

HURLSTONE AGRICULTURAL HIGH SCHOOL SITE BILL 2009

Second Reading

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN [11.40 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This is a bill for an Act to require the Hurlstone Agricultural High School site to be retained for educational purposes. The objects of the bill are to ensure that the Hurlstone Agricultural High School site remains in public ownership and to limit the use of the site to that of a government school. Clause 1 sets out the name of the proposed Act. Clause 2 provides for the commencement of the proposed Act on the date of assent to the proposed Act. Clause 3 defines the Hurlstone Agricultural High School site and contains other interpretative provisions. Clause 4 specifies the objects of the proposed Act, as referred to in the overview I have just given. Clause 5 prohibits the Hurlstone Agricultural High School site from being sold, transferred, leased or otherwise alienated. Clause 6 restricts development of the site so that it can be used only for the purposes of a government school. Clause 7 prevents any development of the site from becoming a project to which part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 applies.

Hurlstone Agricultural High School is a selective high school of excellence located in a diminishing green belt on the south-western fringe of the Sydney metropolitan area. The origins of the school are steeped in our history. It began in 1878 with a vision by John Kinloch to establish his own school, the Hurlstone School and College, named in honour of his mother. The original estate lay in the vicinity of Hurlstone Park, Ashfield. John Kinloch was one of the first graduates of the University of Sydney. Financial hardship eventually forced the sale of the college to the New South Wales Government, which saw the value and benefit to the community of an agricultural college. Visionaries such as John Kinloch have long since departed the ranks of this once proud party.

The Hurlstone Agricultural Continuation School was reopened in 1907 and commenced with one pupil. By the end of the first year it had 30 students. The student population grew to 148 and the school subsequently moved to a 330-hectare property at Glenfield, which was part of an original land grant to the convict James Meehan. The school took possession of the property in 1926 and has educated rural leaders, agricultural scientists and farmers ever since. Today the school has a student population of 967 from metropolitan, regional and rural areas of New South Wales. The Hurlstone Agricultural High School has a proud alumni, a proud heritage of service to the nation and has achieved academic excellence in agricultural education.

According to the prospectus of the school, in 1920 its students nobly upheld the honour of their school in the Great War—156 boys, who represented 54 per cent of the student population aged 18 years and over. Ten of those boys never returned. In World War II the students answered the call again. During the war 844 boys fought with Australian and British forces, with 68 making the supreme sacrifice for our freedom. One of these men, Corporal John Edmondson, tragically was killed while fighting in Tobruk. He was the first Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross in World War II. The Edmondson VC RSL Club in Liverpool commemorates his memory and his sacrifice for nation. The proud spirit of Hurlstone is reflected in the words of the school song, which was penned in 1912:

Come, gather round, ye Hurlstone lads,
And sing with might and main;
'Tis here we learn our dairy work
And how to sow the grain.

'Tis here we learn our orchard work,
To spray, and prune, and drain,
'Neath the eye of the good old boss of Hurlstone.

Hurrah! Hurrah! For the plough, the harrow and the hoe
Hurrah! Hurrah! For the wheat in a waving row,
And when we're out upon our own,
The good results will show.
What we have learned at dear old Hurlstone.
We've soldered in the plumbers shop,
And shaped the sheets of tin;
We've hammered nails and blunted planes—
A craftsman's skill to win;
And often after 'ragging', the office we've been in,
So well known to all of us at Hurlstone.

You ought to see our football team,
When they start kicking goals;
They score the tries and tear it in
With all their hearts and souls,
While on the field the other side,
Lie 'dead' in countless shoals,
When the Blue and Gold play up for Hurlstone.

We've sought the mighty liver fluke,
And learned about its ways,
And how it is, and why it is Merino wool it pays,
And faced with aid of microscope
The fierce Amoeba's gaze
In the modern science room at Hurlstone.

And here's to those who've gone before,
To fortune and to fame, Old Boys in far Gallipoli
Who made for us a name,
And in the years that are to come
We hope to do the same, for the honour of
The dear old School at Hurlstone.

It would be a sad indictment of the character of any member of this Parliament who would contemplate a vote to sell off the proud heritage of Hurlstone Agricultural High School to property developers for 30 pieces of silver. As a former soldier, I say there could be no greater insult to the memory of Corporal John Edmondson, VC. It begs the question whether anything is sacred to this mob, which is desperate to stay in power for the sake of staying in power. The Hurlstone farm is a vital resource for the quality teaching of agriculture. The decision to sell the land is based on the notion that the school has surplus land. However, agriculture involves practical experience; you cannot teach it out of a book. Students need to be able to smell, see and feel what it is like on a farm in order to be good at it.

