INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The PRESIDENT: Before I give the call to the Hon. Stephen Lawrence, this evening I welcome into my gallery guests of the member, including his parents, partner and son. I also acknowledge the presence in the Chamber of Robert Tickner, former Federal member for Hughes and Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; Rodney Cavalier, former member of the Legislative Assembly for the electorates of Fuller and Gladesville; Matthew Batsiua, former member of the Nauru Parliament and former foreign affairs Minister for Nauru; and councillors Shibli Chowdhury and Jess Jennings. You are all most welcome.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE (18:02): Mr President, I congratulate you on your uneventful ascension to high office. Tonight this historic Chamber is full of people who have been part of my journey here. I am humbled by their presence. To honour the faith they and others have in me, I need to be my best self in how I further the public interest in this place. This is Aboriginal land, and one of our challenges in this place is to give meaning to that in modern Australia.

I thank and acknowledge the Aboriginal community in the Dubbo region for their support of me in employment, elections, learning, inspiration and friendship. I acknowledge all the Aboriginal people here in the Chamber, including Frank Doolan, a constant source of support and advice since the late great Hal Wootten introduced us all those years ago in Dubbo at a Palestinian human rights event. I support a Voice to Parliament and I support addressing intergenerational social inequity. For example, I support the State Government finally taking the land rights Act seriously and providing the resources and decisions to allow it to operate as intended. I also support my party in preselecting more Aboriginal candidates for high office. I will be happy if I am replaced by such a person, as I was as a councillor. As the grand events of recent days have impressed upon me, symbolism is important—but so too is the substantive.

Something you learn quickly in law, my first career, is the powerful influence of family, community and social background on the course of one's life, sometimes as to create virtual inevitability—as much as we hate to admit it in an age of liberal choice. Like us all, I am very much a product of my family, which on both sides has long roots in this country and in the Labor cause. My mum's parents were Ted and Mary Bone. He, an active and staunch member of the Clovelly branch of the Labor Party, fought in the Middle East and the Pacific in a long World War II. He loved the Labor Party and he loved the Eastern Suburbs Roosters. Mary was born in Dubbo and grew up in a girls' home in Bathurst after the early death of her own mother. My grandfather died in 1980, on the edge of my lived memory. His influence is no less real for that. Mary had the dignity of being regarded by the State as a war widow, with all that entailed. She had a hard life in many ways, but you would never have heard that from her, a stoic and loving woman.

My dad's parents were Trevor and Ella Lawrence. He was also a member of the Labor Party—a member of the Coogee branch—and a devotee and friend of H.V. Evatt. He gave me a love of words and a schooling in Labor history as I grew up regaled with stories of Labor heroes like Doc Evatt and Ted Theodore and the need for socialist policies to temper the evils of the free market. He loved the South Sydney Rabbitohs, and that tradition has continued down the generations. In 1999 I was proud to march with so many of members of my family to protest the putrid expulsion of our team from the rugby league competition. My late Aunty Ninga was dying of lung disease at the time, but even she marched and would not have missed it for the world. She more than anyone would have loved to be here tonight.

My grandmother was a hairdresser. Some of my earliest memories are of her cutting my hair, and occasionally my ears. Family meals in Coogee in the old home on the hill under the Moreton Bay fig are some of my earliest and best memories. The influence of William Lawrence, my great-grandfather, was ever present in family lore. He had left home in England as a boy to be a sailor and was a ship's captain when he arrived in Sydney. He stayed in Sydney and became the general secretary of the Merchant Service Guild of Australasia at its commencement in 1902, serving in that role until his death in 1953—union leaders know how to last. It is now known as the Australian Maritime Officers Union. It is affiliated with Unions NSW and was the first trade union to be registered when the arbitration and conciliation legislation was passed in 1904.

