



Inaugural Speeches

Inaugural Speeches

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 12 May 2015.

Mr CHRIS MINNS (Kogarah) [1.01 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Madam Speaker, congratulations on your re-election to this important post. It is a true privilege to be elected to serve the people of St George in the electorate of Kogarah. I pay my respects to the Dharawal people, who were the first Indigenous people to meet Captain James Cook's *Endeavour* just 500 metres from the edge of my electorate. Indigenous Australian's have the oldest continuous living culture on the planet. They were careful and attentive custodians of this land long before we came here, and we must be cognisant of that fact as we enjoy this country's natural beauty and resources.

I take this post after 16 years of tireless service and dedication from my predecessor in Kogarah, Cherie Burton. Cherie was a lion for our community. She was the first Minister for Housing who had herself grown up in public housing. I have lost count of the number of times members of the community have told me that I had big shoes to fill if I were to be half as good as she was. Like her predecessor Brian Langton, Cherie upheld the best traditions of a good member of Parliament. They were committed, accessible, hardworking and deep-down true believers in the Labor cause. It will be exceedingly hard to top these two wonderful people's contribution to Kogarah and to claim the mantle of the best member for Kogarah ever. Hopefully, it will be easier to avoid the title of worst member for Kogarah ever, particularly given that one my predecessors was a serial killer who ended up in Broadmoor prison for the criminally insane.

Mr Paul Lynch: He was a Tory.

Mr CHRIS MINNS: I thank the member for Liverpool for that interjection. Thomas Ley, a Conservative member, attempted to bribe his Labor Party opponent, Frederick MacDonald, in 1925 with a £2,000 share in a Kings Cross apartment if he agreed to withdraw from the ballot. MacDonald refused the bribe, went public with the approach and one week later disappeared in suspicious circumstances. That is right: A New South Wales State Labor politician named "MacDonald" refused a bribe! Ley was also implicated in three other disappearances. While Ley's contribution to politics is obviously bad, it at least gives me a retort if one of my constituents ever claims that I am the worst member in the history of the seat of Kogarah.

St George is an example to the world that people from different races and religions, with different skin colours and political beliefs not only do live together and tolerate one another but also can thrive on this one small parcel of land. Australia's ability to absorb new immigrants, to celebrate diverse cultures and to respect ancient traditions and religions is truly the envy of the world. But why is this the case? Why are we succeeding when there is so much turmoil and hate in other parts of the world? It is not luck, nor is it an adherence to a monoculture. The answer is that we respect the ideals and principles of multiculturalism and can claim, based on evidence, that it works. During the Second World War while other leaders around the world were busy banging the drums of war, or alternatively working to divide mankind based on religion or race, our Prime Minister John Curtin said:

There is a price that the world must pay for peace; I shall not attempt to specify the price, but it does mean less nationalism, less selfishness, less race ambition.

Curtin was telling our country in the context of international amity that we had an obligation to each other as humans that is greater than a glorification of our own religion, race or creed. Curtin's speech, made to a tired and war-weary country in the grip of the White Australia policy, was a brave invocation of our shared humanity, and it set the tone and template for the country we are today. And we can never forget it.

The electorate of Kogarah is home to people from all over the world—61 per cent of people speak a language other than English in their households. Dreamers, adventurers, entrepreneurs and those prepared to take a chance on a better life in a distant country call Kogarah their home. These immigrants transfer these positive characteristics to our community and they make St George great. We are proud to have them. It is a wonderful opportunity to be the member of Parliament representing the highest percentage of Chinese Australians in the country at the same moment that China is emerging as a major economic power.

I take this opportunity to state clearly that there is nothing wrong with direct foreign investment in the New South Wales economy, especially considering the fair and appropriate safeguards in place for that form of investment. That does not mean that I would, nor do I believe this Parliament should, sell our electricity assets—particularly given that the Government's asset recycling program is highly dubious and likely to cause major budgetary problems deep into the future. It is instead a reminder that history suggests once countries begin to enact restrictions on trade and investment within their own countries retaliatory behaviour is not far behind. This form of protectionism would prove fatal for Australia's long-term economic prosperity.

