

## INAUGURAL SPEECH

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I acknowledge that we meet on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay respect to their Elders past and present. I was interested in politics from a early age, it is true. We listened to Parliament on the radio in the kitchen as I grew up. It could have been a passing interest, but we moved to government housing at the back of Albury when I was 10 years old. Springdale Heights was a flat suburb and baking hot in summer. It had a well-resourced school with a brutal playground. Seeing the contrast between living there and elsewhere, the life choices for my friends living there and elsewhere, has drawn me back to politics—that gulf and the hope of closing it.

Politics was still an unlikely path. I did not know anyone in politics. Like most families, we concentrated on getting by. You might have quite literally passed us beetling along the Hume Highway in the white family Volkswagen. The Volkswagen beetle is a reliable car, but we are all reasonably tall and you would not call it a huge car for a family of six. Getting the family in or out of the car had all the characteristics of a circus clown act. It felt a long way from the levers of power. I was pleased to find a way into politics and I am genuinely honoured to have a chance to serve here in the nation's oldest parliamentary chamber, created in 1823.

I support three traditions, each of which is older than this Chamber. First, the parliamentary tradition. I love that we can trace the heritage of this Chamber to the Palace of Westminster and perhaps back to the early Roman Senate. I note that earlier today that was the subject of heated debate in the House. I value that parliamentary tradition. Secondly, the public service tradition. Both mum and dad were public servants. Mum was a sound reporter in the courts and dad was a probation and parole officer. They were servants of the public. It is an old idea that needs reviving. Jack Kennedy said it best:

...let every man and woman who works in any area of our national government, in any branch, at any level, be able to say with pride and with honour in future years: "I served the United States Government in that hour of our nation's need".

I do see public service as a calling. I see politics as a public service. I will be a defender of that tradition.

Finally, I come from the progressive Labor movement tradition. Bruce Childs is in the gallery today. As he did, we have argued for peace. We have argued for love, like Tom Uren. We have argued for dignity, like trade union activists everywhere. Peace, love and dignity as part of a radical international social movement fighting for social justice, equality and democracy. Mr President, I do not mean to alarm you, but I am also part of that tradition, the parliamentary tradition, public service and progressive Labor traditions, all of which I intend to draw on during my time in this House.

I was also traditional Labor. As a school kid, now settled in Newcastle, I had a copy of LF Crisp's book tucked under one arm. It was a gripping political thriller titled *Ben Chifley*. It was the age of Hawke and Keating, but the Labor I was joining was the party of Chifley and Curtin. I admired their personal modesty, ambition for the country and focus on economic justice for ordinary citizens. It's an agenda that still matters today.

As have other members, I served an apprenticeship. It has had some vivid moments, but two of them stand out. I have had the pleasure of serving as Deputy Chief of Staff to Premier Nathan Rees. I acknowledge his presence in the gallery today. Eleven days on the job, the first week back to Parliament, had its pressures. But we were watching another crisis 16,000 kilometres away. Lehman Bros had collapsed, catapulting the world and New South Wales into financial crisis. It was a rollercoaster apprenticeship in economic management. New South Wales improved its triple-A rating during the financial crisis. Still, New South Wales citizens suffered. Some lost their jobs and some lost their homes because of lending and rating decisions made in middle America and New York. Those are firms we cannot regulate, risks we cannot control and consequences we cannot stop. It is a reminder to every New South Wales Government of the continuing need for economic vigilance.

That was not the only crisis—try serving as Labor's Assistant General Secretary in 2011. As a party official I suspended or expelled more than a dozen individuals, including seven for life. I never took it lightly. I personally presented one case against a prominent member. The lawyers' threats were flying thick and fast. Uncomfortably at the time, we had few of the powers we needed as a party. Without revealing our legal advice, as I sat in the tribunal meeting I knew that if I proceeded I was exposed and the Labor Party was exposed, but I chose to press ahead. Thankfully, Labor has since been able to strengthen those powers. We were facing in our ranks a malign group disloyal to the labour movement. Taking action was the right thing to do and, despite the threats, I would do it all again. Labor is stronger as a result. We need strong political parties in New South Wales because we need strong governments in New South Wales.

The first test for any New South Wales Government is the economic security of its citizens. We need to invest in our economy. Keating argued two years ago that the key economic levers now lie in State, rather than national, hands. The things that fascinate me about the New South Wales economy are our ports, our rail, our roads, and our airports but also our stock and futures exchanges, our teaching hospitals, our universities and the national broadband network. That is where the action is. Each of these is a gateway through which our State and our cities touch the international economy. They create wealth, share understanding and allow us to rapidly adapt to a changing world.

Put aside for a minute our country's history of inventing things. What interests me is our record as a country of fast, and first, adopters, our ability to rapidly translate the latest technology, the latest health care and ways of living to improve the lives of people in New South Wales communities. These institutions are where that happens. Some operate publicly, some privately, but they should all receive the support of an active government sector. An active government tackles inequality and recognises our rights as New South Wales citizens, each born equal, irrespective of our wealth. An active government formally measures our social, environmental and economic wellbeing alongside our gross state product in its annual budgeting process. Six weeks ago I returned from travelling in the United Kingdom, a country in turmoil after Brexit, a country where wages are lower now than they were in 2008. Events there and in the United States remind us that we ignore economic insecurity and economic inequality at our peril.

