



Legislative Council

Walsh Bay Development (Special Provisions)

26/05/99

Bill Hansard

Extract

Ms LEE RHIANNON [6.57 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): The Greens oppose the Walsh Bay Development (Special Provisions) Bill. It is an outrageous triumph of greed over public good. What once belonged to every citizen, held in trust for this and future generations by the State Government, to be used in the best interests of all the community is about to be lost forever. Walsh Bay is one of Sydney's jewels. It does not deserve to become the home of Sydney's second toaster. If Walsh Bay is vandalised, the Premier, Bob Carr, will cop the heat. Those responsible - and that appears to include all parliamentarians in the major parties - will be the burnt offering. The bill is opposed by many residents, including the Walsh Bay Wednesday workshop, and by a broad cross-section of the community, including the Nature Conservation Council, the Total Environment Centre, the History Council of New South Wales, and the National Trust. The Greens join with those groups in opposing this bill, not only because it would result in an irreversible loss of heritage structures and not solely because of the appalling planning precedents it would establish. We oppose this bill because at its very core it promotes the acquisition of private profit at the expense of community needs.

The development of the existing structures at Walsh Bay grew out of the inability of the private sector at the end of the nineteenth century to develop docking facilities that would service the people of Sydney. In the 1890s the docks were chaotic, inefficient and rat-infested. In March 1900 the New South Wales Parliament resumed the entire area and placed it into public ownership. In October of the same year another Act of this Parliament created the Sydney Harbour Trust. It was recognised that the interests of the city and the State could only be protected by a public authority whose primary objective was the pursuit of the common good.

Within 10 years, work had begun on the Walsh Bay wharves, as they are now known. The enthusiasm and the idealism of the young engineers working under the leadership of Walsh and Hickson leaps out from the pages of the Sydney Harbour Trust journals. Inspired by the ideals of public enterprise, they created a world-leading port facility to serve the needs of the community. Ninety years later the current Government introduces a bill to create certainty for developers seeking to destroy this heritage and take over public assets. Walsh Bay Partnership plans to demolish wharf 6/7 and replace it with a modern structure containing six stories of apartments. Like the toaster at East Circular Quay and many other ill-conceived and damaging developments, this proposal is designed to maximise profits with little regard for urban amenities.

There is no doubt that the Mirvac-Transfield proposal will become another toaster, another monument to the triumph of avarice and self-interest over public good, and another embarrassment for Sydney. Designed by the same firm of architects that brought forth the East Circular Quay development, the arguments that have been advanced in support of the development of Walsh Bay are wrapped in exactly the same self-serving cant. The Government has not, however, been content with merely giving away this priceless public asset. It has knocked down the total purchase price paid by the developers for the land and wharves by \$37 million. In a series of deals that are clouded in secrecy, the people of New South Wales are effectively paying to be ripped off. No matter how sophisticated the arguments about net public benefit, the people of New South Wales are the losers.

One cannot escape the argument that both Labor and the Coalition are blinded to the public need by their addiction to campaign donations. Later this session the Government will come forward with a Budget that will slash funds from almost every portfolio area, yet it can still treat the developers with unrestrained generosity. Like so many large construction projects, the proponents of Walsh Bay have hidden behind the mantra of jobs creation. This is a smokescreen. The \$37 million gift to developers should be redirected to seed projects with similar or greater job creation impact in areas of high unemployment and with a socially worthwhile outcome. Western Sydney, western New South Wales and the Illawarra are some of the regions in desperate need of sustainable employment growth.

Apartment blocks do not generate large amounts of post-construction employment. Imaginative adaptive reuses could become the kernel of new industries, and many jobs in The Rocks could be created if the Premier would get out of the bed he has created for himself with developers. The approval being validated by this bill contains the sale under strata titles of numerous apartment units, including those over the water on wharf 6/7. If this bill passes we will never be able to return Walsh Bay to public ownership or community use. Like so many other large developments, both urban and in rural areas, the proposed development at Walsh Bay would establish an appallingly bad precedent. If the

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existence of a permanent conservation order does not prohibit the demolition of entire structures and their replacement with modern buildings, then such instruments are truly meaningless.