Best practice suggests that 160 hectares can sustain 127 cattle; Hurlstone Agricultural High School has 118 cattle. It also has 76 sheep, 29 goats, 58 pigs, three alpacas and 248 poultry. The 115-hectare farm is fully utilised at slightly above recommended stocking levels. Land and animals are linked to specific husbandry and agricultural education outcomes. Hurlstone agricultural farm has no surplus land. The entire farm is valued and used for educational

purposes. If the land were sold, the school would no longer function as it does now; the school would stagnate.

No doubt the Treasurer is using eastern suburbs logic in his fire sale of our public asset. We know he lives among the elite in Sydney's wealthiest and most exclusive suburbs, many of whom have made their millions from property development. Many are generous donors to the Labor Party. The Treasurer's boundary between east and west is Sussex Street. Westies live on the other side of the divide. The Treasurer does not mind mixing with these types for the odd photo opportunity, but they would never be invited to rub shoulders with his rich and powerful friends around Vaucluse and Rose Bay. If there is one position that will get you on the social A-list in Vaucluse and Rose Bay, it is that of Treasurer. Money is the language of the eastern suburbs and status is assessed by how much you have or how much you control. How you got it does not matter much.

The blood of the former Premier and former Treasurer had barely been cleaned from the carpets in Sussex Street when the present Treasurer got the call. Now he has made his mark: the State's economy has been trashed by the highest-spending Government in New South Wales history. Its last budget was a shambles because it could not deliver in its own party the numbers needed to privatise the power industry. The Treasurer put together a fire sale of public assets that included the Hurlstone Agricultural High School at Glenfield. He rubbed salt into the wound by adding that students in western Sydney and rural New South Wales would have to walk further to and from classes each school day. It was heavy stuff. He got to speak in the Legislative Assembly. He was on television and radio. He was on the eastern suburbs A-list—speaking to double-A people about the triple-A rating. He jetted off to New York at the pointy end of the plane just as it all began to unravel. The Premier was told that the westies were revolting.

The Treasurer agreed, but the Premier thought he did not fully understand the message so he had to prick his bubble by telling students that they could catch a bus to school. Then the shadow Treasurer and former shadow Minister for Finance, Mike Baird, took a closer look at the Treasurer's fire sale of the Hurlstone Agricultural High School. In his reply to the Treasurer's mini-budget on 3 December, the shadow Treasurer said he was amazed to hear that the State Property Authority, which is our articulate expert in this area, did not have input in determining the valuation of the property. He advised that a critical amount of more than \$800 million for all the public assets in the fire sale had not been verified by the Government's experts, who had no involvement in the process. The Government's own advisers say that they will not be able to sell 140 hectares, as they have been telling the public. The most realistic assessment is that they will be able to sell only more like 50 hectares, which will deliver only a fraction of the expected revenue included in the now-disgraced mini-budget. The black hole left by the Premier's backflip on school bus passes is now Eric's abyss. It is clear that the Treasurer's figure of \$800 million was a SWAG, which is an old Army acronym for scientific wild-assed guess!

If that was the Government's figure late last year, one can only guess what the property now would be worth, as we plunge deeper into the worst recession that we have had since the Great Depression. This is not the first time that this Labor Government has tried to get its grubby hands on the school so that it could sell it off to wealthy land developers. In 2003, another eastern suburbs icon, the Hon. Andrew Refshauge, tried to flog it when he was the Minister for Education and Training. Back then he was reminded by some astute students of the school that his predecessor, the Hon. John Watkins, had "completely ruled the sale of the land out". In a letter to the Hon. Andrew Refshauge, they wrote:

Hurlstone is a unique school, which continues to mould students into leaders of society. Our school prides its reputation on producing a well rounded student, that is offered the best education due to the many different facets of learning that are offered at Hurlstone.

The Hon. Christine Robertson: I know a lot of good people out at that school. They are not compost!

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Were you speaking English?

The Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox: She is a SWAG.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Yes, the Hon. Christine Robertson is a SWAG. The letter goes on to state:

Agriculture is one of the key learning areas in which students excel both in and out of the classroom. This is shown in outstanding HSC results and also our pursuits outside the classroom in developing skills that most government schools can't offer, such as competing in shows, involvement in organisations such as Rural Youth, becoming involved with animals and developing a love for agriculture.

