

## INAUGURAL SPEECH

**The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG (17:56):** I start by recognising the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to its Elders past, present and emerging. One of the outstanding defects of our great social democracy is the fact that to date we have failed to recognise our Indigenous peoples in the Australian Constitution. It is a task that politicians of all persuasions must set themselves to lead on. Until we do, we will never be complete as a nation. I dedicate this speech to my son, Gerard, who is here today and whom I love very dearly. I am very proud of the decent and caring human being he has turned out to be. In 15 years he has achieved more than I have in 53—he is in a rock band and he is cool.

My journey to this place started in 1955 with my grandfather and grandmother, Gilardu and Annunziata Mercieca, who stepped off the ocean liner *Surriento* just down the road from here at the Overseas Passenger Terminal. My uncle Robert vividly remembers those first steps on Australian soil. Together with his wife and four children—my lovely mum, Carmen; my uncles Robert and Vincent, who are with us today; and my aunty Josephine, who is no longer with us—my grandfather shouldered a massive wooden box that contained everything the family had brought from Malta. The sharp edges of the box cut into his shoulder as they walked up from Circular Quay, past this very Parliament, on their way to rental accommodation in South Dowling Street, Darlinghurst. They would not have even known what this building was, let alone imagined that their first grandchild would be giving his inaugural speech to the New South Wales Parliament in that same building some 65 years later.

It was my Nunnu Gilardu who first sparked my interest in politics. He was a blacksmith and secretary of the labour club in his village of Naxxar in Malta. Today I am wearing his original Malta Labour Party badge. In 1978, at age 12, I was sitting with him at the dining table of my grandparents' place at 349 Bunnerong Road, Maroubra. The year before, my dad, Victor; mum, Carmen; and sister, Fiona—who are all with us today—had moved from 14 Keating Street, Maroubra to Sylvania Waters, which was and still is in the electorate of Miranda. The front page of *The Daily Telegraph* had caught my attention—as it often does. It was emblazoned with the headline "Wranslide" in reference to the momentous Labor Party victory in the New South Wales State election, led by the great Neville Wran.

I was asking my Nunnu Gilardu about the voting result tables published in the newspaper. I remember him proudly explaining to me, "This seat of Maroubra, Mark, is a blue-ribbon Labor seat,"—because it was almost impossible for the Liberal Party to win—"unlike the seat where your mother and father have moved to," Miranda, which was a Liberal seat. Ironically, the Labor Party won Miranda in that "Wranslide" election and again in 1981, after which it reverted to the Liberal Party. It was then famously won back by Barry Collier in 1999, who went on to hold the seat for 12 years and won it back again in 2013 with a record 26 per cent swing. I am very pleased to see that Barry Collier is with us here today in the Chamber—a great campaigner and a great local member.

In that year, 1978, the Labor Party recorded a 58 per cent primary vote—the highest primary vote of any party for 100 years. It is a reminder that despite recent disappointments at both State and Federal level, the Labor Party was and still is capable of garnering significant majority support from the community. On that point I do not subscribe to the view that the Labor Party should retreat to a small-target strategy in order to win elections. That is the *modus operandi* of our conservative opponents. Losing elections by being honest does not imply the policies are wrong. What it does imply is that we are not bringing people along with us when we prosecute a change for the better. Progress is always more difficult to explain than the status quo but that is no reason to abandon progress.

That 1978 election was also the year when for the first time the people of this State directly voted for members of this House, the New South Wales Legislative Council. In June of that year voters had approved a referendum to introduce a directly elected council. I was, of course, recently elected by that very same system by virtue of being selected number seven on the Labor ticket. I make special mention of how important that party endorsement status is and what it means for me. It is an honour that I shall forever be grateful for. The power of ALP endorsement comes from broad-based community support for a political brand that has been built up over generations of our great movement standing up for people to gain an improved standard of living and to reach their full potential irrespective of inherited

socio-economic circumstances. As an elected representative of the ALP, I am very conscious of ensuring that the Labor brand name is not trashed but instead enhanced by what we do as a Labor movement. I will be standing up for the rights for working people and sticking to our principles of social justice and equality of opportunity. I thank the people of New South Wales who voted for me because they have faith that I will stay true to those Labor Party principles. I will keep the faith.

