



INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The PRESIDENT: This evening I welcome into my gallery the family and friends of the Hon. Rachel Merton, including Wayne Merton, former member for the electorates of Carlingford and Baulkham Hills; Nathaniel Smith, former member for Wollondilly; Kerry Chikarovski, the former member for Lane Cove, former Leader of the Liberal Party and former Leader of the Opposition; and Chris Stone, the New South Wales Liberal Party State Director.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON (17:59): Firstly, Mr President, I congratulate you on your election as President of the Legislative Council. I have known you for many years prior to this place and I know you will be as fair as you will be hardworking. I wish you the very best. It has been an exciting and humbling experience for me to join this Chamber as the very last person elected to the Fifty-Eighth Parliament. As members know, the NSW Electoral Commission did not push the button to distribute preferences for the Legislative Council until some 3½ weeks after election day. It was very unclear for that entire time whether I would be in or out, but as you can only refresh Antony Green's peerless election website so many times a day, I would like to say it was a thrill when the declaration was finally made that I was elected. But having forgot my glasses, I could not see the Electoral Commission's screen and could only ask my friend sitting next to me, the Hon. Jacqui Munro, who told me the good news. "Really? Are you sure, Jacqui?" I asked. She was right, and here I am. My own excitement aside, I am conscious of the enormous privilege it is to serve here and to follow a long line of distinguished members. Despite our political differences and our political views, I join with my fellow freshmen forever bound as the class of 2023.

Whether it is finding a good school, saving for a home or seeking care for a loved one, to name three issues I will touch on in a moment, the people who have sent us here have great hopes and face many challenges. They expect from us hard work and results. Churchill famously quipped that "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others". Most Australians agree, according to a recent Lowy Institute poll. But there are voices, particularly amongst our youngest voters—some 30 per cent of them—who question whether our form of government, democracy, really is better than all the rest. Let that sink in—30 per cent. That same cohort, sadly so cynical about our constitutional inheritance, is also more likely to vote in favour of the so-called Voice, which I firmly believe is contrary to our system of responsible government and parliamentary sovereignty that has served us so well. I will campaign and advocate for a no vote to the Voice in the months ahead. My opposition to the Voice is grounded in the liberalism that gave rise to our democratic institutions that are now under threat.

Such pessimism we are witnessing, particularly from our young, about our democratic institutions is not unique to Australia. That does not mean that we cannot do better in this place to help restore and strengthen faith in our public institutions. Yes, there is work yet to make the fair go all it should be. But the way is not to entrench racial division or muck about with Parliament. It is to face all our flaws honestly and together—if not always as a harmonious chorus of voices—to work practically towards equal opportunity for all. This evening I pledge to work with my fellow freshmen and the other members of this place to do my best to make our great Parliament work just a little better, especially when we disagree—as we shall.

Of the many strands that have made our democracy better than all the rest, it is hard to calculate the contribution of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. I believe it would be fitting, and I hope all members will agree, that this Government should invite proposals for a truly significant memorial to honour our late Queen's untiring dedication to our country and State. I also wish to reiterate my steadfast allegiance to our new sovereign, His Majesty King Charles III, long may he live. His Majesty's remarkable record of service, together with his great regard and love for Australia and New South Wales over many decades, is well known. It is splendid that our King will visit Sydney next year to celebrate the bicentenary of this place, Australia's oldest and most venerable parliamentary Chamber.

I stand before you this evening as a lifelong Liberal, a proud conservative, a proponent of liberty, a staunch defender of our constitutional monarchy and a Christian. I hope that in the years ahead I am able to draw on my beliefs, values and experiences to make a meaningful contribution to the Council for the good of New South Wales. Family has been and remains an enormous part of my life. Its values of courage, community service and faith shaped my upbringing. My maternal grandparents were loyal officers of the Salvation Army and served as missionaries in New Guinea. My mother, Olwyn, attended a dozen different schools as her parents established new churches to spread the word of God. My mum is the personification of kindness, service and sacrifice. She continues today, as she has for decades, giving her time selflessly to others through the Salvation Army and the Golden Years, which provides fellowship for older Australians who are alone.

