



Governor's Speech: Address-in-Reply

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 13 May 2015.

Mr DAVID HARRIS (Wyong) [5.51 p.m.]: Mr Deputy-Speaker, I was another of those members you mentored from the early days. I remember some good cups of coffee in Newcastle discussing what goes on in this place and how I could do better. I congratulate you on your victory; I was quietly cheering you on in the background. I respectfully acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which this building stands. I also acknowledge the Darkinjung and Garingai people, the traditional custodians of the lands encompassed by the Wyong electorate. I pay my respect to and acknowledge Aboriginal elders past and present and I acknowledge those Aboriginal people who may be present today. As an educator I acknowledge the important responsibility we have to the elders of the future—our young people. I acknowledge the deep feelings of attachment of Aboriginal people to country and the cultural beliefs that are still important to them today. Underneath the asphalt and the concrete this land was, is and will always be Aboriginal land.

It is an incredible honour to be elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. To be elected by one's community to represent them and to battle for their interests and hopes is the ultimate honour and responsibility. No person who enters these doors should be under any illusion as to the importance and the duty that goes with being a member of the Legislative Assembly. I understand that better than most as I have been given a second opportunity to represent my electorate in this Chamber. Tonight I will not repeat my inaugural speech as people can refer to it at their leisure if they wish. I humbly stand in this Chamber not claiming to be a great wordsmith. I am a person of action; I get stuck into things but I am not so good with words. I congratulate everyone on their inaugural speeches. I have truly been moved and honoured to have witnessed them.

Tonight I will attempt to articulate some observations of the past, make an assessment of where we are now and offer some brief thoughts about the future. I have been deliberately low key about my speech. I have not sought to fill the gallery but I acknowledge my staff members from Point Clare who are in attendance this evening. I have not wanted to engage in election victory grandstanding; rather, I have wanted to get into this Chamber, roll up my sleeves and get stuck into unfinished business. I was pleased that the majority of my branch members came last Thursday night to celebrate the great Central Coast victories for David Mehan and Kathy Smith.

Michael Daley suggested that I start my speech tonight with, "Now where was I before I was rudely interrupted?" I admit that that had some appeal but, more appropriately, I have had four years within which to contemplate my first term in Parliament, assess my performance and, importantly, understand more fully my responsibility to my community upon my return. I have to make up for four years of lost time and I will not be wasting any more time. Over the past eight years I have seen the best and worst of Labor. I have also observed the best and worst of the conservative side of politics. In this important position of trust we, as members of Parliament, must have a strong moral compass. We must understand that leadership comes with responsibility. The ethical challenges we face as a society are increasingly complex and we need a strong moral foundation to guide us through them.

We can think about it as being principle centred, possessing strong character, demonstrating integrity, or following an ethical compass. No matter what we call it, we need a strong moral foundation in all our decision-making. In politics it is appropriate that political parties can argue the how and why, determine different priorities but, fundamentally, act at all times with moral fibre and resist the temptation to give in to self-interest. We must always put the interests of the community first. The past few years have resulted in lessons for both sides of politics that must be heeded. There has been a deceitful tendency to write New South Wales Labor off as having done nothing in 16 years of government. This glib assessment clearly is a fallacy perpetuated by those on the conservative side of politics and their friends in the media.

I speak proudly of the work in the Wyong electorate during my four years in Parliament, which included \$270 million worth of infrastructure. Everywhere one travelled in the electorate there were construction sites. This was true also across the Central Coast. Over four years Labor delivered Warnervale Public School, Wyong police station, Casuarina Grove Disability Care Centre, major upgrades to Wyong Hospital, the Tuggerah railway station interchange, upgrades to Wyong railway station, Tuggerah Straight, Hamlyn Terrace fire station, and the upgrade of the Pacific Highway at Blue Haven, amongst many other projects. This is the high standard to which I again commit myself.

Why do I find myself back in this Chamber again? Before closely examining that journey I acknowledge the good people of my electorate from Toukley, Norah Head, Blue Haven and Charmhaven, Wyong, Tuggerawong, Gorokan, Kanwal, Tacoma, Mardi, Chittaway, Berkeley Vale and the rural valleys in the west. We have a special community in which people back one another in the hard times—whether it be floods, storms or tragic accidents.

