

GOVERNOR'S SPEECH
Address-in-reply
Jacinta Ermacora, Inaugural Speech
Legislative Council

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:52): I second the motion for the address-in-reply to the Governor's speech. President, I also congratulate you on your appointment.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand here today in this place, the Wurundjeri people, and I acknowledge the Eastern Maar, Gunditjmarra, Barengi Gadjin and Wathaurong people as traditional owners of the western region of Victoria. I acknowledge the land was never ceded and that the prosperity of settler people has been at the expense of First Peoples. I wish to recognise the difficult work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, because as Uncle Rob Lowe said to me recently, 'If the stories are not told, then the healing can't happen'. One of my hopes for my time in this place is to play my part in promoting respect and understanding for the scientific, farming, economic and traditional knowledge held by First Nations people. I intend to listen to the stories of the past, and I look forward to working toward a treaty with First People in our state. I am deeply honoured to stand in this place representing the people of Western Victoria Region. I congratulate all members here today and Premier Daniel Andrews for achieving a resounding endorsement by the people of Victoria at the election. As an incoming member I see a government with a vision, a big and bold agenda, that does what matters for Victorian people, and I am excited to play a part in that.

I have been involved in Labor in Western Victoria for about 25 years. I represented our region at the state conference thanks to the support of Labor members in the seat of Wannon, and I acknowledge Kylie Gaston here today representing those members; it is a very long way from Wannon to here. The friendships and mentoring that I have received over the years across the party mean a lot to me. Helen Coleman, Pam McLeod, Di Clanchy, Lisa Neville, Gayle Tierney, Lily D'Ambrosio, John Eren, Richard Marles, Jaala Pulford, Ella George and Sam Rae are but a few of the wonderful people who have guided me and worked with me on the needs of south-western Victoria in my various roles over the years.

To my knowledge, the last Victorian Labor electorate office located in Warrnambool was that of Malcolm Gladman, 1952 to 1955 – some 67 years ago – so having our Labor office in Warrnambool is almost revolutionary, and I am confident our community will appreciate greater access to government.

The dinner table during my childhood was the place where I first experienced the joy of passionate political debate. My parents Bill and Lorraine Ermacora delighted in encouraging me and my sister Luisa and my brother William to think critically and be engaged in the world around us. Most nights we would listen to the 7 pm ABC radio news – I am that old. Afterwards the radio would be turned off and away we would go discussing and debating our positions on the news of the day. Mum and Dad expressed their values through their community involvement and service. They showed us the value of volunteering, of taking up additional responsibilities and of being active and involved with others to better where we lived. I remember one day a man came to the house and invited Dad to stand for preselection for the Liberal Party. Dad told him he was very honoured, but it was the 'wrong party, mate'.

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My parents supported me in every endeavour I undertook – fought through university in Melbourne, delivering lamb chops and firewood. Later, after I returned to our region, they even fielded constituent inquiries while I was a Warrnambool city councillor, as they were the only Ermacora in the book. They helped shoulder my stress during tough times, always offering a wise listening post. Without fail Mum and Dad would letterbox and work polling booths whenever I asked, and they did this for the candidates I was assisting. We lost Dad in January this year, and I cannot help thinking about how proud he would have been here today. I miss his application of politics to everyday life, the constant list of books he would recommend that I read, and I remember very fondly his humour. My partner in life, my husband Francis Broekman, and our daughters Annika and Alena Broekman have always been a tower of strength and joy for me. We are a team, our family of four, and they have been through some pretty absurd experiences due to my involvement in politics. Family are both bystanders and inextricably involved, and I know growing up with a mother who was often on the front page of the local paper was not easy. I feel so thankful to Francis, Annika and Alena, always showing dignity, always having my back. I also thank my wonderful parents-in-law Mary and Harry Broekman and the whole Broekman family for their constant support of Francis and I, despite some of them being mystified at my involvement in politics.

We are all the sum of our past. Trauma, hunger and homelessness are primal drivers in the human condition. I am an Australian because of a life-changing tragedy that happened to a 14-year-old boy during World War I in Friuli in north-eastern Italy. He was assisting the war effort when he heard of his older brother's death before his parents were informed. He could not bring himself to tell his mum and dad. He came home each evening, waiting for three days before the authorities came to tell them. That young boy migrated to Australia in 1922 at the age of 22. His name was Guglielmo Ermacora. He was my grandfather. He and my nonna Olga ran a wine shop in Smith Street, Collingwood – not very far from here – raised their family and volunteered as migration advocates for the second wave of Italian migrants that arrived after World War II. The reason he was a migrant advocate is the same reason I am here in this place today: to play my part in making the world I live in a better place for future generations. Even the most ordinary migration story is full of drama and pain and loss but also full of hope for a better life. The contribution of the waves of migrants that have settled in Victoria is a beautiful example of hope and aspiration for our state. We must continue to welcome and nurture our new migrants, because we will be rewarded with generations of talented contributions to our diverse community.

