



# Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 13 May 2015.

**The SPEAKER:** I welcome all of the family, friends and supporters of the new member for Lakemba. In particular, I welcome local councillors from Canterbury and Bankstown councils. I welcome also Mr George Bitar Ghanem, Consul General of Lebanon. I gather we have some visitors from Ulladulla, Cathie Griffiths and Glenn Royall, old friends. Welcome. Ladies and gentlemen, I call the member for Lakemba.

**Mr JIHAD DIB** (Lakemba) [11.45 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Al Salam Alaikom. I greet you in the traditional Islamic form, which is, translated, "Peace unto you." I take this opportunity to acknowledge the Gadigal and the Wangal peoples of the Eora nation and pay my respects to elders past and present.

When my grandfather wore this watch he never imagined that in a different time I would be standing in the oldest Parliament of Australia, delivering my inaugural address, wearing his very same timepiece. Both of my grandfathers were men who never had the opportunity to attend school beyond 10 years of age. They were never wealthy men; rather, they were rich in soul and respect for others. My grandmothers I loved deeply because they taught me to believe that anything is possible. When that generation passed I thought the world was lesser for it.

In accordance with custom, I was named after my paternal grandfather as the first son of the eldest. That was a time when my name did not have the same connotations that it carries today, a time when the true meaning was clearly understood. My grandfather's name, Jihad, is an Arabic word that means to strive and to improve one's self, to overcome struggle and to help others improve their lives. Jihad is charity, jihad is service, and jihad is support of others. It is a name used by people of different faiths because they know its true interpretation. It is this meaning of "jihad" that I want people to know.

Last week I had the greatest honour of being sworn in as the eighth member for Lakemba. I stood here as a proud Australian and took my oath on my very own *Qur-an*. It was the first time someone had done such a thing in this House, and the significance is not lost on me. It is one of the defining characteristics of our nation that we have always sought to better our society and ourselves; and in wearing this same watch, I pay homage to those who believe anything is possible, and I hope to inspire them to make their own change to the world. Over the past week I have listened to moving inaugural speeches of those who, like me, have entered this House to serve. I have been inspired by their respective stories, heard their insights and learned what they stand for.

There is always a lot more to a place than that which appears on the surface; or, worse still, what some choose to see without knowing the stories that highlight the struggles, hopes and dreams of individuals. People of my electorate talk of how they are regularly misunderstood and of the ways in which they suffer from a stigma of superficial analysis. Like all things in life, when one takes the time, it is possible to discover all sorts of gems. The electorate of Lakemba is a tapestry of Australian multiculturalism, with 47 per cent of people born overseas, and more than 150 different cultural groups represented.

It is a fascinating fusion of modern day Australia. Like most of Australia, the first migrants into Lakemba were the British and Irish. The Greeks arrived later, then the Vietnamese and Lebanese. Over the past decade many migrants from China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and New Zealand have joined us. Our many festivals and celebrations are filled with colour, harmony, culture and the shared stories of people proud to live in our neck of the woods. However, in my electorate we face some pretty big challenges. Unemployment tracks at rates much higher than the State average; we have three of the 10 lowest average income earnings in Sydney; we have more than 2,600 public housing dwellings and what appears to be a seemingly endless waiting list, but there is a sense of public service not found in many other places.

In my electorate we have numerous organisations that, despite being chronically underfunded, punch above their weight in supporting those struggling with financial distress and disability, suffering from mental health issues, and battling displacement, domestic violence and substance abuse. Many of those organisations run on no more than the smell of an oily rag. Many projects are designed to assist work across an interfaith and intercultural platform so that no-one is left flailing. These heroes of our community provide a helping hand to those most in need—the safety net we all desire. Services are stretched and the need for more resources is paramount. Investment in social infrastructure to support organisations in providing a fair go, a better life and an opportunity for all, is just as important as the investment we make in the physical infrastructure to keep our society moving.

I am a glass half full person. In my electorate there are a greater number of people under the age of 24 than there is in any other part of the State. A concerted focus on education, whether at school, TAFE or university, and the creation of real opportunities that lead to well-paid jobs has the potential to change the profile of the entire generation in one fell swoop. We need to move away from our preoccupation with cost when we are providing services to those most in need, because when providing opportunities we are

investing in a better and more egalitarian Australia. The more money we invest in people and in providing opportunities for their aspirations to become a reality, the less money we will have to spend on picking up the pieces of a broken society.

