



NSW Legislative Council Hansard Full Day Transcript

Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Tuesday, 21 September 2004.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL [5.02 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I support the Motor Accidents Legislation Amendment Bill. Madam President and honourable members, I am named after my grandfather, a man I never knew. He perished in Auschwitz in 1944. As he was herded into a train, he threw his signet ring to a local railway worker, who later gave it to my grandmother. I proudly wear that ring today. And I hope my grandfather is watching with pride as his grandson joins the oldest Parliament in Australia—a privilege to rival my previous job as head of the oldest branch of the oldest social democratic party in the world. It is therefore with great pride that I deliver my inaugural speech.

I am filling the vacancy created by the departure of Tony Burke, who will shortly be elected as a member of the Latham Labor government. I have no doubt Tony will achieve greatness in our national Parliament. I am grateful for his assistance and advice during my transition into the Legislative Council.

My presence in this place owes everything to the two great causes to which I have devoted my life: my family and the Labor Party. My beautiful wife, Amanda, and my three wonderful children, Liam, Harry and Jema, are my world. Amanda is a wonderful wife and mother, and, as my partner in life, my rock of support, for which I am eternally grateful. She has always been there for me. My children remind me daily of the truth and value of unconditional love. Nothing is more precious than their hugs when I come home at night, and the sound of their happy voices—and sometimes not so happy voices—as I leave in the morning.

But I am also here in this Parliament because of the confidence of my party, the great Australian Labor Party—founded in 1891, and in 2004 still as strong and as necessary as ever. My appreciation goes to the New South Wales Administrative Committee for its unanimous support in electing me. I thank them for their vote of confidence.

Many life stories find their way into Parliament. I am here today because in 1942, at great risk, a kind Dutch policeman hid a little Jewish seven-year-old boy, his four-year-old sister and his mother for over 15 months. That seven-year-old boy was my father. In those 15 months, he and his family never saw daylight. Eventually my father's family was able to escape to Renkun, and then to Ede, where they remained hidden until being liberated by Canadian forces in May 1945.

But for the exceptional bravery and generosity of that lone Dutchman, my father might not have lived, and I would not be here addressing this House today. His experience reminds me that within the horrific, and seemingly hopeless, totality of human conflict, individual acts of kindness and sacrifice make a difference. It is a difference that stretches across generations. And in 2004, the need for such acts of kindness and sacrifice remains as ever.

As I address this House, a tragic humanitarian crisis continues to unfold in the North African nation of Sudan, despite all efforts aimed at its prevention. It is estimated that over 1.2 million refugees have abandoned their homes in a struggle to survive, just as my father's family did in 1942. There must be times for all of us when the scale of foreign tragedies seems too great, when we as individuals seem powerless to help. Yet, even remote as we are in our far-flung and peaceful nation, we as individuals have the ability to help the victims of these conflicts. Collectively, we have the ability to do far more.

My father and his sister emigrated to Australia with their step-parents in 1951—a country far from the ruined cities of Europe, far from the horrors they had witnessed and remembered, and far from the Cold War tensions that threatened to plunge Europe into conflict once again. And so my father became part of that post-war generation that built the modern Australia, and I honour him tonight. I honour my mother, too, who is also the daughter of migrants from Russia and England.

They also came here to build a better life. But it only came through hard work, through many tough years of running a cake shop in Earlwood, which we lived above, and later a cake shop in Maroubra Junction. They set an example of long hours and hard work that my brother and I have always followed. They made sure I stayed out of trouble as a teenager, and they taught me the value of learning. They were very insistent that I take advantage of the free university education that Gough Whitlam made available to every Australian.

Of course, I still did my best to upset my parents. And to their great shock, I dropped out of my commerce degree at the University of New South Wales in my first year. But I redeemed myself a year later, when I returned to study law at Macquarie University, the place where my interest in politics began. I had not heard of Trotskyites, Maoists, Spartacists, or international socialists until then, but I instinctively realised I was uncomfortable with the dogma of the far Left.

I opposed the reaffiliation of Macquarie University to the extremist-dominated Australian Union of Students, and for my trouble I was racially vilified. We won that campaign. It heralded a major overhaul and reformation of the national student movement. It was my first political victory. And my small, moderate coalition went on to win control of the student council, of which I was elected chairperson. One of my fellow councillors was Andrew Ziolkowski, who never got the chance to enjoy the distinguished career I know he would have had. Cancer cut his time in this Parliament tragically short.

As chairperson of the Macquarie University Student Council I made few friends on the extreme Left. But I made even fewer on the extreme Right. I led a successful campaign to have the racist group National Action banned from campus, and stopped its vilification of overseas-born students. In retaliation, National Action called me a "communist Jew". The group sent me a tirade of death threats, climaxing in the attack and ransacking of part of the student council offices.

This experience gave me a deep aversion to all forms of extremism—a lesson that has stayed with me ever since. This is why I joined the Australian Labor Party, the only party to defend the less fortunate in our community, and I soon went on to work with Michael Cleary, the Minister for Sport, Tourism, Recreation and Racing. My next step was to the State Organiser's job in the ALP party office. It was my biggest break. The New South Wales party office is an organisation with a unique, some would even say fearsome, reputation. There must be few political organisations in the world simply known by their street address. Sussex Street is one of them.