While investment in Australia is welcome, investment by Australian firms in China and Asia more generally is vital to Australia's future. PriceWaterhouse Coopers recently conducted a study that showed that Australian businesses have more direct foreign investment in New Zealand—a country with a population of just four million—than all of Asia, with a total combined population of four billion. This is a worrying statistic given the expected opportunities emerging from growth in the countries of the Pacific over the coming decades. The study shows that, despite all the rhetoric about Australian readiness for the Asian century, in terms of business we are still not of Asia, we are simply floating within it.

The leading cause of Australia's unpreparedness to take advantage of the Asian century is that Australian firms are unsure of Asian customs and Asian languages and lack Asian contacts. A big and bold decision by this Parliament to mandate the teaching of Mandarin to all New South Wales schoolchildren from kindergarten to year 12 would make a big, positive difference. Last year, out of 70,000 children who finished the Higher School Certificate, only 0.5 per cent studied Mandarin. This is a miserly number particularly given that most countries in Asia, as well as European Union member countries—including recently the United Kingdom—have mandated the teaching of a second language in their schools. According to the *New Scientist*, Australia's multilingual rate is lower than that of the United States. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that 81 per cent of Australian kids speak English only at home compared with a multilingual rate of more than 50 per cent in France and 80 per cent in Sweden. Half of the world's population speaks two languages and as Australia enters the twenty-first century our kids will need to as well.

Some might say that it is not fair to compare Australia's low bilingual language percentages with the rate in a country like Sweden given that Sweden is surrounded by countries with populations that do not speak the same language and that the populations of all its major trading partners speak a foreign tongue. My response is to say that most of our neighbours do not speak English, and our first, second, fourth, fifth, eighth and ninth largest trading partners do not speak our language either. Not only would mandating the teaching of Mandarin have a positive impact in terms of commerce and trade but also it has been established that people who are bilingual score better on standardised tests, do better at maths, reading and vocabulary exams, are better at remembering lists and are more discerning of information presented to them. The Australian Curriculum may be a hurdle to this sort of reform. If New South Wales is not able to leverage its competitive advantage in teacher skills, training, diversification and teacher numbers for the benefit of the people of this State, then its goals and objectives need to be examined.

New South Wales has traditionally led this country in skills and education. If the Australian Curriculum is squeezing learning into the lowest common denominator then it should not be the children of New South Wales who suffer; rather, its goals and objectives need to change. The former Federal Government's white paper on Australia in the Asian Century, which has shamefully been abandoned by the Abbott Government, called for Australian children to learn one of four priority languages: Mandarin, Hindi, Indonesian or Japanese. If compulsory Mandarin is too much of a stretch for the New South Wales curriculum, then at a minimum the white paper's suggestions should be implemented fully. By 2025 Asia will produce half of the world's total economic output. It is forecast that Asia's middle class will reach 3.2 billion people by 2030. Indonesia is growing by 5 per cent to 6 per cent per year and China by 7 per cent to 8 per cent per year. Australia cannot afford to miss the boat. Our integration must be deeper than being Asia's farm or quarry; we must be part of Asia, not simply in Asia.

I represent the Australian Labor Party in this Chamber and, stretching back to 1953, I am the fourth Labor Party member in a row to represent the electorate of Kogarah. I was never interested in politics; I was only ever interested in the Labor Party. My interest in public policy is driven and directed by the pantomime of Labor history. Labor's heroes and the Liberals' villains shaped my understanding of complicated public policy problems. I still remember the 1993 Federal election when all had given up on Labor except Paul Keating and my dad. For three years my father was considered a genius amongst family and friends for having predicted that Labor would win the sweetest victory of all. Unfortunately, his sage-like reputation took a battering three years later when he also predicted that Labor would win a landslide in 1996. It dawned on me that my father was so one-eyed about this party that he could not countenance the idea that anyone would vote for the Tories.

I love my dad for introducing me to the Labor tribe. The Liberal Party is a party but Labor is a tribe—with all the good and the bad that that implies. Labor has survived intact not because its processes have never changed but because the essential values remain the same: equality, opportunity and recognition that no matter what your parents did for a living you can make it in Australia. We have achieved these goals because of a decent health system, the best education money cannot buy and an egalitarian spirit that does not place social barriers before people from other classes or backgrounds. Labor is the founder and custodian of these values, but to protect them into the future we must also change.

