



INAUGURAL SPEECH

The PRESIDENT: I welcome into the President's gallery this evening the family and friends of the Hon. Susan Carter, including my predecessor, a venerable former President in this House, the Hon. Don Harwin; the Hon. Justice Robertson Wright of the NSW Supreme Court and Mrs Wright; and the Hon. Justice John Halley of the Federal Court of Australia and Mrs Halley.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER (18:00): I am conscious of what an honour it is to be here in this Chamber in Australia's oldest Parliament. I admit to being a little overwhelmed by the privilege that is being afforded to me. In preparing to speak tonight, I have been reflecting on the nature of this institution, the Legislative Council, which will celebrate its 200th anniversary next year, and the changes that have occurred over that period. This House began as an advisory body to the Governor, drawn entirely from the colonial elite. While their presence cloaked executive government in the semblance of broader consultation, I doubt that the Governor was often troubled or challenged by their advice. Through legislation, the Legislative Council was transformed seamlessly into a house of review in a bicameral system. Although in the 1850s, its membership was still firmly the preserve of the squattocracy. The Chamber was to undergo further change and challenges in the form of attempts at abolition, until it became what it is today: an elected representative Chamber and an important part of our Westminster system.

We are perhaps so used to hearing the story of the peaceful transformation of all of our institutions, planted by the British but growing over time into their uniquely Australian forms, that we do not appreciate the strength of these institutions and the importance of the values that underlie them. We have the privilege of living in a strong parliamentary democracy where power is truly in the hands of the people, and that power is transferred peacefully at election times. I am deeply honoured to be standing here today because I was trusted by the people of New South Wales at the last election to represent them, and I will always respect that trust which has been placed in me. Our robust democracy is only possible in a society based on respect for the individual and the acknowledgement that each member of society—whatever their views, whatever their background, whatever their skills—is equal and has equal dignity and worth, and that their voices should all be heard. Democracy requires us to protect the fundamental freedoms of thought, worship, speech and association. It also requires that we do not fetishise those freedoms and make them ends unto themselves. When we live in society with each other, no freedom is absolute. The right to exercise freedoms entails the responsibility to exercise them well, recognising the rights and needs of others. But the need to protect those freedoms is absolute. For democracy to thrive, we need the freedom to think and to express those thoughts.

This Parliament is important because it is the home of robust debate, where thoughts and ideas are exchanged freely. This debate adds to our democracy and helps refine and improve our policies. We need that same freedom in all of our public spaces. Being exposed to the ideas of others will never harm us, but being deprived of the opportunity to have our own ideas tested or challenged will. Our institutions have changed and developed because there was robust social and political discussion, which continues to this day and will help drive further change. We have all changed our views about some matters, I hope, because we have continued to discuss and refine and reflect on a variety of issues. Free and mutually respectful debate is essential to the development of individuals and societies. If we shut down those freedoms of thought and expression, we will ultimately harm ourselves. We should never fear hearing things with which we disagree or be frightened to speak clearly for fear of offending others. We need to cultivate a robust and respectful exchange of ideas because that creates a stronger society and encourages peaceful and beneficial change.

All the changes to the Legislative Council—from an elite group of appointed men discussing matters of the day with the Governor to a truly representative democratic House, where a woman not from the squattocracy can be elected to serve—were achieved by talking. There was no resolution or armed conflict. There was, rather, extensive and ongoing discussion, several reviews, much legislation and a referendum. In strong democracies we move forward by sharing and exchanging our ideas. We need more free debate, not less. Totalitarian societies regulate freedom of thought and expression; strong democracies do not.

I was attracted to the Liberal Party at university because of its defence of our democracy, our constitutional monarchy and our basic freedoms. I share the core values of the Liberal Party and believe we will be stronger as a society if those values find expression in government policy. In common with the Liberal Party, I believe in a society where individuals can flourish, and risk and hard work are rewarded. I believe strong families are the greatest resource we have as a society and that family life should be encouraged. I also believe government should provide the broad infrastructure in which we are all able to make individual choices and thrive, rather than seek to micromanage our lives. I also believe the choices we make need to be tempered by respect for others and recognise that we all live in society together, governed by the rule of law. I have been proud to see how successive Liberal governments have sought to enshrine and advance those values.