My paternal grandparents, Ted and Nancy Merton, were children of the Great Depression. Nancy was raised on a Toongabbie dairy farm where a housing estate sits today. She and Ted worked full-time until they were nearly 80. People of great faith and self-sacrifice, they helped my father, Wayne, a proud product of Granville South Public School and Fairfield High School, establish a legal practice in Parramatta as a young man. Wayne is known to many of you for his 23 years of service in the New South Wales Parliament in the other place. It was his involvement in the Liberal Party that many years ago first opened my eyes to the ideals of liberalism and the cause of public service. It was quite a journey.

Like many thousands of Australians, Wayne joined the Liberal Party in the turbulence of the Whitlam era. Typically, he threw himself into the party. Our household was a hive of suburban Sydney liberalism. Branch meetings in the Merton lounge room involving casks of Lindeman's moselle, wooden bowls of cheese and concerned discussions about the harmful government of Neville Wran is an early memory. The wine, as I understand, might have been ordinary but the debates were better. When my twin brother and I were 12, my father came home one Saturday to say he had been preselected for the electorate of Carlingford at the upcoming election. This was surprising news to all of us, including my mother, as we thought he had stepped out for his weekend newspapers. We then discovered he had defeated test cricketer and New South Wales captain Dirk Wellham by a single vote. Close-run things are a family tradition.

Macquarie Street has changed a lot since my father arrived with Nick Greiner's 1988 landslide, when there were 59 Liberal and National Party members elected in the other place but just two were women. Today the Coalition not only has gender parity in the Legislative Council but a majority of female members. In other ways, the Parliament has not changed so much. For example, my illustrious and very kind next-door neighbour, the Hon. Peter Primrose, was part of that same Legislative Assembly class of 1988 as my father when he was the then freshman member for Camden. It is an honour to serve in this Parliament alongside him.

Mr President, I am sure you recall that 1991 was the year of MC Hammer, Danni Minogue and Vanilla Ice for most teens. For me, it was a Young Liberal Movement branch secretary, with a fax machine for weekly meeting notices. Somehow, there was no spill motion against me. By university, I was an avowed anti-Marxist. I joined the Macquarie University Liberal Club, serving for a time as its president and as a National Union of Students [NUS] delegate. The driving issue for me then, as for so many Liberals over many years and still today, was freedom of association. I was outraged that as a condition of enrolment I was forced to hand over my wages—hard-earned at Castle Hill Target and Dural Macca's drive through—to fund the political projects of left-leaning student unions. I became a firm and vocal advocate for voluntary student unionism.

Many members in the Chamber took part in the battle of ideas as students. I feel a little *deja vu* looking around the 2023 Parliament. I believe there are four former NUS office bearers on the Government frontbench in this Chamber. I vaguely remember the Deputy Leader of the Government in this place at a conference being elected NUS president. We Liberal delegates may have voted for him! I certainly remember my friend the Hon. Tania Mihailuk at Macquarie, who was part of Student Unity. The Labor right at Macquarie tended to caucus with the Liberals much more than with the Labor left. Who knows? Maybe we will see more of that again now. I encourage any student and any young Australian, whatever your politics, to get involved in political debate and to stand up for your convictions. The Liberal Party needs more of that today.

I was privileged to have had the opportunity to cut my teeth in national politics as a young staffer in the Government of John Howard, working for some 6½ years in the Western Sydney heartland seat of Parramatta. Helping Ross Cameron's constituents, often to cut through treacle-thick government bureaucracy, was a rewarding experience. Ross, together with my very good and long-time friend the Hon. John Ruddick, has pitched his tent elsewhere these days. I wish both of them all the best. Western Sydney swung heavily towards Mr Howard and the Liberal Party's optimistic and sensible policy platform of economic liberalism, reward for effort, mainstream conservatism and keeping our borders strong. I remain a proud John Howard Liberal today.

