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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Swan Electorate: Belmont Community Group

SPEECH

Monday, 14 September 2015

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Questioner
Speaker Irons, Steve, MP

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Mr IRONS (Swan) (18:41): I have stood in this place before and spoken about a group in my electorate called the Belmont Community Group. At that particular time I linked them as an exact replica of Craig Thomson's Coastal Voice. The set-up was the same and the hiding of their affiliations with unions and with the Labor Party was exactly the same. I spoke about that some time ago and I am now going to speak about it again, to update the good people of Belmont and to let them know that the group is still there and still keeping that facade of being a Belmont community group when they are nothing more than a front for the Labor Party and the unions.

The ugly side of the Labor Party, which the people of Western Australian in particular have never liked, is the link with the unions and the fact that many of the key decisions that impact people when Labor are in power are made by faceless union officials who they have never heard of and who they have not elected.

Quite often the Labor Party tries to hide these links when presenting its image to members of the public. Part of the job of the coalition is to shine a light on this unsavoury part of the Labor Party so that voters know who in fact they are really voting for. That is what I intend to do today, with particular reference to some recent activity in my electorate. As I said before, it is to do with the Belmont Community Group.

When I was first elected in 2007, the coalition's vote held up very strongly in Western Australia. Part of this was a strong reaction to union behaviour from characters such as Joe McDonald and Kevin Reynolds. The coalition actually picked up two seats at that election in WA, against the national tide, including my seat of Swan. Since then union activity has rarely been out of the news, be it the involvement of the unions in the toppling of Kevin Rudd or the scandals of the Health Services Union and then, of course, the issues with the AWU. At the moment we have the Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption, which is showing the extent of union corruption across Australia. As at 19 August, there had been a total of 26 people referred to agencies, including public prosecutions, including in WA, and there have been four arrests made. Four hundred and forty-one witnesses have given evidence in public and private hearings or have had a witness statement tendered as evidence, and there have been 149 public and private hearings conducted to date, including in Perth. The numbers speak for themselves.

I must also admit that I do have a bit of family history in the union area. I understand how they operate, with my uncle being a former secretary of the painters' and dockers' union in Melbourne. My father and his other brother were both painters and dockers as well.

We have seen over the last few weeks the Labor Party, at the behest of the unions—such as the militant CFMEU—trying here in parliament to have the royal commission shut down on spurious grounds. I think this shows that the Labor Party will always put their union bosses before anyone else, and this is the reason the Western Australian people are so rightly aware of union involvement in politics.

In my electorate of Swan there has been a history of ugly scenes involving unions, many of which I have spoken about before. In 2007, we had Joe McDonald and Kevin Reynolds, in 2010 we had a dispute between two Labor figures now in parliament, Joe Bullock and Kate Doust MLC, which ended by affecting adversely the Labor Party candidate's chances on polling day. At the Senate election last year there were ugly scenes, again involving Mr Bullock, after a deal between the faceless union officials to decide who would be elected to the Senate angered their membership. At my first election in 2007, at the first booth that I went out to in the eastern part of my electorate, union thugs had been through that morning and had kicked over or ripped down all of our signs. And at the next election, they actually went to one of the booths and set fire to our signs. So we know that they are passionate about election day and that there is nothing they will not do.

In my electorate we have a situation where the AWU and TWU are trying to transplant union officials into the area. I have spoken before about the Belmont Community Group organisation in my electorate. I have spoken about how the organisation was set up only recently and how the group's organisers seem to be not just members

of the Labor Party but, in some instances, members of the same family. They have recently transplanted into the area from not only the western suburbs but also Victoria. The head of the family is a former Labor MLA in Victoria. I spoke about how the organisation was at the time apparently concealing its links to the Labor Party and trying to present itself as independent. I received some interesting feedback from constituents of the Belmont area following my speech. They were completely unaware of the links of this group to the Labor Party. I think it is the secrecy that has so disappointed members of the community. As I said in my previous speech, if you are Labor then why not just say so instead of going to these lengths to hide it? If you are interested in the community then why not get involved with other local groups? There are plenty of them who would love the support. Why does it have to be hidden?