In my electorate some people do it really tough, but it is also a place of big dreams. Do not be fooled into believing that it is not an aspirational community or one that thinks of itself as any less than others. One has only to open the local papers to see the many success stories that fill them. One finds a genuine sense of spirit forged in the belief that every person can do something to make themselves and their community better. It is a community where families set up small businesses, involve themselves in voluntary work and spend quality time with their friends. Indeed, the community is exceptionally generous in its charity work, compassion and support for one another. It is inspirational to see that those who often do it the toughest in our society are the first to put their hand into their pocket—if they cannot give money, they will give something else. They understand there is always someone worse off.

People in my electorate do not want special treatment; they want justice and fairness. They want decent roads and hospitals. They want the same opportunities as others. For example, my predecessor, Robert Furolo, stood up for those who are still crying out for an easy access lift at Punchbowl railway station. People in wheelchairs, parents with prams and those who struggle with stairs do not need me to tell them it is tough. One has only to go to the station and see for oneself. A rejuvenation of the Lakemba shopping precinct will promote the development of a tourist hub in which a diversity of Sydneysiders can enjoy the delights of a multicultural electorate. The potential is there not only to create a stronger local economy and opportunities but also to begin a process of demystification of the area. I invite everyone to come to Lakemba to eat some of the best food from across the globe. Why not have a Moroccan tea, or eat some Lebanese sweets, a biryani or a meat pie whilst browsing shops that sell everything from henna to traditional African clothing.

Former Premier and member for Lakemba, the Hon. Morris Iemma, retains a lasting legacy for the changes he implemented, which saw Riverwood mix its public housing with private ownership—that move improved overall community facilities immeasurably. The electorate also takes in Narwee and Roselands to the south, and Wiley Park, Greenacre and Chullora to the north. Each suburb has its own needs. My job is to advocate endlessly for those who have entrusted me to speak on their behalf in this place. They have entrusted me to ensure they are never forgotten.

As I said earlier, my electorate has amongst the lowest average earnings in Sydney and housing affordability is a major issue. Owning a property should not be the great Australian dream; it should be the great Australian norm. At the heart of a better society, people symbolically plant their roots. They take an interest and ownership in what happens around them. They build a township and become part of its future story. The challenge for us all is to address the current inability for people to own a property and establish themselves in a place they can call home, and to have somewhere to claim as their community.

In the early 1970s my parents, like all migrants, came to Australia to pursue a better life. They left behind loved ones, everything they had known, and took a chance to establish themselves in a growing country. The Australia I grew up in is, and always will be, a proud nation made richer by its cultural diversity and harmony. It has been my greatest honour to have been an Australia Day ambassador to regional New South Wales and a Commissioner of the former Community Relations Commission. I have been privileged to travel across our great State and to hear people's stories from all walks of life. I take that on board in every decision I make.

My parents' story is not dissimilar to that of others who have migrated here—some of whom are in the gallery today. Many of them arrived with little more than a vision for a better life. They worked hard as factory workers, cleaners, tradesmen, labourers—as anything a person with limited English could find. Some had overseas qualifications that were never recognised. They poured their blood, sweat and tears into this nation and gave back when they could. They recognised the need to address a sense of belonging and established local groups to assist new and emerging communities. It was voluntary, but crucial. Their community groups became touchstones for new arrivals and provided vital conduits between the known and the new. In a different time these now community elders were once the community activists, community dreamers and community builders. It is a credit to them that I and many others are able to stand on their shoulders to make our way in the world.

People face many challenges in social cohesion. The sad reality is that intolerance is a symptom of views that seek to cause division in an otherwise harmonious community. Much more unites us than divides us. We have a responsibility to ensure that the rhetoric that seeks to encourage bigotry and disharmony never takes a foothold in mainstream Australia. I am greatly concerned that far too much is made of a person's faith, especially when it may prove to win a few votes here and there. We cannot talk about an inclusive society on one hand and look to divide it with the other. Those who exploit community division in the short term by seeking to achieve a "gotcha" moment must come to realise their actions have long-term ramifications to maintaining a close-knit society. We all bear the responsibility to promote acceptance at any cost—and as a teacher I see that.

