



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 6 May 2003.

Ms BEREJKLIAN (Willoughby) [7.58 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Mr Speaker, I stand tonight in this Parliament knowing how important families and communities are in allowing individuals to grasp their potential and the opportunities our great nation almost uniquely offers its citizens. Increasing pressures on families, exponential rates of technological change and continuing global uncertainty have meant that more than ever before we turn to our local communities to offer and to receive support, to effect necessary change and to define and express the type of society we are.

Residents of the Willoughby electorate have every right to place high expectations on me as their newly elected member of Parliament. In this, my first speech, I wish to pledge to all my constituents that for as long as I have the honour and privilege to represent them in this place I will always put my local community first. I will strive at all times to remember the words of Edmund Burke, who said, on being elected the member for Bristol in 1774, that a representative should:

... live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion high respect; their business unremitted attention.

I will dedicate the next four years and beyond to proving to my constituents that their trust in me is well placed, because for me, first and foremost, politics is about people. Willoughby is a richly diverse electorate, from the bustling central business district of Chatswood to the quieter suburbs along the foreshores of Middle Harbour. In Willoughby we have an extremely strong sense of community. We have prominent chambers of commerce, Rotary clubs, progress associations, Lions clubs, church communities, Neighbourhood Watch groups and sporting clubs. Informal street meetings and gatherings amongst neighbours are frequent.

In Willoughby we have a strong and proud tradition of revering and supporting our ex-service men and women. The Chatswood RSL Club, Willoughby Legion Club and Anzac Memorial Club in Cammeray remind us that so much of what we have today is due to the men and women who defended our nation's honour in times of war. For me, it was also of a great deal of personal interest to learn that the fifth member for Willoughby, Edward Larkin, who was sworn into this Chamber in 1913, died on the battlefield of Gallipoli in 1915, alongside thousands of other young Australians. The plaque behind me in this Chamber recognises his ultimate sacrifice.

In Willoughby we are passionate about our natural heritage and environment. When in 1788 Governor Phillip set out to explore Middle Harbour he found a very beautiful and rugged foreshore unsuitable for settlement. Due to the rough terrain much of that foreshore was not touched for over 100 years and fortunately for the most part it remains in the same pristine state today. Willoughby Falls at Flatrock Creek, the unique architecture and streetscape of Castlecrag—ably protected by the local Walter Burley Griffin Society—the famous bridge at Northbridge, 1920s California bungalows and Federation homes dispersed throughout Willoughby, Naremburn and Artarmon are but some of the other unique heritage and environmental features within the area.

In Willoughby we welcome cultural diversity. Locals of many backgrounds contribute in every facet of community life. According to the 2001 Census, 55 per cent of constituents in Willoughby have at least one parent who was born overseas and 32 per cent speak a language other than English at

home. Despite these natural attributes and a great sense of community, regrettably many State government services are deficient in Willoughby. Our police in Chatswood, in the centre of Sydney's fourth-largest central business district, should not be forced to work from an old home and demountable buildings which comprise the current police station. It is not even deemed fit enough to be opened to the public on police open days. The Coalition committed \$1.5 million to fund the shortfall between private sector development of the site and the total amount that is required. I urge the Government to match this commitment. I put on notice that I will be pursuing it vigorously on this issue until the new station is built.

The unique character of our local neighbourhoods in Willoughby is being threatened by this Government's heavy-handed approach to planning and development. The wishes of the local community and the character of our neighbourhoods need to be considered in the wake of inappropriate blanket policies such as State environmental planning policy [SEPP] 5 and SEPP 53. Chatswood train station is one of the busiest on the northern line, yet there is no access for the elderly or disabled from the platform up to the station. How much longer must we wait for this basic service?

If you travel around the Willoughby electorate during peak hour you will notice frustrated bus commuters who spend too long waiting in long queues, especially in Naremburn, Cammeray and North Cremorne. Other areas such as Castle Cove require new routes. I have also recently learned about the cancellation of services from Willoughby bus depot and will demand that the Government reinstate these services. Traffic congestion throughout the electorate is a serious problem. But what incentive is there to alleviate some of the stress through encouraging public transport usage when current services are so lacking? This situation cannot be allowed to continue.

I will be vigilant also to ensure that Willoughby receives its fair share of public education funding. Thanks to the efforts of my predecessor, Peter Collins, and the local community, Chatswood High School remains, notwithstanding the Government's earlier decision to close it. But there remain grave concerns regarding access to public education throughout the electorate, especially in relation to class sizes, special needs education and general resourcing issues. I intend to set a rigorous pace in communicating with my constituents, in working with the many local organisations, in being accessible and by being an effective voice in this place on their behalf. The recent election in Willoughby was hard fought and the result was close. I want to take this opportunity to place on the public record that I look forward to developing strong working relationships with both Willoughby and North Sydney councils. I thank the Willoughby councillors who are here this evening.