I look forward to working for all the people of New South Wales, a privilege which we have in this House, but I am particularly excited to work with the people in the southern country, having been entrusted with this responsibility by the Liberal Party. The criticism is often raised that New South Wales is not just N-S-W: Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. Indeed, anyone who has travelled in the south of the State and seen the productive capacity of the Riverina in both food and fibre; experienced the beauty of the Snowy Mountains; travelled along the southern coastline and enjoyed the great tourism opportunities—and the wonderful oysters—and experienced the entrepreneurial spirit that is alive in the farms, the forests, the small businesses, the manufacturing enterprises, and the small towns and cities in the south, would know what great contributions those individuals and families make to our State. They would also be aware that they face great challenges, especially access to water, health care and education, and challenges around roads, transport and Brown Mountain. I commit to being mindful to the needs of all of our citizens and to represent the interests of all of New South Wales, including those in Narrandera, the South Coast and Wagga Wagga.

I am honoured today by the presence of so many of my family members, including the newest star in our family circle. My family was like so many others: nothing extraordinary. I was raised in suburban Sydney in a classic red brick house that even had a white front fence, until it got in the way of neighbourhood cricket games and, as it was a hazard to fielders, needed to be sacrificed. My siblings and I knew we were loved because we saw each day how committed in love our parents were to each other, to each of us and to God. We never talked about this, of course, but we witnessed it daily in acts of sacrifice, self-denial and giving to others. It was an ordinary family life because, in many ways, it was typical of the way in which so many of us were raised. I wish this type of upbringing, with the solid foundation for life which it provides, were the birthright of every child. But I recognise that it is not. As a society in which we care about each other, we need to hold out our hands and catch those in need.

I am concerned that our families are another of our great social institutions that, like our democracy, seem only to draw our attention when they are troubled. Are we so familiar with family life that we have stopped recognising the important work that happens in families? That day in, day out love offered by parents to each other and to their children, expressed in practical gifts of self, may seem simple and mundane but has extraordinary results. Families quite literally create the next generation. They nurture and increase our social capital. They heal us, encourage us and challenge us to become productive, outward looking citizens. Families give us the security to take risks and become entrepreneurs and are our first and most important educators. Through the example of service that we receive as children, we learn how to be of service to others in the community.

We have just celebrated Mother's Day, and a wonderful occasion it was. But if we are serious about valuing families and the work done by parents, we need to move away from tokenism and place functioning families at the centre of all of our policymaking. Housing policy must be family friendly and provide for the elbow room and play space needed by growing families. We have a housing shortage, not just in Sydney but also throughout the regions. A panicky response focusing on bed count and not families is no solution. Simply building the promised high-rise boxes does not provide the space or the community that families need to thrive. If there is no room to kick a soccer ball around, then FIFA 23 on the Xbox becomes the realistic alternative for our kids. The dark bedroom and the Play Station are the only options if we phase out the backyard. Is that really the society we want to build?

We need to learn from the mistakes of the past and not build now what will become the troubled housing estates of the future. Adequate housing policy requires a mix of some high rises but lots of open space, especially backyard space, where children can explore and imagine and risk, and families can recharge. We must build communities, not just tower blocks. Schools and other services such as transport must also be readily available. In education we face many challenges, but the place at which all education policy should start is with respect for the role of the family as the primary educator of children. Schools and parents need to work together for better outcomes for our children.

Infrastructure is spoken about a lot in this place. We need good infrastructure, not for its own sake but so that families can spend less time commuting and more time together. Active, creative kids are positive goals that deserve our recognition and our support in tangible ways. We need to honour and recognise those who make spending time engaged in family life a priority. Like so many women, I have worked all my life—and sometimes been paid for it. I have held challenging legal roles and exciting posts in tertiary education but, in common with so many other women, the most valuable and the most least respected work I have ever done is in my family. It would often amaze me that if I answered "mother" to the occupation question, I would be dismissed. But if I styled myself as "domestic capital manager", which is a fancier way of saying exactly the same thing, I was immediately of interest.

It is well and truly time to challenge the false stereotype that the only way we contribute anything of value and acquire worthwhile skills is when we exchange work for money. That particularly impacts on women, who traditionally have spent more time in family and service roles. But it should be an issue for all of us. If feminism was meant to be about empowering women to have agency over their lives and to make choices, then why do we still seem to be valuing some choices more highly than others? All those who serve others in whatever capacity contribute to our society and should be respected for their service, not dismissed if their real work is not counted in the gross domestic product.