[Interruption]

The Hon. Christine Robertson may well mock what the students wrote to Andrew Refshauge, but they were genuine. I know she does not have a feel for western Sydney, but some of us who have lived there all our lives do. Further back, in 1995, a residential agricultural high school review into the viability of agricultural production of agricultural schools reported:

The consensus of the working party was that none of the farming ventures would ever be commercially viable operations, because of the small size and the use of unionised labour which is both inflexible and expensive. Each of the schools however, operate what could be considered a main farming activity; Hurlstone dairy operation [at Glenfield], Yanco piggery [in the Riverina] and Farrer stud beef cattle [at Tamworth].

The one common factor that each of those schools needed to fulfil their role as agricultural educators is land—not virtual land, but real land that can sustain crops and livestock on a sufficient scale for educational purposes. Our historic economic development has been underpinned by agriculture. We owe the standard of living we enjoy today to this vital industry. The combination of modern science, quality education and real experience will ensure that we continue to develop our leadership in this field, where demand threatens to outstrip supply because of climatic and population trends in the world in general and our region in particular.

Farmers have already been belted around by the drought. The New South Wales Government is making a bad situation worse by cutting the number of city students who will be exposed to agriculture. I should mention that students of non-English speaking backgrounds comprise more than 60 per cent of the student population at Hurlstone. In the working-class western suburbs there are a lot of students who would otherwise not be introduced to agricultural pursuits, but the Hurlstone working farm gives them that opportunity. But, more importantly, something of value that cannot be measured in economic terms is that our rural students from throughout New South Wales who reside at the school as part of their education have the

opportunity of meeting students from a wide variety of non-English speaking backgrounds and to learn about their culture and language. They form lifelong friendships and mateships, which helps them to understand the diversity of culture in metropolitan Sydney. That is an experience that many students do not get in country towns. That is the unknown role played by the Hurlstone Agricultural High School.

The Hon. Lynda Voltz: Is that like what they did out at Camden?

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: The rejection in Camden was based on planning grounds.

The Hon. Lynda Voltz: Did they take to cultural diversity down there?

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: We want diversity, and there is diversity in Camden. I know the Hon. Lynda Voltz knocks Camden and does not like Camden, or anywhere west of the Sydney CBD, but our aim is to protect the integrity of the district.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I remind members of the importance of a second reading speech, which the Hon. Charlie Lynn is making, and I ask members not to interject.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: The proposed sell-off of Hurlstone will have a serious long-term impact on our rural economy. It goes without saying that if we do not have good farmers and farming practices, which is what the Hurlstone Agricultural High School teaches, we will not have viable rural towns in many areas, due to their dependence on farming families. But rather than trying to geld the industry, as this short-sighted, quick-fix Government seems intent on doing, we should be seeking ways of enhancing it. We have land. We have the talent. All we need is the commitment from those who are charged with articulating our vision for the future.

Unfortunately the vision of the short-sighted political pygmies in this Government is limited to 2011. One has only to look at the pathetic response by the Government to an attempt by the Leader of The Nationals, Andrew Stoner, to debate in the other place as a matter of urgency the fire sale of the Hurlstone Agricultural High School. The Government had a great opportunity to explain how it would use the proceeds of the sale to add value to agricultural education in the State; but rather than do that, those political pygmies gibbered on about using the money to fund infrastructure upgrades at nearby public schools. Any funds left over would be reinvested in capital works in schools throughout the State or redirected to services in other agencies. That is Orwellian speak for marginal seat slush funding. It does not get any more pathetic than that.

If the current Government had been in charge when the First Fleet arrived, the convicts would have stayed aboard and put back to sea. The appointment of the new Minister for Planning, Kristina Keneally, by the new Premier, Nathan Rees, prompted speculation that she may well have been passed a poison chalice. On 29 November last year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that the Planning portfolio had been plagued by controversy over the millions of dollars that hungry developers had poured into Labor's coffers. While the new Minister might have been presented as a political cleanskin, she was also still on training wheels in regard to experience in running a ministry. The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that after only 12 weeks in the job, she had already set alarm bells ringing.

A tight circle of Labor elders associated with former leaders Paul Keating, Bob Carr and Morris Iemma began to notice some uncanny parallels behind the scenes with the actions of her political patron, the Minister for Finance, Joe Tripodi, and his fellow hard Right powerbroker, the Hon. Eddie Obeid, in the months leading to Iemma's downfall. They expressed concern that the new Minister looked as though she was about to repeat the planning mistakes of the past, when the suburbs in western Sydney were left without decent

shops, schools and rail links for years. Major concerns were expressed about the fact that some of the State's most powerful housing and land release agencies had been stripped of planning functions while Joe Tripodi was handed a big say in the management of more than \$1 billion worth of strategic land around Sydney.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that the well-regarded Growth Centres Commission, which was set up three years ago to kick-start new suburbs on the outskirts of Sydney and to make sure that roads, water and sewerage were delivered properly, has been absorbed back into the under-resourced Department of Planning. The new Minister advised the *Sydney Morning Herald* that she had consulted widely in her attempt to clean up the planning system—a task that former Minister for Planning, Frank Sartor, had commenced. Unfortunately, Frank was knocked off his perch because he rattled too many factional cages in the process. The Minister's detractors in her own party accuse her of not only delivering much of the Tripodi-Obeid agenda—an agenda that was resisted by Morris Iemma and Frank Sartor—

