



# Legislative Council

## Heritage Amendment Bill Hansard

### Extract

19/09/2001

**The Hon. MICHAEL COSTA** [5.58 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): Madam President, I support the Heritage Amendment Bill. This is an important bill that will lead to the protection of significant heritage items in this State. I come to this House with a great sense of responsibility. The Legislative Council is an institution that, on balance, has served the workers of this State well. In coming here I follow a proud lineage of Labor Council officers who have represented the workers of this State in this House. Since the position became full time, I will be the second former Labor Council Secretary after Barrie Unsworth to sit in this House. I would also note that the Premier, Bob Carr, was once a Labor Council official. I say this not to raise any expectations on my own behalf, but to highlight the critical role that the Labor Council has played in the political, economic and social life of this State.

There is no doubt that the sensible and moderate approach of the Labor Council has been a critical factor in the leading role that New South Wales plays in the economic and civic life of this nation. I place on the record my thanks to John Robertson who succeeded me as secretary. For a time in June I thought that he might arrive in this place before me. John is a person of enormous capacity and I am certain that, despite the initial fireworks, John and his deputy, Mark Lennon, will continue the great tradition of sensible and pragmatic leadership. They, of course, are assisted by what must be one of the most professional and dedicated teams that any leader has been fortunate enough to work with.

I would particularly like to thank Karen Adams and Kelly Laing. The whole team operates under the guidance of the current President of the Labor Council, Sandra Moait, and the executive of the Labor Council. The presidential officers of the council, Russ Collison, John Hennessey, Pat Ryan, Michael Williamson, Michele Hryce and, until recently, Alison Peters, have worked together to make the Labor Council the pre-eminent trade union peak council in this country. I doubt whether I will ever meet a more dedicated group of people than the trade unionists who make up the executive and delegates of the Labor Council of New South Wales.

I would like to thank all the previous Labor Council secretaries who have provided guidance, advice and counsel to me, some of which I have heeded—John Ducker, John McBean, Michael Easson, Peter Sams and Barrie Unsworth. Michael Easson, one of the most decent people that I have ever known, was instrumental in my career at the Labor Council. It was on his recommendation that John McBean offered me the opportunity to stand for election as a Labor Council officer. He was also instrumental in my expulsion and subsequent readmission to the Labor Party. Michael remains a close friend and influence.

Peter Sams has always been a close mate. He balanced my more radical views of industrial relations with his more pragmatic outlook. Peter is an unashamed traditionalist who understands the importance of history and institutions and who taught me to respect tradition. I wish to say a few special words about Barrie Unsworth. Over the last decade I have worked extremely closely with Barrie and the Labor Council's financial controller, Jeff Priestly, in managing the commercial interests of the Labor Council. Because of their efforts the Labor Council is financially secure. Barrie has provided me with support, advice and encouragement. Occasionally that advice was provided in the direct manner for which he is renowned. I think his style may have rubbed off on me.

Barrie's love for the Labor Council is heartfelt. Having come to know Barrie so well, I say without equivocation that it was a great shame for the people of this State that his duration as Premier was so short. He is a man of principle, competence and vision, who had much more to contribute to this State as Premier. However, the State's loss was the Labor Council's gain. I come to this House as a dedicated trade unionist who believes that the union movement, despite its recent difficulties, has a critical role to play in ensuring fairness in the workplace. No issue highlights the important role of unions more than the issue of workers entitlements.

Thousands of workers confront the despair of lost entitlements annually, yet we still do not have a national system that protects those entitlements. It is a national disgrace. Without unions, many workers would have lost all their precious entitlements. For those who doubt the broad support for trade unions in this country, I strongly advise that they study in depth the polling carried out on behalf of the Labor Council, which shows over a long polling period consistent and growing support for trade unions.

I come to this House as a person from a non-English speaking background. In fact, I was the first Secretary of the Labor Council from a non-English speaking background. I look forward to the day when the secretary of the Labor Council is either an Asian or a person of Middle Eastern background. My parents were Greek Cypriot post-war immigrants. Like many others, they experienced the trauma of war, the confusion of displacement and the hope of a better life in Australia. My father found work in the steelworks in Newcastle, where I was born, and subsequently in the railways, where he served for more than 40 years.

