

INAUGURAL SPEECH OF DR MEHREEN FARUQI

Dr MEHREEN FARUQI [5.45 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I will begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. This land always has been and always will be Aboriginal land. Whether we arrived with the First Fleet or in the two centuries of immigration since, it is important to remember that most Australians come from migrant families and that the soil on which we stand belongs to someone else.

I believe my story is one that belongs to many Australians. I am one of the 5.5 million Australians who were born overseas. I am proud of my heritage, but I am also deeply connected to the nation I now call home. Australia is richly multicultural, and this diversity brings a vibrancy that is hard to match anywhere else in the world. My inclusion in this Parliament reflects the promise that brought my family and millions of families like ours to this country: an inclusive, democratic, pluralist society which seeks to provide opportunity for all who live here; a society in which our achievements may only be limited by the scale of our determination, and the scope of our imagination.

It is a tragic moment in our history though that a land as diverse and prosperous as ours, which owes so much to its migrant heritage, may be tarnished by fearmongering and dog whistling over refugees and migrants. I am proud of my party, The Greens, for denouncing this rhetoric; our party which values inclusive multicultural societies and democracies and having them remain that way. Before I say anything else, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the thousands of Greens NSW members who are here today and who took part in our democratic preselection and appointed me to be their representative in Parliament. It is this practice of grassroots decision-making that most inspires me about The Greens. I am incredibly honoured and humbled by the support I have received from across regional and metropolitan New South Wales.

This all seems though quite far removed from the Pakistan that I grew up in, where the notion of democracy was still so far from our grasp. Although Pakistan was formed as a secular democratic State, for much of the 66 years since its independence it has been dominated by martial law, oppression, and inequality. When I was 15, a military dictator came to power in Pakistan and brought in dogmatic religious laws that took away the rights of women and minority groups. It decimated the democracy my grandfather helped create through massive people's movements and a revolt against the British Empire. This was my awakening to activism and politics; this is why I am so passionate about reversing inequalities.

When I was growing up, my dad would often recite a poem by the great philosopher and poet Allama Iqbal. Though it was written a world away, a century ago, its significance to my life—both where I grew up and where I am now—is not lost on me. I would like to share a few lines from this poem with you.

Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain
Abhi ishq ke imtehan aur bhi hain
Gaye din ke tanha tha main anjuman mein
Yahaan ab mere raazdaan aur bhi hain

This poem is about pushing boundaries, about reaching beyond what we may feel or be told we are capable of. It is about looking beyond the short term and thinking instead about the

challenges that lie on the horizon, about how when we join with others, we may have the hope and power to face whatever those challenges may be. Reflecting on it, I feel as though I have taken many of these themes to heart, much to the despair of my parents sometimes. I was influenced strongly by my boundary-pushing aunt, who was always speaking out for gender equality in a patriarchal society. I followed my dad into engineering and was for a time one of the few practising women engineers in Pakistan.

If I am honest with myself, my decision to study civil engineering was more an act of defiance against a male-dominated society and profession than a burning passion to become a structural engineer. I had grand ambitions of breaking down the barriers which oppressed the women in my community. I will be the first to admit that instead of tearing those walls down I caused one mere dent. But what are social movements if not thousands of individual dents, collectively bringing down old structures?

When I left Pakistan, I arrived in Australia with just my husband, my one-year-old son, and two suitcases. In a familiar migrant story, we arrived in the middle of a recession, and my wonderful husband spent our early months in Australia driving cabs to make ends meet until we could find jobs in our respective professions. I was able to continue my postgraduate studies, and then went on to work in research, local councils and consulting firms, before finding myself having come full circle as an associate professor of business and sustainability with students of my own to teach. I know that it was only through the love and support of my husband and my two beautiful children that I was able to do that. Omar, Osman, Aisha, I cannot thank you enough for the strength and sustenance you provide me.

I know that none of this would have been possible had I not received a good education. Though my father is no longer with us, my mother made the journey to be with me tonight. I would like to thank her both for my formal education and for perhaps the more valuable lessons I received watching her example as I grew up. She is the centre point of our extended family, and all who come in contact with her bear witness to her love and wisdom.

I also know that not all girls and women from Pakistan are so lucky. For me, education has been a way of life, but for the inspirational Pakistani heroine Malala Yousafzai, the battle for that right almost cost her her life. At point-blank range, extremists used terrible violence with the intention of suppressing a girl and her "dangerous" ideas. Instead, the bullets fired to silence her caused her voice to reverberate around the entire globe. On her sixteenth birthday, she spoke in front of thousands at the United Nations, and in front of millions more watching from their homes and schools across the world. "Let us pick up our books and our pens," she said, "They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution." And she is right. Education is the tool by which we may push over boundaries, reach beyond our capabilities, see those horizons in the distance and then go charging towards them. Education is not just about information. It grows our society and economy, and it creates industries that we have not even imagined yet. It is a way out of generational poverty and towards security, out of bigoted ignorance and towards peace. Education today creates the teachers, artists, builders and leaders of tomorrow.

