

INAUGURAL SPEECH OF THE HONOURABLE JOHN AJAKA

Page: 315

The PRESIDENT: I ask members to bear in mind that this is the first speech of the Hon. John Ajaka. I ask that all customary courtesies be accorded and that the member be heard in silence.

The Hon. JOHN AJAKA [5.51 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): With the indulgence of this honourable House, I rise to deliver my inaugural speech. The *Bible* instructs us to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." As a child, as a 10-year-old altar boy at the Lebanese Melkite Catholic Church, those words from St Matthew carved a guiding life philosophy into my young heart from the moment I first heard them. But tonight I would like to combine that philosophy with the last great commandment of Jesus: "That you should love one another as I have loved you."

The *Bible* says that we must act generously with grace, with compassion, with concern and with justice. But, it is not enough just to do the right thing to others. We must love the act, and we must love the people for whom we are striving. That is how in this place I shall always endeavour to serve the people of this state; with the same commitment, compassion and love that my parents showed to me as a child.

My mother and father travelled to Australia from Lebanon in the early 1950s with my older brother and sister, Albert and Eva, in tow. After being billeted with a family in Wollongong my dad went to work shovelling coal into the furnaces at BHP and found us a house in Corrimal. Mum turned that house into a home, but she also worked in a number of factories. She always knew how important the extra money she earned would be for our family. From time to time she even worked the midnight shift to raise the money needed for her children's future schooling. My mother believed passionately in education, and for that my whole family will always be deeply grateful.

I was the first of our family to be born in Australia—in 1956 at Bulli Hospital. I was named, perhaps optimistically, after John the Baptist. Some of my first memories are of worshipping with my family at the local Catholic Church, St Joseph's in Corrimal. However, life was not all about attending church. I remember also how my family kept pigeons, goats and chickens and my being given the greatly sought after job of holding the rabbits we had caught for dinner while my father skinned them. In the early 1960s my parents moved to Rockdale and, with the births of Louie and Ann, my family was complete. Between 1964 and 1966 I lived in Lebanon. In Australia I had always been aware of my ethnic background; it was hard not to be, with the ever-present taunts and jeers thrown by other children. However, living in Lebanon I felt like a foreigner.

Upon my return I threw myself back into the Australian lifestyle. I went to school at St Joseph's in Rockdale and then Marist Brothers in Kogarah. I joined the Army cadets and graduated as the second-highest ranking officer. I boxed for 12 years and played rugby league for eight years. I served briefly in the Army Reserve, leaving only to open my first law practice in Rockdale at the age of 27. For a little Lebanese kid from Wollongong, the son of immigrants, I felt exceptionally blessed. It was not an easy road for me, as I am sure it is not an easy road for many others, be they immigrants or first- or even second-generation Australians.

We demand that our new Australians fully embrace our way of life, and appropriately so. I have a friend who did just that. He is an Australian Moslem of Lebanese background. He came to this country when he was 10 and is now in his mid-thirties, with a beautiful wife and young children.

He has contributed much to our community and is an accomplished businessman. He previously ran a successful hairdressing salon and now owns and manages a popular local day care centre.

A month ago he came to see me, very upset, after his son was subjected to a particularly vicious and racist rant. He said, "John, I don't understand it. This society asks us to embrace being Australian, but society is not embracing my children as Australians. They still see us as ethnics. They still see us as wogs." Now whilst I believe that the overwhelming majority of Australians do not engage in this behaviour, I still think there is a lesson to be remembered here. Prime Minister Howard, a great leader of our country, whom I am proud to have always supported, has often spoken of the concept of mutual obligation. I believe that that applies here too. Immigrants and those from differing ethnic backgrounds are obliged to accept and embrace the norms and traditions of Australian society. And it is just as incumbent on Australian society to open their minds and their hearts to the newer arrivals; to accept and include and embrace.

However sometimes society, and the media that reflects it, do not help that process. For example, I think there is a real argument for the abolition of ethnic descriptors when discussing alleged perpetrators of crime. Within any grouping in society there will always be the troublemakers—the hoodlums—those who refuse to embrace the laws and conventions of the time. This is just as true for racial groupings as it is for bankers, or journalists, or even politicians. However, a continual reference to "Middle Eastern criminals" and people "of Middle Eastern appearance" does not help to solve the problem; it only serves to drive wedges further into our society.

Peter El Khouri, the Chairman of the Australian Middle East Christian Council and a great friend of mine, has argued that, "There is a perception that the Middle Eastern community—Australians of Middle Eastern background—are significantly responsible for crime in the state." When this perception takes hold all sorts of unpleasant consequences follow. In the lead-up to the Cronulla riots for example, people described as being of Middle Eastern appearance were found later to be of Caucasian, Greek and Serbian background.