It appears that the integrity of all planning processes in New South Wales exists only at the whim of the Government and at the convenience of the developers, who really call the shots. Walsh Bay developers did not like their chances in a court of law. Even if they were successful they feared that their development plans could be delayed if an appeal was lodged. For developers in New South Wales these obstacles are not a barrier. A word to the Government and a compliant Opposition ensures special legislation. In this case, the Walsh Bay development bill is fast-tracked through the Parliament. Due process evaporates, community rights of appeal dissolve and public participation is reduced to an even greater degree of tokenism.

The Greens are committed to a vision of the future where developers are treated equally with other citizens, where additional rights cannot be purchased by campaign donations to political parties and where the public interest is vigorously protected. Only by empowering and resourcing the community and by building sustainability and equity into the planning laws can our cities and towns, forests and wilderness and rural landscapes be saved for all future generations.

The vision of Walsh and the Harbour Trust engineers 80 years ago has left Sydney with a unique physical and cultural heritage. This is not only about nostalgia for old buildings. It is about a community that relates to its past through a continuity of architecture and a special relationship with its space. In the case of Millers Point, a large part of that heritage derives from the formation of the trade union movement. As early as 1837 the seamen and labourers at Millers Point struck for a pay rise. Throughout the nineteenth century Millers Point was a focus of the growing movement for the protection of workers' rights through organised labour. In the 1880s the Sydney Wharf Labourers Union was formed in response to poor pay and dangerous conditions. This union played a key role in the general strike of 1890. A century later the inheritors of this legacy, the Maritime Union of Australia, continue their struggle against those who would seek to destroy organised labour for their own advantage. One of their famous picket lines is in this Walsh Bay area.

Millers Point was also an important example of the public provision of housing. The Sydney Harbour Trust, the Sydney City Council and other similar bodies built many housing units. To this day, much of the stock in Millers Point is publicly owned. Just as the vision of Walsh and his engineers for a publicly owned waterfront has been betrayed, both the Coalition and Labor parties have sought to reduce the role played by government in housing. This short-sighted approach relies heavily on a blind belief in the ability of the market to provide and ignores the important role that public housing can play in creating a more just society.

The Australian Labor Party's plans for Walsh Bay are not surprising. Helping out mates from the big end of town to the detriment of local communities is now so common with this Government that one could be forgiven for thinking this style of work has policy status. The full story of why the ALP makes decisions that so often damage the lives of its own constituents is yet to be told. But part of the story clearly is that the ALP is beholden to many big developers and financial institutions.

One of the Green's election promises was that we would work to expose and eliminate conflict of interests whereby a party receives donations from a company and then, when it is in government, that company can clean up with lucrative contracts. This style of work is undermining democracy in New South Wales, lining the pockets of a few to the detriment of the majority and adding to environmental destruction. We are yet to see how the ALP will reward its mates for donations to its 1999 election campaign fund. A few examples from what happened after the 1995 election illustrate what we can expect. Leighton and Macquarie Bank Ltd, the builders and financiers of the Eastern Distributor, gave the ALP \$300,000 between 1992 and 1997, and a similar amount was given to the Coalition. This is clearly a conflict of interest. Lend Lease gave the ALP \$75,000. In January this year it was awarded a \$90 million contract to upgrade the Cronulla sewage treatment plant.

Abigroup, the proponent of an airport in Newcastle, donated \$50,000. The Premier, Mr Carr, is strongly backing this proposal to the point that some of his statements have not been truthful. His statements that the Newcastle airport proposal had solid community support cannot be reconciled against the fact that all ALP members from the Hunter area, including Mr Bryce Gaudry, Mr Richard Face and Mr John Bartlett, are publicly opposed to the project. Mr Gaudry has organised petitions against the airport.