Tonight, I have the privilege and the opportunity to honour my own parents. I recognise that I would not be in the Chamber tonight without their love, support and consistent example of service. On my last day of year 10, my father and I walked up to the station together as we often did. He to work and me to school. On the platform he turned to me and said that he had forgotten something and needed to go home. He did not want me to worry because our routine was being broken. I learned later that day that he went home because he was experiencing a major heart attack. In the days before mobile phones, he was seeking medical attention. Unfortunately, he dropped dead on the bed. My father, literally as he was dying, put others before himself. His last words to me were pure love and pure service. That is an extreme example perhaps, but typical of the way he lived his whole life and how we all experienced family life. It is typical of many fathers and mothers and the day in, day out loving sacrifice that is one of the great strengths of family life.

My mother, who was left a young widow with four children, with the foundation stone of her life gone, carried on in love. She often described our family as a joint enterprise that she had embarked upon with my father, which now fell to her to finish. She provided for us financially, spiritually, emotionally and in every way she could. They surrounded us with love, offered us tremendous examples of service and challenged us to use any gifts we had for others. If I have achieved any success in life, it is because of them. I am deeply grateful to them.

Education was an enormous value in our family. The key expectation was that we would apply ourselves and keep learning and growing. My mother was a librarian, with the happy consequence that we were always surrounded by books. My entire school education was entrusted to the nuns, and I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Catholic education system, especially to the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. We are used today to thinking in terms of jobs, but I had the good fortune to be educated by women who had answered a vocation. They were not working for themselves but had answered a call to love and to serve and encouraged all of us to do the same. It was never a question of doing well, it was always if you had done your best, which is different for every person according to their various gifts and talents. The answer was never what have you achieved, but had you offered to God the best that you could.

To be educated in that environment of challenge with the lived example of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan—which encouraged us to strive to be our best selves, not for ourselves but for others—was an exciting way to navigate the often choppy waters of high school, and gave me gifts that I still enjoy today. I particularly acknowledge Sister Teresita Sexton and Sister Marilyn Kelleher for their example, for their encouragement and for driving all of us to give more than we ever realised we could. I am not alone in benefitting from that excellent education. I was delighted to discover that the first female Liberal member of this House, Mrs Mabel Furley, was also educated by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan at St Scholastica's College. Education requires learning facts and mastering information, but it is much more. It is the process of learning how to think about those facts and use them, and the process of learning about yourself and rising to the challenge that education provides.

A lawyer by profession, I have had the privilege of working in tertiary education for many years. I have experienced the power of education in my own life and in the lives of others. Most recently, I have served as the Director of the Law Extension Committee of the University of Sydney. This program provides the teaching for the Legal Profession Admission Board's Diploma in Law—of which, I am proud to say, many outstanding alumni are graduates, including the new Attorney General. This is a program that exemplifies the opportunities of education: broad admission, high expectations, rigorous standards and exciting results. Open to students from all walks of life, it produces outstanding legal practitioners. I recognise all my former colleagues for the great work they do and commend the University of Sydney for its ongoing involvement in this program, which provides access and opportunity for so many to enter the law.

I have spoken about family tonight, but the other great F in my life has been friendship. I am honoured tonight to have people in the gallery who have known me since I was 12—which is a particularly long time to have to put up with me! I am also honoured by the presence of so many of my friends from the Liberal Party to whom I am very grateful for their ongoing encouragement and support. Also present tonight are members of the Brownie Pack, who sustained me through university; my fellow devotees of the Tea Ceremony; the Coffee Therapy Group; the Saturday Coffee Group; and the Luncheon Club. And, yes, I acknowledge there is a theme, but there is also a deep and abiding blessing in friendship—friendships that sustain, nurture and, when needed, challenge us to lift or rethink, and on occasions provide very helpful styling advice.

In closing, I wish to mention my own children. As a parent of young children, it is a delight to see them acquiring skills and meeting milestones. But as the mother of two of the brightest and kindest and best young adults in our society—objectively determined; no bias involved—it is the deepest of pleasures to see them navigating life, overcoming challenges with resilience and grace, making wise decisions, good friendships, and offering service to others. We all have difficulties in our lives—some more than others—and while as a mother it is heartbreaking to see your children face these issues, it is joyous to see them triumph. I regard my children as the greatest of my life's very many blessings, and I am immensely proud of the adults that they have become. Mr President, I thank the members of this House for their courtesy tonight.

Members and officers stood in their places and applauded.

The PRESIDENT: I shall now leave the chair. The House will resume at 8.00 p.m.