During those Howard years, whilst young and dead keen, I did make an attempt to join this Parliament at the 1999 election. Some of the people who were part of that adventure are in the Chamber this evening, including our then leader, the outstanding Kerry Chikarovski. The electorate was the then new and semi-marginal seat of Wentworthville, which happened to be next door to my father's Baulkham Hills electorate. The father-daughter axis attracted a bit of media attention, including from a young Ben Fordham at Channel 9, who came to our home to record our campaigning clan. Despite my supreme confidence, the result was not what I had expected. I won just one booth and tied another out of 40. Pam Allan won on primaries, Labor won the election in a landslide and we incurred our greatest campaign expense when our campaign van sideswiped a Mercedes.

In early 2005 I joined KPMG and in April that year I married Justin. As those who know me are aware, I have an equestrian background. Three weeks later to the day of my marriage, I was towing one of my horses over Bells Line of Road near Lithgow. I do not need to tell any member in this place who has travelled to the Central West of the dangers of that road still today. I hit a pool of oil and collided in a head-on with a truck. On waking from an induced coma over a week later in the Nepean Hospital intensive care unit, I discovered that my bones were broken, my horse was dead and I faced a painful months-long rehabilitation before I could go home, let alone return to full-time work.

Family and my faith in Jesus Christ as my saviour sustained me during that testing time. I remain grateful for the dedication of healthcare professionals, as well as for the kind support provided to my family by both sides of politics, particularly by then Premier Bob Carr and the Hon. Tony Abbott. I also learnt about the power of resolve, to be determined, to not let the accident destroy my hopes to build a professional career, have a family and make a difference in public life. There is not much point in getting into politics without the resolve to fight for your convictions.

Before having another big crack at public life, I spent 14 years working in professional services at KPMG and went through the usual challenges working women face of balancing a full-time career, returning to work far too early, raising children and paying a mortgage. In addition to a stint on the Australian Classification Board, I was particularly pleased to be able to join the Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones in the ministry as her deputy chief of staff and focus on homelessness and social housing. It was inspiring to witness the extraordinary work of frontline departmental staff, volunteers and community providers. I am honoured to now be in this place, where as a parliamentarian I can advocate for commonsense policies on behalf of the people of New South Wales.

As I noted earlier, I want to touch briefly on schooling, housing and health care, which are issues I intend to focus on in my time in Parliament. As the mother of two primary school-aged girls, I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to serve as Deputy Chair of the Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education. Every child is unique, with differing educational needs. Australia is blessed to have a globally distinctive commitment to school choice that responds to that diversity. New South Wales families and students benefit from the many options provided by government, Catholic and independent schools, a system we know is a driver of quality and a preserver of equity.

Non-government schools are mostly faith based, hailing from a pre-Federation tradition of Australians of faith making early sacrifices to build an educational future for their children and community, often before government schooling was available. That continuing contribution of parents and differing faiths not only provides appropriate alternatives but also saves the New South Wales taxpayer the full obligation of providing suitable school places for every student. There are many good reasons why, in a pluralistic democracy such as ours, government support for faith based and other independent schools makes sense, a policy setting that has been honoured by Labor and Coalition governments alike.

Regrettably, there are early signs that this Government might abandon that consensus in favour of emboldened ideological teacher unions which loudly claimed a triumphal stake at this election. Already the new Labor Government is refusing to continue the modest needs-based capital works funding for non-government schools and has committed to zero new dollars. Schools such as Wollondilly Anglican College, Regents Park Christian School, Penrith Christian School and the low-fee Catholic parish schools throughout Western Sydney have been put at the back of the queue for much-needed help, as the education Minister's ear is turned away from the voices of south-western Sydney and towards the ideological demands of Teachers Federation headquarters in Surry Hills. The Minister needs to realise that she has been appointed Minister for Education and Early Learning for all of our State's schools, not just those whose teachers are represented by the Teachers Federation. And what about what is taught in our schools? G.K. Chesterton wrote:

Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.

What are we passing on to our next generation? Unfortunately, our schools have become a front line in the so-called culture wars. Our classrooms are meant to be centres of learning and knowledge, where students are taught how to think, not what to think. Instruction and teaching should not take the form of activism. I will have much more to say about that in the time ahead.