The political ideology and philosophy upon which my politics are built is social democracy and collectivism. They are the foundation upon which I ground my Labor values and my views on policy. It is why I am a unionist, a social democrat and a Labor Party member and not a conservative or a Liberal. I believe in the power of ideas to progress humanity and society and I reject the inwardness and fear of change that conservatism embodies. Over the long sweep of history, humanity inevitably and eventually tends towards progress and development. It is in our DNA. The question is how fast we can achieve that progress. That is where the battle of ideas and politics plays a crucial role.

Advancements in societies come about because groups of people wanting to progress a cause band together as a collective to prosecute a political case for change. The change is almost always resisted. Voting rights for women and our Indigenous peoples, unemployment benefits, minimum wages, universal health care, superannuation, anti-discrimination, same-sex marriage—to name a few—were all resisted at first as unaffordable, unnecessary or a threat to society. It is only when these things are pushed into the political arena by activists and debated by politicians that we move forward.

Climate change is the latest emblematic example of such an issue. Australia could and should be leading the world in renewable energy by now, with renewed economic growth and jobs incubated by government and private investment in new technology. Instead, we languish, caught up in a combination of conservative fear of change and naked self-interest. How fast we can deal with this issue and the opportunity it presents depends not on the conservatives but on how active we are as progressives in prosecuting the case for change. The longer we fail to convince people, the more it costs our future. No matter what talents we possess or how inherently gifted we might think we are as individuals, there is little we achieve without being part of a broader collective and cooperative effort. The essence of living a good life lies in the self-realisation that our true human nature comes from the power of collectivism and cooperation. Numerous people, many of whom are in this room, have collectively hoisted me up onto the Labor ticket and into this House. I want to make specific mention of some of them.

My political activism started in 1993 when I joined the ALP and handed out during that memorable Federal election when Paul Keating won the sweetest victory of all. My cousin and friend Jason Marks, who was a member of the Miranda branch and is here with us today, encouraged me to join that branch the same year. I thank Jason for that—at least, I think I do. My political mentors and advocates traverse factional divides that might surprise some, depending on how well you know me. I have been around the movement long enough to know that no one person or faction has a monopoly on intelligence. The best political outcomes are distilled by listening to what people have to say from a wide range of perspectives—including, I might say, our political opponents—and then concluding policy based on what makes sense within the guiding parameters of my Labor principles.

During my long political apprenticeship I have been fortunate to have Titans of the Labor movement who have seen it all take me under their wing. Arthur Gietzelt, who is no longer with us, is one of those, as is my great friend Gary Punch, whom my wife refers to as "Charlie" from *Charlie's Angels*, because I am constantly on the phone to him seeking counsel, with only rare sightings. Gary has been my closest confidant, mentor and strongest advocate. Gary, I hope you know how grateful I am for your friendship. Graham Richardson and my now colleague the Hon. Peter Primrose have been political father figures to me and consistently supported my ascension to political office.

Despite their differences the people I have mentioned have an abiding and common goal: to see Labor governments elected at all costs because they genuinely believe in Labor as the only practical vehicle for social improvement. I thank them from the bottom of my heart. There is scarcely a more difficult role in politics than General Secretary of NSW Labor. The person in that role must manage hundreds of political and industrial agendas, personalities and stakeholders and mould them into a

cohesive whole, which manifests itself in the political machine that is NSW Labor. Since joining the party in 1993 I have not seen a more hardworking, dedicated and accessible General Secretary than Kaila Murnain. She is committed to opening up the party and making it more democratic. She has been a good friend and I thank her for her support. I also thank and acknowledge the presence of Mark Lennon, NSW Labor President.

I also want to thank the many rank and file ALP members and party representatives too numerous to mention here, who I have worked with over the last 26 years, particularly in the Sutherland Shire and St George area, and for the support and friendship that colleagues have provided—in particular, Bob Rogers, Bill Saravinovski, Sophie Cotsis, Steve Kamper and Shaoquett Moselmane. I come to this place on the back of advocating a firm and fundamental principle that underlies my politics: that the bedrock of the Australian Labor Party is the union movement and the values it stands for. Those are the same values I referred to previously: social progress, solidarity, collectivism and cooperation.