We also need to invest in our people. I am a great lover of books and libraries. During a childhood spent in libraries, I learnt a real lesson in the power of government to change lives. Many of the books in our local library were stamped inside with these dates: 1973, 1974 and 1975. Many of the books I read, I later realised, were a product of the Whitlam Government pouring Federal money into local libraries, using the power of government to support local libraries. Libraries deserve our support. It is not enough to support those who can already read. Reading was always important. In the information age it is a human right. Without it, filling in forms, reading the news, using social media and reading a map are all difficult or impossible. Some people still struggle with reading. That is why I support the introduction of a new New South Wales Government principle: the right to read. I support a massive lift in our literacy effort, with stronger programs in schools and TAFE, and an outreach program in our public libraries. I support the enshrining of the right for all New South Wales citizens to learn to read, with State support, at whatever age they choose to do so. It will be one of my priorities.

I take the time to recognise what I consider to be the most unheralded microeconomic reform in my lifetime. It is a past act that deserves greater recognition. At my high school people did not stay until year 12 or even year 10. Often, the day they turned 15 they were out the school gate. No-one told us that the world was changing. No-one told us that modern work would require more education. My friends walking out the school gate at 15 thought they were stepping into the world of adult work, not stepping out of the modern economy. The Hawke and Keating governments changed all that, increasing the school completion rate from 40 per cent to more than 70 per cent. It was a massive boost to human capital, to our national wealth, and it changed lives in the community. I applaud them for it.

Still, I believe New South Wales could do better in education. In most areas of State Government activity, the share of total Government expenditure has been remarkably stable over time. There is one exception, and that is education. New South Wales education expenditure as a share of total expenditure has fallen from around 28 per cent in 1989-90 to 26 per cent in 2002-03 to

just 21.5 per cent this year. It has fallen despite the growing importance of human capital. It has fallen as other countries spend more. It is crucial for New South Wales that we reverse that trend. I call on this Government and future governments to do so. Books, libraries and learning are three of the passions I will bring to the job. I have already acknowledged country, but I also want to acknowledge the challenges we face. In 1965 in Alabama Martin Luther King said:

... the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.

Fifty-one years later, I am not sure Australia would meet that challenge. An act of recognition is overdue, but we could also listen more carefully to the world's oldest continuing culture. It is an urgent task for this generation, not the next, to engage with this oral tradition and to keep the languages. I recognise that this Government has built on the early work in this area. Together, we have much to give to the world.

I will speak briefly to some of the other issues in which I intend to take an interest. As a walker I love our parks and the landscape of New South Wales. As an environmentalist I believe that our citizens demand clean air, water and safe food. Where companies do not follow the law, I believe we should be tougher in enforcing it. Ecological costs do not fall equally; they are usually borne by the least powerful. As a man I will be committed to the full equality of women. My mum's example meant that I have always expected women to be treated equally in this world. As an arts lover I never accepted that the arts were for the upper class. They are for all of us.

As a founder of Labor Loves Live Music, I do not like these lockout laws. As an economist I am appalled by them. There has to be a less heavy-handed regulatory tool than closing down economic activity at night in our international city. A ban should be a last resort. As a citizen I support an open data agenda for New South Wales. We can produce both a more responsive government sector and a more competitive private sector by giving citizens control over their own data. One way that this Chamber could be more responsive—and some traditions have to change—would be to adopt the change to its standing orders that the Australian Senate has recently adopted to allow photography in the House. I support that change and encourage the House to do so.

It is impossible to thank everyone who deserves it. Politics and social change are collective enterprises, so there are many more people I would like to thank. Thanks, first, to those friends, relatives and colleagues present here today. I deeply appreciate your coming. Thanks also to my colleagues with whom I worked most closely in my last role: Mark Boyd, Tim Ayres, Linda Burney and now Assistant General Secretary Rose Jackson. Thanks also to my fellow party officers, including General Secretary Kaila Murnain. I recognise Don and Alma, mum and my brothers and sister, and an old friend who travelled to be here, Brendan Wynter. To my wife, Jenny, and our two sons, all of whom I love dearly, I say thanks. Dad could not be here. He died five years ago. I wish he were here.

I look forward to working with members in this House and in the other place. I extend fraternal greetings to each of them. I make only one exception, that is, the member for East Hills, because he knows what he has done. I have loved serving in politics and the labour movement. I never saw it as inevitable that I would serve in Parliament. It never seemed further away than on 5 December 2009. I was working for Nathan Rees. The Labor caucus met that day to vote on the premiership. I headed to work that morning in Governor Macquarie Tower knowing that, by the end of the day, I would be out of a job. In the hour that caucus met, I packed my office. I walked out of the Premier's office and out of politics, possibly for good. So I feel lucky to be here. I have kept coming back in no small part because of dad's example.

All my life my father remained an optimist. After a lifetime of working with criminals he could always see the best in a person. I cannot think of a better role model for someone entering New South Wales politics. Moving out the back of Albury also taught me that often communities that rely most on government feel the least engaged by politics. The day after the shock result in the United States of America election seems an appropriate time for all of us to reflect on that. I look forward to working with you and with others in this Chamber as we face that challenge together.