I encapsulate this community spirit by relating the story of Craig Middleton, a tradie and surfer, born and bred in Wyong. His

children are members of the Soldiers Beach Surf Life Saving Club. Craig tragically injured himself in a freak accident. He displaced and fractured the C4 and C5 vertebrae in his neck and subsequently had to have the C5 removed and replaced with supportive rods. Craig is now permanently confined to a wheelchair. The Wyong community got together and supported Craig, his wife, Jo, and their two children. "Midido", as he is affectionately known, is now back home and the community continues to rally around him and to offer support.

Craig's story is one of many which reveal the way in which the people of Wyong support one another. I am proud to live and work in the area and to be able to call that community home. It is because of the people of Wyong that I am so passionate about the area I represent. I feel privileged to have been re-elected to the Wyong electorate. Since leaving Parliament in 2011 I have not been standing still. At the end of 2012 I was appointed principal of Point Clare Public School. The past three years have been the most rewarding in my educational career, which spans 22 years, and 17 years as a principal. Working with such a positive, enthusiastic team to enhance the lives of young people, both socially and educationally, created a massive dilemma for me. I thank every student, every parent and every staff member for the way in which they welcomed me. I hope that I made a positive difference to the lives of that community.

I asked everyone at Point Clare every day just to do their best—as I said many times to the kids at assembly—and to live by the mantra of the You Can Do It! Education program and its five keys to success: confidence, organisation, persistence, resilience and getting along. I try to live by that mantra all the time. If we give kids those values, they will do well as citizens in our society. Those fantastic young students, who certainly rejuvenated me, the supportive and professional staff and parents that I now proudly call friends made the decision to re-enter politics so difficult. In fact, 18 months ago I faltered and decided not to recontest the election, a decision I later reconsidered. Hopefully I made the right decision.

During the past four years I also became president of the Soldiers Beach Surf Life Saving Club, a voluntary director of the local Bendigo Community Bank and president of the Central Coast Men of Football charity. I love giving back to our community. That brings me to how and why I think I am standing in this place for a second time. Some have suggested—hopefully in a friendly manner—that madness played a part, but I believe it is more about a deep sense of duty to my community. I spoke earlier in my oration about the need for a strong moral compass. I found that people do not expect you to do everything, but they expect you to stay true to your word. The community of Wyong felt that they had no support from the former member for Wyong so they came to me for help over and over again on numerous issues from social housing to fighting against development. I knew I had to get back here to fight for them again. It was a huge decision but, as my wife told me, "It's in your blood."

Clearly the results of the 2015 election on the Central Coast—where we had consistent above 12 per cent swings—demonstrated that our community rejected the policies and credibility of the New South Wales Liberal Party and The Nationals. Here are some of the reasons. I fought hard and for a long time against the Wallarah 2 Coal Project. The Liberal Party went to the 2011 election with a clear and unambiguous promise to stop mining under the Wyong Valley's water catchment—no ifs and no buts. It went further, promising to introduce legislation to protect the water catchment, if necessary. Every Liberal candidate stood with Barry O'Farrell and Chris Hartcher in bright red "Water Not Coal" T-shirts and promised to end this issue for good. Shamefully it was a promise they broke.

Then there are the election funding laws. I have always thought that you abide by the rule of the day. You do not decide whether it is a good or bad rule; you just follow it. If you do not like it, you try to change it. The law is the law, so that is what you do. I will be careful, but the fact is that four out of five Central Coast Liberal members of Parliament were forced to resign from the parliamentary Liberal Party. The Central Coast was effectively without representation for almost two years and whilst the Hunter got an apology from the Premier, the Central Coast never did. Those are clear examples of a broken moral compass.

