

The SPEAKER: On behalf of the House, I congratulate all new members on their election to this place. It is my great pleasure to ask the member for Lakemba to make his inaugural speech to the House.

Mr ROBERT FUROLO (Lakemba) [6.00 p.m.]: (Inaugural Speech): I stand here today, both proud and humble, as the seventh member for Lakemba, representing the people of my community in the oldest Parliament in Australia. We all have a story, our own story, of where we have come from and why we are here. It is my pleasure to share my story with members, as well as my hopes and aspirations. I am the youngest of five children born to Antoinette and Pasquale Furolo. Both my parents were born in Egypt and, like more than 40 per cent of people living in the seat of Lakemba, my mother's family made the decision to come to Sydney to start a new life in a new country. My father, chasing love, followed shortly after. Having arrived with little more than a few pounds in their pockets my parents, like so many migrants arriving at that time, set about finding work wherever they could—in factories, on process lines—both doing whatever was necessary to get by. Of course, things were difficult and money was tight. But with the fierce determination and pride shared by thousands of other new arrivals, my parents laid the foundations of a new life.

Children arrived quickly, and to provide for their needs dad found a job as a cleaner of the new post office in Penrith. The family moved to the area and dad found more work and established a small family business. While my mother spoke English well, and about four other languages, my father's education was not as comprehensive. Yet, despite these difficulties, he more than compensated in other areas, and his qualities and traits taught me a great deal about success in life. My father was a cleaner, but he was more than just a cleaner. He was a proud cleaner. He took great satisfaction in doing his job to the best of his ability. When he had finished a big stripping and polishing job, he would look at his work with pride, knowing it was a tough job done well. Interestingly, my first brush with this place was as a young boy helping my dad clean. Dad had the contract to clean the office of the then local member for Penrith, Ron Mulock. I know my father, who passed away nine years ago, would be proud that I have gone from cleaning the office of a member of Parliament to being a member of Parliament.

My mother also was, and continues to be, an important influence in my life. Mum is the sort of person who would never accept orthodoxy without question. She taught me to be curious and questioning and to not run with the pack. I will be forever grateful for her lessons. My sister and my brothers, who are here today, also played key roles in my development. In fact, they continue to be wonderful role models in my life. They show me how to be a good citizen and a good father, and to stand up for what I believe in—and they do it all with love. As the youngest of four boys, it was not always easy. I still recall my terror and my brothers' delight at a concerted effort by them to flush me head first down the toilet. But, of course, they did it with love.

I was schooled by the Sisters of St Joseph in primary school and by the Christian Brothers in high school. My high school years at St Dominic's College and McCarthy Catholic College were very formative years. Obviously it was a great school because another member who is making his inaugural speech tonight—the member for Port Macquarie—attended the same school. The Brothers instilled in me a strong sense of social justice and the expectation that we must all work to contribute to the betterment of society. At school I also learned that you should not miss the final examination of your Higher School Certificate, for without it you cannot matriculate. Sadly, I learned that lesson a few hours too late. My hopes of attending university dashed, I set about finding jobs doing whatever I could. Over the next five or so years I worked in a range of jobs, none of them glamorous but all of them honest.

During those years I worked as an owner-driver delivering parcels around Sydney and as a sales

representative selling cleaning supplies. I worked as a barman, waiter, cleaner and hotel porter and as a cook in an Italian restaurant, run by my brother Jeffrey. I sold courier services door to door and I even flipped burgers at McDonalds for a living. Some view all these jobs as beneath them. But these jobs taught me many things. They taught me about myself. They taught me how, like my father, I could take pride in doing my job well, whatever it was. They also taught me about human nature and respect for people. These jobs are not the usual path of members to this place, but I can recommend them to anyone who wants to learn about themselves and humanity. For my part, I will relish the lessons and experiences of these jobs and apply what I have learned through them to this new role.

As a young idealist with a Christian Brothers education, I was drawn to the one political party that understands the essential role of government—to foster opportunity while protecting and supporting the less advantaged—the Australian Labor Party. While living in a share-house in Canberra, a dear friend of my brother invited me to a Labor Party branch meeting in Belconnen. I moved back to Sydney and the same friend encouraged me to join the Warren branch in Marrickville. They were interesting times, and my taste for politics had been whetted. But the event that turned my life around and opened my eyes to the wonderfully rewarding world of elected representation was the suggestion of a job with a relatively unknown backbencher in State Parliament. I was immediately interested.

