

INAUGURAL SPEECH OF THE HONOURABLE COURTNEY HOUSSOS

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS [5.56 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I thank them for their continued custodianship and I pay my respects to the eternal Gadigal elders and any other Indigenous people here tonight and offer a sincere hand of friendship on the journey towards reconciliation. I am immensely proud to be a member of the Labor Party, which has a long history of working respectfully with our Indigenous people, and now in this place I look forward to continuing our commitment to address the practical inequities that still, shockingly, befall many Indigenous Australians.

I thank the people of New South Wales for electing me to be their representative in this Australia's oldest and most historic parliament. It is an immense honour. I thank the Australian Labor Party and the broader labour movement for their support over many years. I would not be here in this place without them.

I was born in Forster to Jane and Brett Roche and grew up there the eldest of four children—me, my brother, Jordan, and my younger sisters, Phoebe and Bronte. Forster, on the mid North Coast of New South Wales is named after one of New South Wales' early, and brief, premiers, William Forster. It was a typical childhood: school, plenty of sport—hockey in winter, touch football in summer, tennis—and dancing all year round. I was a cricket tragic, even learning to manually score games, and I always loved to read. I would read anything I could lay my hands on. Attending Forster Public School and Forster High School, now Great Lakes College, I benefited from many hardworking and dedicated teachers in the public education system. There is no doubt that education has had a transformative effect on my life.

One of my earliest political memories is the 1987 Federal election. I found the process of entering the polling booth and receiving all the how-to-vote pamphlets very exciting. When we returned home I conducted my own exit poll, to which my mother replied that it was not polite to ask. My father asked me who I would have voted for. "Bob Hawke", I confidently responded. "Why?" my father asked. I said, "Because he's the Prime Minister and I like him". As I grew older I was quietly told that my family were National Party voters. Indeed, I can remember an uncle's birthday party on the night of the 1996 Federal election and the joy of many of my relatives.

The referendum for an Australian republic also had a key influence on me as a teenager. As a 16-year-old I was too young to vote in the defeated referendum of 1998. However, it was my first taste of political campaigning and I was hooked. I was bitterly disappointed with the results, but I slept in my treasured "Yes" T-shirt. Sixteen years later I still firmly believe that Australia must become a republic as the final step to show our maturity as an independent nation.

I find it contrary to the Australian belief in equality that we are still governed by a celebrity, hereditary family who live half a world away. I recognise that for many Australians this issue is a secondary concern to finding employment, balancing work and family and accessing

affordable health and education services. Nevertheless, I believe it is an important issue that will shape Australia's future identity. I hope in time that an Australian republic will be one part of the progressive manifesto of a Federal Labor government.

By now I was an outspoken progressive at most family gatherings. Despite their more conservative leanings, my Uncle Darrell and Auntie Genene knew there was no turning back for me. In my final year of high school Darrell insisted on taking me to meet the Federal Labor shadow Cabinet when they visited Forster. It was the first chance I had to meet and talk to elected Labor representatives and it is a memory I reminded Darrell of upon my preselection. Today it is a reminder of just how far I have come, from the auditorium at the then Forster RSL to this historic Chamber. It is perhaps ironic that I stand here as a Labor member and, indeed, that I have devoted my working life to the Labor Party and its ideals.

It came as a surprise to me then when, after I had commenced working as a party official, I discovered I had a rich Labor heritage in my family. My great-great-grandfather and his brothers were all Labor representatives from the proud Lazzarini family. Herbert Ferdinand Lazzarini was the mayor of Young in 1931. His brother Carlo Camillo Lazzarini was the member for Marrickville and later the member for Western Suburbs in the other place from 1917 until his death in 1952. His brother Hubert Peter Lazzarini was the Federal member for Werriwa from 1918 until 1931 and again from 1934 until his death in 1952. Both Carlo and Bert were the first members of the respective parliaments with Italian surnames, and they died only a month apart. Bert, as he was known, was succeeded as the member for Werriwa by the Hon. Gough Whitlam, AC, QC.

Like both Bert and Carlo, after growing up in country New South Wales I was attracted to the opportunities that Sydney could offer. I was determined to come to Sydney to pursue my tertiary education and was fortunate to do so at the University of New South Wales. This is where I formed a close friendship group—like me, all country girls—that I still hold dear today: Naomi Cronan, Kate Moran, Lucy Gavin, Melanie Barnett, Georgie Baldock and Dana Craft, some of whom are here tonight. They have been the cornerstone of my support network for years and have handed out and voted for me since I first ran to be a student representative many years ago, arguing for a more moderate voice for students.