Housing access, ownership and affordability is a big concern for south-western Sydney, where I have representative duties for the Liberal Party. The ability to own one's home was an Australian hallmark. Our home ownership rates are well above those of the rest of the world. Beyond a roof over one's head, home ownership provides broader benefits, including family and social stability in addition to long-term financial security. Sir Robert Menzies said:

The home is the foundation of sanity and sobriety; it is the indispensable condition of continuity; its health determines the health of society as a whole.

...

The material home represents the concrete expression of the habits of frugality and saving "for a home of our own." Your advanced socialist may rave against private property even while he acquires it; but one of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours ...

How true. But home ownership levels have been trending down over the past two decades. Some of the suggested fixes pose dangers for those aspiring to get into their own home and for those who already have a freehold stake. In Sydney this Government has told councils and residents to get out of the way of developers who want to bulldoze the backyard and the box hedge and replace them with row upon row of high rise. In Canberra, the Albanese Government's answer to the growing housing crisis is to cut build-to-rent tax and create forever renters rather than aspirational home owners. Meanwhile, Federal Labor has flagged cuts to infrastructure investment and an increase in net overseas migration of over 700,000 people in the next two years—nearly 15 per cent of the population of Sydney.

Sydney's population is 5½ million. By 2050 it is forecast to be eight million—double what it was at the time of the Sydney Olympics when Bob Carr declared the city full. That is no way to solve our housing crisis. First, we must continue to invest in infrastructure, including in regional areas, to support future housing and the amenity of existing residents. In the Coalition we know about this, having over the past 12 years accomplished the greatest and most far-reaching infrastructure investment in this State's history. Second, we cannot meet the State's housing needs by destroying the prosperity and autonomy of the individual by creating generations of Australians who will never own their own home. Already the mobility gap between home owners and renters is amongst the highest of OECD countries. We need to focus on build-to-own, not on build-to-rent. Low- and medium-density developments that are sympathetic to our way of life need to be supported. Yes, apartments also have a place in this landscape. More land needs to be released by government and land-banking developers, not drip-fed by large developers to push up prices. And last, red tape must be cut.

Even modest developments must run a gauntlet of State and local planning regulations, some of which are little more than expensive box-ticking exercises. I will mention just one example of a two-bedroom addition to a Sydney-area home that required no excavation or extension of the house footprint. Besides what one might reasonably expect a council to require, such as architectural and engineering plans, the home owner was obliged to lodge countless redundant plans and reports. These included landscape plans for the same garden; an acid sulphate report for undisturbed soil; an arborist's report, even though no trees were to be cut; and a stormwater plan for the same roof and gutters. Surely it is not beyond our wit to find commonsense ways to lift some of the regulatory burden that adds unnecessary cost and delay to modest housing stock improvements for growing families who may wish to stay in their home and neighbourhood near schools where their children attend.

Home ownership builds wealth, autonomy and stronger communities. That is the society we created when, under Menzies, Liberals built modern Australia. It is one of the main reasons people from every corner of the globe seek to join us. It is a society I will fight to preserve and uphold. I will fight for policies that build houses and homes for families in which to grow, not just rental flats for foreign investment funds. I will fight for policies to encourage stronger communities, not new Labor political constituencies.

The final matter I want to touch upon this evening is the vital role of faith-based hospitals. Before I do, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary work of our frontline healthcare workers and public officials who kept our hospitals running throughout the COVID pandemic. As is the case with non-government schools, faith-based hospitals play an indispensable role serving our community. They include St Vincent's Hospital Sydney, which was founded in 1857 by the Sisters of Charity to care for all regardless of belief and operates as both a public and private hospital; the Mater Misericordiae Hospital—the Mater—begun by the Sisters of Mercy; and the Sydney Adventist Hospital—the San. Those faith-based hospitals have been serving our community since the Federation era.

Like many, I was appalled by the Australian Capital Territory Labor Government's compulsory acquisition—the nationalisation—of Calvary hospital. It is no accident that Calvary, a faith-based hospital, was targeted. A Labor-dominated ACT Legislative Assembly report earlier this year outrageously claimed Calvary's religious ethos breached human rights. I commend the bishops of the Catholic Church, especially Sydney's Archbishop Fisher, who have spoken out about one of the most serious attacks on the role of faith in Australian public life to date.