One of the other big issues in our area at the last election was the leasing of our electricity network—leasing in name only because we know a 99-year lease means a sale. The northern Central Coast was built on the back of the power industry. Many families used to work, still work or know someone who does work in the electricity industry. For us on the Central Coast the argument was simple: it was about protecting jobs. The Liberal Party failed to recognise that there is a dire social cost to asset recycling, which particularly reverberates in areas that already have high unemployment. As I travelled around I found there was an inherent dislike, particularly in the older generations, for privatising public assets. These people feel that they have paid for the assets. They own them, not the Government. They have not seen a single case where they are better off after giving their assets to the private sector. I support that view.

One of the biggest issues at the last election was not about State issues; it was what I called the Wyong Shire Council factor. As Marcellus said to Horatio in Hamlet, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Our community has a deep distrust of the conservative control of Wyong Shire Council. This topic deserves a speech of its own, which I will make. But this evening it would be remiss of me if I did not at least acknowledge that this was a major election issue. In fact, as I doorknocked around the community, I found that Mike was reasonably popular, Tony was terribly unpopular, but the mayor of Wyong was deeply unpopular.

The community is angry about special rate rises because the council cried poor and then we saw millions spent on potential projects that do not seem to be in the ratepayers' interests. Further, the council actively fights applications for information about projects such as the mysterious airport, denying proper public scrutiny of its intentions. At the same time, we saw the jobs of our lifeguards and water and sewerage workers threatened. We saw bullying in council, preschools close and the massive sale of public land, followed by a large number of spot rezonings, which the local community had to fight one by one.

This is a state of affairs that requires close investigation, but no government body seems equipped or has the desire to take it on. The public record of Operation Spicer states there is evidence that shows correlations between political donations and some of those dubious zonings. I made a commitment to the staff of Wyong Shire Council and the community at a mass meeting to pursue these issues with vigour and I will do so. In the fullness of time, those issues need to be fully investigated and, at the very least, any suggestion of wrongdoing must be cleared up. I think we will find that it is a lot worse.

As others have done, I make the point loudly that our social infrastructure is just as important, if not more important, than physical infrastructure. I am deeply concerned that the practice of competitive tendering will destroy the social fabric of many community organisations that support the most vulnerable. This is another issue I will pursue in Parliament. As many other new members have stated, you do not get to stand in this Parliament without the help and support of others. In 2007 John Robertson supported my election with a visit of the Your Rights at Work campaign. He stood with me at the railway station in Wyong and at a gathering at the Grand Hotel. He did very well on that night; there were a few people who had had a few sherbets and who were very excited. John Robertson was also the Minister for the Central Coast when I was the Parliamentary Secretary. We achieved some great things for the Central Coast. So when I was trying to make up my mind whether to stay in education or to come back to politics, I consulted John in his office before deciding to again run for Parliament. I respect his counsel and I value his opinion. Thank you, John.

To Kaila Murnain, my good friend and go-to person, thank you for believing that I could get back here again and thank you for being persistent and for chasing me to ensure that I followed through. To Jamie Clements, Senator Deborah O'Neill, Jill Hall, member of Parliament, and the member for Shortland, your encouragement, support and belief were unflinching for four years. What can I say about Greg Donnelly, Sophie Cotsis and Linda Burney? You all kept the torch burning and did the hard yards through four tough years, inspiring me to continue to work hard—even though I was working full-time doing other things—to support the Central Coast community and to stick up for the most vulnerable people in our community. I thank you and appreciate you all for that.

To my branch members—I sent a message to them, and they were here last week, but I hope this will get to them—I extend my thanks for their hard work and dedication and for their confidence in me. I said to them on election night 2011 that I had let them down; but they never doubted me and supported my return to this place. I will appreciate that eternally and will repay their support as best I can. There are particular people who go above and beyond the call of duty.

I thank Narelle Rich, Tony Grant, Neil Rose, John Leonard, Cheryl Greenwald, Richard Field, Darcy Waller, Bill Smith, Paul and Sue Day, Tony Booth, Daniel Turner, Ruth Punch, Daniel Greenwald, Salim Barber and Michelle and Colin Cashman for their hard work during the campaign. We have a good group of young people on the coast, Peter Duggan, Zach Harrison, Shane Gillard, Richard Mehrtens, and I thank them for their invaluable assistance. I thank also my good friends Lynn and Allen Thompson, who stuck by me that terrible night in the pouring rain when we had our non-victory celebration. They were there again when I made it known that I wanted to run this time.