The Bus and Coach Association donated \$12,500 to the ALP. This body has done very well

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in protecting and promoting the interests of private bus operators, particularly Westbus, owned by Mr Bosnjak. A private bus transitway for western Sydney was announced in the last session, and we still have the scandalous situation that no public bus is allowed to go further west than Lidcombe, which means great inconvenience to people on low incomes who rely on their passes.

These are just a few examples of a conflict of interests that plagues government in New South Wales irrespective of which major party is in power. This situation is unacceptable, and the Greens will continue to campaign to remove the conflict of interests between money received by a party and the decisions that party makes when in government. While this blatant form of political patronage dominates political life in New South Wales, the quality of life of the people of this State will continue to suffer.

The New South Wales Government must put people and their communities first. The common good needs to be central to all policies developed and all projects undertaken in this State. Anything less further entrenches inequality and adds to the hardship of this State's one million poor and low-income households. Four years of a Labor Government in this State have led to a divided Sydney and divided New South Wales.

Small towns and rural areas are suffering. Many rural towns and regional centres are also bleeding. Young people carry a particularly heavy burden in this divided society. The passions and visions of young people are something that our society should nurture. As a society, we are not providing the fertile ground for young people's hopes and dreams to be realised. In the term of this present Labor Government there is the opportunity to bridge this divide.

History shows that usually when Labor is in power in this State it has faced a hostile upper House. In this current Parliament if the Labor Government can drop its flirtation with the big end of town, there is every chance that great things can happen for the majority of people in New South Wales. The Greens share a progressive agenda with many of their fellow crossbenchers. At present we have little in common with current Labor practices. However, many of us have a great deal in common with the Labor ideals as set out in the Labor Party's constitution, such as the call for "redistribution of political and economic power", "the development of public enterprises based upon . . . forms of social ownership" and support for an ecological sustainability.

The sell-off of Walsh Bay is a sell-out of ALP policy, which contains a clear commitment to the development of social ownership. The challenge is now with Labor. Can it grasp the moment, take the best from its own traditions and work constructively in this House to advance a progressive agenda? The Walsh Bay legislation is an appalling start for this parliamentary session. Despite this setback, the Greens will continue to attempt to work with Labor if the parliamentary wing of the party will be guided by its policies and not by the pocket of a few big mates.

As this is my first speech, I would like to expand on my comments about Walsh Bay. I appreciate that as an elected representative of the Greens I have this opportunity to stand before this House and speak on issues that I have great passion for. My concern for the future is moulded by the history of this country. I am both proud and sad to acknowledge that we are on the land of the Cadigal people, was one of many Aboriginal tribes of the Sydney region that put up a heroic

struggle when British colonialists occupied their land. To its credit, this House was the first House of Parliament in Australia to officially say sorry to the stolen generation of Aboriginal people. As a new member of the Legislative Council I would like to add my voice to that most important statement.

In less than two centuries, this House has evolved from nothing more than an outpost of British colonialism made up of landowning officials nominated by the Crown to one of the most democratic Houses of Parliament in this country. While the Legislative Council will continue to be relevant well into the next millennium it is time that its anachronistic trappings were overhauled. The oath of allegiance that all members of this place must swear to the British Crown needs to be at the top of the list of outdated practices to be jettisoned.

I was deeply offended that even though I had been elected by the people of New South Wales to take a seat in the Legislative Council, the only way that I could become an active and full member was by swearing allegiance to a British monarch. A change in the State's Constitution is needed to modernise and Australianise the swearing-in process. I recognise that this will take some time, but I am sure it will happen. But there are other areas where we can cut the colonial ties right now.

The Greens congratulate the President on her decision to remove the painting of the Queen from her office. And I would like to thank Legislative Council staff and fellow members for their co-operation in assisting me to become the first

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member to take a seat in this House without using the term "honourable". This title is another part of the colonialist trappings of this place that we need to relegate to history's dustbin.

