



INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The PRESIDENT: Before calling the Hon. Bob Nanva, I welcome to my gallery the family and friends of the honourable member, including his wife, Sally Deans; his children, Aaliyah, Darius, Yasmin and Elijah; his mother, Rae Nanva; and Mr Mark Morey, the Secretary of Unions NSW.

The Hon. BOB NANVA (18:05): I acknowledge the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, traditional custodians of this land never ceded, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I begin with those now-familiar words which embrace three concepts: acknowledgement, respect and custodianship. Of acknowledgement, I say that it is important but, alone, insufficient. It is fact, not opinion, to acknowledge that 235 years of settlement has brought pre-Federation practices ranging from near genocide to convenient terra nullius; then later, governments stealing children from their families; and of late, entrenched social disadvantage and a normalised de-prioritisation and ignorance of the importance of the right to speak for oneself. It is such that as we stand here now, no group of Australian people face the same level of entrenched and multi-generational disadvantage as Indigenous Australians—poorer health, shorter life expectancy, a lower level of education and employment, and a higher infant mortality rate.

If you are a male Indigenous Australian, there is a one in six chance you are in prison or have spent time in prison, often with parents and in some cases grandparents. I acknowledge those grim facts. I also acknowledge how the first custodians nurtured this country. First Australians were careful with the land and the lives of others. Connection with land and all generations was of such value that it has come to define the oldest continuous culture in human history as proud, careful and respectful people.

But words of acknowledgment, unless accompanied by deeds, are diminished. That is a simple truth. That truth is one that our nation will grapple with in the referendum that we will decide this year. I am a passionate advocate for a "yes" vote—an unequivocal, loud, proud, emphatic yes. I say yes to the Voice to Parliament, friends: yes to words and yes to the simplest of deeds, an act and a process of listening and learning. Let us be at least respectful enough to do that. Yes for another very practical purpose: so that the next deeds are better, and the ones after that better, and the ones after that better and better again, to take us to a place where a respectful relationship becomes as uncontroversial as it should be.

That is why the Voice is the next best step—and hope—for building a bridge between acknowledgement and respect. It is a real opportunity for cultures old and new to evolve as joint custodians of modern Australia. And if we do this, then the astonishing cultural kaleidoscope which is the greatest country in the world becomes even shinier still. That is the sort of custodianship I aspire to and, friends, that is how I see myself as a parliamentarian—a joint custodian with you of a crucial and powerful institution for a short period. Being custodians of this place at this time is the one thing that truly binds us all, regardless of political allegiance. None of us are the winners of a prize. We are the lucky recipients of an opportunity to serve.

I am proud to say that my own family has added to the colourful Australian spectrum. That migrants have been an engine for growth and innovation in our State should be no surprise. The act of moving around the world, often leaving everything behind, selects those with determination, an entrepreneurial spirit and an appetite for risk. Mum and Dad came to Australia before the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran. Dad, an academic and a teacher, received an offer to undertake a PhD at Oxford but chose instead to settle in Australia. Our distant shores provided comfort on which secular or religious political oppression could not easily cast its menacing shadow. Distance, contrary to the title of Jeffrey Blainey's book, is not always a tyrant. As an English literature lecturer in 1980s Townsville, Ali, as he was then known, raised the ire of many locals who were outraged that an Iranian would have the temerity to lecture locals on anything, let alone English literature.

No wonder then that the appeal of being his own boss outweighed the long hours and personal risks. He nurtured a successful business from behind a ramshackle wall that split our house in two. My bedroom was commandeered as part of the office set-up and I spent many years sleeping on a mattress in my parents' room. My dad's business, in time, moved on to become an accredited tertiary college occupying an office floor, then office floors. My brother, the chosen one as I refer to him, acquired an adjunct to the kitchen as a bedroom. That he would retain a place of rest within striking distance of a pantry and a fridge was infuriating. As a child I never quite found the nerve to assertively protest the sacrifice and the injustice of it all. But I do say now to my brother, who is here this evening, that he more than made up for the favouritism that he received and the trespasses on my liberty in the family home through his unconditional love and protection of his little brother over decades.