In 1982 at 15 years of age I began an electrical apprenticeship with the then Sydney County Council. I worked as an electrician with them for 30 years. My first act was to become a member of the Electrical Trades Union [ETU], of which I have remained a member ever since. I recall in those early years meeting a fourth-year apprentice at the Miranda substation branch by the name of Bernie Riordan. Bernie seemed to vanish from the workplace as quickly as he appeared. When I asked what had happened to him, I was told he had left to gain a degree in industrial relations. It dawned on me years later—once I had come to terms with the fact that my utopian youth, which largely consisted of surfing and drinking, was over—that had I better allocated my time I might also have risen to the loftier heights of Secretary of the ETU and President of the ALP. In any case, I am grateful to have been in Bernie's orbit and lucky to have had his friendship and support.

During my working career both at Ausgrid and the ETU I have been fortunate enough to have many loyal friends and supporters in the workplace and at the industrial coalface. I want to thank all ETU members, delegates and officials, especially Col Harris, Graeme Paterson, Phil Oswald, Anthony O'Sullivan and Joe Von Borneman, who have all been the most solid friends and ETU colleagues I could have hoped for. To get the endorsement by the ALP for a seat in Parliament is not a cakewalk. It is a competitive process and requires more than a modicum of strategy and political nous. In this respect I want to make special mention of my good friend and ETU colleague Paul Lister. Pretty much from the day I became an ETU official in June 2012—notwithstanding the fact he thought I was mad for wanting to go into politics—he has prosecuted my case with a single-minded obsession that at times exceeded my own. Many of you will appreciate that that is saying something! Paul has one of the sharpest political minds I have come across and I value his friendship, advocacy, support and advice.

I want to make special mention of my great friend and now colleague Adam Searle, Leader of the Opposition in this House. Adam is a constant source of calm, considered, rational advice based on a very thoughtful and considered analysis of the situation at hand. He is a loyal and good friend and an invaluable asset to the ALP in this place on policy, legislative reform and strategy. I also express my gratitude to former ETU secretaries Steve Butler and Dave McKinley and the current secretary, Justin Page. They were all unrelenting in their backing of me. My good mate Dave McKinley is here with us today. It was Dave who pushed the hardest of all to finally get me here, but the whole ETU contributed, and I am forever grateful. Before my recent electoral fate was known, the current ETU Secretary, Justin Page, concerned that I may miss out on a spot, immediately set himself the task of lobbying for me to get the next available ALP vacancy. This is the sort of loyalty you get when you are part of a union.

I also want to thank the assistant secretary of our union, Ben Lister, who has been a long-time colleague and friend of mine. As well, I thank the secretary of the postal division of our union, Shane Murphy; secretary of the plumbers division, Theo Samo; and assistant secretary Chris Seet—all great blokes. Once union secretaries stick, they stick. I want to express my gratitude for the key role other unions played in advocating my place on the ALP ticket—in particular, Graeme Kelly, Gerard Hayes, Alex Claassens, Bernie Smith, Tony Sheldon, Richard Olsen, Daniel Walton, Misha Zelinsky, Tara Moriarty, Barbara Neibart, Bob Nanva and Martin Cartwright. I also want to thank Mark Morey, Secretary of Unions NSW, who advocated a collective position of unions around me. I also want to acknowledge

two of the most solid trade unionists you will find and who I would trust with my life—Paul Reid from the United Services Union and Mary Yaager from Unions NSW.

Most people do not see the workload, stress and responsibility involved in being a union official, let alone running a union. Union officials make a significant and important contribution to society by having a very tangible and practical effect on the improvement of people's lives in the workplace. It is nothing short of a disgrace that our political opponents use the power of government to deliberately besmirch the character and the role that union officials play by attacking unions through the establishment of political witch-hunt bodies like the Australian Building and Construction Commission and the Registered Organisations Commission. They wish to do this because, despite their electoral rhetoric, they are fundamentally anti-worker and anti-union. They do not acknowledge or understand that if it were not for unions and unionists this country would be a much more unfair place than it is today.