What I did not mention in my speech is that the executive of this group are all linked to unions. I will now talk about this more fully. The president of this community group is a member of the AWU, the vice-president is a member of the AWU, the patron is a member of the TWU and the secretary is a member of the TWU. So the Belmont Community Group seems to be a group for unions. Once again, you would not know this from the website or the communications put out by the group. Once again, it is a case of the unions and Labor not telling the whole truth to the local people. It is tricky, and I inform the people of Belmont today so that they can make their judgement on the reasons the group is not disclosing this information. A number of these union affiliated individuals are running in the upcoming council elections. It will be interesting to see if the union affiliations are actually declared in any of their material so that people know who they are voting for. I somehow doubt whether we shall see that.

What is the immediate consequence of all this? In the time I have remaining I want to turn to a couple of key issues in the City of Belmont, where Labor and the unions are letting the local people down. The first is the Belmont community centre. The City of Belmont has been trying since at least 2009 to get some funding for a new multipurpose facility to accommodate the library, senior citizens centre, Belmont Museum, a creche and a cafe as well as providing facilities for the community groups and important not-for-profit providers. This development is vital for residents as a number of existing facilities are falling apart or are beyond their lifespan. The council advises that housing these services together in a new development is the most cost-effective way if they are to provide these services into the future without increasing the rates. The facility has been planned since well before 2009. It is time to get on and build it. It is no longer an option to do nothing.

In 2010, we tried to get some federal funding for this project but we were knocked back by the Gillard government despite having the strong support of the council and local residents. The local residents saw it as a disappointment at the time, given that the money was going elsewhere, including to the new Leisureplex at Canning, and came as a double blow after Belmont's NBN proposal had been rejected. The minister of the day, Mr Conroy, said that the Belmont NBN proposal was one of the best he had seen. But Belmont still did not get it because it did not suit their political agenda.

Now, in 2015, with facilities at the City of Belmont in rapid decline, the council has put together another submission for a federal funding contribution from the coalition's National Stronger Regions Fund. I understand that Belmont is seeking a federal contribution of \$10 million to what is a \$28.3 million project and will be seeking funds from other sources as well. I have offered my support to this application, which is currently being considered, as it would be a significant contribution to the overall project and take some significant pressure off the council in funding this development. We must also remember that the whole area is the second lowest rated SES area in the whole state. So this is an area that actually needs help and funding. However, unfortunately Labor continues to stand in the way of efforts to achieve the funding, and I understand that the local Labor MLC, Ms Rowe, is not providing a letter of support to the application currently being considered by the government. Ms Rowe happens to also be involved in the Belmont Community Group and the TWU. As you would know, broad support is helpful when pushing funding in Canberra, and the lack of support being offered by Labor just makes this task more challenging. The project is being considered now, and it is not the best message for Labor to be sending.

Finally, I want to mention another project relevant to the Belmont area which is under threat because of the Labor Party and its union links: the Perth Freight Link project. It is designed to improve access of freight from the Kewdale and Welshpool industrial areas to the Fremantle port. It enjoys the support of many in the community and the coalition as a means of boosting economic growth from jobs in Perth. There is, however, a split in the Labor Party that is putting all this at risk. A group led by the member for Perth is now opposing the project outright, and this now seems to be the position of many of the Labor Party. Part of the reason seems to be the

pressure from the green groups and the Greens party, as the road crosses a wetland. On the other hand, the TWU has come out in support of the project, as they see that it would be good for their members. I am not sure where Ms Rowe MLC stands, as she is a TWU member and also, obviously, a member of the Labor Party. These vital projects are necessary for my community and I say to Labor and the Belmont Community Group: get onboard.