The Hon. Eric Roozendaal: Point of order: If the Hon. Charlie Lynn wants to attack a member of the other House, he should do so by way of a substantive motion. He is clearly casting aspersions on members of the House and he knows the appropriate way to do that. I would have thought a member of his expertise and experience—

The Hon. Melinda Pavey: And intellect.

The Hon. Eric Roozendaal: Let us not go that far. I thought the Hon. Charlie Lynn would realise the importance of observing the rules of the House. If he wants to attack a member of the House, he should do so by way of a substantive motion.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: To the point of order: This information is already public knowledge. I am quoting widely from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The Hon. Eric Roozendaal: Selectively quoting.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Everybody in New South Wales knows it as well.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Imputations against other members are disorderly at all times. I remind the Hon. Charlie Lynn of the particular importance of second reading speeches and I ask him to confine his remarks to the long title of the bill that he is proposing.

Second Reading

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN [3.34 p.m.]: The political links between this Labor Government and developers needs to be examined during debate on this bill. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Minister for Planning has detractors within her own party who accuse her not only of delivering much of the Tripodi-Obeid agenda—an agenda that was resisted by Morris Iemma and Frank Sartor with fatal political consequences for both of them—but also of accommodating the Urban Taskforce, which is regarded as the most aggressively anti-regulation group of the developer mates lobby groups. Unlike associations in the industry, its membership is by invitation only. One can only imagine the joy of

receiving an invitation from Joe and Eddie! The former Minister for Planning, Frank Sartor, regards it as the least credible of the property lobbies.

The co-founder of the task force is David Tanevski, who is a key player with a long association with Labor. He has been mates with Joe Tripodi for many years, and the two are veterans of past Labor branch-stacking battles. The director of the task force is Aaron Gadiel, a former chief of staff to both Joe Tripodi and the Hon. Eddie Obeid. The new Minister for Planning, Kristina Keneally, has a strong personal allegiance to Joe Tripodi because he delivered the numbers for her preselection. Her husband, Ben, was a friend of Joe Tripodi's at the University of Sydney. The Taliban would envy this network.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that its sources believed Joe Tripodi, the Hon. Eddie Obeid and their front organisation, the Urban Taskforce, wanted particular developers outside the planning protocols of the Growth Centres Commission to jump the queue. One does not have to be a Rhodes Scholar to identify Labor's developer mates. The invitation list for developer donors who attended a fundraising dinner in support of Labor mayor Nick Lalich when he ran for the seat of Cabramatta in the recent by-election is a veritable who's who of Labor mates. Some of them could have walked straight out of the set of *Underbelly!* These developers have a lot of political clout in south-western Sydney's Labor circles. Overdevelopment in western Sydney is obviously not one of the major concerns, but we have a responsibility to stop any attempt to rape our heritage and diminish the quality of agricultural education in this State.

Last year the Department of Primary Industries objected to a school being developed on prime agricultural land in Camden because of its detrimental impact on diminishing viable agricultural land. The department emphasised the importance of protecting scarce agricultural land from urban encroachment in the Sydney Basin. Unfortunately the Treasurer's vision for a parcel of land like Hurlstone Agricultural High School is limited to the number of housing blocks and shops that his developer mates can put on it. The proposed development of the land will increase the burden on local infrastructure, which already is at capacity. Glenfield is already congested and does not have the infrastructure to cope with more development. Local hospital waiting times are painfully long and the M5 Motorway cannot cope with the daily demand.

The Government obviously has thought about the problems it faces in meeting its obligations to its developer mates and so organised a smoke and mirrors strategy to dupe the public in regard to its real intentions. Its first challenge was to create a perception that it is at arms length from the land grab. This was done by announcing an independent public inquiry. The second problem would be how to limit the collateral damage to their local parliamentary representative Dr Andrew McDonald. This would be done by arranging for Dr McDonald to call for the independent public inquiry, and get the Government to agree to his call. On 17 February the local Macarthur newspapers announced "an independent public inquiry into the planned land sell-off at Hurlstone Agricultural High School".