My mother, a process worker, juggled long hours with raising a family. When I went to school I could not understand English. I was an outsider who experienced racism first hand. Like many of my generation, I confronted the intolerance of racism at a time when the country was adjusting to the difficulties of the shock of post-war immigration and the cultural diversity that came with it. Today it is fashionable to make light of terms like "wog" and "dago" and I wear the wog label with pride. But in Australia in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s it was a vicious term of racial abuse that wounded and psychologically scarred many young people. It is in this context that some of the undertones of what currently passes as an immigration debate concern me.

The notion that persons of Arabic or Middle Eastern origin are not appropriate immigrants is a subtext barely kept from the surface. Racial and religious backgrounds have no place in immigration policy. What a prospective immigrant can contribute to a country should be the only criterion. The racism that I experienced was and still is based on ignorance and insecurity. Governments have a responsibility to deal with both these causes. There is no doubt that education and the economic opportunities mitigate against racist climates.

On reflection, my early encounters with the injustice of racism was the critical factor in my development of a strong concern about fairness and justice. My background also forms the passionate view that I have about immigration. I support a substantial increase in Australia's immigration intake. Australia is a large land with abundant resources. It requires a commensurate population to ensure its economic viability. I reject those elements in the immigration debate who use legitimate community concerns about environmental matters as an argument against immigration.

Australia requires a larger population to ensure that it has the economic wealth to afford the strong environmental safeguards that developing countries cannot afford. Economic growth and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive, as some would have us believe. To the contrary, they complement each other. In this context the recent hysteria over asylum seekers is quite misguided. What this country needs is not a closed-door policy to the world based on ignorance; rather it needs an immigration policy formed by rational assessments of its costs and benefits.

Prejudice and hysteria over the plight of refugees is not the appropriate context for such a debate. In my trade union career I often stood alone against calls for interventionist industry policies. Those calls were based on economic confusion with their often well-meaning proponents failing to understand that these types of policies would, in the long run, have the diametrically opposite effect on employment to that which they sought—that is, a significant increase in joblessness.

The one industry policy that I am proud to support is an expansionist immigration policy. This is an area where governments at all levels and of all political persuasions should be able to co-operate and co-ordinate policy that balances the community's legitimate concerns for the quality of life with the economic imperative to ensure critical mass in our domestic markets. Our economic security requires nothing less.

I come to this House from a blue-collar background—as someone whose real education was completed on the job by my co-workers. As one would expect of a son of Greek migrants, I worked in numerous jobs where the main task was deep-frying fast food before getting full-time work as an

ironworker-rigger at the Garden Island naval dockyard. I spent five years there learning about the real world and daily contrasting its lessons to the theoretical world provided by my university education.

I finally ended up as a locomotive engineman with the State Rail Authority and my trade union career began in earnest when I was elected President of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen [AFULE]. At this point I pay tribute to Noel Cox, the former Secretary of the AFULE, and to Bob Plain, the current President of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union—two great union officials who had the confidence and courage to run on a ticket with me against the incumbent leadership of that union. Workers in the rail industry have been fortunate to have superb union leaders looking after their interests—people like Jim Walsh, Harold Dywer and Nick Lewocki, to mention the most outstanding.

As the Premier noted, without the efforts of the New South Wales work force, we would not have been able to stage the best ever Olympics. The most important thing that I learned in my time on the shop floor is that Australian workers, often in spite of poor and inadequate management, have skills, commitment and real pride in their work and they unquestionably are our greatest economic asset. It is often ironic to hear business leaders preaching about unproductive workplaces. All my experience suggests that it is management that is letting the side down. I entered the labour force in a period of economic uncertainty when the great scourge was the spectre of stagflation.

My generation was the first of the post-war period to experience mass unemployment. An appreciation of unemployment and its demoralising and dehumanising impact on people and families has remained a major influence on my political outlook. The attempt by some politicians to cast the unemployed as willing architects of their own fate only trivialises what is a major economic problem. It is my strong belief that governments have a core responsibility to provide the circumstances that maximise job opportunities. It was my disillusionment with the lack of economic opportunities associated with stagflation that politicised me.

