



University Funding.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON [2.40 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I commend the motion to the House and fully support the Hon. Jan Burnswoods' statements. I recognise and thank the Eora people. I join this place fully recognising the expectations of a considerable number of communities and individuals from country New South Wales for me to deliver. I am not afraid of hard work, I am fully committed to the wellbeing of the communities of country New South Wales, and I strongly believe that Country Labor is the political vehicle of government that relates to all different groups and individuals for the benefit of all country communities and their industries.

Being the first Labor woman from Duri to be in this place is a considerable honour. However, I am not the first Labor person from Duri to be here. William Cahill, the father of two brothers who have served in this House, was the Duri schoolteacher from 1906 to 1930. Cyril and James Cahill were both Labor members of the Legislative Council for periods between 1950 and 1978. Both men had a long history of community service. James received his primary school education at Duri school, as did my two sons.

Cyril was expelled from the Labor Party in 1959 after voting against the abolition of the upper House, so I am not sure whether I should feel guilty for being thankful. Two other notable Labor figures from the immediate area are the Federal members Bill Scully, who was born in Bective and was the Minister for Commerce and Agriculture in the Curtin Government—a very important gentleman—and, of course, the legendary Fred Daley from Currabubula, which is just down the road from Duri. My local area has a good solid Labor history and I am proud to be part of it.

I was born in Wollongong in 1948, and by the time I finished school in 1965 I had attended eight schools across New South Wales and had managed to get an excellent education in life from very different communities, from Berry, a small dairy town in those days that was not then a major tourist centre, to Tamworth, which was already presenting as a regional centre, to Mascot, a culturally diverse inner-city suburb. My years as a nurse were satisfying. However, it was in 1986 when I joined the health education and public health section of the regional health system that I learnt about the issues that affect people's ability to be healthy: issues such as access to work, racism, poverty, housing, education and healthy family structures—not in any order, because they all influence each other.

The communities, public health practitioners and clinicians of New England, the north west and, for a while, the Manning area, taught me well. It was not easy to leave my job recently, and my farewell last week was very sad. I married in 1968 and have had 34 good years with my husband, Richard. I have two sons, Abe and James. I am very proud of these two young men as friends. I also have a delightful grandson, Joshua. I thank them for surviving my obsession for social justice and Labor principles and apologise for the time it stole from them.

I joined the Labor Party in 1980, not long after moving to Duri. Garry Ryan is a Country Labor member in Tamworth. He is a very good man who does not make value judgments of people's actions, gender or race. He ensured that my work in the New South Wales branch of the Australian Labor Party [ALP] and local and regional structures was valued and utilised. I thank Garry for the honest and forthright ideals he shared with me, which will help me work in this place. I joined the Rural and Provincial Affairs Committee of the New South Wales branch of the ALP in the early 1980s. I succeeded Garry Ryan as the secretary and proudly became the chair in 1990.

I decided to leave the cracks about women and the chair out of this speech, but it was interesting. From that group and the grassroots country Labor Party members, Country Labor was born. I still chair the Country Labor Committee and I will continue to do so until after our July conference. I am very proud that it will be held in Tamworth. Rob Allen's devotion to Labor principles and the Labor cause has been a major factor in the success of Country Labor. He is now the New South Wales branch country organiser and he was the secretary of the Rural and Provincial Affairs Committee and the Country Labor Committee for most of my years as the chair.

I thank the New South Wales Labor Party general secretaries for their support over the years. John Della Bosca, who is now a member of this House, was the first to recognise the way forward, both for Labor in the Bush, which we then called ourselves—I heard the crack about that this morning—and for making country services relevant. He set up direct dialogue between Ministers and the Country Labor Committee. That committee has been a very successful advisory group. Because of several years of intense debate, and because we have in the Hon. Bob Carr a Premier who believes in good government for all, country New South Wales has enjoyed major benefits in recent years.

I particularly thank Party Secretary Eric Roozendaal and Assistant Party Secretary Mark Arbib. Their trust in me has been a major encouragement over recent years. Eric and Mark confirmed and expanded Country Labor,

presided over its registration, and got me here. I thank my friends in the union movement, particularly Michael Williamson of the Health and Research Employees Union—my union—for their support. There is no doubt that without the unions in country New South Wales, our workers would be totally ripped off. Given the current Federal industrial laws and few jobs, many already are.

I am pleased to be working here with the Hon. Amanda Fazio. We have a long history of partnerships that work. I will continue to work with my friend Senator Ursula Stephens, the President of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Labor Party. She is a Country Labor woman and I have worked closely with her to positively influence country policy. I also thank my friend and Emily's List mentor, Christine Kibble, and all my workmates and life friends for their support and trust.

