



NSW Legislative Council Hansard

Rice Marketing Amendment (Prevention of National Competition Policy Penalties) Bill

Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Wednesday 16 November 2005.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE [5.43 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): I support the Rice Marketing Authority (Prevention of National Competition Council Penalties) Amendment Bill. As this is my first speech in this place I wish to formally acknowledge that we hold our deliberations on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects to elders past and present and to the Aboriginal people present here today. I thank the members of the House for their courtesy and indulgence as I take this opportunity to talk about the path that has brought me to this place, the values I have gained on the way, and what I hope to achieve as a member of Parliament.

I joined the Labor Party when I was 19 for the very simple reason that I wanted to change the world—immediately. It is taking a little longer than I expected. But although I know now that commitment to change must be matched with patience and perseverance, I still believe in the principles and values I held as a young woman at her first Labor Party branch meeting. Australia is a nation of abundant wealth—in our environment, in our people, in our diversity and in our spirit. We are able to care for all of our citizens. That we do not is a burning injustice. I could not and cannot accept that in a wealthy nation like Australia we tolerate the poverty, the violence and the plain unfairness that too many Australians experience day after day. We all deserve the opportunity to live with dignity. We all deserve to be treated with respect. None of our citizens should be shut out of our nation's prosperity.

In the Australian Labor Party [ALP] I recognised a similar commitment to the dignity and security of all Australians, to prosperity built on equity rather than exploitation. The belief that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and with respect was instilled in me by my parents. My family was very typical—some might say "traditional". My parents raised me and my two sisters, Angela and Julia, in Canberra and did everything they could to give us a strong start in life. My parents worked hard to make sure we had all the advantages they could give us. My parents, John and Desley Sharpe, are here today and I want to take this opportunity to thank them. I would also like to thank my sisters, Angela and Julia, who are not able to be here today, but I forgive them anyway.

One of the advantages my parents gave me was a quality education. They sent me to public schools. I was taught by dedicated teachers who pushed me to consider options that I had not previously imagined, and challenged me to examine critically the world around me. It was my late grandmother Linda Sharpe who quietly encouraged me to pursue political activity. Influenced by her father, William Doc Howey, who was the president of the Dubbo ALP Branch in the early 1900s, Grandma taught me that only Labor would make sure that working people got a fair go. And she told me that it was better to act than to talk. So when I stopped talking and started acting, and when I joined the Labor Party, she was one of the first people I told. My grandmother passed away many years ago and I am sorry that she is not here to share this with me today.

I was a student at the University of New South Wales when I joined, first the campus ALP Club and then the Labor Party. I became involved in campaigns for better income and housing support for students, for increased childcare, and for access to welfare and legal services that students could afford. It was through the work of student representatives in student unions that these campaigns were transformed into tangible services for students. To my great anger and dismay, these services are likely to disappear as a result of John Howard's voluntary student unionism legislation.

For many on this side of the House, the legacy of Gough Whitlam was an important political influence. While Gough always looms large, it was Paul Keating who was at the forefront of my political and, indirectly, my work experience. It was Paul Keating's Working Nation that set up the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation [ASTF]. The ASTF was charged with improving the transition of students in years 11 and 12 from school to work. Working with local schools, employers and communities, the foundation supported local partnerships that trained young people in real workplaces with real employers. The ASTF gave me the opportunity to travel to over 100 communities in NSW and work with these partnerships to provide work training for their young people.

The partnerships delivered much, including a permaculture food forest in Wilcannia; pathways into sustainable timber jobs in Oberon, Kyogle, Bombala and Tumut; aquaculture in Ballina; and a focus on design and visual arts in Dulwich Hill. It was a model where each community drew on its own strengths and worked together to find solutions. It showed me that good ideas, backed by responsive government programs can make a real difference to people's lives and their communities. It also confirmed my view of the value of education in its ability to transform lives. Education is one of the most effective tools governments have to improve the life chances of individuals. Access to preschool for every child, public schools that are the best in the world, second chance education opportunities, and a public training system to provide the skills to keep our economy strong are the issues that I want to pursue during my time in this place. In another first speech made by a woman from Murrumbidgee, in September 1944 Lillian Fowler told fellow members of Parliament:

I have always thought that government meant action by elected representatives and the formulation of ideals for the benefit of the people. My ideal government would frown on anything not to the ultimate good of all.