I come to this House as a political being, who started off by accident on the far left and in more recent times has been regarded by my political opponents as being on the far right. I reject, particularly in the post Cold War period, attempts to characterise people's politics as either left or right. I believe a much better framework to understand the political differences that exist is provided by political theorist Thomas Sowell. Sowell argues that underlying political conflicts is a fundamental conflict of two irreconcilable visions which he terms the constrained and unconstrained visions. Underpinning the unconstrained vision "is the conviction that foolish or immoral choices explain the evils of the world—and wiser or more moral and humane social policies are the solution". In contrast, "the constrained vision sees the evils of the world as arriving from the limited and unhappy choices available, given the inherent moral and intellectual limitations of human beings". I place myself in the tradition of the constrained vision.

My real political education began when, by accident, with a group of high school mates I attended a Marxist education camp. The experience was critical in my political development. It introduced me to serious debate about economic and political issues. While I came to reject Marxism as dogma, it left a legacy in my interests in economics and politics. In retrospect, the problem with Marxism as a political philosophy was not Marx's original ideas, which bear the limitations of his era; it was the Marxists, his self-styled followers, who turned a political theory that needed testing and refinement in the face of new realities into destructive dogma.

Marx, though wrong on many issues, was in the tradition of the great classical economists and prided himself on dealing with facts in a scientific way and not dogma. I have no doubt that if Marx were alive today he would, given his understanding and interest in economic systems and technological development, support economic policies that promote prosperity and, indeed, would be a vocal advocate for globalisation. In all probability he would be a member of the Centre Unity faction of the Labor Party of New South Wales.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge my fellow officers of the New South Wales branch of the ALP: Eric Roozendaal, Mark Arbib, Steve Hutchins, Ursula Stephens, Darryl Melham and Damian O'Connor. Eric Roozendaal and Mark Arbib are, in my view, the most professional officers the Labor Party has ever had. They have dramatically transformed the operations of the New South Wales branch, and I thank them for their support and friendship.

During my trade union career I was often the only voice arguing for free trade, which, given the history of the labour movement, always puzzled me. I have constantly had to remind my colleagues that the first Labor members elected to this Parliament had amongst their number a majority of free traders. Free trade has always been critical to the economic prosperity of this country. Today nearly two million Australian workers depend on exports for their jobs. It is pleasing that at its last national conference the ALP returned to its free trade roots and reaffirmed its commitment to an open economy.

In recent times we have seen an almost hysterical reaction from some in response to what they perceive to be the evils of globalisation. The bulk of these concerns are no doubt genuinely felt, though, as always occurs in these situations, professional political agitators have sought to exploit ignorance and uncertainty for their own political advantage. History clearly shows that we should not fear the success of globalisation, rather its failure. Globalisation is not new. Today we are witnessing the renewal of an economic process that began in the early nineteenth century and brought with it tremendous increases in living standards. The process was interrupted by the extraordinary brutality associated with much of the twentieth century's history. Economic stagnation associated with protectionism, destructive nationalism, xenophobia and wars is the consequence of globalisation's initial failure. If globalisation fails this time, we face a return to these destructive forces.

The key to its success is to ensure the benefits are spread widely. Contrary to the views of some, governments have not been relegated to a secondary status in the global world. They have a critical role in ensuring the success or failure of the historically important process of globalisation. Good government is more important than it has ever been. Much of the failure of globalisation in the developing world, as Hernando de Soto persuasively argues in *The Mystery of Capital*, is the result of government and not market failure. Many governments in developing countries, either through corruption or incompetence, have failed to maintain the rule of law and a system of property rights underpinned by a strong safety net. Without these, development is impossible. In our system State governments have a critical role in all these areas.

I have been described at various times by my political opponents as an economic rationalist. It is not a label I seek. Nevertheless, if by that label they seek to imply that I believe it appropriate that governments use the latest economic tools to inform policy positions, I am happy to accept the categorisation. While it is true that I respect the power of the market mechanism, I reject market fundamentalism, which places all market outcomes above social concerns. Market fundamentalism is as much a dogma—an intellectual straitjacket—as its antithesis, command economics. Market fundamentalists fail to recognise that markets are social constructs: in other words, products of human activity. Markets are tools for allocating scarce resources, not the end goal of an economic process. Societies structured on markets that do not deliver social outcomes supported by the majority of the community are doomed to failure.