I will always be supportive of the trade union movement because it represents the interests of the great mass of people. We are indeed stronger together. I would not be in Parliament without the support of great unions like the Australian Workers' Union [AWU]; the Health Services Union; the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association; the Rail, Tram and Bus Union; the United Services Union; the Transport Workers' Union; the Plumbing Trades Employees Union; and the Posties, part of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union of Australia. I thank their members and officials. I note the presence in the Chamber tonight of Daniel Walton, the national secretary of the AWU and the vice-president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

I was born in Griffith in 1975 to Sue and Bill. My dad was 29 years old at the time and already the CEO of the Griffith Base Hospital, a testament to his work ethic and talent. He was part of a new generation of professional health administrators. After some years in Griffith and elsewhere we ended up a family of five children, moving back to Sydney in 1984. My father went on to positions at the highest levels of health administration in the public system. We were so proud when he was admitted as a Member of the Order of Australia in 2007. My mum went back to teaching in the Catholic system once we were all at school. She ended her career an assistant principal at St Therese's at Mascot. Mum worked very hard. I can picture her now at the dining room table surrounded by papers as we headed to bed on a school night.

We lived for many years on the grounds of Prince Henry Hospital at Little Bay, one of the great public teaching hospitals and a community of families, staff and patients that would later cease to be. Free of organised activities, to be home by sunset and trusted to take care of each other, we had a truly idyllic childhood. The entire hospital was our backyard, as were the golf courses, national parks, abandoned army tunnels and secluded beaches at that beautiful part of Sydney. So many of the hospital staff treated us like family. We socialised with their kids and always felt safe on the grounds. We fished, we rock climbed, we swam, we explored. We had long summers. We had the unconditional love of our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. We got into all sorts of mischief.

The Hon. Penny Sharpe: Fess up.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I've only got half an hour. My first job was in 1985, selling newspapers, lollies, cigarettes and the occasional *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazine in the hospital wards for the hospital shop. From 5.30 a.m., trolley fully stocked, I would trundle up and down through the middle of those long hospital wards. Yes, a 10-year-old child really did walk through a public hospital selling cigarettes and soft porn to staff and patients. This was the 1980s. I won't comment on whether I smoked any of them.

The morning run started with ward one, which housed spinal and brain injury patients. I remember a young man there named Jamie. He had been viciously attacked in Long Bay jail and spent a long time at Prince Henry. I knew something horribly unjust had happened. An HIV/AIDS ward was opened at Prince Henry in 1986, a time of fear, and I distinctly remember the controversy about whether paper boys and girls should be allowed to enter that ward. My father came to the rescue and arrangements were made to allow us to service that ward. As I grew up in south-eastern Sydney, HIV/AIDS was not the only virus killing gay men. As much as wider society was on a journey to acceptance, gay men were being bashed and killed in toilets and parks and thrown off cliffs—the victims of an evil social virus. I remember the dark stories and rumours about such crimes that circulated among boys as I moved through high school. These events were later to be examined in a groundbreaking inquiry in this place. It is hard to believe how much has changed.

Most of my schooling was undertaken in the State and systemic Catholic systems—eight years all up at Marist schools and my last two years at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, a special opportunity my parents gave me, for which I am so grateful. My favourite teacher at Joeys was John Watkins, later to be the Labor Deputy Premier of New South Wales, an amazing man and teacher. I vividly remember his teaching on the first Gulf War. For the first time, I learned to think beyond what might be presented in the media. My mum insisted we attend Catholic mass every week until we were old enough to make our own decisions. Many of the values I will bring to my work in this place were formed in a Catholic family, and I regard the church as a force for good in the world.

These early influences led me to the largest and, I would say, greatest Australian political party, and its thousands of branch members who work to elect candidates to public office to implement our vision of social democracy. I want to acknowledge those whose service to our party is measured in continuous decades, not years, and all the branch members in the Dubbo region and country New South Wales who have been such a support to me over my various campaigns. Many have travelled to be here tonight. I first handed out how-to-votes for Laurie Brereton in the "true believers" election of 1993. He jumped up on a table on election night and declared that Labor would bring home the bacon. Phil Priest and his wife, Annette, were the first branch members I met in Dubbo. Phil personifies the true believer—what a legend.

My family has also been an incredible support for me in my campaigns. Parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, their partners, nieces, nephews—I thank them all. I want to thank the head office of the NSW Labor party and all its officials since my recent involvement began in 2014. I note that our general secretary, Dom Ofner, is here. I want to acknowledge my Labor colleagues here, especially Courtney Houssos, a source of advice and a role model for me. Service for me here is a second career. My first career was an at times wild, almost 25-year journey in the law. I believed in social justice, but I embarked on a career in the law for vague reasons. I basically just wanted to stick up for people. The journey took me around the world and significantly shaped who I am, what I stand for and what I feel I need to do. I guess I needed a first career to work out exactly why I needed a second one.