I am a proud product of the public education system. I acknowledge those teachers who have worked in this place before me. I acknowledge the Minister for Education. I also acknowledge that the President of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council [SPC] is seated in the gallery. Thank you for being here. As a student I was inspired by those who not only taught me the things I needed to

know for examinations but also, more importantly, the things that would make me a better person. I became an English and History teacher and commenced my teaching career on the beautiful South Coast.

Many know the story of my principalship of Punchbowl Boys High School. On the verge of closure, it had become better known for its violence, dysfunction and sense of defeatism. My first day saw me deal with a fight and convincing kids to stay for just a week, to give school a go, to make a fresh start to the year and not to give up. The school needed a new sense of purpose and a belief in the possibility of something better. It may seem like I am glossing over it but with the dedication of passionate colleagues we transformed the school completely. It was not easy, but it is amazing how you find energy when you feel you are making a difference. Our work motivated other schools to follow suit and led to remarkable changes both within the school fence and in the community at large. The school became a lighthouse, and the community built itself around it.

Where students would once joke about joining gangs, they began to see a brighter future. I did everything I could to ensure that no child ever missed out on the opportunity to succeed or an opportunity to have an experience that would make their life richer. I began to talk to the kids one by one, greeting them at the gate in the morning. My wonderful team and I showed them that we believed in them. Do you know what happened? The kids started to change. This encouraged the teachers to change and to give more of themselves. Our students no longer talked flippantly about their future. Instead they looked to a brighter one and strode beyond school into further education, whether at TAFE or university—something which opens doors. I still see many of those kids today in the street. They come up to me, hug me and shake my hand. They say thank you. And that is more touching than anything else you can imagine.

For a multitude of reasons, the very heart of a better society starts with an excellent and well-resourced public education system. I lived it. Education is the great leveller. We need to make sure that, regardless of where one lives, educational disadvantage does not translate into social disadvantage. Over the years and in all the schools I have worked in, my colleagues were the unsung heroes. They shared my belief that students always need someone to be their champion. I wish to place on the record my very good fortune at having worked with some of the finest people I will ever meet. I have had outstanding principals mentor me, and I thank them for the support, the advice and the friendship they have given me.

Punchbowl Boys High School offered a moving story of how a community could take inspiration from one of its greatest public assets and change for the better. Great schools are known for their sense of community and determination to succeed, for their unwavering commitment to every kid and his or her family, and the certainty that all students, regardless of their circumstance, deserve the very best education that society can provide. This commitment that every person matters is what I bring to public service. My educational leadership background places me in a pretty good position, I think, to be able to judge people and to have a better understanding of society at large. Life is funny in that you do not always realise the impact you have had until much later. When I embarked on my political career Omar, a former student, wrote to me. His words were:

... growing up without a dad, it was hard finding a father figure. You were the person who stood out for me. If you can influence a school to better itself, you can inspire a community. You inspired me and now I am studying medicine.

To say I was moved at the time, as I am again now, would be an understatement. I knew Omar well. He spent a lot of time with me because he was often in trouble. He became my shadow and we had many great conversations. I knew how important it was never to give up on him, even when he would bait me to do so. When he left school he did not make it into medicine on his first attempt. But we had taught him resilience and determination and he eventually realised his dream. He has now come full circle, because today he spends his spare time mentoring young kids who need someone to tell them that it is okay and that there is someone to believe in them. I thank him for being here today. If I was not clear enough, let me say it again: Education is the great leveller.

I have always believed in the values of the Labor Party. These values align well with my personal beliefs—ensuring that everyone gets a fair go. John Curtin remains for me a true political hero and one of the finest examples of servant leadership I can think of. I joined the Labor Party after meeting with former Premier and Minister for Foreign Affairs Bob Carr many years ago. I have been fortunate enough to have had his advice on many an occasion. On my journey, I have had the exceptional support, guidance and friendship of Tony Burke and Jason Clare, my two local Federal members and great mates. I thank John Robertson, General Secretary Jamie Clements and the New South Wales Labor leadership team for their support in my preselection. I also wish to thank and acknowledge Luke Foley and my caucus colleagues for welcoming me into this place, and I thank everybody who has helped me when I needed it in any way.

