of this axis of evil.

Why is this facility being installed so close to residential areas which are about to become further urbanised? Is the Australian government being totally honest with the Australian people and has the full nature of these satellites been disclosed? Why was this announcement made by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and not by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts in the first place? As I said, I want some answers to these questions and I want to be able to ensure that my constituents who live adjacent to this Telstra site are fully informed of the nature of the site and the job that it is doing.

I do not want to be alarmist about these things but, as I have said, since that release of the minister's, things have changed. I do not trust the Australian government and I am sure that there are many Australians out there who, following the most recent revelations of how they were spied on, also will not trust the Australian government. In short: is the Landsdale site being used by the Australian government to spy on other Australians? I want a clear answer from this government on that question, as will my constituents and many other Australians.

I have spoken to the shadow minister for foreign affairs, Kevin Rudd, who I might say has taken like a duck to water to that job. He is a very active, committed and professional member of parliament, and a very professional shadow minister. I know that he will want some answers, and I am sure that he will want a briefing from the Minister for Foreign Affairs so that we can confirm what it is that the Landsdale site is now involved in.

I do not have much more time, but there are some issues which I want to visit briefly. I said earlier that the debate on the address-in-reply gives a member the opportunity to forecast some of the things that he or she will be interested in pursuing over the next three years. I am particularly interested in my electorate in the issue of aged care. Like many other members on this side of the House, I celebrate the fact that we now have a new minister for aged care. I celebrate the fact that the former minister, Bronwyn Bishop, has moved on.
I have had a bit to do with the new Minister for Ageing, Mr Andrews. I believe him to be a man of character and a man of good qualities. I hope that he will do everything he can to restore some credibility, some compassion and some integrity to the whole area of aged care, because it needs it. The people who work in the area need some support and they need some leadership. But, above all, the people in our community who rely on aged care, particularly the frail aged, must be given some guarantee that there is a change in the attitude of the Howard government. They must be given some reassurance that they will not continue to be treated in the very shabby way that they have been treated in the past. I say to the new minister that he has a big job here, he has a big task, but I am sure that if he goes about it in an energetic, honest and straightforward way he will have support from members on this side of the House in addressing those issues.

I also want to quickly touch on veterans’ affairs. I want to congratulate the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Danna Vale, on her appointment to this very important portfolio. I have not yet had the opportunity to talk to her. I know she is in Singapore, and I think it is very appropriate that she is there commemorating the Australians who lost their lives in Singapore. There is a lot of work to be done in veterans’ affairs. There is also a lot of work to be done to restore the integrity of that portfolio, following the demise of the minister who recently lost that portfolio. I know that there are many people in the rank and file of the veteran community who celebrate that as well.

I wish the new Minister for Veterans’ Affairs all the very best. I am only too happy to work with her on a bipartisan basis on issues which impact on the veteran community. I compliment the government on putting forward the review of certain aspects of the Veterans Entitlement Act. It is a catch-all review. I hope the government are fair dinkum about it, and I look forward to having some input, as I know many veterans do. Once again, Mr Deputy Speaker, I take the opportunity to wish you all the best in your new job. (Time expired)