Special recognition must be given to the Country Labor members in our branches. The people of the Tamworth branch of Country Labor have been a huge part of the past 20 years of my life. At 11 or 12 years of age at East Tamworth Primary School I first learnt that Aboriginal people did not have an easy time. The Aboriginals—my peers—lived in a paddock on the way to the tip. Their houses were small sheds built with corrugated iron and hessian. In the cold there were not enough clothes. They were supposed to be learning with us. They were not allowed to swim in the public swimming pool. I started to learn.

The New England north west has the largest Aboriginal population in New South Wales. I have worked for those communities since 1986 and I have made many good friends. I know that there are not enough resources and that family-destroying feelings of worthlessness have been created by generations of racism. I also know that many young Aboriginal people are getting a good education, that health services and access to health are improving in some places, that there are good, strong, tough kids who can compete on the job market, and that more opportunities are available. It is our job in government to ensure that everyone has the resources and support to be able to access education, housing, jobs and health. I will be working hard to achieve that for all Aboriginal communities across the State. There is not yet equitable access to education, health, housing and justice for all communities in country New South Wales, whether black or white. In some of our towns and villages it is very easy to hide that fact, but I have no intention of leaving it hidden.

The changes to rural industrial bases have had a considerable impact on the demography of country New South Wales. Coastal areas have fast-growing populations with large numbers of elderly people, who have a huge impact on services, such as health, and on the environment, and there are many poor people. Southern inland New South Wales is generally growing, except the smaller towns, and it has fewer problems resulting from poverty. It is facing development issues. Western New South Wales and northern inland New South Wales have declining populations outside their regional centres. Some areas have large proportions of children and others have large proportions of elderly people, and there are many poor people. The country is not one amorphous mass; each region is different with different needs. Within towns there are extremes of rich and poor. The individual regions also have fiercely defended identities.

The country is complex, and legislation and policy must recognise that. Policies for country New South Wales should not be about propping up or saving but about developing innovative infrastructure programs that deliver services to the people who want to stay, and who have a right to stay, in small towns and villages. There is always potential for industrial development in country New South Wales, and it is essential that the Government support rural communities with relevant infrastructure and implement processes to enable that when appropriate.

Most people in country New South Wales are not farmers. They live in the regional cities, towns and villages. They may or may not be required by the agricultural industry, and these days they would be more likely to get seasonal work if they were not competing with backpackers. They may work for the industrial base within the town.

Agriculture is incredibly important to this country and this State. However, it is not the only country consideration for this Parliament. The current drought has affected farmers, business and major industries such as the abattoir industry. It would be tragic if we were to permanently lose our abattoirs, for example. Towns that have lost abattoirs rarely recover their jobs through other industries. We are able to assist the farmers, and we are able to assist the small business proprietors and offer development assistance to affected industries, including abattoirs. We must find a way of dealing with the massive unemployment and family dislocation that will occur if these abattoirs shut.

Historically, the workers either move on or just stay in town to become second and third generation unemployed families with a resultant decline in health and lifespan. I intend to work for these people. Bob Carr's Government has introduced many policies and programs, which have certainly improved life and equity for country people. As the motto said, "There is more to be done". Last week, when I was feeling somewhat directionless in this place, I ran into an old Rural and Provincial Affairs Committee member, Paul O'Grady, a previous member of this House. Paul said, "Just don't forget what a great honour it is to be in this place." To all those trusting me to deliver I will not forget. Thank you.

Before I finish I must express my thanks to my family. I thank my husband, Richard, who really has stuck by me

during nasty times when people thought it was acceptable to publicly denigrate me because of my political belief, struggling in his business because that is what is often done to people in the country when they are perceived not to conform, and coping with my constant travel. Thank you: my life would be lost without you. I also thank my sons, Abe and James, who grew up to be nice people despite my constant community commitments, and Abe's friend Elisha, who is a special part of our family. I thank my brothers, Robert, Michael and Peter, who have always supported me and for several years tolerated my unfortunate teenage cooking. I extend my thanks to my sisters-in-law, Norma and Susie, who are so important to us all. I also thank my Robertson brothers and sisters-in-law, John and Barbara, and Christopher and Vicki, for not necessarily sharing my politics but always supporting my right to work for others. Very sadly, we all lost John last year. I lost a great friend and confidant.

I extend thanks to my extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins, who in many ways have supported me to become the person I am. I thank my grandmother, Bobby, who was such a major part of my very young life and who gave me many of my little personal traits. I also thank my father, who taught me how to be angry. I especially thank my mother, Diana Carr, who taught me how to use the anger; who believes that everybody is equal so I never learnt to feel subservient or gender affected; who has spent her adult life ensuring her children could think; who is a wonderful painter; who worked in soul-destroying jobs for a pittance to feed, clothe and house us and still kept her amazing brain; and who lends her only coat to someone who knocks on the door and asks for it—and, amazingly, gets it back, even if a few months later. I can never thank her enough. Thank you.