Much of my legal work was at the interesting point at which law and politics intersect. I worked as a specialist family violence and sexual assault prosecutor in the Australian Capital Territory as part of a whole-of-government project aimed at best practice in those areas. I saw how hard it is for victims of those crimes to speak. Then, war crimes trials in the Solomon Islands from 2004 as part of an international intervention, only to find myself in April 2006 in the middle of an insurrection and then immersed in the trials that resulted from that. Friends from those crazy days are here tonight.

Then, advising a reforming Attorney-General, the brilliant Simon Corbell, as part of his ministerial staff. A stint helping to set up a public defender system in Palestine; I crossed the checkpoint into Israel most weekends to wander around Jerusalem. My young Palestinian colleagues were so proud that I could visit that special place of theirs. They lived just kilometres away and could never visit—not ever, not once. Then, the Aboriginal Legal Service [ALS] in western New South Wales for many years, appearing in trials, sentences, mental health hearings and coronial inquiries, some involving deaths in custody.

And, perhaps most importantly, appearing in the High Court for Wilcannia man William Bugmy, now the leading case on sentencing socially disadvantaged Aboriginal offenders, cited every day in courts across Australia. It was part of a determined effort—some would say a crusade—by the Aboriginal Legal Service and members of the Bugmy clan, including chief spokesperson, Julie, to make our criminal punishment system confront its role as an ongoing source of the social disadvantage of Aboriginal people. Then, a stint living in a shipping container in war-torn Afghanistan, under occasional, indirect fire, working with brave, generous Afghan lawyers who faced death from the same organisation whose members they defended in a special court. I was safe behind the wire; they lived in their communities and travelled daily to the base, sometimes with food and presents for me. Now, of course, all is lost. Those lawyers have fled as refugees or live under Taliban rule.

Then, at the private bar, acting for the former President of Nauru, Sprent Dabwido, a part of the Nauru 19, which included Mathew Batsiua, who is here tonight. Sprent was suspended from Parliament, let down by the courts and outrageously charged with riot, blatant State persecution that cost him his life. His widow, my friend Luci, is here tonight. She and her kids are now settled in country New South Wales, in a place Sprent loved and found peace. Sprent, Mathew and Squire Jeremiah are fine examples of service as a member of Parliament. They gave up their seats on a point of paramount principle.

I refer to a last-minute, urgent appeal on the computer screen audiovisual link from Dubbo to legalise a mass protest at Town Hall on behalf of the Black Lives Matter movement at the height of the COVID lockdowns. As the decision was announced over the loudspeaker by the family of David Dungay, police quickly moved away and responded to the decision of the court, or so I later heard. I was on my roof in Dubbo having a beer with Felicity Graham, still half dressed in my pyjamas. Please do not tell the Chief Justice that I was dressed as a newsreader. Appearing in the Federal courts for some of the world's most persecuted people: Rohingya, Tamils, Hazaras, trans and gay people from countries where such people are still killed and locked up. Iraqis, Iranians, Ahwazi Arabs. These are the people who seek our refuge. Speaking of Hazara people, my friend and former client Reza is here tonight. He is finally on that precious path to Australian citizenship and family reunion that Anthony Albanese has provided. Labor governments make a difference.

I have worked with a wide range of distinguished barristers and solicitors in such matters. I note the presence here of fine lawyers I have appeared with in the High Court on such cases: Shane Prince, SC, Jamie Clements, Christian Hearn and maybe others I have missed. And I cannot fail to mention being part of *The Wigs* podcast with Jim, Felicity and Emmanuel for three days in June 2020—the top-rating podcast in the country. Excuse the plug. It is not commercial; there are no ads. My journey in the law has led me to conclude that we humans are the same everywhere. When we are in trouble, we all want a good lawyer.

My work at the Aboriginal Legal Service was a turning point in my life. It is a big reason why I am here. Every day provided an opportunity to be the lawyer I went to law school to be. Systemic advocacy is a big part of the work of the ALS movement. Let me give you just one example. I arrived in Dubbo in 2010. At that time, young Aboriginal people were systematically being sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for offences like driving while disqualified where no issue of road safety was posed, sometimes even for a first or second offence.