In making this statement I would like to emphasise that I have the greatest respect for tradition. However, the symbols and imagery that we preserve need to be ones that are inclusive, not ones rooted in the oppression and misery of so many people. My strong feelings on issues of social justice and environmental vandalism are part of my family's traditions. The fact that I stand here today has much to do with my family. My grandfather, Ben Lewis, was gaoled as a conscientious objector in the First World War. He exposed police violence perpetrated against striking workers, organised unemployed people and took up many other burning issues at the start of this century.

Nana and Granddad's two sons, Leon and Rae Lewis, were wharfies. One of their places of work was Walsh Bay, which certainly gives me a connection with that area. In the 1950s and 1960s when I was growing up, wharfies were vilified as selfish and lazy. The reality I saw was quite different, and I now realise how I was influenced by my hardworking uncles and their workmates, whose concerns and campaigns went much further than just their own wages and conditions.

I particularly wish to thank my parents, Bill and Freda Brown. My parents were members of the Communist Party of Australia. I was raised surrounded by people whose driving conviction was how to work to make this world a fairer, healthier, more peaceful place for all. Being raised in a household steeped in political campaigns leaves one with many proud moments. One of those was the night my father and Jack Munday became the first people arrested in Australia for protesting against the Vietnam war.

I find these days when I explain my background some people are surprised by my acknowledgment. I am certainly proud of being part of a tradition of optimistic social activism, as I am proud of my three children, Kilty, Rory and Conor, who in their own way and sometimes in this place keep the family political passions alive. As a member of the Greens I feel very honoured to be part of this progressive international movement that will play a key role in addressing many of the challenges that confront this planet. From the sale of public assets, tragically epitomised by the events unfolding at Walsh Bay, to taking the lead in the fight against the GST, the Greens are out in front.

The fact that the Greens now have two members in this House is testimony to the hard and innovative work of thousands of members and supporters. Particular thanks go to my colleague the Hon. I. Cohen. His ability to combine parliamentary work with some of the most creative direct action seen in this country is a great asset for our party and for the community. Senator Bob Brown is one Greens parliamentarian whom I value enormously as a friend and colleague. It is a credit to Bob and to our party that his qualities have been publicly recognised in Australia and internationally.

I believe all the political parties represented here have in their ranks many dedicated people, most of whom receive little recognition for their years of commitment and hard work. I would like to thank all the tireless party workers for the Greens, and I would like to mention one person by name. Ten years ago I was asked to join the party by Geoff Ash. Today he is my partner. I thank him for his political and personal wisdom. I am thankful that I am in a party of which I can be proud, which adheres to its policies and which is driven by its local branches. In my short time in this place I have learned that many of my colleagues in other parties are principled and frequently do not agree with the decisions of their party hierarchies.

I acknowledge that for some of you it must be painful to be forced to vote on legislation, such as this bill, that will be so destructive of a community and much of Walsh Bay. For those on the Labor benches, a vote for this bill will be a vote against the wishes of many local Labor branches. I say to honourable members who have privately voiced misgivings about the Carr Cabinet manipulation of the democratic process: now is the time to take a stand. You can cross the floor. One day we hope we see it, and we hope to see it soon. A vote for this bill is a vote for Carr's mates at Transfield, Mirvac and a few others yet to be identified.

If the bill passes the House the battle to save Walsh Bay will not be over. Just behind Millers Point lies The Rocks, the birthplace of the green bans. It was from this movement that my party, the Greens, derived its name. The residents of Millers Point have inherited a heady tradition of activism and, if this bill is passed, no doubt the Walsh Bay Wednesday workshop will fight on, and the Greens will be right there with them. The battle for Walsh Bay is far from over. This Parliament makes the laws, but it is the people who make history. The Greens will fight all the way with the people of Walsh Bay to ensure we have a city for people and a history of which we can be proud. We condemn the bill.