But what example will we be setting for these new leaders? After recent revelations of past activities in the New South Wales Parliament, what we do here has been met with derision. Our Parliament, and others like it, has become contaminated in the minds of its citizens with corruption, cynicism and stagnation. When the work we do is shadowed in such a way, how may we inspire the best and brightest of this generation to join our ranks? As a parent of two very

switched-on children, and an educator of hundreds more, I know that there is no fooling them. With their future at stake, they are the ones that demand and deserve our best service.

We must remember why we are here. I am here because I believe in The Greens principles of social justice, ecological sustainability, peace and non-violence, and the power of grassroots democracy. I am here because we must speak out for those unjustly treated, whether they were born here or are fleeing persecution and seeking refuge on our shores. I am here because we must act when the State has jurisdiction to remove discrimination over who you can love, or whether you can make choices for your own body. I am here because I know the responses to the great challenges of this century will not be framed with money as the only measure of success, but by how we simultaneously meet our social, environmental and economic needs. I am here because I believe that we live in a nation where one person can make a difference, but where we can do so much more when we work together.

It is this view to the future that makes me so proud to be a Green, and prouder still of my Greens colleagues. When I joined The Greens, we had just three members in the New South Wales Parliament, and genuine political leaders like Bob Brown in Tasmania and Lee Rhiannon here in New South Wales inspired me to take an interest in the party. I signed up because of our strong stand on the environment, climate change, animal welfare, workers' rights, compassion for refugees, and removing discrimination from the law. While our stance on those issues remains resolute, we have since grown to six members, and are always ready to welcome the next one.

Regardless of the size of the team, The Greens have always been a force in the community for equality, justice and environmental protection. I join a terrific team of members of Parliament whose experience and knowledge has been vital to my transition to Parliament. I am particularly proud to arrive in the wake of two strong Greens women in New South Wales Parliament—Cate Faehrmann and Senator Lee Rhiannon—who preceded me in this House. I am excited to be working closely with all my Greens colleagues in New South Wales and across the country to fight for the rights of our people and our planet.

In a professional capacity, I have been very fortunate to collaborate with and be guided and supported by many of you here tonight. To my students and colleagues from the University of New South Wales, my colleagues from Mosman Council and Port Macquarie Council, and those from my consulting days, you have been critical in shaping my engineering and environmental work, which includes delivering infrastructure projects, building cycleways and stormwater recycling plants, and rehabilitating rainforests. The skills I have learnt prior to my involvement in politics are the skills I use every day to further strengthen the work of Greens members of the State Parliament, who have been standing up against education cuts, against the privatisation of public assets and for stopping coal seam gas mining.

My priorities during my time here will probably be familiar to those who know The Greens' vision for our society. They may not make me a lot of friends here but they have been shaped by my own experiences and values and my commitment to social justice. As the tenth Greens member of Parliament to serve in the New South Wales Parliament, I want to build on the strong foundations of all my predecessors by being a strong voice for public education, a strong voice on environmental protection, a strong voice on the rights of working people, and a strong voice on issues of discrimination against women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning [LGBTIQ] community.

I have been lucky to find a team of staff who are also passionate about these priorities and have been working tirelessly with me to make sure we use every minute of our time here for public good. Thank you for your support. My first few weeks in Parliament have been made so much easier by the dedicated parliamentary staff. It has been a real pleasure to work with all of you, and I look forward to working with you in future. Regardless of what we achieve inside these walls, it pales in comparison to what can and will be achieved by the people outside them.

It is the passion, knowledge and determination of the people of New South Wales that can and will drive the great changes, as it always has been. Increasingly, the way forward will be for small, local movements to come together and become more daring and resolute in their advocacy. This transformation will come through consensus from the bottom up rather than top-down authority. Of course, we should be proud of what has been achieved and celebrate this, but there is much more to be done, both here and globally. I believe that we can only change the world by changing the way we do things in our local communities. We do not have to wait for the whole world to agree to change before we do.

The challenges we face in the twenty-first century are complex and do not have straightforward, clear-cut solutions. They require long-term thinking, innovation and creativity and the courage to challenge dominant world views and business-as-usual thinking and doing. We need new models of leadership to forge solutions through shared and collective processes. I do not believe that political leadership is purely about those of us in this building. It is instead the process of collaboration, which relies on working with and mobilising people in the community to lead the change through inclusive processes that generate trust and consensus. It is this approach to leadership that will deliver the responses to solve the problems we face today.

It is often said that the future is uncertain. We all have the privilege of shaping the future for New South Wales and to lead the way, both in Parliament and in our communities. But rather than waiting for a future that we do not want, I want to work with you all to shape one that we do want—a future in which our environment is healthy, our economy is green and the diverse communities of our State are meaningfully represented and included in their Parliament. Thank you.