



City Of Sydney Amendment (Electoral Rolls) Bill.

The Hon. TONY BURKE [3.58 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): Madam President, honourable members, it is not lost on me what a significant opportunity it is for me to speak as a member of this House. I also note from the outset how much I appreciate two courtesies extended to me. The first is that I can say I support this bill and not refer to it again. The second is the courtesy of your presence in the Chamber, Madam President, the presence of other honourable members, and the presence of my friends and family in the gallery. I also have to thank the staff of the Parliament not only for the welcome they have given me since March this year but going back over the last 15 years since I started visiting Parliament as a student.

I very reluctantly acknowledge that I am not here because the people of New South Wales were overcome with a burning desire to elect Tony Burke, except for 244 primary votes from people who I think were all on a first name basis with mum and dad. I suspect that a fair few may be in the gallery today, but most of them are members of the party and I know they would never break the ticket! I am here only because the Labor Party trusted me to take the position on the upper House ticket that became available when Ron Dyer decided not to recontest. Ron has already been recognised here as both a great bloke and a fine parliamentarian who took his work seriously. He replaced John Ducker, who had replaced Reg Downing.

While I know I am meant to say a bit about myself in this speech to let you know about aspects of my life and my principles that might not already be on record, I want to spend as much time as I can talking about the people to whom this position actually belongs, the people who rely on representation from the Labor Party, the people who need us to fight for them, the people who gave me the motivation to become politically active in the first place.

My life today is defined by the young family that my wife, Cathy, and I are raising in Roselands. We live in a wonderfully diverse community in which it is as commonplace to greet people with "Iasoo", "MarHaba", "Chao", "Buona sera" and "Lei hau" as it is to say "G'day." I am involved in my local area with a range of sporting clubs, with my parish, and as president of both a local benevolent foundation and the Bankstown Community College, a leading provider of adult education in my community. My daughters, Liana, Caitlyn and Helena, know how proud I am of them, and I will never find words that go far enough to express the thanks I owe to Cathy. It means the world to see you here in the Chamber today. If I could find better words I would use them, but I am sure you know how grateful I am.

A friend told me last week at a function that I would not be able to give a good first speech because I had not had a tough enough upbringing. I thought about claiming that there were 150 of us living in a shoebox in the middle of road, but the reality is that, while we have all had tough times, I have lived what A. B. Facey described as "a fortunate life". I grew up in a small business family. Dad ran a small chemist shop in Riverwood. He bought it when he was 27 and stayed there until he retired. Mum left the Commonwealth Bank when she married, back when married women automatically lost permanent status. She worked full-time raising my sisters, Rosemary and Sharon, my brother, Michael, and myself.

When, as the youngest, I started kindergarten, Mum went to what is now the University of Western Sydney and studied to be a primary schoolteacher. She taught in the government system for 17 years full time and still works as a casual from time to time. I extend my gratitude to all those family members, now extended to include Peter and Junette as well as Cathy's family, Peter, Colleen, Maree and Trent, and a wonderful collection of nieces and a nephew. They have all helped to shape me and challenge me, and my appreciation could not be more sincere.

I am lucky to have always had employment since I was 12. My first job was delivering the Sunday papers for Beverly Hills Newsagency. I held the job for six years—which remains the longest period I have held down a job. The paper boys at Beverly Hills were receiving only 10 per cent commission, but other shops were paying 12.5 per cent. So I got the other paper boys together and we agreed to form a union. When I took our demands to the boss he would not listen at first because he said we could not be a union if we had not paid union fees. So, to make it official, everyone threw in a copper coin and I went back to the boss to negotiate.

The log of claims was substantial: 12.5 per cent commission, an extra \$1 extra every time it rained, and free food for a Christmas party. He came back with the typical response: "Why should I give you lot that?" I can still hear my 12-year-old voice answering, "Cause if you don't, we'll have a paper boy picket line outside the shop. The TV cameras will turn up because they'll think it's really funny, we'll be on TV, so we'll feel really important, and your customers will know it's your shop and you'll look really bad." He gave in to all three demands, and to celebrate we spent the union fees on mixed lollies.

When I was 15, I started to pick up some extra work at Grace Bros at Roselands and joined the Shop, Distributive

and Allied Employees Association [SDA], the shop assistants union. One of the great privileges of working for the SDA over the past five and a half years has been to be the local organiser for the people I worked side by side with for so many years at Roselands. The SDA is the largest union in Australia and has consistently had one of the highest membership satisfaction ratings of any trade union. The membership is largely female and more than 60 per cent of the members are under 25. In the last year alone, membership in New South Wales grew by 8.6 per cent.

I extend my thanks to Greg Donnelly, the Secretary of the New South Wales Branch. Greg has one of the most extraordinary work ethics I have ever encountered. His commitment to deliver for his members and his fundamental decency help to explain the success of the New South Wales Branch. To Gerard Dwyer, the industrial officers, my fellow organisers, all the clerical staff and friends at the SDA, I say thanks.