I have been privileged to work in regional leadership roles across south-west Victoria for 18 years now. I have seen and taken part in change and progress. Following the example of Mum and Dad, I became involved in local community organisations and ran successfully for Warrnambool City Council in 2004 as a local government councillor and became mayor of Warrnambool. I saw how partnerships with government could achieve very positive outcomes for community. The affordable housing program in Dennington, Warrnambool–Port Fairy Rail Trail, numerous new civic facilities, construction of key link roads in growth corridors, a new industrial park to create jobs and the complete redevelopment of the main street of Warrnambool all played a role in positioning

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Warrnambool for the future during my time in local government. Each of these projects received local, state or federal funding.

Looking back, I would say that I have learned a great deal about the leading role that local government can play in regional development. A region can achieve enormous transformation through the powerful combination of good leadership and good government. These experiences have prepared me for getting to know the whole of the Western Victoria Region and advocating for their needs. Some challenges seem insurmountable at times, but I have seen enormous change in our region. When I think back to the early 2000s, when the gas plant and pipelines were constructed at Port Campbell, I could not have imagined that in a few short years wind farms would spring up across the landscape, that businesses and residents would install solar panels, that Wannon Water would install a wind turbine on its land at Portland and that Deakin University in Warrnambool would be developing renewable hydrogen. Now, with the Andrews Labor government's return of the State Electricity Commission and renewable trade training at TAFEs, our region is well placed to continue the journey to carbon neutrality. I am confident that a combination of private sector and government investment will achieve affordable electricity, energy security, carbon neutrality, job opportunities and a thriving economy in our state.

As a state we are only as strong as the most vulnerable amongst us. Social justice, fairness and equality are my Labor values. I believe that the unique needs of outer regional communities can be viewed through the lens of diversity and inclusion. To this end I could not be prouder of the approach of the Andrews government – the massive investment in Warrnambool Base Hospital, mental health and the rebuilding of the TAFE sector, which has been transformative, especially in small towns, where it costs more to deliver vital skills to country people. The regional rail upgrade, where the Big Build comes to the regions, is another example of necessary regional equality. It is exciting that stage 1 of the Warrnambool line is now complete. Capping daily V/Line fares to metropolitan fares is a massive recognition by our government that it costs more to live in the country. This initiative alone will make it vastly cheaper for outer regional individuals and families to visit Melbourne to work, for health or for enjoyment. I was honoured to play a very small role in supporting Gayle Tierney and Kylie Gaston achieve a new library for Warrnambool so that everyone can access information and education in a beautiful purpose-built facility. Again this was achieved through a brilliant partnership between the Andrews government, South West TAFE and Warrnambool City Council.

Equality is another value that is brought to life by the actions of this government. Free kinder, construction of state-owned childcare centres and the incredibly important journey to treaty are recent examples, as is our progress towards gender equality. When I reflect on the workforce experiences of three generations of women in my family, I can see enormous progress as well as a long way further to go. My mother was required to resign from her job when she became engaged to Dad. Whilst my generation stayed in the workforce, many had to put up with sexual harassment and discrimination, and today many young women are delaying motherhood due to the high economic and social price paid.

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We still have a long way to go, but the leadership of the Andrews government has been groundbreaking to say the least. Among other strategies, the Gender Equality Act 2020 brings in a set of tools to enable employers to make workplace changes. I am delighted to have had the opportunity as chair of Wannon Water to help implement these reforms at a practical level. As a social worker in the 1990s I had the deep privilege of listening to survivors of sexual assault when I worked as a counsellor advocate at South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault in Warrnambool. The continuum of violence against women, whether it is a demeaning joke in a pub or aggravated sexual assault, continues to underpin the deep structures of exclusion for women in our community today. I want to thank the women and families who came forward to the Royal Commission into Family Violence and told their story so the Andrews Labor government could respond. I also thank the public servants, lawyers and non-government organisations that are working on delivering support to women because of the royal commission. This work is only possible because of the leadership of the Andrews Labor government.

I first joined the Labor Party in 1997. I had not done so earlier, even though I had known I would for a long time, because, to be honest, I found it a bit blokey. Since then, Labor has transformed from an organisation almost exclusive of women to one where women are front and centre. Many of the policy initiatives of this government have come about because women are at the table. I am so proud to be sworn into a government with 14 female ministers. Times are indeed changing, and the Andrews government has been instrumental in facilitating that change.

In closing, it was never about Parliament or bust for me. I have only ever wanted to represent my own regional community. Representing and advocating for the unique needs of Western Victoria and other regional communities is central to my reason for being here in this place. We know that it costs more to live in the country, that our communities are less healthy, have lower education attainment levels, struggle to reach services and earn lower incomes. I have always felt that our voices and perspectives need to be heard and understood. I acknowledge the privilege I have to represent regional Victoria in this place.

The Andrews government is governing for the whole of Victoria, and I am so proud to have the opportunity to play my part. I pledge to always be frank and forthcoming, to always remember where I am from and to work with dedication and focus for the people of Western Victoria.

Members applauded.