Michael Buckland, you deserve a medal. Michael coordinated our Central Coast campaign and was on the end of my abrasive, demanding phone calls on a daily basis. I can be demanding, particularly when it comes to getting resources for our local area. Michael delivered for us in bucketloads, and I thank him for that. To Unions NSW, Central Coast Community Union and union members more widely, thank you for your hard work in the campaign. I thank the three Labor councillors on Wyong Shire Council, Lisa Matthews, Doug Vincent and Ken Greenwald for their support and contributions during the campaign—particularly Doug Vincent, who stood aside so that I could run again. I am eternally grateful to Doug for that.

I would like to acknowledge Grant McBride, the former member for The Entrance. As members would know, Grant unfortunately now suffers from dementia. I certainly appreciate the support of Grant and his family during the campaign. I always thank Michael Lee for his mentorship and friendship over the years. Our great Central Coast team, Kathy Smith, Yasmin Catley, David Mehan and the indomitable Jeff Sundstrom fought hard and deserve the result that we got. I truly believe we had a team built around years of community advocacy; and the people saw this and knew we stood for them. The results reflect this fact.

Our leader Luke Foley has impressed me with his deep knowledge, strategic thinking and consultative approach—and I am a fairly hard critic, as those who know me would attest. I particularly thank him for appointing me to his shadow Cabinet. I pledge to work day in and day out to repay that confidence; I will be working hard to hold this Government to account. To my new parliamentary colleagues in the Labor caucus: what a truly amazing group you are. We are blessed to have so much new and significant talent in the State parliamentary Labor Party. Your enthusiasm, friendship and dedication to your communities and the Labor cause are

inspiring. Congratulations to every one of you as you forge ahead and make your presence felt in this place on behalf of your communities.

To the Wyong community—especially the Save Mascord Park crew, the Water Not Coal group, John Asquith at CEN, Kevin Armstrong, Warnervale Family and Community Service, Toukley Neighbourhood Centre, the gang at Soldiers Beach Surf Club, Central Coast Men of Football as well as many others—thank you for your help, understanding and support. Jake Allen, my campaign director, is a dynamo. Jake organised the whole show, ensuring we returned to this place with a much higher margin than when we left. I was still working full time through most of the campaign, and Jake stepped up to the plate and helped to achieve a 13.8 per cent swing and a victory on first preferences. Proudly, we won many Liberal booths for the first time, and by significant margins. Jake has a bright future, and I thank his family for lending him to my campaign for such a significant amount of time. I look forward to continuing to work with him in his new role on my staff.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my former colleagues in this place whose counsel and opinion I continue to actively seek. There are so many who contributed and I acknowledge every person who assisted our campaign, particularly Colleen and Anne, my former staff. The victory in 2015 was as much for them as for anyone else. They love our community, they work their hearts out, and I am pleased that Colleen is back with me, and Anne is part time serving the community again.

I would like to pay particular tribute to Dayle Walker. Dayle, my friend and speechwriter, tragically passed away from ovarian cancer just a couple of years ago. I said on election night, "This is for Dayle." Dayle was always about the community. I am so sorry she is not here to share our return to this place. I am also very pleased to be back with my great friend the member for Strathfield. That is certainly a pleasure. To my wider family, my mum and dad, my sisters and their families and to my grandfather, who is 93 and now confined to a nursing home: your support is invaluable and treasured.

To my daughters Rachael and Jessica: What do you say to the shining lights of your life? They endured my first term in Parliament, being away so much and missing so much of their lives as they grew from small children to fine young ladies. I am so proud of both of you. You could not have turned out any better; I know that your mother has done an incredible job. And, finally, to my wife, Sherelle: we are a team. You never complain, even though you take so much on your shoulders, and I love you dearly. We are good mates and I thank you for being one of the few people who truly understands me, indulges my passions and always provides a shoulder for me, in good times and in bad. Wyong and the Central Coast need so much care and attention, and I commit myself in this my second term to representing the people, to do my best every day and to work to repay the confidence of my community which has honoured me with a second term. Thank you all.