I will always support the presence of unions in the workplace and the integral role they play in the Australian Labor Party and Australian society. I do not come to this position through some misguided sentimentality for the past but because I believe the future of our Labor movement depends on strengthened relationships with the union movement. The reason for this belief is not because of the financial or human resource that the industrial wing provides for the political wing of the ALP but simply because unions understand what is going on in the lives of people on a day-to-day basis and what their concerns are.

The union movement represents some 600,000 working people in New South Wales and some 1.6 million people throughout Australia—or about 15 per cent of all employees. It is one of the single largest representative interest groups in Australian society. Much has been made in recent years of the relevance and role of the union movement in the ALP. The point has been made in relation to falling union membership. My response to this is that falling membership has made unions even more relevant than they have ever been. With fewer people being represented by unions the cause for empowering working people has become greater, not less, and should strengthen our resolve to encourage union membership. The strength and differentiation of the Labor Party from its conservative opponents lies in its ability to create a mass movement around issues that affect many working and disadvantaged people.

The representatives of this mass movement must comprise union members and ALP branch members. Policy formulation works best when structured from the ground up, by listening to the people in our movement who are grounded in reality. Working people will tell us when wages are not keeping up with cost of living pressures, when electricity prices are too high, when there is bullying in the workplace, when people are being unfairly sacked and when labour hire is being used to undermine wages and conditions—not to mention how we keep employees healthy and happy and businesses productive so that the economy works for everyone and not just a select few. The more influence unions have and the more we listen to them, the better policy formulation we will get.

Unions also play a critical role in balancing a key power relationship—that between capital and labour. They strive to ensure that there is a fair distribution of income and wealth. They serve as a counterbalance to large employers and corporations and their attempt to have a monopoly on capital. By coming together as a cooperative and forming monopolies of labour, unions can negotiate for wages and conditions on equal terms with big business and corporations. There is no doubt that there is currently a fundamental imbalance in that power relationship. It is creating unfairness and hurting people's livelihoods. If this is not rectified it will see Australia lose its social democratic character forever. Unions must be empowered to have the capacity to represent and organise workers.

Over the past 30 years a huge realignment of industry has taken place, characterised by the disaggregation of large-scale workplaces and a proliferation of small-scale employers who are both workers and businesspeople. Whilst this has meant that unions have found it more difficult to recruit and organise members, it presents a historical opportunity for the Labor movement. Despite some excellent Labor Party policies for small businesspeople, the truth is they generally do not support the Labor Party. There is no good reason as to why this should be the case. They have more in common

with our traditional constituency than the owners of big business and corporations. They work long hours for modest sums of money, they pay their fair share of tax and they contribute to employment on a large scale.

Big business is not universally bad; it has its place and it plays its role in economic growth. However, the disparity in income and wealth apportioned to this sector is hampering balanced economic growth. The power balance between unions and big business needs to be restored so that both wage earners and small businesses have a fairer share of national product distributed to them based on their contribution to the economy. This is critical to a buoyant economy because purchasing power spread over the masses creates demand in the economy for goods and services and, in turn, employment growth. The ALP can and should represent the interests of both working people and small businesspeople because they are increasingly becoming one and the same constituency. Unions can play a critical role in binding these two constituencies together by representing both.

In recent decades governments have sold us the myth that privatisation of public assets would liberate funds for public infrastructure, create competition and lower prices. The truth is that the opposite has happened. With each State asset that has been progressively sold—telecommunications, desalination plants, ports, power stations, electricity distribution networks, water utilities, toll roads, buses and the Land Titles Office—consumers have seen prices rise with less reliability. Publicly owned not-for-profit monopolies are simply appropriated into private hands for profit. The result has been greatly reduced accountability to the consumer. The proceeds from these fire sales are often squandered on white elephants like Sydney's notorious light rail project, with private companies gouging excessive profits with little or no return to the public.

Functioning and competitive markets can and do play a crucial role in delivering a wide range of cost-effective goods and services to masses of people. Government should provide appropriate parameters within which the operation of such markets can occur. There are some who believe—misguidedly—that free and competitive markets can be created in every corner of the economy. Others simply cynically use this free market theory as a front for appropriating wealth from public to private hands because it suits their interests. In large part it has been the latter that has been the motivation and result of privatisation.