True to form and right on cue, the local member, Dr Andrew McDonald, chimed in and said, " the question of land use on the Hurlstone site has to be resolved once and for all". Dr McDonald said he was confident that the Premier and the Minister for Education and Training, Verity Firth, would agree. And sure enough, during the following week on 24 February the Minister for Education and Training announced that both she and the Premier, Nathan Rees, would back Dr McDonald's call for an independent and public inquiry. The Minister gushed that "whoever chaired it would be independent". Yeah, sure!

We now know that the Government already had drawn up plans to have an inquiry into the sale, with the terms of reference and a draft list of names of participants having been drawn up in February—long before Dr Andrew McDonald proposed an inquiry and Verity Firth said, "What a great idea!" All that was missing from these documents was the outcome of the inquiry. Any Minister who needs a public inquiry to understand the value of an agricultural educational facility that is accessible to students from western Sydney and rural New South Wales is a dunce. The Minister's assurance that the chair of the inquiry would be independent is pure folly. Such a person does not exist in this State. After 13 years of Labor rule, under the ruthless influence of Joe Tripodi and the Hon. Eddie Obeid, any such person either has been gelded politically or they are completely compliant with the outcomes that Labor wishes to achieve. We know that the Government's spin doctors would have monitored the local media to see if the locals had swallowed the subterfuge of a so-called independent inquiry. No doubt they would have been disappointed at a posting from "Independent" on the website, who advised:

It seems like this inquiry has been put together to save Andrew McDonald not Hurlstone. How unusual for an inquiry to have an 'investigation' arm to it. Where will these experts come from? Will they be truly independent? Why, when the sale was first announced did then government say that it was the sale of 'surplus' land? Now the school is going to be 'compared' to other selective schools, James Ruse, Farrah and Yanco to ensure they are 21st century whatever that means? I don't know of one public school that you could consider 21st century. They simply do not have the funds to have 21st-century facilities. It would seem now the school has demonstrated that there is no surplus land they want to find a method to sell Hurlstone. This government can not be trusted. They have lied and deceived this State for far too long and this witch hunt has been designed to allow the local members to stand up and say look at what I got for you. Well we have one message to the government. Hands off our farm and hands off this local greenspace. Hurlstone is not for sale and if one inch of this land is sold then Andrew McDonald and his government can expect it to be an issue at the next election.

And this one from Darlusz:

Rather than sell the farm, how about improving it, and making it an educational resource for schools from all around Sydney to visit. Bus students in from urban schools for a day of education on the farm! This country is built on agriculture, we should be encouraging kids in urban centres to learn about it, and experience it, without travelling for hours to see a real farm.

I do not know Darlusz. I do not know if Darlusz is a he or she, and I do not know where he or she lives. But I do know that Darlusz has displayed more commonsense on this issue than the entire caucus can muster as a collective. If we want students to achieve excellence in our public education system, we should take note of what they have to say, and it is obvious that they are against this proposal. An organisation called Team Macarthur has been heralded as a new power group within the dysfunctional Labor Party. The group comprises the member for Macquarie Fields, the member for Camden, the member for Campbelltown and the member for Wollondilly. If they want to represent their constituents, they can stop the sale by walking into the Premier's office and saying, "It's not on." They did it with electricity privatisation—members opposite did it—and they can do it with Hurlstone school. The question we must ask is this: Do the members of Team Macarthur have the intestinal fortitude to walk in and stop this fire sale and protect the small amount of green belt we have left from Labor's developer mates? It will be interesting to see whether they turn out to be the men of Macarthur or they scurry away as the mice of Macarthur. I tend to think it will be the mice of

Macarthur.

The Hon. Michael Gallacher: They're rats.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Yes, rats in their ranks—they need a few. I challenge those members to stand up and take on the Treasurer. The Treasurer's experience of farm products is a boutique supermarket in Rose Bay, and he thinks Centennial Park is extensive quality farmland. That is all he has got. I challenge the men of Team Macarthur to stand up to the Treasurer and the Premier and stop this land grab and this donation to their Labor mates. Normally there are two sides to most arguments but that is not the case with the Government's plan to sell off the Hurlstone farm. I challenge the Government to provide details of any community benefit or any moral justification for the sale. There will certainly be no improvement to agricultural education, which is the *raison d'être* of the school.

There is obviously no heritage value in the farm or any value in practical agricultural education in the eyes of the Treasurer. Obviously the Government does not see any value in protecting the last remnant of the once famed green belt separating us from Sydney's ugly urban sprawl. This is just a grubby cash grab in the finest traditions of the New South Wales Labor mates club. The sale is bad for education, bad for agriculture and bad for the local community. I call on members to support this bill and save Hurlstone farm from Labor's greedy developer mates.