It was while I was at university campaigning as a student representative against John Howard's cuts and unfair changes to higher education that I decided to join the Labor Party. I would go on to become president of the Student Guild and started to realise that there was an opportunity to pursue my political beliefs as more than a pastime but as a profession. It was also while I was at university that I first met my wonderful husband, George, but more about that later.

My dream became a reality when, straight out of Young Labor, I had the privilege of being an official of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Labor Party and went on to be elected as the first female country organiser. During this time I worked with some of the most dedicated members of the Labor cause—the thousands of people who work tirelessly election after election, often in spite of a large margin in favour of our opponents.

It is not easy balancing work, family and other responsibilities and often travelling thousands of kilometres over the course of an election campaign. These people make many sacrifices to do it, but they do it for the greater cause of Country Labor. These dedicated members and their supporters are the backbone of our party and share a genuine belief in Country Labor and the Australian Labor Party as the way to improve outcomes in their local communities and regions. Country New South Wales is a diverse and beautiful place, whether it is the stunning beaches along the coastline, the gentle rolling hills around Kiama, further west near Gundagai, the dense forests in the Northern Rivers, the dramatic mountains of the Great Divide, or the long, wide plains of the Far West.

Country New South Wales will always be a special place for me. I am lucky to have fond memories across country New South Wales, whether it is standing with thousands of others in protest at the Grafton jail being closed or marching to support Your Rights at Work in Queanbeyan and Dubbo. I have travelled literally hundreds of thousands of kilometres throughout country New South Wales, mainly driving my trusty Honda Jazz and later a couple of Holden Commodores.

Paul Keating infamously said of his 1993 victory that it was for the true believers. I understand that all political parties rely heavily upon volunteers but there is something special about the people who make up the Australian Labor Party. From the branch secretaries, presidents and delegates to conferences to the volunteers who hand out on election day, I take this opportunity to pay my deepest and most humble respect and gratitude to them. It was a great privilege to serve them as a party official, and I now look forward to doing it as their member of Parliament.

I am not the first to pay tribute to these true believers and I hope I will not be the last. After almost a decade in our New South Wales Labor Party office, I have seen up close the character and commitment of our party officials, staffers, Young Labor members, union officials and ministerial advisors. Too often these dedicated people are derided by a cynical electorate or commentators as hacks, apparatchiks and faceless men. But my experience has shown me that they are the ballast of the true believers, and tonight I thank them. They worked for Labor in the toughest of times—the 1988, 1996 and 2011 elections—despite knowing Labor faced electoral defeat but maintaining their commitment and belief in the Labor values of our nation's oldest party.

They are not fairweather friends. They are there making personal sacrifices when the chips are down and everyone has left the show, fighting hard to preserve the legacy of our movement, and even at times when we may have lost our way. Some cynically believe that they are there for the perks or the good times, but they are the ones who toil day after day, in good times and bad. These people remain deeply committed to the ideals of our party. They do not lose those beliefs simply because they work on campaigns, in a union or for a Minister. Indeed, these beliefs are what motivate them for the early mornings and late nights, the impossible deadlines and the unending scrutiny. I know that Labor does not have a

monopoly on these true believers; they exist on both sides of the aisle and are an essential part of our political system.

I have had the good fortune of working with hundreds of dedicated individuals over many years and I pay tribute to these people who become our party's stalwarts. Working as a party official also allowed me to work closely with a number of affiliated and non-affiliated trade unions. There is, and always will be, a special relationship between the Labor Party and the trade union movement. I thank all of the affiliated trade unions for their support and their peak body, Unions NSW. I especially thank Russ Collison and the Australian Workers Union; Jim Metcher and the communications branch of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union [CEPU]; Steve Butler and the Electrical Trades Union; Tara Moriarty and the Liquor and Hospitality Division of United Voice; Derrick Belan and the National Union of Workers; Gerard Dwyer, Bernie Smith and Barbara Nebart and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association; Alex Claasens and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union; Michael Aird and the Transport Workers Union; and, finally, Graeme Kelly and my own union, the United Services Union.

The Hon. Robert Brown: A great union.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I agree with the Hon. Robert Brown. Many people often tritely speak of the tyranny of distance in country New South Wales. The reality of life is that it can take hours of travel to participate in representative sports or charity work or attend a specialist appointment. But the pervading sense of isolation is one that governments must address. The key method for government in addressing the challenges that rural and regional New South Wales face is improving connectivity. This applies to all aspects of government policy. I am so proud of the former Federal Labor Government for laying out a plan and beginning to build the National Broadband Network.