From a very young age I was imbued with a great appreciation of all the opportunities I had and how fortunate I was to be born and raised in a country like Australia. My parents each migrated to Australia in the 1960s, met in Sydney and were married in the Armenian Orthodox Church in Chatswood, in the heart of the Willoughby electorate, in 1969. Our family involvement in the activities of the local Australian-Armenian community cemented my growing interest in community life. Many of my childhood memories are of attending Armenian Saturday school at Willoughby primary school, as well as being involved in other activities, such as the 2nd Willoughby Girl Guides and local sporting groups. This experience taught me to be proud of my cultural background but, more significantly, to value the importance of being a good Australian. This includes being proud of

my surname. I thank the good people of Willoughby who voted for me, even though they could not pronounce it.

I am deeply thankful for the support I have received from my friends in the Australian-Armenian community, many of whom are here tonight and many of whom I have known since childhood. I take this opportunity to salute the contribution they continue to make to New South Wales and Australia, just as I salute the contribution made by all the culturally diverse communities in Willoughby.

Whilst I did not realise it at the time, my upbringing and the values instilled in me were core Liberal values. In a society increasingly cynical about the political process and organised institutions, I believe it is more imperative than ever to have a constant point of reference, a core set of ideals and guiding principles to rely on, an anchor when one's mettle is tested and tough decisions need to be made. For me, that anchor has been, and always will be, the tenets of modern liberalism. For me, the essence of liberalism is having the opportunity to pursue and achieve your life goals, irrespective of your background, and then give something back to society by ensuring that this opportunity is created for others.

Liberalism ensures that government will always support those in need and allows individuals to live freely so long as they do not impinge on the freedom of others. I believe the challenge of modern liberalism and the challenge of governments all around the world can best be summed up by John Stuart Mill, whose following statement is as relevant today as it was two centuries ago. He said:

There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.

I stated at the outset my principal belief that politics is about people. I strongly believe that governments should strive to achieve the liberal principle of equality of opportunity as opposed to the Labor Party's ideological position of equality of outcome. Labor's position thwarts innovation, and engenders mediocrity and conformity. In the context of modern State government, a key component to equality of opportunity is a strong education system—both public and private. I deeply appreciate the opportunities I have enjoyed as a product of the New South Wales public education system. I will fight hard so that all schools in Willoughby have the necessary resources to educate our successive generations.

The people we represent in this Parliament will have access to equality of opportunity only if they are provided with adequate essential services such as education, health, public transport, safety and security. To provide these services we need fiscally responsible governments and sound economic management. A well managed economy means that adequate services are provided where they are needed. It is therefore frustrating today, in 2003, to see that Labor is failing to deliver better services and standards of living to the people of New South Wales. Whereas the Federal Government made the tough but necessary decision to address taxation reform by introducing the GST and allowing the abolition of several State taxes, the State Labor Party has tried to sweep the issue of taxation reform under the carpet. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

Despite record State Government revenues and budget overspending, services in New South Wales are deficient. Furthermore, the Labor Government has failed to create a climate conducive to

business growth. And the result? The average taxpayer is now left bearing the burden of funding this Government's inefficient economic management. It is high time that State taxation reform was firmly on the public agenda. When the Labor Party came to power in 1995 it stated that there would be no new taxes and no tax increases. Since that time, Labor has introduced the insurance protection tax, the owner occupied land tax, the parking space levy and now we even have to pay tax when we go fishing.

It has also increased land tax on investment properties and registration on motor vehicles, and payroll tax has increased by 58 per cent during Labor's eight years in power. Alongside these taxes, revenue has exceeded the budget estimates by more than \$3.3 billion in the past two financial years alone. In fact, in the past eight financial years the Government has increased its revenue in real terms by more than 34 per cent. It is of great concern that against this backdrop of rising State Government revenue streams, increasing taxation and the successive budget spending overruns, the people of New South Wales have had an inadequate return on their hard earned tax dollar. Waiting lists continue to blow out, our transport infrastructure is at breaking point, our classes are too large, and the list goes on.