Despite the prospect of taking a pay cut, I contacted the member to arrange an interview. With no experience working in an office or of using computers, the young MP took a punt on me and offered me a job. My life was changed forever. Many members will be aware that the member I am referring to was the then member for Hurstville—my good friend Morris Iemma. The experiences I gained over the next five years set me on a course that has changed my life and led me here today. I publicly express my deep and sincere thanks to Morris for his positive influence, his support and his friendship. His values and commitment to the community he represented were wonderful lessons to me on what can be achieved for people. My work in the electorate office was immensely rewarding and the friendships I formed with so many people remain to this day. Morris, you changed my life, and now I hope to be the same positive influence on others that you were, and represent our community with the same dedication and compassion that you displayed. Thank you.

I am an optimist. I believe good things will happen. I see the goodness in people and in humanity. For me, the glass is always half full. As a young boy growing up, my life was charmed. I had good friends, a loving and supportive family, and an unrelenting sense that everything would always be all right. I had a powerful belief that anything was possible. I was convinced that if I believed something strongly enough I could do anything. For a short time I was even convinced I could fly. Unfortunately, the strength of my convictions was not enough to break the shackles of gravity, but the scraped knees bore testament to my optimistic nature. My sense of optimism was so strong there was also a time in my life when I just assumed I would win Lotto. Needless to say, it did not happen. But this information helps to paint a picture of my positive outlook on life. I am pleased and fortunate that this sense of excitement and optimism has carried through into my later life.

Standing here today, that part of my nature is as strong as ever. Being positive and optimistic has fuelled and been fuelled by my experiences as a councillor and Mayor of Canterbury over the last nine years. Many members will know of the energy that exists in our local communities and the warmth, generosity of spirit and goodwill of the people in our electorates. This intrinsic goodness in people is the intangible force that has driven and inspired me to keep working in public life, and it exists in abundance in the electorate of Lakemba. I have continued to learn and be inspired by the people of the community I represent, like the wonderful staff and volunteers of the Riverwood Community Centre and the Canterbury City Community Centre.

These amazing neighbourhood centres, and others like them, serve their communities well because they understand the needs of people in their local area. The volunteers—many of whom are experiencing difficulties themselves—are the threads that, woven together, make the fabric that

binds my community together. Working hand in hand with the families, community groups and volunteers of my electorate are the people at the coalface of government service delivery—the people at our local councils.

My experience as a councillor and mayor have reinforced in me the critical role played by the men and women working in councils across our State. In the city of Canterbury, where more than one-third of households earn a combined income of less than \$26,000 and where nearly half of all residents were born overseas, the work of a committed and compassionate council is essential. I put on the record in this, my inaugural speech, my deep respect and gratitude for the management and staff of Canterbury council from the General Manager, Jim Montague—who has headed the organisation for more than 26 years—to the directors, managers, and staff at all levels. The people who work for Canterbury council make a real and tangible difference to the lives of those living in our city.

I also acknowledge the councillors with whom I serve on Canterbury council: councillors Karl Saleh, Brian Robson, Bill Kritharas, Fadwa Kebbe, Mark Adler, Carlo Favorito, Michael Hawatt, and the newly elected councillors Linda Eisler and Ken Nam. Regardless of their political persuasion, I am pleased to say that during my time as mayor, the elected body of Canterbury council has worked together to implement some great reforms and projects for our city. One of the projects that I am most proud of and which has fundamentally changed the way our council operates is the introduction of an Independent Hearing and Assessment Panel [IHAP] at Canterbury. I drove the reform, which is now regarded by all as a significant improvement to the processes and integrity of council's development assessment system.

The IHAP provides for an independent review of all contentious development applications. The panel is able to objectively assess an application, take verbal and written submissions from applicants and objectors, review the council staff's report, and make its own independent recommendations. There are a number of benefits from this system, and a review of the IHAP's first 12 months of operation demonstrates them. Of the 65 applications only one matter—the most contentious matters considered by IHAP in its first year—was appealed to the Land and Environment Court, and the court ruled in favour of the council. Most importantly, feedback from applicants and objectors indicates a greater degree of confidence in the process, which was my objective from the start.

Of course, there are many other projects and initiatives of which I am proud. The introduction of a 15-year infrastructure renewal program has ensured Canterbury council is well placed to meet the challenges of the future and to fund the repair of all its roads, footpaths, drainage and town centres. Over the past four years more than \$12 million has been invested, and there is more to come. Whether it is funding for the community building work of local libraries and capital works projects like multipurpose community centres, whether it is key environmental initiatives like a new three-bin waste system or cleaning up the Cooks River, or supporting community events and festivals like the Campsie Food Festival or the Haldon Street Festival, councils like the City of Canterbury make a real difference to people's lives. I intend to work hard in this place to be a strong voice for local government. It is facing a difficult time and many challenges. It needs champions who believe in what it can achieve. Our communities depend on us to get the relationship between Federal, State and local government right. This will be one of my priorities. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

The people of Lakemba—like people all over New South Wales—have dreams and hopes and aspirations. Regardless of where they were born, what language they speak at home, or what church or mosque they worship in, the people of Lakemba want the future to be a better place for all of us. They want the opportunity to share in the benefits of a cohesive society that is working together for a better today and an even better tomorrow. My duty as their representative is to work with everybody in this place to deliver on this expectation. And it is my view that the best way to build a safer, healthier and more cohesive society is through education.