This is a vital part of improving connectivity in everything from health care to education, especially for businesses in rural and regional areas. Improving connectivity is also an economic imperative: farms, manufacturers and small businesses cannot reach markets if they do not have appropriate road or freight infrastructure. But we will also have a more cohesive and vibrant society if all parts of our State can feel connected. Indeed, congestion within Sydney is creating an increasing problem of disconnectedness right here in our State's capital. There is a disparity between the demographics of our cities and the demographics of our regions. Governments can play an important role in building bridges between the two.

During my time in this Parliament I will be a strong advocate for working families and the challenges they face. The phrase "working families" has been often mocked, but I use it deliberately. I firmly believe that governments should support working people who are trying to get ahead, whilst also providing a safety net for the most vulnerable. This means governments should support jobs, ensure safe and fair workplace practices, universal and accessible health care, quality local education and infrastructure to support their daily lives. One issue I hope to focus on during my time in this place is that of workplace flexibility. This is still regarded as a tokenistic and fringe issue but it fundamentally shapes our society and is

the key challenge for families. Just as no person is the same, there can be no one-size-fits-all solution for families trying to balance work and parenting. Every family must find the balance that works for them.

However, governments need to be innovative in supporting families, especially in those crucial early years after a child is born, but also through their lives. Paid parental leave schemes and quality and affordable child care are key parts of the puzzle—but not the only parts. Workplace flexibility—not just for mothers—and a focus on outcomes rather than simply hours in the office is another part. Embracing technology has an important role to play in this too. It seems that job-sharing rather than part-time positions allows parents the opportunity to return to work in a meaningful way but balance that with their childcare responsibilities at home. Whilst it is difficult for governments to legislate for flexibility and for individualised solutions, I hope that during my time in this place I will be able to contribute to addressing this important challenge for governments at all levels.

I now live not far from the area that my forebear, Carlo, once represented, in Earlwood, with my amazing husband, George, and our delightful daughter, Anna. We are part of a wonderful community and have some great friends close by, some of whom are here in the gallery tonight. Through George I have been introduced to Greece. I love Greece so much that we were married there, almost seven years ago, in his mother's village. Who knows, Joseph Hanna, without your intervention, we may never have got there! I have become a true philhellene and have seen the hardworking and generous nature of Greeks, both here in Australia and in Greece. I share their values of the importance of both family and community within daily life.

I identified with the key role that the church plays within the Greek community, as my Christian faith has been a constant in my life and has shaped my values and ethics that I bring to this place. Although I was christened in the Catholic Church as a baby and raised in the Forster Baptist Church, as an adult I have converted to the Greek Orthodox faith. I would especially like to thank my Greek godparents, Leah Georgakis and George Vallas, and Father Leslie Kostogolou at St Gerasimos in Leichhardt for making me feel so welcome, and for his spiritual advice and guidance.

There are many people here tonight in the gallery and more are watching online. I am so grateful for the love, support and friendship you have shown me over so many years. You have been my companions on this journey so far. But now, this is just the beginning. I will continue to call on you, to keep me grounded and in touch, as I seek to represent you in this place. I have many people to thank—too many to name. Tonight I will try to mention but a few—however, it is not an exhaustive list.

I must begin with my husband, my best friend and my unwavering support, George. There is no doubt that I would not be standing here tonight without George by my side. He supported, mentored and guided my journey with the Labor Party after I joined as a young, idealistic university student, and as I worked in the party office. He has supported the many sacrifices we made together and now, as we begin this next stage, as an elected representative. I am so

lucky to have such a smart, loyal, passionate, logical and understanding partner in all that I do. He is a true man of conviction. Many people know that George has a quick wit and unmatched campaigning skills—I agree with Senator Deb O'Neill: he is the best marginal seat campaigner in the country, with no exception. He is also an incredible supporter of women, and I am one of the many beneficiaries of this support.

I can already see our daughter benefiting from this same guidance and love. I gave birth to our delightful daughter, Anna, 15½ months ago. She is on her best behaviour tonight. Her calm yet curious nature has been evident from those very first days. Her quiet independence has emerged later. We are truly blessed with our little munchkin. Watching her grow and develop is an endless source of amazement. Annoula, I hope your love of books continues to grow, and one day you will read this speech and see how much we love you. Becoming a mother has certainly been a life-changing event for me.

