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Legislative Council
Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Apprentices
Concession and Rate Reduction) Bill Hansard
Extract

The Hon. H. S. TSANG [5.38 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): First I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Eora people. I support the Government's Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Apprentices Concession and Rate Reduction) Bill, which recognises the importance of fostering a better investment climate in New South Wales. In particular, the bill seeks to achieve this by granting exemptions from payroll tax in proportion to the wages of apprentices. This bill will see a reduction in payroll tax from 6.85 per cent to 6.4 per cent for employers in New South Wales. This reduction is in accordance with the Premier's commitment and promise before the last election. The Labor Party keeps its promises.

The passage of this bill will result in the creation of an estimated 5,000 long-term jobs, and 20,000 employers of young people across the State will receive benefits. As a businessman I can say that these changes will benefit trade and investment in New South Wales. This bill is good for creating jobs and I support it. As this is my first speech in this Chamber I seek the indulgence of the House to now make some personal comments. It is indeed an honour to be standing before you this evening for my inaugural speech in the New South Wales Parliament. Mr Deputy-President, I would like to congratulate you on your election as Deputy-President of the upper House.

It is strangely fitting that I, a Chinese-born refugee, an employer and a professional, stand before a House presided over by a President who is a feminist, a socialist and an academic. And it is ironic that we are members of the same party. We are truly on the crest of a new millennium, one that is unpredictable and diverse, complex and challenging, just like this Chamber. Our evolving society is very much reflected in the make-up of this Chamber.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the newly elected members, spanning the breadth of the ideological, political and social spectrums. Like Madam President and many of my colleagues in this Chamber, I became involved in community work because that is how I felt I could make the greatest contribution to my country of nearly 40 years, a country I have come to know and call home. Despite my many years experience in community work and

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community politics in Australia, it was an event in the country of my birth which led to my decision to become a member of the Australian Labor Party.

I am more and more proud of that decision as I see the way the party, the oldest social democratic party in the world, is changing and tackling the challenges of a complex future. I am proud to be a part of the modern fusion of the Australian Labor Party, the fusion of its historical essence as the champion of social justice, with the modern imperatives of global economy. I call it blending a Labor heart with a pragmatic head. Some call it new Labor or the third way, but it does not matter what it is called. What matters is the essence of our commitment to a community that has the energy and the expertise to prosper, but not at the expense of the weakest among us.

I hope to be a visionary but also pragmatic, to take decisions now that will benefit our society well into the future. I decided to join the Labor Party almost exactly 10 years ago while standing outside the Sydney Town Hall on a cold afternoon. I was one of a big crowd of enraged Australians - trade unionists, students, families - surging around the Town Hall to protest the horror of the Tiananmen Square massacre. It was a very emotional public meeting.

The major emotion expressed on that day was disbelief. How could that have happened in the 1980s? How could young people, in a supposedly civilised society, be callously mowed down in the street? Yet balancing the anger and horror of what happened in Beijing was a powerful desire to protect and rejoice in our democracy. That event was a violent reminder that we must never take our democracy for granted, and never become complacent about our gift of freedom.

At that time I was an active leader of the Chinese community in Australia. I spoke at the rally, as did several other community leaders. Standing next to me during the rally was my good friend Michael Easson, who offered me some advice that I have brought with me and would like to share with honourable members today. He said, "Henry, if you want to be in a position to actually do something about this issue, to actually achieve real things for the community, you should join the Labor Party." I thought about it.

I really did want to be in a position to do something not just for the Chinese community with which I was already closely involved but for the whole community. After all, several years earlier I had worked to get a little parcel of land on the Darling Harbour foreshore turned into a Chinese garden in celebration of Australia's bicentenary. Working with the Labor Government we transformed a run-down area of Sydney into a tangible symbol linking Chinese and Australians alike.

I remember Premier Neville Wran joking at the time that he had agreed to establish the Chinese Gardens because "Henry talked me into it." I remembered thinking about that a lot, and thinking how great it would be to be in Neville's position - a politician who could get something done - rather than being the one trying to talk the politician into getting something done.