My ideas on political economy had been refined by numerous discussions with my close friend and intellectual soulmate Mark Duffy. Mark is one of the most talented people I have ever met and has a passion which I share for good public policy. My political journey has taught me that outcomes are the most important thing and that values are more important than ideology. I come to this House as someone who believes that the political process does improve the lot of its citizenry. I am committed to playing a constructive role in this process.

I have a particular interest in issues related to mental illness, which my family and I have had to confront first hand. I draw honourable member's attention to the recent report released by St Vincent de Paul titled "A Long Road to Recovery". This report dramatically details the clear connection between mental illness and homelessness. According to the report, amongst the inner city's homeless, 75 per cent have at least one mental disorder compared to 20 per cent in the general population. Amongst the homeless, 23 per cent of men and 46 per cent of women have schizophrenia compared to a prevalence in the general population of between 0.5 per cent and 1 per cent, 33 per cent have depression compared to 6 per cent of the Australian community, and 93 per cent report at least one experience of extreme trauma in their lives.

These statistics are disgraceful. It is time we recognised that we have not handled the problem of mental illness properly. This has its genesis in the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s which had the laudable aim of humanising appalling mental institutions but resulted in the wholesale abandonment

of people in need. This area requires immediate government attention. The silent victims of mental illness are the carers of the mentally ill. They receive inadequate support and are expected to perform caring functions which, in many cases, are beyond human endurance. Support for carers should be a government priority.

Enormous advances are being made by medical science in understanding mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. I congratulate the Government for supporting the Neurological Institute of Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders by a very generous grant earlier this year. For honourable members interested in this, I highly recommend a recent publication by David Horrobin entitled "The Madness of Adam and Eve—how Schizophrenia shaped humanity". This book advances the novel, seminal thesis that mental illnesses such as schizophrenia are what separates us from our nearest primate relatives. Issues such as mental illness highlight the need to think more broadly about the role of government in dealing with social issues. I am not one who believes the State should run everything but I believe the State has responsibilities. That is why I have supported a social audit of government activities.

My friend the Treasurer has pointed to the difficulty of conducting such an audit at a State level, given the complexity of Commonwealth-State financial arrangements. I accept his wise counsel on this matter, and I am now convinced that the only sensible way to conduct such an audit is at the national level. A national social audit is critical to public confidence in the Government's service priorities. It is pleasing to note that Federal Labor has agreed in principle to a national social audit. It is a welcome development.

I look forward to working with and occasionally working against, to discussing and sometimes arguing matters of import with honourable members on both sides of the House and those who sit on the crossbenches. I am fortunate that I come to this House to join a number of existing members whom I regard as friends, not just colleagues, some of whom have guided me to this point. In this context I specifically mention the Hon. Michael Egan, the Hon. John Della Bosca, the Hon. Eddie Obeid and the Hon. Ian West.

I also pay special tribute to the Hon. Johnno Johnson. Johnno is, and always has been, first and foremost a committed trade unionist who, over his political career, made numerous important and historic sacrifices to ensure the stability and survival of the institutions and structures in which he believes. It is not true that he has left me his raffle books, and I thank Sam Moreton for his herculean efforts in restoring Johnno's office to its former glory.

Friends and family are critical to the vocation of politics. I should like to thank a special group of people for their support: my two wonderful children, Matthew and Ellana, and their mother, Helen; my brother, George, and my sister, Mary; and my special friends John Whelan, Deborah Robinson, Joe Tripodi, Peter Lewis, Conrad Staff, Joe Di Leo, Colin Cranson, John Signorle, Jennie George, Bernie Riordan, Chris Christodoulou, Naomi Steer and Michael Gadiel.

Finally, I dedicate this speech to the memory of my two closest teenage friends, Spiro Kikilas and Ralph Pisacane, who both died in separate tragic circumstances in early adulthood. Barrie Unsworth advised me that this inaugural speech was an important speech because it provides a public benchmark to judge one's contribution to public life. I hope that at the end of my time in this House I will be judged as having contributed to prosperity, opportunity and fairness. I thank the House for its indulgence.