I am incredibly fortunate to have such supportive bosses in Jamie Clements and Kaila Mumain. I am proud to call both of them friends. Jamie, your calm, intelligent and measured leadership was a key part of our recent election success. I hope, for our party's sake, that you continue in your role for many years to come. Thank you for giving me this incredible opportunity. Kaila is a very dear friend of mine, and I am already missing working with her in the same office every day. She is one of the toughest and hardest working people I have ever met. She is an incredible trailblazer as the first woman to be Assistant Secretary of New South Wales Labor, a position she has thoroughly earned with years of service and dedication to the Labor Party.

I thank all the past general secretaries and assistant general secretaries whom I have worked with in the party office, particularly Mark Arbib, Sam Dastyari and Chris Minns. Chris, I appreciate your considered advice over many years and I look forward to working with you again in this place. I thank the many party officers, especially Mark Lennon, Tara Moriarty and Deb O'Neill. I must mention the many support staff at party office whom I have worked with over many years. I congratulate our leader, Luke Foley, on the great election result and thank him for his support. I acknowledge my many State parliamentary colleagues both in this place and in the other place. I have many friends—some new, some not so new. I am truly excited when I look around our caucus and see the talented and hardworking people we have representing New South Wales Labor. I look forward to working with all of you to return Labor to government.

I especially thank Noreen Hay, my newest Country Labor colleague, Kate Washington, and Jenny Aitchison—all strong and inspiring women—with whom I am so proud to be entering Parliament. New South Wales Young Labor is a truly amazing organisation. While I was a member I formed a number of close friendships, which I have still to this day: Sally Sitou, Tom Hollywood, Ian McNamara, Tegan Gilchrist, Janai Tabbernor, Michael and Belinda Cominos, and later Jay Suvaal, Josephine Hillard, Luna Zivadinovic, Crystal Validakis, Alex Cowan, Dorothy Rapisardi and Sarah Coward. I thank you all. In particular, I would like to thank Salim Barbar, the most loyal friend whose inspiring commitment to the union movement has been evident from the very beginning. It is also within Young Labor that I

found Blake Mooney, who is beginning this journey with me. Blake, I know you have big things ahead of you. I just hope I can hold on to you for a little while.

Within Country Labor we have so many hardworking representatives who have supported me. I would like to thank the members of the Country Labor Committee that I have worked with. I make a special mention of my two chairs, Bryce Wilson and his predecessor, Harry Woods. Justine Elliot and Joel Fitzgibbon are both outstanding representatives for their communities and rural and regional Australia. To Mike Kelly, I say thank you for your support over so many years. You will soon be back in your rightful place in the Federal Parliament. I thank the many candidates who have stood for Labor and Country Labor, in particular Steve Whan, Glenn Kolomeitz and Peter Ellem. Through George I have met and made many friends I now regard as my own, including Joseph Hanna, Peter and Kelly Zangari, Sabina Husic, Talal Yassine, Ryan Park and Nageb Al-Malah, amongst others. I thank you for your friendship and your unqualified support for me in all of my political endeavours.

I have been lucky to have four wonderful grandparents who have all had a significant influence on my life. Both my grandfathers have an incredible work ethic—something I hope I have inherited—and my grandmothers have been the glue to hold their families together. Sadly, my Poppy Bob and my Grandma cannot be here tonight. Poppy passed away in 2008, only months before I married George. I have no doubt that he is watching over me with a celebratory XXXX in hand. Nothing could keep Joyce and Jim away tonight though—even the train line being washed away by recent floods. They have driven down from Taree tonight with my uncle Derek.

I am fortunate to have in the gallery tonight my late grandfather's brother, my great-Uncle Bill, and Aunt Imelda, who have always encouraged and supported me. Despite their great success in business they have maintained their down-to-earth nature. In recent years we have developed a close relationship, which I treasure. My Uncle Bill shares my late grandfather's cheeky sense of humour and I appreciate my Aunt Imelda's measured advice. Your quiet determination and ambition are an inspiration to me.

I am truly blessed to have the world's best mother-in-law. Since our first meeting both Anna and Arthur welcomed me into their home and their family without question. I am so happy that we were able to honour Anna by naming our beautiful daughter after her. I cannot express how much Anna's support and love, especially since our daughter's arrival, have helped me. I love watching the two of them together; they are the best of friends already. Her very practical support has given me great freedom to pursue my political career for many years.

Finally, I thank the many staff of the Legislative Council who have assisted me and made me feel so welcome since my election to this place. When the Labor Party was formed 124 years ago it was to advocate for working people throughout their working life as they raise their families and in their retirement. I plan to continue in that tradition. I am a proud Labor

member of the Legislative Council, but my heart also lies in country New South Wales. I hope to represent all of our great State during my time in this place.