The SDA is a national union and I also acknowledge the support over many years of Joe DeBruyn, the National Secretary, Don Farrell, the National President, and Geoff Williams, the Secretary of the Newcastle Branch. Thanks for the friendship, the commitment, the example. I want to especially thank the members and delegates whom I worked side by side with each day. There is nothing that an organiser can achieve without the active support and loyalty of the members and delegates on the shop floor. I hope I can continue to help deliver results for those same people through my contributions in Parliament.

A lot has been said in the last few years, particularly in the Federal Parliament, about trade unionists entering Parliament. My work history since I left Grace Bros of working first for Senators Graham Richardson and then Michael Forshaw, a lobbyist and campaigner in the debates on euthanasia and the Republic, and then as a trade union official for nearly six years is seen by some as not being experience of the "real world". Those who think that working for a union somehow places people outside the real world just do not understand the work that unions do.

It is bizarre that some in the Federal Government would argue that I would have had more real-world experience if I had utilised my law degree to represent the same people on the same issues, but charged them a few hundred dollars an hour to meet with me in some solicitor's office with dodgy wood panelling and terminally ill goldfish. The critics of trade unionists entering Parliament speak as though unionism was an industry and as though we spend our days in the same sorts of union offices doing the same sort of job and bringing the same life experiences to Parliament.

As an organiser I did not have an office; I did not even have a desk! My workplace was wherever my members worked; my meeting rooms would be at Coles at Earlwood, or Big W at Campsie; my lunch room would be the food courts at Roselands or at Hurstville; my desk would be whatever box I might have to lean on in Woollies, Target or KFC. I am happy to compare the day-to-day experience of the real world between a union official and a Minister in the current Federal Government any day.

I am proud to be among the five new Labor members who have just entered Parliament with an immediate union background. However, no-one should think that what Tanya Gadiel, Angela D'Amore, Paul McLeay, Kayee Griffin and I bring to Parliament is some common shared experience in a trade union industry. What we bring is experience from the frontline of the concerns and aspirations of nurses, postal workers, council workers, public servants, fastfood workers, and shop assistants. There are 700,000 people in New South Wales working in those jobs. Their workplaces have been our workplace.

Trade unions are not an industry. Unionism is a movement; a movement that provides a gateway into every industry. That frontline experience brings a perspective that is available only through experience on the shop floor. I have seen work practices, some great and some that I never would have believed if I had not seen them for myself, such as managers telling staff to work in an area covered by two inches of water with electric cables running through it on the basis that their shoes would have thick enough soles to protect them; and part-time nightfillers being systematically underpaid to the extent that they had backpay claims—which were ultimately paid—amounting to \$20,000 each. I will never forget the fastfood manager who tried to save money by no longer stocking band-aids and telling the 15-year-old employees to use serviettes and sticky tape.

My understanding of some of the issues affecting casuals changed radically at a midnight union meeting in a Franklins store for the nightfillers who fill supermarket shelves while most of us sleep. After the meeting, one of the members started telling me where I had had a coffee that afternoon and at which club I had attended a Labor Party meeting the night before. She knew because she had served me the coffee and seen me while she was working as a cleaner at the club. I realised that many casuals do not have to deal only with underemployment; some have a different set of problems that have largely passed under the radar in the public debate.

I refer to the problems faced by people with multiple jobs. This worker told me she would usually work overtime hours but, because they were across multiple jobs, she never received overtime rates. Her total income reached the superannuation threshold, but she fell below the threshold in two of her jobs. The health and safety principle of a 10-hour break between shifts had become meaningless. Any roster change not only caused havoc for family responsibilities but also jeopardised the other jobs. When annual leave required simultaneous approval from three

employers, it was easy to see why she never enjoyed a real holiday.

Whether it be issues as specific as this or just the general understanding of how meaningless employment conditions become unless they are enforced, trade unionists bring an essential perspective to this place. Those who have sarcastically remarked, "Just what Labor needs, another union official", do not realise how true the words they utter are.

As I said, my election is entirely due to my being selected to be on the Labor ticket, and there are a few people from within the Labor Party to whom I extend special thanks. The first thank you is to the Premier, not only for the election result which allows me to be here but also for the kind of Government Bob Carr runs. Those of you who know me well know I can be pretty passionate in pursuing my beliefs. No-one will ever lay awake at night wondering, "What does Tony Burke think?" Some years ago I was honoured when Bob Carr invited me to address the other House as one of two private citizens invited onto the floor of the Parliament for the first time.

That speech gave me the opportunity to put on the record a number of my strongly held opinions. I finished that speech with a principle which I believe holds true on a range of issues, and I will refer to one of them. The principle was this: A law that fails to protect people who are vulnerable will always be a bad law. The same can be said of Government policy. Government policy is at its best when it protects and provides for our most vulnerable citizens.