The Hon. PATRICIA FORSYTHE [2.54 p.m.]: Before I speak to the motion moved by the Hon. Jan Burnswoods I take this opportunity to congratulate the honourable members who have recently joined us and delivered their first speeches: the Hon. Tony Burke, Ms Sylvia Hale and the Hon. Christine Robertson. I note a very strong Tamworth connection from the Hon. Christine Robertson. She joins many other illustrious members and former members of this House, including the Hon. Jennifer Gardiner, the Hon. Rick Colless, Sir Adrian Solomons, who was a member of this place when I was appointed to this House as a member of staff, and the Hon. Ian Sinclair, who was a member of this place many years ago. If the new members to this place are able to make as valuable contributions as each of those people have made, this place will certainly be richer for their presence. I certainly enjoyed listening to each of their first speeches over the past couple of days.

Not surprisingly, the Opposition cannot support the motion because it is based on a false premise. It begins by condemning the Howard Government for the crisis in university funding. On what possible basis can the Hon. Jan Burnswoods contend that there is a crisis in university funding? Indeed, the honourable member was not able to sustain such an argument. She said that she had originally placed the motion on the *Notice Paper* more than 12 months ago and that the motion had been changed very little. The honourable member is full of rhetoric. Clearly, in the past the motion was put on the *Notice Paper* as some sort of political stunt. Just as the community has rejected Federal Labor for its scaremongering tactics and these sorts of attacks, so we will reject this motion by the Hon. Jan Burnswoods on behalf of the Government. It is not correct to suggest that there is a crisis in university funding.

It seems that the argument being put forward by the Opposition is taken from the song sheet of the Federal Leader of the Opposition, Simon Crean. He has been wrong on this issue, as has the Hon. Jan Burnswoods in moving the motion. It seems that the honourable member has been reading too many of the media releases of Jenny Macklin, the Federal Opposition spokesperson and shadow Minister for Education, Science and Training, who has also been wrong on these issues, as I will demonstrate. None of what the Hon. Jan Burnswoods has said today suggests that she has done other than swallow the rhetoric that has been put forward and has discredited Federal Labor on this issue. Simon Crean, the Federal Leader of the Opposition, has for a considerable period made incorrect assertions about university funding. On 25 February this year he made the following statement on Queensland radio 4QR:

You know in the last six years there has not been one extra university place created. If, in fact, the pattern that I'd put in place had been kept by John Howard, we'd have 16,000 more places today—the whole of Australia—but 16,000 more.

If that sort of figure had not been achieved in the period since the Howard Government came to office in 1996, we might be able to talk about a crisis. But Simon Crean was wrong. His suggestion that not one extra university place was created is simply incorrect. If it were the case, it would have been a crisis. In fact, since 1996 the Howard Government has created 22,420 new, fully funded undergraduate places for Australian universities. This includes the additional places delivered in 2001 by the Prime Minister's innovation action plan Backing Australia's Ability. That package provided 2,000 additional university places each year from 2002 for Australian universities in the priority areas of science, mathematics, and information and communication technology.

So not only are there more places but there are more places in critical areas that matter to the future of Australia, such as science, mathematics, and information and communication technology. The honourable member has ignored these issues in her motion—the very issues that convince the Opposition that there is no crisis in public education. In fact one would think, if one was to believe the Hon. Jan Burnswoods, that the Commonwealth has provided very little funding for higher education. Approximately \$6.7 billion in Commonwealth funds goes to the higher education sector each year. Add to that the \$4 billion that the universities get from other sources and that

sector effectively is receiving \$11 billion. Where is the crisis in that? The sector is not in crisis. In fact, given its overall assets and revenue—\$20 billion in net assets, \$4.4 billion in liquid assets or funds, and an estimated \$11.3 billion in revenue last year alone—the higher education sector has the capacity to do very well and be a world leader.

I do not suggest that there should not be changes and that the universities cannot do better. The Commonwealth Government has recognised that there should be changes and that is why we have had the most significant review of higher education. That is why discussion papers have been presented and an opportunity given for community input to the Government. But this issue is not about many of the elements of the motion of the honourable member; it is not about picking out a couple of universities to the detriment of the rest. That is simply wrong. There have been extraordinary assertions—nonsense, say my Opposition colleagues—coming from the Labor Party that suggest that the focus will be on only a couple of universities to the expense of others.