What are the chances of that sort of socialist ideology travelling up the Federal Highway? The ACT has long been Labor's ideological laboratory from where it launches its corrosive ideals across wider Australia. Members would have seen ACT Labor has even announced a ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars. Faith-based healthcare services are simply the latest victims of this ideology. I hope the Premier will reassure New South Wales that our faith-based hospitals, including Calvary Health Care Kogarah in his electorate, are safe from a similar Labor asset grab.

There is much more to say about commonsense policy, but as we know there is a State of Origin series to be saved tonight. Every member is here thanks to our families, supporters and volunteers. I also wish to thank the Liberal Party, without which I would not be here. This election, I campaigned in Western Sydney with some amazing candidates and party members. In particular, I want to congratulate Courtney Nguyen in Cabramatta and Calvin Biag in Prospect on your impressive performances—amongst the best in the Liberal Party in a tough election. I know we will see you both again, as I am sure we will see Wendy Lindsay back in East Hills. Her determination was inspiring. It was a privilege to be part of Wendy's campaign along with her conference president Richard Noonan and her hardworking volunteers. I will miss my dear friend Nathaniel Smith after his Wollondilly loss. I am pleased, however, to see him in his new role as CEO of the Master Plumbers Association, so we will see him around this place and hopefully back in the other place.

I would also like to place on record my thanks for the advice and support of two of my wonderful friends in the other place: the Father of the House, and member for Lane Cove; and the member for Willoughby. Robbo and Tim, you have been great compadres in the trenches for decades and I am thrilled to be here to work alongside you for our State. I also thank my colleague and long-time friend the Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones. It is almost a quarter of a century since we campaigned together for the Republican Party in the United States—the only republicanism you will see us support.

I want to call out Dallas McInerney. Dallas is one of Australia's brightest minds, most insightful policy professionals and a loyal Liberal, who I have known, along with his wife, Zoe, for many years. I will always value his advice and support. I also extend my sincere thanks to all of you who have been with me along the way: Zorica Kaye-Smith, Chris Stone, Alexander Drake, Catherine Ellis, Alexandra Rafael, Zaya Toma, Wade McInerney, Tom Switzer, James Flynn, Brett Whitford, the Hon. Donna and Scott Faragher, Damien Jones, the Hon. Larry Anthony, the Hon. Matthew Guy, Sophie Mirabella, Tony Barry, the Hon. Mathias Cormann, the Hon. Ross and Kyla Cameron, Jo Liddell, David McLean, the Hon. Scott Ryan, Katherine Deves, the Hon. Peter Katsambanis, James Morrow, Chris Hall, Angelo Rozos, Byron Hodkinson, Nathalie Samia, Professor Michael Fearnside, David Miles, Ruth Gibson, David Heffernan, Alan Anderson, the Hon. Scott Morrison, Natalie Campbell, Alan RM Jones, the Hon. Tony Abbott and, of course, the Hon. John Howard.

To my parents, my sister, Alexandra, and twin brother, Andrew, your love and support have been my lodestar. To my husband, Justin, whom I met a quarter of a century ago in a beige lecture theatre—oh, the romance of student politics—where he was chairing a hostile Macquarie University Liberal Club AGM when I was running for treasurer; I won the ballot and won the chairman. It has been quite a journey, Justin. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do. I recognise your tireless commitment to our family and to public service, whether it be in the field of Commonwealth administrative law or getting the North Sydney Bears back in the National Rugby League—a particularly worthy public good.

To our beautiful girls, Amelia, who is 11, and Alexandra, who is seven, you are the joys of my life and every day you make me very proud. You have visited more polling booths, listened to more political ranting and handed out more how-to-vote cards than a child should ever have to. You are clever, patient and remain great spokeswomen for the Liberal Party at the netball courts, the hockey fields and the hill at North Sydney Oval. I love you both very much. Honourable members, thank you for your indulgence this evening. I shall always be grateful for the genuine kindness and collegiality that I have experienced from across the Chamber and from our hardworking officials since my arrival. I look forward to working with you all in the years ahead to make our great State of New South Wales even greater. Thank you, and go the Blues.

Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.

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