Some years ago I was a volunteer with a public speaking club for young inmates within maximum security at Goulburn correctional centre. It was a great project, and it caused many members to receive applause for the first time in their lives. I will never forget when we started with a standard training exercise for building confidence. We divided into small groups, one person wrote down the names of everyone in the group, and someone else was to introduce the small group to the rest of the room. My group had me write down the names. I then asked, "Who is going to read them?" The pause went on for so long it hurt. None of the others within my small group could read. The education system had not protected them; it had not served them well at all.

Maximum security might seem an unlikely place to find vulnerable people—and a few of them did not look all that vulnerable. But the vulnerability had occurred years earlier, when they needed the education system and it had not been there for them. I do not pretend for a minute that if each person in that group had been literate, none of them would have ever committed a crime. But I do believe that literacy would have provided an advantage that would have given these blokes options which simply had never presented themselves.

I cannot begin to say how proud I am of the focus the Carr Government has put on literacy. Programs like Reading Recovery will provide a positive legacy that young students will carry with them for their whole lives. I wonder how many of those young blokes at Goulburn would have been there had programs like Reading Recovery existed in the early seventies.

I joined the Labor Party knowing no-one. Having been a member of lobby groups such as the Wilderness Society for some years, I was impressed when I saw areas such as the Daintree actually being saved by a Labor politician by the name of Graham Richardson. I felt it was time to stop being a spectator. I joined the party believing this could be the place to make a difference. I still remember at the age of 16 walking back up King Georges Road after attending my first meeting at the Beverly Hills Baby Health Centre and being chased by Morris Iemma. He shouted out, "Tony, wait, it's not usually like that." Incidentally, meetings were usually like that, and I came to love them and to see them as a newspaper of the local community. Morris kept me involved and never stopped encouraging me. His mind for policy and skills as a campaigner are second to none, and I extend my thanks for his friendship over the past 17 years.

Nobody has done more to encourage young people throughout the New South Wales branch of the Labor Party than Johnno Johnson. I am one of the many who has always enjoyed his friendship, and one of the few who has actually won his raffles. I hope to be able to emulate the support he has always shown for each new generation of Labor Party activists. The New South Wales branch of the Labor Party runs quality, professional campaigns. I thank everyone at the party office, particularly the Secretary, Eric Roozendaal, and my good friends from Young Labor days, Mark Arbib and Karl Bitar. I became National President of Young Labor shortly after Reba Meagher and Joe Tripodi took over New South Wales Young Labor. We had been told we could never get there. None of us will ever forget the conference at Eastlakes which I attended after a twenty-first the night before and had no shoes. By the end of the day the president, Carmel Tebbutt, had excluded from the conference every member of our group except me. I was grateful for not being excluded, but it would have been nice to have a seconder for my amendments.

All politics is local, and I am no different. My involvement has centred on my local branches of Beverly Hills and now Roselands, together with a strong involvement with the Watson Federal Electoral Council [FEC]. I have been Secretary of the Watson FEC since the creation of the seat more than 10 years ago, and I have enjoyed working with the local member, Leo McLeay. Watson is now the most strongly represented Labor Party area. It is Labor heartland. It is the only Federal landlocked-Labor seat, having Labor seats on every boundary. Every State seat within it is held by Labor, and I am grateful for the good working relationships I enjoy with all those members:

Morris Iemma, Kevin Greene, Cherie Burton, Tony Stewart, Linda Burney and Frank Sartor.

I also acknowledge the support of two former members for Canterbury, Kevin Stewart, and Kevin Moss, who is in the Chamber today. My friends and colleagues John Hatzistergos and Kayee Griffin have both served as presidents of Watson FEC, a position Kayee still holds, and I look forward to working with them here. I also thank Young Labor, the FEC, and all the branch members—many of whom are here and many who could not make it—who have helped and supported me in local branches. There are too many of you to name. I can only say that you know how much I value your friendship. Thank you for continuing to be my newspaper, telling me what is really going on, and keeping me on track.

I neglected to mention earlier that I have spoken in this room once before. When I say "neglected", I deliberately did not mention it in case someone took that to mean they could interject. It was the grand final of the Australasian Debating Championships and I was standing there, on the opposite side of this table. The topic was "Independents hinder the Parliamentary Process". I found myself on the negative side, whose job was to argue how terrible the major parties were and how minor parties and Independents provided the way forward.

I am very proud and pleased to say that we lost that grand final—the arguments just did not hold up. I am very proud to be here as a Labor representative, but I do look forward to a positive working relationship with members on all sides. This is not debating for its own sake; now it is real. Debate here is on real legislation that affects the real lives of the real people we represent. Madam President, I thank you and the House for the opportunity to introduce myself in this way this afternoon. But enough of introductions: as the Premier has told us at every opportunity, it is time for work.

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