The Federal Opposition has engaged in scaremongering by suggesting that the Federal Government plans to direct its funding away from some institutions to only one or two big world-class institutions to get them in the top 100. That is not true. That has never been an issue that has been taken up by the Federal Minister; it has never been an issue that has been on our agenda. We want our universities to be the world's best, but we do not want to engage in cherry picking by saying, "We will give support here but we will not give support somewhere else." It is intended that there be reforms within the higher education sector but that does not mean there is a crisis. It is a recognition that we can do better.

The proposed reforms are intended to enable all institutions to maximise their potential and provide the best service to students, their community and to Australia as a whole. Who could disagree with that? I repeat, anybody who would suggest that universities are doing their best and cannot do better would be wrong. We do not say that. What we have said is that it has been appropriate to have a review because many things have happened that have impacted on our universities over a number of years. My personal view is that the Dawkins reforms, where we amalgamated a number of higher education institutions and created a vast array of universities across the nation, has not been and was never in the best interests of higher education in Australia. The reforms may well have given people access to universities but they may not have been in the best interests of students because probably far too many universities and far too many courses have been created.

While I do not have the figures in front of me, I recall a speech from the Federal Minister last year in which he highlighted the fact that there is a myriad of courses in Australia which are expensive, have a staff-student ratio better than one staff member to one student in many cases, but attract only a minute number of students. The honourable member mentions rising staff-student ratios in her motion, but she overlooks the fact that a myriad of courses in universities across Australia could be described as mickey mouse courses—highly funded courses that provide little mainstream education that would better advance the whole of Australia.

The Federal Government is absolutely right in putting some of those issues on the table for discussion. One concept is that anybody with a personal interest can, on a whim, create a course and assume that the course should be funded because it will generate broad interest and advance Australia as a nation. But at the end of the day this is not only about personal education and the advancement of each individual—or at least those of us who have or have had the privilege of attending a university—it also is about the community good. The community good is best served by ensuring that university funding is directed to support the majority of students in courses that are in the community's interests. If the honourable member had bothered to look through many of the courses that are in some of our universities, she could draw the conclusion that they are not necessarily going to advance the whole community. Indeed, if one compares the best practice outcomes from Australian universities with outcomes from other universities, one would have to ask whether we are being well served by the billions of dollars that we contribute annually to universities.

Given the commitment of research dollars, we should be able to expect from universities outcomes that go beyond pure research to commercial activity derived from that research. For example, most advances in medical science come from research within universities. But that principle also holds true in many other areas. Across 29 Australian universities surveyed in 2000, 38 commercial start-ups were recorded. While that was an increase of 40 per cent on the previous year, only two of our universities—the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney—approach international best performance.

When the honourable member talks about a crisis she should focus also on how universities are performing, a question that involves much more than dollars. The honourable member has missed an opportunity to talk about that issue. There may be issues about how universities are performing but the honourable member today missed a great opportunity to address a fundamental problem—the governance of our universities. I raised that point in this House recently when there was debate about the former Chancellor of the University of Sydney. The governance of universities was discussed and on that occasion I said it was ironic that the University of Tasmania was the university that had moved to the most modern approach. It had reduced the number of people on its council rather than keep the 30 to 50 members appointed to some university councils.

Yesterday this House passed a number of motions appointing parliamentary representatives to the councils of

numerous universities, thus maintaining a long tradition well entrenched in legislation. Perhaps the Parliament should consider whether over the years those parliamentary representatives have attended meetings regularly, provided appropriate service and given proper scrutiny to the tasks they were allocated. Perhaps representation of parliamentarians on university councils and university governance should be reviewed. Governance and obtaining a proper return for research dollars may not be a matter of crisis but they highlight the fact that some changes are warranted. That is the reason for the Federal Government embarking on its extensive review. Reform is needed on a range of issues, such as the quality of teaching and learning, governance arrangements, specialisation and regional engagement, indigenous participation in higher education, university financing, and the interface between higher education and vocational education and training.

Two years ago the Minister was savagely attacked for suggesting the need for debate on this issue. Because of the way TAFE courses are presently structured, students may undertake a three-year course, and those who do well may receive the appropriate certificate and slip into an undergraduate course at university, thereby avoiding some of the HECS fees. The Minister merely highlighted that loophole, and he was right in doing so. The State Government is very good at cost shifting and I would have thought it would have pursued the matter. Certainly, the Federal Government need make no apology for reviewing the matter because honourable members would agree that differentiation, competition and flexibility are in the best interests of students and university teaching staff.

I believe that at the end of the day the mover of the motion and the Opposition all seek a robust, vibrant, higher education sector that will assist Australia to be at the forefront of learning and teaching. Australia as a society should benefit from a high education standard and its research should strive to be world's best practice. The Australian vice-chancellors committee and the Federal Minister are in agreement and a review is now taking place. However, universities must examine ways in which they, too, can make a contribution. What is wrong with commercial involvement? [*Time expired.*]

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