If there is one portfolio area that can level the playing field for disadvantaged families and give them and their children a chance to work towards a rewarding and fulfilling career, it is education. With a better education we have a better standard of living, we are healthier, and, arguably, more fulfilled. Our educational institutions, both public and private, are our best chance of building real

opportunity for families and young people in New South Wales. And for disadvantaged families—like many in the electorate of Lakemba—we must make education the State's number one priority.

I mentioned earlier that by nature I am an optimist. I hope this always remains true. However, there is one issue that I believe needs conscious effort on the part of all community and religious leaders, especially in our parliaments. Unless we are prepared to stand up on this issue, the consequences will be devastating. I speak of the need for all of us to repudiate bigotry, and cultural and religious prejudice. Nothing is more debilitating to a peaceful and harmonious existence than those who choose to exploit ignorance and promote fear based on real or perceived differences in others.

My parents, who arrived in this country with little more than a strong work ethic and hopes for a better future, experienced the scorn and resentment of those who found it easier to hate the unknown. Of course, they also met many people who welcomed them and befriended them. I doubt my parents were very much different to the waves of migrants who have come to Australia over the past 30 or 40 years. Like my parents, more recent migrants to Australia have come to build a new life for themselves and a better future for their children. Yet there still exists a fear and resentment of migrants. Yes, there is a period of adjustment—of learning the local customs and language. There is a period when new migrants want and need the security of living near others who know and understand their language and culture. But this is not a barrier to their participation in our lives, merely a period of adjustment and learning.

As leaders, as governments, as citizens, we must rise to the challenges of a society rich in diversity. We need to recognise the shared values and hopes of people, regardless of their language or cultural background. And we need to show that we respect them and welcome them. This analogy might be simplistic but it is like being at school when a new kid arrives. We can sit back and complain that they never came up to us to say hi, or we can reach out to them, acknowledge the challenges they face of settling into a new school, and offer to help them. The seat of Lakemba, like the city of Canterbury, is one of Australia's real cultural melting pots. My community is home to people from more than 150 different countries. And while there are occasionally difficulties, my community is an example of what can be achieved when new migrants are supported and welcomed. As the member for Lakemba I will be working to promote understanding and respect between all people so that our true potential as a society can be achieved.

I have many people to acknowledge and thank, and I wish to start with the two people who have had the biggest and most positive impact on my life: my daughter, Isabella, and my son, Alexander. From the moment of their births they have given me a sense of wonder and love that inspires me. They are beautiful, happy, loving and affectionate children and I am blessed to be their father. I have worked hard to be a good dad, but I have often made mistakes. And as members here will know, it is often those we love the most that suffer for our work. I thank my family for their love and for the lessons they have taught me in life—my mother, sister and my brothers, who have been my teachers, my friends and my confidantes. They have always been there and I know they always will be.

I also thank the wonderful Labor Party branch members and supporters who worked during both the council and by-election campaigns. We had hundreds of people helping out on election day and during pre-poll: they have been tireless in their efforts to support me and the Labor Party. I also thank the campaign team who worked so hard in what was a very short by-election campaign. In particular I acknowledge Brendan Cavanagh—a dynamo who has a big future—Matt Dixon, Tom Pacey, my good friend Ari Margossian, and the many young Labor activists and volunteers who delivered a solid result on 18 October. To my partner Jess: Thank you for believing in me, and thank you for understanding why I do what I do. In the words of a famous Australian who succeeded despite adversity, I love youse all.

Finally, I will read a small quote that came to me while attending the Annual General Meeting of the Campsie War Widows Guild. This group of ladies has been serving the needs of local war

widows since 1946. They are wonderful ladies who have experienced true adversity and who continue to help others. Their motto, which I believe is an extract of a message from King George VI, sums up their values. It reflects a commitment to society and the common good that parliamentarians, Ministers, religious leaders, teachers, doctors, mums and dads could all aspire to. It reads:

We all belong to each other,
We all need each other,
It is in serving each other and in Sacrificing for our common good
That we are finding our true life.

I hope that I have painted a picture of who I am, of where I have come from, and of what I hope to achieve in this place. I am here as a servant of my community and the people of New South Wales. I will do my best to make a positive difference with the opportunity I now have.