Last year a woman was charged by police after she falsely claimed that she and her baby boy were robbed by a man of Middle Eastern appearance armed with a screwdriver. It is interesting that she immediately chose the description "Middle Eastern appearance" for her fabricated story. The public was outraged by the attack. Media frenzy ensued, and all to find a man who did not even exist—a man alleged to be of Middle Eastern appearance. The problem is that all these attitudes trickle down into the schoolyard and into the consciousness of the next generation. Over the past two months I have been asked on more occasions than I can recall why I decided to run for Parliament. This is the first reason. Australia is a great society, a progressive society, a society that has shown it will embrace difference. But still, even now, a latent prejudice runs through our community like an underground stream—a stream that bubbles to the surface in times and in places unexpected, as we witnessed with the emergence of the stench and stain of One Nation. When I was a child some of my peers sadly constructed my entire identity solely on my ethnic background. They isolated, separated and labelled me a wog. This was all I would ever be to them. Well, I do not want my children—any children—growing up with the feelings I had when I was growing up. We have come so far in the past 30 years in tearing down the monolith of prejudice. I am here to add my own small contribution to the continuation of this important task.

If the first reason for my presence in this place is to fight prejudice, the second is to fight injustice. I believe in the spirit of the law. I have been proud to serve in the legal profession for a quarter of a century. I believe it is a worthy and noble profession. It is an honour to have been appointed parliamentary secretary to the shadow attorney general, Greg Smith, a senior lawyer for whom I have the utmost respect. I look forward to working with Greg in trying to find good

and fair policy for law and justice in this state. I also look forward to fighting for an appropriate allocation of resources in justice, including the necessary upgrades of courts such as Kogarah, and of police stations in places like Kiama, Moorebank, Rockdale and Menai.

In my time in law I have seen many issues that I believe should have been and can be addressed by this place, but today I will speak to one about which I have a great concern and for which the New South Wales Law Society has become a tireless advocate: the current compensation system for personal injury, which I believe has lost its fairness and equity. The current system was supposed to achieve a balance between the rights of injured people to compensation and the ability of the community to pay. But the result has been that the majority of people that are injured, through no fault of their own, are now not entitled to fair compensation. Whilst I understand the desire to reduce minor and vexatious claims, I believe that the new requirements have gone too far.

This situation has arisen because injured people now need to meet a certain threshold based on a percentage of bodily impairment before being considered for compensation. The present system is arbitrary because whether a person is injured at home, at work or in a car now determines the threshold the injured person must meet. The new stringent tests that were introduced have made it much more difficult to receive fair compensation for injuries suffered. The fundamental right of the individual to appeal has been limited and, contrary to the notion of fairness, the ongoing everyday impacts an injury has on a person's life are not readily taken into account. I agree with the proponents of the fair compensation campaign that this all adds up to a system that is unfair, inconsistent and too bureaucratic. The balance is now tilted too far the other way and people are not receiving the compensation that they deserve. But I believe that the system can be fixed.

The Government should abolish the present absurd system of a 10 per cent threshold for some victims and 15 per cent for others and replace it with a uniform approach to ensure fairness. I believe these arbitrary rules should be replaced with a single test to be applied to all victims of injuries. The rules should take into account the full impact people's injuries will have on their lives, including loss of future income, an incapacity to engage in their favourite recreational activities, or an ability to enjoy family activities. I believe that in the interests of fairness there should be one scheme and one test for all. This is one of the issues that will be my focus and my priority over the years ahead.

Sitting as an elected councillor on Rockdale council I know how critical good planning is for the amenity of the local urban environment. Local councils are the elected voice of local residents. They know their local areas best and should be trusted to make responsible and sensible planning decisions for their constituents. I have great concerns at the ever-increasing centralisation of planning powers and believe that this must be reversed. Councils should be permitted to retain their independence. I am also passionately concerned about the development and maintenance of necessary infrastructure in our state. For example, I am strongly of the view that after appropriate community consultation and safeguards the F6 should and must be built. It often takes me an hour and 20 minutes to travel from Kogarah Bay to the city— Sitting as an elected councillor on Rockdale council I know how critical good planning is for the amenity of the local urban environment. Local councils are the elected voice of local residents. They know their local areas best and should be trusted to make responsible and sensible planning decisions for their constituents. I have great concerns at the ever-increasing centralisation of planning powers and believe that this must be reversed. Councils should be permitted to retain their independence. I am also passionately concerned about the development and maintenance of necessary infrastructure in our state. For example, I am strongly of the view that after appropriate community consultation and safeguards the F6 should and must be built. It often takes me an hour and 20 minutes to travel from Kogarah Bay to the city—a journey that should take 25 minutes outside peak times. And for residents of the shire and further south, it is even worse. With the construction of the M7, the F6 is now the most urgent and necessary road development in the Sydney metropolitan basin.