After the Tiananmen incident, I had the opportunity to see two more Labor politicians at work. I worked closely with Bob Hawke and Nick Bolkus on the amnesty for Chinese students which led to 40,000 young people becoming committed new Australians who, like me, can appreciate the benefits and beauty of our country because of the contrasts in our experiences of life and the different perspective of our wellbeing. So I joined the Labor Party with an ambition to be the one who could get something done.

Through my association with the Labor Party I became the Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney, the first Asian-born Australian to hold that position. I utilised my position with the balance of power in the City of Sydney to make a difference to how the city is run. The City of Sydney is now more efficient, its budget has reverted into surplus and it delivers its services more professionally.

As Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney I have presided over the following achievements: the development of a vibrant cultural and community life in the city; the promotion of quality development and preparation of the city for the 2000 Olympics and beyond; the installation of street cameras to improve city safety, including the Haymarket area; new community and activity centres opened in Pyrmont, Ultimo and The Rocks, and the new Chinese community centre in Haymarket due to be opened; city streets being upgraded in time for the Olympic Games, including the Dickson Street refurbishment; the city's cultural calendar extended to include the celebration of the Chinese New Year; the city's sculptural walk which includes public artwork; and an imaginative lighting scheme in city south. Sydney is truly a living city.

As Deputy Lord Mayor, I relished the honour bestowed upon me by the Labor Party and the people of Sydney to work for all those tangible

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achievements. I hope that the people of Sydney have benefited as much as I have from the relationship we forged over the past eight years. And now I stand before you tonight - eight years and two kilometres from where I made my first step into public life in Australia - a different man. My election to this place is both a crowning achievement and a very first step for me. It seems all my years in local politics have led me here. Now that I am here it is like starting all over again.

Neville Wran said to me, "Henry, the city hall is a small painting, the State is the big canvas." In the few weeks since my election I have begun to understand how big a canvas it is. I am determined to make my corner of it vibrant, useful and very important to the big picture.

If one looks at the Labor Party in its historical context, I am a very unlikely Labor politician. I am a professional - a white-collar man in the party which was traditionally supported by a blue-collar work force. I am ethnic Chinese - an Asian in the party that was at one stage in its history fiercely protective of a white Australia. I am a businessman - an employer in the party that was established to take the fight of the workers up to the bosses.

The fact that I have been nominated and elected to this Parliament shows how dramatically the Labor Party has changed in the way its policies are framed. Yet I also believe it shows that after more than 100 years the party is still working with the same basic material to build that framework. Today, the Australian Labor Party is very much a party representing the community of interests that are necessary to build a strong and vibrant society. Its pragmatism is such that it understands that all elements must be given consideration.

We need the professions to provide expertise and services; we need immigrants to build the population and richness of our society; and we need business people to continually stimulate economic growth and build the national economy. Labor has a policy framework at the national, State and local levels that takes all of this into account. Yet, as I said, that framework is fashioned from core principles that have stood the test of time. The raw materials of Labor's policy structure will always be a commitment to social justice, an understanding and tolerance of diversity, and a firm belief that a decent society protects its people, particularly those who are vulnerable.

These three things - the fact that I am a professional, I was born Chinese and I am a businessman - provide me with three immediate areas in which I can make a real contribution to the Labor Party, the New South Wales Parliament and, most importantly of all, the people who elected me. First, my ethnic background gives me an understanding of the issues faced by immigrants to Australia. Our whole community has tough issues with which it must deal, in health, education and social cohesion. Among ethnic communities the impact of these issues is often intensified because of language or cultural differences.

In my 20 years of involvement with the Ethnic Communities Council I have been pleased to note the bipartisan support for a multicultural policy, and especially for social justice, access and equity for all Australians. As an ethnic Australian I am proud that I was able to motivate the community and act as honorary architect for the beautification of the Dixon Street Plaza, the Freedom Plaza in Cabramatta, and the Chinese temples in Canley Vale and Alexandria.