My constituents in Willoughby have every right to demand to know why Chatswood cannot have a new police station or why the elderly and disabled cannot have escalators at Chatswood railway station, or why residents have to pay land tax on the family home they have owned and lived in for 30-odd years. But again the question beckons: If these additional revenue sources are not fixing the many problems we have in the delivery of essential services, or if they are not being used to ease the tax burden on the people of New South Wales, where exactly is the money going? For the sake of the hard-working taxpayers in Willoughby and across the State the Government must urgently address these legitimate questions. Furthermore, the Labor Government can ignore genuine tax reform for only so long, particularly with respect to payroll tax and land tax.

Payroll tax is a disincentive to job creation and business growth, particularly for smaller and medium businesses. The New South Wales payroll tax rate of 6 per cent is uncompetitive with the rates in Victoria and Queensland. The Government should have worked harder to stay within budget and delivered a program for reduction of, at the very least, a full percentage point on the payroll tax rate. As for land tax. Land tax on the family home needs to be abolished and the burden of land tax on investment properties needs to be reduced. The land tax on investment properties is indirectly a tax on tens of thousands of renters because landlords are inevitably forced to pass the increases to their tenants. Such increases also affect small business operators. There also needs to be greater transparency in the land tax valuation process to address concerns about massive and inconsistent fluctuations.

Beneath the Government's spin about its record of economic management lurks a series of time bombs, highlighting the need for more comprehensive budget reporting standards. Honourable members should compare this situation to where New South Wales could be today. We have the people, we have the resources, but we lack a State Government which can make the necessary tough decisions and which can manage the economy efficiently. Working in the financial services sector for the past five years has given me an insight into the many pressures placed on business. I thank the senior management of the Commonwealth Bank for taking a risk in entrusting me as the

general manager for a core part of the bank's retail business, with business responsibility for over 2½ million customers Australia-wide. I leave behind many friends and dedicated colleagues.

In politics it is almost impossible to achieve anything on your own. I would like to thank my friends in the Liberal Party, many of whom are here tonight, who through their loyalty, honesty and counsel have assisted in my development over the past decade. In this category I place my predecessor, the Hon. Peter Collins, QC, who served the people of Willoughby with great distinction for 22 years. His contribution to the good governance of this State has been outstanding, particularly in relation to the arts, health, Treasury and his leadership of the Liberal Party. I extend a special thanks to the two Federal members covering my electorate—Joe Hockey and Brendan Nelson for their mentorship and continuing support.

I would not be here were it not for the training I received in the New South Wales Young Liberals movement, and I will forever be proud of having served as the President of the New South Wales Young Liberals in 1996. The Young Liberals play a major role in the leadership of our country, and it is a testament to the organisation that both our Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard, and State Leader, John Brogden, are former New South Wales Young Liberal presidents. I thank the Liberal Party Women's Council for assisting me to take my seat in Parliament—without quotas I might add—and for preparing me for what lies ahead. A special thanks to my friends on the State Executive, especially Sam Witheridge, to the staff at the State Secretariat, the party membership at large, and to my personal staff for their unstinting support.

To all the members of my campaign team, led brilliantly by Deborah Klika, and to all the members of my local conference, under the exceptional leadership of Peter Davidson, you were all with me every step of the way, including those long 13 days after the election. In the first instance you bestowed upon me the great honour of being your candidate and then worked tirelessly to ensure that I became the member. I regard you all as part of my extended family and am excited by what we can achieve together for our local community in the years ahead. It is special to have former Premier Nick Greiner here this evening. I thank him for continuing to inspire a new generation of Liberals. I also note the presence in the gallery of two former members of this Parliament and distinguished Ministers in Robert Webster and Wendy Machin, who I am proud to call my constituents and who have been of enormous support. As you see, the Coalition is alive and well in Willoughby!

To my father Krikor and mother Arsha—whose birthday it is today—thank you for making me believe, ever since I can remember, that the sky is the limit. A special thanks to my sisters, Rita and Mary, who have always been my strongest supporters. Thank you also to my uncle, Father Razmig, who continues to be a constant source of inspiration. I stated at the outset my core belief that politics is about people. At the end of my parliamentary career I would like to look back and believe that I have contributed to improving the opportunities and standard of living of the people of Willoughby and the people of New South Wales.

I am particularly moved by the words of Johann von Goethe (1749-1832), who said, "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you will help them to become what they are capable of being." I am proud and humbled to be here tonight to represent the values of my family, my party and my community of Willoughby. These are things that will always guide my words and actions in this place. Thank you for your courtesy.

Mr SPEAKER: I extend to the honourable member for Willoughby my congratulations on her inaugural speech. I note the presence in the gallery not only of a large contingent of her family, friends and constituents but also the former Premier, the Hon. Nick Greiner; the Federal Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Joe Hockey; former Ministers Robert Webster and Wendy Machin; and the former member for Ryde, Michael Photios.