People join a party because they believe in its values and because they want to be a part of something that is the sum of many parts. They give up their time and support their community and candidate to make things better. I want especially to thank my local ALP party members, the backbone of our great party, our wonderful local councillors and all those who continue to give me advice. Our election campaign was phenomenal. It brought together a diverse group of volunteers who engaged in their work with conviction. Made up of the most dynamic mix of people, what we lacked in experience we made up for in passion, enthusiasm and an incredible sense of just what the community can do when it comes together.

My deepest thanks go to George Houssos, who started as a colleague but became a friend; Alexandra Lewis, who joined us as a volunteer and ended up leading the campaign; and Fatima El Cheikh and George Bousamra, who displayed great leadership during the campaign and gave up many hours to make our victory a reality. There are many to thank, and forgive me but this will sound like a roll call—I am going back to teacher mode for a minute. I also want to thank Sarah, Fayez, Anne, Karl, Azzam, Talal, Ingrid, Iman, Rodney, Tepi, Sam, Lynette, Cathy, Rizwan, Fedaa, Karim, Rana, Khaled, Bilal, the Bangladeshi crew and nearly 300 people who stood with me as we did our very best to make a difference and to make this dream a reality. It is on their shoulders that I have made it here, and I will never forget that. I will always be cognisant of the fact that, without you, I would not be in this place today.

We doorknocked, held street stalls and had conversations with locals at every opportunity. Our grassroots campaign set a benchmark for us into the future. There was something for everyone who wanted to contribute and I hope that, in time, I can repay every person in some small way. I would not be here nor would I be the person I am were it not for the support and friendship of the incredible friends and extended family in my life. I have lived the most wonderful experiences and the line "I am a part of all that I have met" from *Ulysses* sums up perfectly the way people and events have shaped my life and made it richer.

My family is the most important thing in my life. My in-laws, Lyn and Ian, and my brothers-in-law and their families have always been supportive and reliable in every sense. Thank you for always being there, especially at short notice. Dad, and I am not going to look at you right now, whilst I will not forget you standing under the blazing sun at the pre-poll voting station for two weeks, it is more important to let you know that I have learnt from you the importance of helping others before I help myself. Mum, you have always been our rock—someone we can depend on regardless of the time or the issue. I find it funny that, even at this age, I still come to your place whenever I am feeling a bit sick and I want some soup.

I thank my brothers and sister, their wives, husband and children for always keeping it real for me and for standing with me as only family can. I am proud of you and I love that when we are together there is no boxing world champion, politician, businessmen or anything else; there are only siblings. We still try to work out who mum and dad's favourite is, but I reckon I might be getting close to it now. I love that we have the same laughs we did when we were kids. Our support for one another is special and we have a bond that is unshakable.

I thank my beautiful kids, Amal, Yasmin and Ali, for bringing such joy into our lives. The special times we have together are what I treasure most. Every day I think of you as the reason I am obligated to make this world a better place, and just quietly thanks for always laughing at my bad dad jokes—like that one. It is only fitting that the last thanks go to my wife, Erin. You have been alongside me ever since I walked into that university lecture theatre late. I had a mullet hairdo and wore an orange tie-dye jacket. Thankfully you did not judge me at first glance. You are a wonderful wife, mother, daughter and true friend to many. You are selfless and always keep things in perspective by bringing out the best in others, not least of all me. You have been with me every step of the way and I have achieved what I have only through your support.

There is something special about being here with a gallery full of friends and loved ones sharing this moment, this time. The challenge for all of us in leadership positions is to show what it means to be Australian and what it means to take the lead. The expectation is that we will use our judgement and influence to build a community that has something for everyone and that we will always serve in a manner that unites us and gives everyone an opportunity to share in the bounty of this land. Our role in this great House is to ensure that no-one is left behind and that, no matter what, we do not walk away from someone or something worth fighting for. Yes, it is true: I am an idealist. I always have been. I remain so because I have seen the results of hard work and vision. Without our ideals we dare not dream and without our dreams we remain the same. We cannot afford to sit in this great House with all that has been entrusted to us and not make a difference. Thank you.