Trade unions are integral to both our success and our heritage, but Labor also needs to represent those who are not in a trade union. That will mean taking steps to reduce union control on the floor of our conference and increasing the representation of ordinary members of our party to have more diverse voices echoing through the halls of this 124-year-old institution. Exceptional trade unionists fight every day for working people but sometimes—particularly at the conclusion of Labor's last term in office—they are shackled by an association within our tribe. In the long term, a more balanced split in the make-up of Labor will be better both for the party and for our hardworking trade unions.

No-one can become a member of Parliament alone. I owe my victory in Kogarah to my incredibly hardworking team—a bunch of true believers who participate because they believe in Labor. Vicki Roussos and her incredible son Peter, Les Crompton, Ashley Mullaly, Sarah Minns, Lee Mullaly, Nick Katris, Colleen Symington, Dom James, Jessica Wei, April Zhou, Chris McKewan, Kris Wendtman, Jim Minns, Toni Goggins, Joe Awada, John Marcus, Kathryn Landsbury, Nick Melas, Matt Murphy, Jessica Yue and Lydia Li, thank you so much for the early mornings at freezing cold train stations and for doorknocking and staffing street stalls in extreme heat. Tommy Zhang, Nathan Liu, David Dai and Tammy Zhang, thank you for your amazing efforts on polling day. I thank Wayne Challinor, Mortdale fire station commander, and the Hurstville Public School Parents and Citizens Association.

I thank the campaign group, who pretty much put their lives on hold in order to see Labor succeed: Leon Pun, Brandan Han, Andrew Silk, Daryl Burge-Lopez, David Dawson, Louay Mustapha, George Vellis and my amazing staff, the wonderful James Zhou and Cheryl Han, who are the hardest working, most dedicated pair I have ever known. I thank also Shaoquett Moselmane, Daryl Melham, Morris Iemma, Kevin Greene, Sophie Cotsis, Ernest Wong, Kaila Murnain and the new member for Rockdale, Stephen Kamper. I thank Luke Foley and his staff for launching a spirited campaign against a government with a big majority and for injecting the Labor caucus with new faces and ideas. I acknowledge also those who have stood by me in fair and foul political weather: Russ Collison, Jack Haran, and my former boss and great mate John Robertson, who I am thrilled has been re-elected in the seat of Blacktown.

I acknowledge also the people I have grown up with in this party and who were with me during the campaign: George Houssos, Brent Thomas, Ian McNamara, Chris Bowen, Damian Kassabgi, Sam Dastyari, Lucy Mannering, my campaign director for Kogarah and the former member for Kogarah, Cherie Burton, and New South Wales Labor's campaign director, my great friend and my son's godfather, Jamie Clements, who did an incredible job in difficult circumstances leading the campaign effort to put Labor back on the map in this State. The godfather of my other son, Nicholas, is also in politics but not on our side: Ben Franklin. I thank Ben for his friendship and congratulate him on his victory in the other place.

I thank my in-laws, Tom and Kath Collins, for holding the Minns family together when my wife or I were studying overseas, running a start-up business, running for office or deciding to pursue something else at the drop of a hat. I also thank my mum and dad. I wish every kid could have the upbringing that I, my sister, Sarah, and brother, Jimmy, had—we lived in a family that sat, ate and talked together every night around the dinner table. They would all be encouraged to pursue their dreams in a home of unconditional love, help and support—and everyone would be forced to support the Labor Party.

Finally, I end where I began: Asian languages. "Yi dzien zhong ching" is a poetic Chinese turn of phrase that expresses the feeling of knowing that you will soon fall in love with the person you have just met. If I had known an Asian language I would have said it the first time I met my wife and best friend, Anna. I have never met a more optimistic and positive person than my wife. Every time I dream up something—whether it is moving overseas or running for Parliament—her immediate reaction is: Great, let's do it! That is pretty extraordinary because she runs a successful business and we are both raising our two little superheroes, Joe and Nick. I have more a sense of us than of me: We are in this together and I owe her everything. I thank the people of Kogarah for entrusting me with this important position. I thank the House for its attention and I look forward to contributing to this historic Chamber.