But it was no sacrifice at all given all my parents sacrificed for us and our life in this country. Mum arrived with little English but plenty of grit and determination. A young woman in the 1980s, she was contending with language barriers, suffering quietly from the significant effects of social isolation and doing backbreaking work as an aged-care worker. When it came to pay, her work was grossly undervalued. I followed Mum around in nursing homes in north-west Sydney. She loaded and unloaded patients twice her size, wiped patients down, showered them, fed them, and comforted them when they were disoriented. As a child I could not comprehend why she would do anything so seemingly uncivilised. Now I cannot imagine anything more civilised than the gentle, devoted and professional care of our aged, by our aged-care workers, at the point of their greatest vulnerability. I am so proud of everything my mum overcame and did. I am proud of our aged-care workers as well as the many angels of our essential services. I say to them—from a naive child that once stood in that nursing home all those years ago to the informed parliamentarian that stands in this Chamber this evening—that I commit to being an advocate for pay that is commensurate to the esteem in which we hold you.

Despite their stoicism I know that life was tough for my parents, who arrived in Australia with few possessions, limited contacts and zero family. The effects of separation and loneliness were magnified in an era where the modern marvels of the internet, mobile phones and mass international movement were barely imagined. But they transcended that, like many migrant parents, because they knew the opportunity of Australia. They had a belief in the promise of their adopted homeland and it drove them to leave everything behind. My parents were united in their aspiration to crash through barriers so that their children could be raised in a world of choices.

They were not let down. We were not let down. I am constantly reminded by my parents of how lucky we are given the violence and oppression that still besets their homeland. As a family we have a love of, and a deep respect for, a country that many of us are lucky enough to take for granted. My brother and I were gifted a public education to raise us up and universal health care to prevent us from being struck down. And, above all else, we had the warmth of strangers that filled the void of a family absent. I have not known what it is to have the love of extended family. Grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins—I have not been blessed to have known them. But I felt intensely the kinship of being chosen by adopted families with names like Honeybrook, Lloyd and McLaurin in my youth and names like Deans, Mack, Pilkinton, Livolsi, Papandrea, Hermo and Webb later in life, many of whom I am pleased are here tonight. Such is the Australian story.

It has been our family's experience that, in the main, regardless of one's place of birth or ancestry, the colour of our skin or religion, what mattered in Australia was our character. But it has not always been thus. There are many who have not been so lucky. From the dispossession of our First Australians and the enactment of legislation in New South Wales like the Aborigines Protection Act 1909 a Stolen Generation was created and—notwithstanding any context provided by history—the White Australia policy also inexorably closed our eyes to Australia's potential as a colourblind society. I am reassured by the scale of social transformation that is possible when the world is viewed through a lens of what could be rather than what is. The scale of transformation is limited only by one's imagination, compassion and ambition.

I am inspired by our predecessors in political life who have courageously and effectively reimaged a world through a factual appeal to the mind and an egalitarian pull of the Australian heart: John Curtin's plea to a nation in the throes of the White Australia policy for "less nationalism, less selfishness and less race ambition"; Al Grassby's road map of a "multicultural society for the future"; and Gough Whitlam's agenda to remove methodically from Australia's laws and practices all racially discriminatory provisions that seek to differentiate people on the basis of their skin. All of them set our State and nation on a path to get to this point in time where people of Asian, South Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and Anglo-Saxon descent interact so unremarkably on main streets, in playgrounds and in shopping malls and toil together in workplaces including this Parliament. It seems so unremarkable to them and mundane to many, but whenever I see it I cannot help but momentarily reflect on how blessed we are. It is such a precious thing to observe. Better yet, it is a precious thing to observe in my children, a generation for whom differences in religion, race and sexuality is so unexceptional.