I proudly stand in this place today representing the Liberal Party of Australia—a great and distinguished party, borne of enterprise, seeded in liberalism and based on merit. But I am equally proud to stand here and also represent a geographical part of our state, for the Liberal Party has allocated one member of the Legislative Council to each of eight regions in this state. We are committed to ensuring that each and every person in New South Wales has parliamentary representation in this Chamber. I am humbled to represent the St George-Illawarra province for our team. It is an area that stretches from the shores of Botany Bay in Rockdale, through the beautiful Sutherland shire, to the magnificent steel city of Wollongong and down to Nowra on the Shoalhaven. It is an area that I know and love, and I have loved it my entire life.

I have been a passionate supporter of my community through local schools and community organisations, and particularly through the mighty St George-Illawarra Dragons. They have brought me great joy and, sadly, at times they have also broken my heart, especially recently. I have served my community through my involvement in organisations like Rotary and Lions. I was proud to be elected as the first vice-president of the Lions Club of Sydney Lebanon. I have played league for Arncliffe Scots, taught boxing at the Rockdale Police Boys Club and have cheered my daughters at Taren Point Little Athletics. I am now honoured by my community, which through my selection process has given me overwhelming support to sit in this honourable place.

It is an even greater privilege to know that I will experience all facets of the Westminster system, having been elected to sit in the Legislative Council for the first four years in opposition and then the next four years in government. However, it is not a step that I could have taken alone. I would like to place on the public record my gratitude and esteem to those whose contribution, guidance and support will never be forgotten. To Peter Debnam, a man of enormous integrity who fought a courageous election campaign against great odds, and to my leader, Barry O'Farrell, an extraordinary man who will lead the Coalition in four years time back to the government benches, I say it is a privilege to be able to work with you as part of your team. To my three regional parliamentary colleagues, Jo Gash, Danna Vale and Bruce Baird, I say that you, by your example, have individually shown how to represent your electorate and your state with civility, integrity and genuine decency.

I am proud to have many of my friends and supporters here in the gallery this evening and, as members will have seen, there are many of them. I am sorry that I cannot honour all their contributions adequately. But I sincerely thank all the members of the Liberal Party from my province who provided me with such enormous support and friendship. I also thank many of my colleagues in this Chamber for all that they have done. As a lawyer and businessman for a quarter of a century I know that I would not be where I am today without the assistance of diligent and loyal staff. I cannot thank all of them enough—particularly my current associates, Lili Gestakovska, Susie Gestakovska and Ann Dalzell, who now take responsibility for continuing the legal practice I began so long ago. I also thank my secretaries, Joanne, Sonia and Talia.

I have been blessed with many great friends and influences in my life. Many of you are here today. But there are four I want to acknowledge tonight: Charlie Micalizzi, who taught me the value of loyalty, friendship and mateship in the truest Aussie sense; Tony Maiolo, who taught me how to work closely with others; Tony Hakim, who was my first legal client 25 years ago and has supported me ever since; and Tony Curcuruto, my youngest daughter's godfather, who taught me the everlasting value of family and the responsibilities of being a father.

And it is on this point that I wish to conclude. The strongest mainstay in my life has been, without a doubt, my wonderful family. Without them, the edifice of my soul and my sanity would have crumbled long ago. With me, they have carried my hope and my concern. They have thrilled in my success and comforted in my failure. And throughout it all they have loved me

without question and without reserve. To my brothers and sisters: I thank you for your love, your confidence and your never-ending support. Through your strength and support you have carried me on your shoulders. To my older and wiser brother-in-law, Maroun: you were always there as my second father, to advise and counsel me in times of need. To my other brothers- and sisters-in-law: you have truly embraced me as your brother and have honoured me with your friendship, help and love.

To my glorious and wonderful daughters, Natacha, Chanel, Holly, Maddy, Isabella and Gabrielle, I say this: No matter how long I serve in this place, no matter what position I hold, my greatest and proudest achievement will always be to have helped in the creation and care of six earthly angels. To my mother, Violet: you were the one who saw that education was the shining path. You were the one who believed in me, who encouraged me, who pushed me—at times, Mum, a little too much pushing! You carry my gratitude and my love absolutely and without qualification. And to my beautiful wife, Mary: you were the answer to my prayers when you entered my life. You restored my faith and my will to succeed. You are the true reason why I am standing here tonight. Without you I am nothing, and with all my heart I thank you for being my partner and the mother of our children.

When I was young the heroes of my childhood were King Arthur, Robin Hood and Zorro—especially Zorro. They were great characters who saw injustice and fought it with all they had. When I became a young man my new inspirations were those whose stomachs turned when they saw the prejudice in their lands—men like Gandhi, Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Tonight I stand at the beginning of another journey in my life—an exciting journey into the unknown. I hope to travel that path with diligence and integrity, passion and belief, and to always bear my sword against the twin evils of prejudice and injustice. As Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Question—That this House do now adjourn—put and resolved in the affirmative.

Motion agreed to.

The House adjourned at 6.15 p.m. until Wednesday 30 May 2007 at 11.00 a.m.