Every so often detractors write the obituary of the New South Wales party office. Yet these doomsayers are invariably proven wrong. The New South Wales branch remains the most professional and most successful political organisation in Australia, as last year's State election landslide demonstrated. My sincere thanks go to all my former colleagues, the staff and officials at the New South Wales office, for their support and friendship in my tenure as New South Wales General Secretary. The team members, Mark Arbib, Karl Bitar, Joanna Woods, Rob Allen, Sarah Conway, Kate Elliott, Margaret Paheerathan and Luke Foley are among the best political party officials in the country. I have no doubt they will uphold the traditions and success of the New South Wales branch.

The key to the strength of the New South Wales Labor Party has always been the strength of the factions—the Left and the Right. The factions spend so much energy sharpening their skills on each other that our political opponents have no hope when we combine to defeat them. Since Labor first came to office in this State in 1910 we have been in government more often than not. Since World War II Labor has been in office two-thirds of the time: 13 election victories compared with the Coalition's six. I have been privileged to help deliver three of those wins. But we have achieved more than just victories: we made the New South Wales Australian Labor Party an organisation dedicated to offering talented women an opportunity to enter this Parliament, and we were not afraid to give them the help they needed to get here.

We are making the New South Wales ALP an organisation where indigenous leaders such as Linda Burney and Warren Mundine are encouraged and embraced. We gave rural and regional New South

Wales a new and effective voice in government through Country Labor; now so successful that the annual Country Labor conference dwarfs The Nationals' annual conference in both size and representation. And we set the ALP on a sound footing with a long-term financial strategy and a strong fundraising program.

I shall take this opportunity to make some observations on the subject of political fundraising. I do that as someone who has had some involvement in this area. My experience tells me the current system is dangerously unsustainable. On a recent trip to the United States of America I was stunned by the amount of money being raised during the presidential primaries and the election campaign—in excess of \$US1 billion. This situation should be cause for concern in this country. If left unchecked, spiralling media costs will continue to fuel the need for our political parties to seek donations.

There is no doubt the Australian public are uncomfortable with the interaction of donations and politics. They have every right to be. It is my strong belief that all political parties need to work together to change the funding of the political process. It is unreasonable to believe that the unilateral regulation of fundraising by any one party could ever be effective; it would place that party at a serious competitive disadvantage. A national, bipartisan approach is required, and caps need to be placed on campaign spending. The fundraising process must become completely transparent, and all donations must be traced to their true sources.

There is no doubt that such reforms need to be accompanied by a major increase in public funding. But surely that is a small price to pay for a fairer, cleaner democratic system in a country that can otherwise boast the most transparent electoral laws in the world. Unlike some, I do not argue this perspective for political advantage, but rather for the purpose of achieving a fairer political process.

I am proud of my 17 years at the New South Wales Labor Party office. During that time I was privileged in 1989 to play a small role in ending 32 years of National Party misrule in Queensland. I experienced the bitterness of electoral defeat in 1988, the mixed emotions of a near victory in 1991, and the sweet victories of 1995, 1999 and 2003. I was proud to play a major role in the by-elections that paved the way for those victories: Peter Anderson in Liverpool in 1988, Grant McBride in The Entrance in 1992, Gabrielle Harrison in Parramatta and Reba Meagher in Cabramatta, both in 1994, and Harry Woods in the 1996 Clarence by-election that pointed to the landslide Labor victory that was soon to follow. I am proud of the role I played in the Werriwa by-election campaign that launched Mark Latham on his journey to The Lodge.

I have already mentioned the role of my parents and my family in bringing me here today; now I want to pay tribute to the members of my Labor family who have helped bring me to this place on this occasion. First I thank Stephen Loosely and John Della Bosca, who took a punt on a young student activist and gave me that first crucial job in the party office. I thank my party colleagues for their loyalty and friendship throughout the years, particularly Johnno Johnson, Michael Costa, Senator Ursula Stephens, Joe Tripodi, Steve Hutchins, Leo Mcleay, John Robertson, Michael Williamson, Eddie Obeid, Bernie Riordan, Jim Metcher, Derek Belan, Graeme Wedderburn, Terry Sheahan, Chris Brown and Matthew Strassburg. Above all, I sincerely thank Bob Carr, the finest Premier since Neville Wran and a man who I believe will go down in history as one of the State's greatest political leaders ever.

For 17 years it was my honour to work for the greatest political party in Australia. Now I place my talents and experience at the service of the people of New South Wales. I do so with a deep sense of honour. I do so conscious of the sacrifices my parents made to bring me here. I do so conscious of the sacrifices that all parents make and the hopes they invest in the future of their children. It is for this reason I have committed myself to the great Labor Party struggle for social equality, to bring within the reach of all citizens the prosperity of our great State. It is a struggle that has lasted over a century, and one which will no doubt outlast my lifetime. Yet, much progress has been made. And with each small victory we grow ever closer to our dream of a more just society, a society in which fulfilment in life depends not on the circumstances of an individual's birth but on individual character and, above all, hard work.

With that, I dedicate myself to working hard at the task of representing and serving the people of New South Wales. Holding public office is a great responsibility, but it is also a great privilege; an opportunity to put one's beliefs into action. It is an opportunity I will not waste. I thank the House for its indulgence.