Lives were being destroyed, in part by idiosyncratic approaches in the summary jurisdiction that systems failed to correct. We commissioned a volunteer to review the file of every person Dubbo ALS had represented on driving offences for the previous five years. Armed with the facts, we launched a controversial national media exposé. Some thought we went a bit far in telling the magistracy it was falling into "errant, idiosyncratic and overly harsh sentencing patterns", that it was "completely out of kilter with community expectations", and that this state of affairs was "harsh, unfair and nothing short of a national disgrace". Harsh comment or not, that is what the ALS exists to do.

Little did we know that the Parliament of New South Wales would ultimately agree with us. The campaign started a national focus in 2012-13 on the way our courts were dealing with vulnerable offenders in western New South Wales and how that impacts the community more broadly. Ultimately a parliamentary inquiry recommended substantially reducing the maximum penalty for drive disqualified, and the Parliament did so. That was a rare event in New South Wales, where maximum penalties normally only go in the other direction. Last year the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reported the dramatic reduction in jail time being served. The driver licensing reforms accompanying that were even more important. It is a fine example of our system working in a bipartisan way in response to real social issues. I note that it was John Barilaro who chaired that committee. That is just one example of the good work the ALS movement does across Australia—work that mainstream legal aid services will never do, even with their vastly greater resources.

We need activist lawyers at the coalface of the justice system in high-volume legal practices where they find the cases, stories, statistics, issues and patterns that can generate real change. The inequitable funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services in Australia must end. The time has come for State and Federal Labor governments to conclude a historic long-term agreement under which both play a role to bring ALS to parity, client for client, with State legal aid. I am talking about parity in staffing, offices, wages and infrastructure. The State funds the justice system; it must fund the organisation who represents most of the members of the most-imprisoned group. Community and governments must work together to close the incarceration gap.

Not all my legal work was political, interesting, high profile or far from home. The bulk of my work has been prosecution and criminal defence work in Australia that no-one will ever know of, except those personally involved in the cases. What a privilege and a burden to be the person to whom someone comes at a low point when they need a lawyer. I have acted for innocent people, guilty people, and people challenging the harshest acts of the State, including the stripping of their citizenship and their exile from Australia. Every such person deserves a lawyer and every person, including victims of crime, deserve the according of human dignity, especially when it has been taken away from them. At every step of my legal journey, I have been accompanied by special people who practise law because it reflects their values and perhaps a bit of oppositional defiance disorder. A few in the House might be feeling a bit triggered. In it they find a cause worth burning the midnight oil for, or the 4.00 a.m. oil. Many are in the House tonight.

The bridge for me between the law and this place was a term in local government; my time there was short but eventful. I am proud of the achievements of the council on which I served and came to lead in 2021. It did include a mire of controversy, one that Dubbo needed and is much better for having endured. My mate John Ryan and I instigated it for the right reasons. I thank my local member Dugald Saunders for his stance in 2021 and his support and cooperation when I was mayor. As a council, we often took an unorthodox path, especially for a regional council. We spent money on a highly successful campaign for a drug rehab centre, a drug court and a youth Koori court. The need for a rehab centre was identified by former Dubbo magistrate Andrew Eckhold, a compassionate and fair beak unafraid to speak out from the bench.

We enacted an Aboriginal employment strategy and we started the process for a reconciliation action plan. We resolved and received funding to construct a large number of important social and tourism infrastructure projects, so crucial for local social and economic development. They include a very significant Aboriginal cultural centre that will house scores of precious scar trees to be brought home from the basement of a museum off country; the old Dubbo jail plaza, which will include the biggest public art piece in inland Australia; additional money on disability access projects across the region; and a new Wellington Caves centre and pool.

We passed the Aboriginal Electoral Enrolment and Engagement Strategy. We focused our staff on closing the gap in enrolment and voting and on achieving a diverse range of candidates for the elected body. The council that followed actually looks like its community, more so than ever before. It includes a Bangladeshi Australian Councillor Shibli Chowdhury, a National Party member whom I as a Labor mayor was happy to endorse in a truly crazy election campaign—I note his ward was a two-councillor ward—and a record two Aboriginal people, local traditional owners councillors Pam Wells and Lewis Burns. Shibli is in the gallery tonight and is my friend.