Kids are showing such maturity and understanding and a level of comprehension and compassion that would have been beyond the capacity of adults only a matter of years ago. I say to Aaliyah, Darius, Yasmin and Elijah don't ever lose your curiosity about the differences of others. I am so proud of you. I pay tribute to this wonderful country, Australia, which somehow simultaneously makes the utterly extraordinary entirely ordinary. That is not by accident; it is by hard-fought nurture invoking a shared humanity rather than hostility in the face of fears, of difference, or of change, and mainly resisting the temptation of electoral opportunism so that statesmanship may triumph.

A seminal moment in my life came when contemporary politics gave in to temptation. The calculated exploitation of refugees during the Tampa affair is a big reason why I am here. People were used as political fodder in a legitimate domestic policy debate. The whispering campaign soon after, following the barbaric attacks on the Twin Towers, that vulnerable men, women and children could be terrorists appealed to the very worst in our nature. These events saw race emerge as a brace for divisive and menacing rhetoric that would pass as political debate. Tampa, 9/11, children overboard and the Cronulla race riots made it uncomfortable to be of Middle Eastern extraction. It was the first and only period I had directly been dealt the hand of racism. Being spat at on the Route 136 bus to Manly, heckled to go back to where I came from while watching my beloved Canberra Raiders at the Sydney Football Stadium and routinely referred to as a terrorist at gatherings—they are all vivid memories to this day. It was the first and the only time I have struggled with identity, not feeling wholly Australian, but having no connection whatever to Iran.

I have no doubt that I would not have become a member of this Parliament today if some tolerance and forbearance had been extended by political leaders to those who felt vulnerable, or those whose voices could not be heard above the shrill debate. The cohesion that appears so conventional today will not endure by accident or good luck, but through resolve and vigilance, which is why as custodians we must always charter our course with care and integrity. To this task I bring my history, some scar tissue and experience as a trade unionist and the former New South Wales General Secretary of the Australian Labor Party.

There is often an unflattering caricature of union officials that is too often drawn by critics from an image scarcely reflecting reality—a reality of sitting in the homes of grieving families that have lost a loved one at work and dedicating oneself to ensuring it never happens again, or being entrusted by thousands of workers to protect the freedom that comes from a fair and secure livelihood. I felt the enormity of those responsibilities as the former National Secretary of the Rail Tram and Bus Union and Vice President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. So, too, do my many great mates from affiliated trade unions that are here this evening. It is a responsibility felt more acutely under an unnecessarily adversarial industrial relations system, which too often entertains and rewards ideological obsession.

I am reminded of the Aurizon matter that I was intimately involved with while at the union, setting a legal precedent to unilaterally terminate enterprise agreements, in that case resulting in the reduction of up to \$20,000 in pay and the removal of a host of negotiated conditions for around 5,000 workers, all with the stroke of a pen. Barely months later, that company reported a half-year profit of \$307 million to the Australian Stock Exchange. The CEO at the time was on the record as saying that his objective was simply to "raise the temperature under the unions". Unions do not want an end to business in the way that some want an end to unions. We would all do well to exercise more perspective and circumspection on matters as important as the freedom of workers from deprivation, danger and insecurity.

As a political person, like us all, I have become all too familiar with the means and the pressure to probe fallibilities in human nature, and the issues with which to exploit them. I have seen the roadmap of corrosive political cynicism and negativity, where political research takes precedence over principle, and political expedience over policy, leveraging fears, differences and weaknesses, and engaging mercilessly in the politics of smear, both internally and externally—whatever it takes. That was a road less travelled by the party office while I had the great honour of being the Party Secretary, a position I had the privilege of being elected to in 2019 at a very difficult time for our party. Four years is a long time in politics.