The reality is that not all markets are amenable to competition and, furthermore, some goods and services such as education and health should never be given over for private profit because the profit motive is inimical to equitable access and comprehensive quality provision. The deregulation and privatisation of vocational education and the gutting of our TAFE system exemplify how badly this can turn out when worship of the market for provision of everything is prioritised over the public good. One of the main tasks of Labor governments is to ensure a balanced and mixed economy is maintained—one where the private sector operates in markets that are conducive to real competition, where goods and services are provided at competitive prices.

In markets that are not conducive to competition such as natural monopolies like electricity, water and rail, government can and should own them. Similarly, where the provision of goods and services that are essential for equality of opportunity in life, such as health and education, would be deficient by way of privatisation, government should step in to ensure adequate provision happens. Let us not be fooled by the neoliberal falsehood that the market can adequately provide for everything. It is a smokescreen for the private provision of self-interest.

After health there is scarcely a more important human benefit than education. Properly invested in, it can lift the horizons and capacity of human existence and the progress of nations. There are two glaring defects in our education system which I believe diminish our democracy. Voting is compulsory but understanding our political system is voluntary. Citizens are compelled to participate in our democracy by exercising their vote, but there is little effort to educate them on both the mechanics of our voting systems and equipping them with the knowledge for coming to an informed decision on that vote. The rate of informal voting at recent elections has become so high that had people exercised a formal vote it may have changed the result. The situation is unacceptable.

Currently our education system does not provide adequate knowledge and emphasis on how the various voting systems around the country function at both the State and Federal levels. Nor does it provide an adequate historical analysis of how the various parties and underlying ideologies evolved or what they stand for. If we can all agree on the view that the best ideas should win through to policy, then it follows that people need to have the knowledge to determine what the best ideas are. We should strive for a more informed society which makes better decisions about our future. Our education system should not just produce qualifications for jobs but also produce thoughtful citizens who care about their country and the world around them. We should include in our formal education a comprehensive study of civics, humanities and politics.

I want to conclude by thanking my family: my mum and dad, Carmen and Victor; sister Fiona; brother-in-law Craig and nephews Lawrence, Hennessy and Louis, all of whom are here; and our godson James, who is also here. I love them all very much. Mum and dad, you gave your children the biggest start in life we could ever have hoped for—unconditional love and freedom and a rock solid platform of self-esteem and confidence which we will carry with us forever. I express my love and gratitude for my other family in Greece: my father-in-law, Gerasimos, who is a councillor in Athens for the Greek centre left party; my mum-in-law, Eleni; and sisters-in-law Lina, Emmanouela and Alexandra, and my nephew, Panos, always encouraging us and urging us on with love and support.

Last and most importantly, I express my admiration, love and thanks for the luck I have had with my beautiful wife and life partner, Anna, always by my side. People in this room who know Anna understand I would not be here without her. It is not a case of her supporting me, it is a case of her leading me and driving me along. Her insights into human behaviour, which often wake me up from my childish naiveté, are invaluable. More than all this, she is selfless in her love and nurturing of our son, Gerard, and me. With that foundation, everything else in life is simply a bonus, welcome as it is.

I am a lapsed Catholic but, as many in that boat, or should I say ark, will appreciate, it is not an easy one to disembark from. I therefore finish with a quote from the great British economist John Maynard Keynes; it has always resonated with me. Keynes said:

We are not the trustees of civilization but of the possibility of civilization ... like *Le jongleur de Notre Dame*, we must make sure we juggle for great purposes.

He was referring to the French story of *The Juggler of Notre Dame*. A juggler, unsure how to impress Our Lady Mother Mary, decided to do what he knew best and proceeded to juggle furiously in front of a statue of Mary in the Notre Dame Cathedral. After hours of juggling he collapsed, exhausted. The statue came to life, walked over to the juggler and wiped his brow in acknowledgement. Despite the uphill battle for social progress and the sometimes seemingly insurmountable challenges it poses, the people of New South Wales have elected me to this place to juggle for great purposes. I intend to do so.