I arrive in Parliament with a variety of perspectives to contribute. Years of talking to my father about his work and growing up as part of the community within a public hospital instilled in me early a passion for our public health system. We need to be keenly aware of the way that often illegitimate private interests operate to reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of our public hospitals and our wider public health systems. The same can almost be said for education. We do not have the balance right in funding. Too much is going to well-off private schools and too little to our State schools. The state of the health and education systems is of particular importance in the regions. Shortages are more acute and there are less services overall. The concerns of western New South Wales are my concerns, and I will be an advocate to the best of my ability. Health and education, as well as infrastructure, transport, law and order, and economic development, are pressing issues. So too are the protection of the natural environment, water security and climate change.

Fraught social issues invariably come before parliaments. In recent times society has often been divided over questions of identity, gender, religious freedom and sexuality. It is an era of heavy, overt corporate political involvement in many of those issues of our times, but not, I note, in many of the real economic ones impacting the mass of people. I do not intend to be constrained by the dominant ideas. We can never forget the evils of the past, but we must always try and see truth, facts and reality as they are. The grievances, historical or otherwise, invoked by some do not justify all responses. In public policy we need to always be mindful of unintended consequences, especially those impacting vulnerable groups like religious minorities and women. A seat in what the Hon. Greg Donnelly calls the "chamber of second thoughts" is a vantage point. Those types of issues will occupy my time in proportion to their importance, not their importance on social media. The labour movement must never lose its focus on the substantive economic realities that impact on the day-to-day lives of the majority of citizens.

I am a strong believer in human rights as a framework that allows citizens to apply to an independent court to adjudicate alleged breaches of rights guaranteed by international agreement. In that vein, in my view it is time to consider carefully what criminal offences and civil wrongs that make merely offensive words and actions unlawful have a continued place in the statute book. We are a free and democratic society, and such laws invariably operate in a highly arbitrary way. I have seen that occur. We need to comprehensively review the regulation of illicit drugs, focus the criminal law on real antisocial conduct, and help people live safe and fulfilling lives. That path might be long and stepped.

All reforms of the criminal law must have community safety and confidence at their heart. But we need to carefully examine and reconceptualise what we mean by protection of the community. Many of our old assumptions are false and make the community less safe. Our criminal justice system does, however, have many strengths. A fair trial, both civil and criminal, and the independent legal profession are precious. They all exist in New South Wales, and they are markers of civilisation. The fair trial must be safeguarded, especially from those who come with "saintly intentions and high-minded arguments", to quote my friend Steven Boland. I will proudly take a conservative approach to proposals that encroach on the right to a fair trial.

The Local Court needs more resources and its professionalisation must continue. An independent prosecutor is a human right, and work is needed to improve the prosecution services in the summary jurisdiction, where the majority of matters are prosecuted, including the majority of family violence matters. Lawyers acting under independent supervision, fully complying with their obligations as ministers of justice, would ideally appear at all criminal cases. I will be a strong advocate for true justice reinvestment. The theory is that if you invest in social services, you can ultimately reduce spending on prisons and create a virtuous cycle of reinvestment that produces a safer, happier and healthier society. A breaking the cycle fund, as proposed by the Justice Reform Initiative, would be a good way to find the right policies. Our criminal law needs to avoid operating as an instrument of oppression and marginalisation with respect to certain communities. We are not meaningfully addressing the over-incarceration of Aboriginal people.

Our institutions are strong because they outlast and transcend any individual and any one lifespan. The ship of State that is government is slow-moving. Long-term policy and planning are key. I respect this all the more having seen firsthand how societies can unravel and how hard life is for so many in our global community even at the best of times. I respect the central role of the permanent public service that will implement Labor's ambitious election agenda in this term of Parliament. I thank the Premier, Chris Minns. To steal some words from Michael Pilbrow, "Like Bob Hawke, Chris is both ordinary and extraordinary." He is setting a sterling example of skilful and positive leadership.

To all the people assembled here, especially all my family and friends, I thank you. As Jeff Fenech used to say, "I love youse all." Lastly, I thank my partner, a very private guy, and our beautiful, cheeky, happy, healthy son—a son who was a gift, a gift more precious than anything, and a little boy who has transformed our lives for the better. I am keenly aware that when this this eight-year term ends, he will be a young man of almost 18. He will definitely be a heartbreaker by then. I dedicate this speech to him. Thank you.

Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.