I believe that my ethnic background enhances my capacity to serve the mainstream community. I am exceptionally proud to lead the march with the State Executive of the RSL at the annual Anzac Day march. I am equally as proud to lead the march of Youth Against Racism with the President of the Legislative Council. This important evolution from an ethnic community perspective to a more holistic community service agenda is reflected in the Carr Government's recent renaming of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales to the Community Relations Commission and the Ministry for Citizenship. This was done to emphasise that Australian citizenship is the common bond that unites all Australians.

Australians are from an enormously diverse range of backgrounds, drawn together and unified by their commitment to this country. Cultural diversity is one of the greatest strengths of New South Wales. Our multicultural society gives us a strong competitive edge internationally. My goal in the future is to continue serving communities of all backgrounds and to promote a harmonious and tolerant Australia.

The second area in which I am qualified to make a contribution is the environment. Professionally I am an architect. My expertise is in urban planning and design. In a country that is so rich in natural beauty the environment is a massive subject. A multitude of issues are involved and must be covered in any debate. However, I believe that my expertise is important to the State Government. I was proud to be the national delegate to the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro,

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and chair of the opening session of the United Nations World Urban Forum in Curitiba. I was also a national delegate to the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. I am totally convinced of the principle of sustainable development. We must think globally and act locally. I strongly believe that all of us have a responsibility to care about the environment and preserve our heritage for the next generation.

I have spent many years in business. I know a broad section of the business community, through both

my own contacts and my years in local government. I believe that I can bring to the Labor Party a strong understanding of, and good contacts with, the business community. During eight years with the council I have been in a position to work with the Commonwealth Government and the State Government to facilitate overseas business and investment in Australia.

I am pleased that Sydney is home to an increasing number of regional headquarters of international organisations. It is my continuing goal to develop strong business links between Australia and the surrounding region, as well as between the State Government and the business community. I aim to continue this momentum and to ensure that job growth is maintained in New South Wales in post Olympics 2000.

If I can blend the areas of my expertise - my passion for a sustainable urban environment, my commitment to social justice, and my understanding of business - and I can make a difference for the Government in those areas, I will have come to the Parliament for the right reasons and achieved what I set out to achieve. I owe my election to all the leaders of the Labor Party who helped me to get here, from former Prime Minister Bob Hawke and former Premier Neville Wran and in particular former Premier Barrie Unsworth, to friends Michael Easson, John Della Bosca - who is now my colleague in this place and supported my nomination - to the Hon. Eddie Obeid for his guidance and to Premier Carr for his constant support.

Before the election the community was concerned that number eight on the ticket would be a death seat. However, I believe that number eight is a lucky number. I thank Eric Roozendaal, Mark Arbib and Paul Bodisco from head office who guided my campaign strategy, focusing on marginal seats and the North Shore which saw a 10 per cent swing back to the Australian Labor Party. I take credit for that. This would not have been possible without my campaign team, notably James Liu, Hatton Kwok, Steven Cheung, my sister Evina, Teresa Siu and her family, as well as more than a hundred young volunteers who assisted across the marginal seats.

I also value the advice and support given to me by Mimi Chau, Claudine Clarke, Aldo Pennini and Wendy Guest. I owe my election also to my business partner of 20 years, George Lee, who gave me the freedom to continue to concentrate on my community work while he kept the business running. Most importantly, I owe my election to my two families, the Tsangs and the Pows. They include my nieces, who assisted during my campaign. My 4½-year-old niece Louise took the letterbox drop campaign in Strathfield very seriously. She is present today. I envisage that in the future she may well be a Left, feminist academic like our President.

I thank my wife, Donna, who is a great contributor to the community in her own right as the founder of the East West Orchestra and a member of the board of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Without Donna's patience, tolerance, understanding and devotion to looking after our children and extended family I would not be able to fulfil my commitment to the community. I owe every success to her. To my boys, Clement and Derwent, who, with so many of their friends from university, supported my aspirations throughout my community and political life, I extend my thanks.

Most of all I should thank all of those who voted for me, especially the people who told me that they voted Labor for the first time in their lives. Finally, I hope that everyone who has contributed to my election to this place will feel pleased and proud as the years go by because they know that they have made a difference by helping me to make a difference.