I led that famous Sussex Street machine about which so much has been said. Let me say what is often unsaid, which is how much I respect and adore its professional and dedicated staff. I am in awe of, and indebted to, the thousands of indefatigable rank and file members. As General Secretary, I embarked upon a comprehensive reform of the party's culture and structures. It was not easy, but it got done. Our members and supporters, and the entire community of New South Wales, need a well-governed and administered Labor Party. The "whatever it takes" road of smear and division was also one not travelled by Chris Minns, a leader who disavowed gratuitous negativity and personal criticism from the Opposition benches, despite the pressure of political orthodoxy to do otherwise. That act alone, perhaps more than any, demonstrated that our Opposition leader was ready to be Premier. Those are all legacies I am intensely proud of.

A lesson I bring with me into this Parliament is that cheap political gain often comes at too high a price. It paralyzes reform and unravels progress. It is used to persuade others that no politician, or any government comprised of them, can be trusted. It corrodes faith in the ability of our democratic tradition to resolve challenges through discussion and debate. I will always remain committed to the public spiritedness of our vocation and to the craft of weighing alternative perspectives to build broader coalitions, because I am convinced that those things will make what I cherish more enduring and make our mission to leave the State in better shape than we found it more attainable.

To that end, there is a variety of perspectives I hope to contribute to this Parliament. I want to use the rare privilege of serving in this place to pursue the principles of equality and a fair go, which have given me purpose and meaning for decades. Pursuit of these principles links the Australian Labor Party and the trade union movement to a shared history and a joint fate. The collectivist ethos expressed by the trade union movement has had an enormous influence on the egalitarian character of our society. On many occasions I stood proudly on the shop floor and the picket line with delegates and members to fight the wages cap, a blunt instrument which failed to appreciate their work. I now stand in this Parliament to finish that fight.

For years I would see those same frontline workers disrespected, their jobs systematically debased, diminished and devalued, full-time jobs converted to part-time jobs, part-time jobs converted to casual jobs, casual jobs turned into so called "gigs". I will not soon forget the words of a former New South Wales Minister who gleefully proclaimed of transport services, "They will all be private. In 10 to 15 years' time, government will not be in the provision of transport services. It will be all on-demand, private sector driven, underpinned by innovation in technology"—a government shamelessly privatising its way out of service delivery, and the language of "innovation" and "disruption" to cloak the reintroduction of feudal models of work where workers have no rights, have no security and compete against each other in a brutal race to the bottom. It is unacceptable for corporate Australia to contort its way out of obligations to customers and workers through technicalities, rorts and loopholes. It is unconscionable when a government does it. I will call it out when I see it. I will also work to protect our public assets and reform an industrial relations system which for too long has stifled the effectiveness of our essential services.

I am also a believer in second chances. We have the great distinction of being a nation that has the graciousness to huddle around those deserving of new beginnings. An internship at the Attorney-General's Department many years ago and my participation in a review of the Young Offenders Act left an indelible impression of the profound impact second chances can have in the criminal justice system. A hierarchy of interventions to give a generation of children their best shot at living productive and fulfilling lives is not just an act of compassion but a demonstrably more effective and cheaper means of reducing recidivism. This bold reimagining of criminal justice was not just principled; it was good policy. There can, and should, be more of it. I want to be part of it.

I conclude by paying tribute tonight to the greatest exponent of second chances—my wife, Sally Deans. Sally forgave my obnoxiousness between years 7 and 11 to date me when we became school captains in year 12. There are fewer acts that could have been more gracious than that. Some have called it her greatest act of charity. But we have been together since, spontaneously living out the years of our youth together, developing our careers together and, our greatest achievement, raising four very kind-hearted children together. I say without hesitation that Sally has shouldered a heavier burden in our joint endeavours, while charting her own course as a lawyer at the coalface of the criminal justice system through her work at Legal Aid. I love her and I could not have fulfilled any ambitions without her.

To my children: You have transformed my life for the better. I love you more than you know, and you fill me with even more hope about our country's future. Friends, I am honoured that, at this time in my life, I have the opportunity to serve the people of New South Wales. Today I commit myself to this end, to be the custodian my parents raised me to be, the man my wife has supported me to be and the caretaker my children need me to be. Thank you.

Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.