She believed that "the more democratic the Government, the closer it is to the people". Lillian Fowler was the first woman elected to a local council in New South Wales in 1928. She was elected to the New South Wales Parliament in 1944. In between she became the first woman mayor in Australia in 1938. She is an example of what women can achieve when they are given the chance. All women should be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. I commit myself to pursuing full equality for women in our society. I will defend the rights of women to be free to control their own lives and I will support the choices that they make in their quest for freedom. Lillian Fowler was the mayor of Newtown, a suburb that is now part of the Marrickville Council area. The 15 square kilometres of Marrickville takes in the suburbs of Camperdown, Dulwich Hill, Enmore, Lewisham, Marrickville, Newtown, Petersham, St Peters, Stanmore, Sydenham and Tempe.

Like Lillian Fowler I am very fortunate to have been elected by the residents of Marrickville to be a local councillor. Marrickville is home to young and old, rich and poor, straight and gay. Some in our community have come from around the corner and some have come from across the world to make Marrickville their home. Marrickville exemplifies the working class and multicultural traditions of urban Australia. It is a living example of what a diverse, inclusive and creative community looks like. Marrickville Council demonstrates also what good Labor Government means for local communities. In 1928 Lillian Fowler established playgrounds for local children and instituted a 40-hour week for council employees. Since that time Labor representatives on Marrickville Council have continued that tradition by providing quality local services and programs and an unashamed commitment to inclusion and social justice. I would like to recognise the work of those councillors and, in particular, mention my current council colleagues Rae Owen, Sam Iskandar and Barry Cotter.

I am here today because I have filled the vacancy created by the successful election of Carmel Tebbutt to the Legislative Assembly as member for Marrickville. Like Lillian Fowler, Carmel Tebbutt is a strong Labor woman, who worked in local government and then chose the New South Wales State Parliament as another way to work for change. All members would respect Carmel Tebbutt's integrity, honesty and intelligence. Carmel's dedication, compassion and hard work have been an example and an inspiration. Like her, I want to spend my time in this place working to make sure that our citizens have the chance to share the opportunities and prosperity of our State. In filling Carmel's place, I am honoured to become a Labor representative in this place. I thank the unions and the ordinary members of the Labor Party, whose collective strength has given me this opportunity.

I also wish to thank the people of New South Wales who voted for the Labor Party to represent their interests within government and this Parliament. It has always been the Labor way to work to improve the lives of working Australians and their families through better wages and social conditions. That goal has remained unchanged for over a century. Labor recognises that industrial rights and social conditions together bring dignity and security. Unionists and community activists have found that in unity is strength. I believe in a collectivism based on compulsory voting, union solidarity and democratic decision making. Only through such collectivism can our society protect the weak from the strong. The many different voices in the Labor Party can be as broad and as diverse as they are because of our commitment to collective action. Yesterday I inadvertently caused some controversy by wearing a "Your rights at work" sticker into the House. A lesson learnt for a new member in this place.

Unions are fighting the fight of their lives—it is more than just a fight for workers and their families—this fight is about the values of unity and social justice that are the foundations of Australian society. It is a fight that, as a Labor party member, I will keep fighting long after the Howard Government has passed this unfair law. It is unfair laws such as the Howard WorkChoices bill that contribute to the community distrust of politicians and politics itself. When half a million people down tools and come to protest across the country, something is not right. When they are met with derision and closed minds from their elected government it confirms their worst belief—that politicians do not listen and do not care what their citizens think. As a result, many turn their backs on the very processes and practices that could help them change their circumstances and change their lives.

The disconnection between citizens and Parliament is made worse when members of our community look at the ranks of parliamentarians and cannot see anyone they recognise, anyone like them. We should expect our Parliament to look like our people. The men and women of our parliaments need to bring as wide as possible a range of experience to their deliberations and they need to reflect as accurately as possible the face of our community. Today, this State and this nation face many challenges. We must draw on all of our strengths, our talents and our qualities to meet these challenges. I take pride in Labor's record on improving the diversity in this House but also note that we have a way to go. I hope that in my time in this place I will be able to welcome many new members from all parties, representing many aspects of our community. The experience that I have gained along the way to be standing here today has taught me that you cannot change the world overnight and that you cannot do it on your own.

I would like to record my appreciation of the following people who have shared my ambition for a better world

and have given me good advice, support and friendship whenever required: Alanna Clohesy, Antony Sachs, Alan Kirkland, Adrian Lovney, Ann Symonds, Ashley Hogan, Alison Peters, Anthony Albanese, Carmel Tebbutt, Cecilia Anthony, Cheryl Baume, Claudine Lyons, Dascia Bennett, Damian Smith, Edwina Hanlon, Emanuel Tsardoulis, Feyi Akindoyeni, Jackie Trad, Jacinta Bunfield, Jan Primrose, Julian Hill, Jeannette McHugh, Ken Fowle, Kate Deverall, Luke Foley, Louise Pratt, Matthew Chesher, Meredith Burgmann, Nareen Young, Phillip O'Donoghue, Paul Murphy, Peter Primrose, Tim Gartrell, Trent Kear and Verity Firth, to name just a few.

I hope that my time in Parliament will give me the opportunity to build the broadest possible coalition of people committed to changing the world for the better. Technology is revolutionising the way in which people connect and communicate in our society. For parliaments to remain relevant in the digital world I believe we need to look at new ways to engage people in the political process. I am committed to exploring the opportunities of new media that moves beyond simply information provision. Through technology I hope to create space for the free exchange of ideas, the building of coalitions and go some way to demystifying the political process.

I said earlier that I grew up in a so-called typical or traditional family. By that I meant kids, a mum and a dad, all related by blood. That might have made us traditional, but it is not what made us a family. Families are formed by blood or by choice, by love and by circumstance. Family are the people who, when you go to them, have to take you in. Family are the people you can turn to, the people you will turn to when things get tough. There are two-parent, one-parent, gay-parent and foster-parent families. There are families that do not have children at all. There are families that fit stereotypes and families that break moulds. We know who our families are and we love them regardless of how they are formed. It is this love and connection that makes them the foundation of our society. To the kids who are growing up in lesbian and gay families: your parents have thought very hard and overcome many challenges to bring you into the world. You are fortunate to live in families that understand the values of love, diversity, and acceptance. I hope that one day—one day soon—you will be living in a community that shows the same commitment to those values as your families do.

That is another of the things I want to work towards in my time here. I would like to thank my family today. I thank my parents. I thank my partner, Jo Tilly. I thank you for your support and love. I also thank you for ensuring that I never take myself or the mechanics and business of politics too seriously. I also thank Jo's family—my in-law equivalents—the Cooks and the Hollingdales, who have welcomed me as part of their clan. To my children, Jemima and Red, who are here today I say: I hope that as you grow up you believe that the work I have undertaken in this place has made a difference and that in doing this work I have also managed to be there for you whenever you have needed me. Finally, I would like to thank the members and staff of the Parliament who made me feel welcome and have been prepared to assist me in every way possible as I have settled in. I know that there are many discussions and disagreements to come in my time here. I look forward to working with colleagues, with all of you. I particularly look forward to working with colleagues on all sides of the House who share a commitment to embracing the diversity of our community and who, in the words of Lillian Fowler, will "frown on anything not to the ultimate good of all".