



Governor's Speech: Address-in-Reply

Governor's Speech: Address-in-Reply

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

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER (Mr Thomas George): On behalf of the newly elected member for Strathfield, I acknowledge the presence in the gallery this afternoon of her friends, family and husband, Stephen. I welcome them to the Legislative Assembly.

Ms JODI McKAY (Strathfield) [5.25 p.m.]: Mr Deputy-Speaker, I am so pleased that you are in the chair for my address—not just because Stephen wanted you in the chair, but because you have been a friend and wise counsel to me since my very first day in this House. I thank you for that. I speak today with the rather unique privilege of being someone who has been given a second chance to make a difference in this great State. Not since the earliest days of this Parliament has someone generally had the opportunity of representing more than one geographically separate electorate, although Henry Parkes, the longest-serving Premier of New South Wales, will take some beating. In his 40-year membership of this House he served as member for Sydney, Cumberland, East Sydney, Kiama, Mudgee, Canterbury, St Leonards, Argyle and Tenterfield. I guess that gave Henry a perspective few could match. Do not worry; his record is not one I intend on challenging.

I speak today as the member for Strathfield in this the Fifty-sixth Parliament, and as the former member for Newcastle in the Fifty-fourth Parliament. For those reading this speech in years to come, I also refer you to my inaugural address in 2007. It is an important prologue to this address. In modern times, the idea of representing two geographically separate electorates is unique. But my story is unique, and I will come to later. First, I want to talk about my community—a diverse and dynamic place in the inner west of Sydney and an area much celebrated for its multiculturalism. Strathfield in many ways is a microcosm of Sydney and a snapshot of our future. Nearly half the community was born in non-English speaking countries, and more than 10 per cent of my electorate is not fluent in English.

While my area is home to many cultures, we particularly recognise those in our community with Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Sri Lankan backgrounds. It is also a young electorate. Along with our fine schools, both public and private, we have one of the highest proportions of 15- to 24-year-olds in New South Wales. Strathfield's many faces, its youth, the rich tapestry of cultures, its peoples and their history, make it a fantastic place to live, work, study and play. You only have to walk down Burwood Road, stroll through Strathfield town centre or wander around Homebush West to get a sense of the buzz, the excitement and the wonderful diversity of my electorate. More and more people want to live in our area and, as such, we face growing pains. The Homebush and North Strathfield areas, in particular, will experience significant growth over the next 15 to 20 years. Unless that growth is planned with supporting infrastructure and public transport then there will be an unfair burden borne by communities in my electorate.

We need to ensure that population growth is fairly spread across metropolitan Sydney and that there are the schools, hospitals, playgrounds and parks to support any increase in population. The urban renewal of Parramatta road will change my community. This is the most significant urban renewal project in the inner west in the past 100 years, but to date there has been little consultation with my community. The Government wants us to take almost half of the 60,000 extra dwellings proposed, yet it has not asked us what we think. One of the key principles that has driven me as a member of Parliament past and present and will drive me into the future is the need to face people and talk to them. There will be difficult conversations. Politics and policy are never easy. But I believe society prospers when we have conversations because they are the building blocks of our community.

Labor won the electorate of Strathfield because we had those conversations. We doorknocked 14,000 houses and made more than 30,000 phone calls into the electorate in just four months. We asked people what was important to them, and they told us. Like others in this place, I heard loud and clear the great disillusionment people have with politics in this State. What has wracked New South Wales politics over the past eight years or more has been symbolised in the rash of Independent Commission Against Corruption [ICAC] inquiries into the affairs of this State—a veritable conga line of politicians and their hangers-on have been paraded before the community. And they have done the community a great disservice.

It is a collective betrayal not just of the community but also of the rule of law and of democracy itself. And for that both sides of the political fence were to blame—Labor for allowing a cancerous growth that saw power as an ends rather than the means and parts of the Coalition for arrogantly presuming that they were beyond certain laws. The fact that my story of standing up and saying no resonated is a reflection of the state in which New South Wales politics has found itself. I have been lauded as someone who actually did the right thing, yet an overwhelming number of members of this place—past and current—have done and continue to do the right thing.

I believe we need to bond around that common sense of the common good. We may disagree with the means and we may argue over the ends, but ultimately we should all be here to do our best to improve public life and work tirelessly for the community. In that spirit, I acknowledge the presence of Government and crossbench members, and I thank the Premier. He and I entered this House

in 2007 and we became friends with a bond to clean up politics in New South Wales. Of course at that stage we were referring to the behaviour in the House. We had no idea what lay before both of us. As I was discovering the treachery and wilful misconduct that occurred in Newcastle, the same inquiries were elevating him to Premier. The irony of that is not lost on me. But I will not forget that he was one of the first people to call me when I lost that terrible election. However, I am back and I am now part of a great team led by Luke Foley. So to the Premier, who I know is listening—I can see him at the door—it's game on.

That brings me to why I am here. I have lived in Ashfield for four years and my husband has lived there for 16 years. I moved there after losing the 2011 election; an election I now know was manipulated. In my inaugural address in this place in 2007 I spoke of the Newcastle campaign as the most difficult electoral battle in living memory in the Labor Party. Of course, I had no idea what awaited me in 2011. What happened in the lead-up to that election has been well documented by the Independent Commission Against Corruption and the media. I do not intend to go into the details of Operation Spicer and its aftermath. What I will say is that, even in the lead-up to my second appearance in August, in my mind I was still very much a former politician—albeit one now faced with the terrible truth of what happened at the end of her term.

At that stage there was no suggestion or inclination in my mind that I would ever return to politics. My poor husband was even making plans and booking hotels for our perpetually postponed honeymoon for early 2015. I promise we will go on that honeymoon eventually. But something happened when I walked out of that second hearing and for the first time I knew I could not sit back and make comment on what was wrong; I really did have to give it another go. My feelings are best summed up in a quote from the ponderous Dr Seuss in the *Lorax*, as everyone on my team knows, which says:

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get better. It's not.

Why do I always cry over Dr Seuss? My desire to play a role in restoring trust in New South Wales politics, of having another opportunity to represent and defend the weakest in our community, of putting into practice my principles of social justice and to contribute to Labor forming government convinced me to again seek the support of my community to represent them in the New South Wales Parliament. As someone who has seen the worst of politics, I really do want to try to bring out the best of politics' potential, and work with others to restore faith and confidence in the political system. That is why one of my key priorities is to work with the local community, reach out to those who are normally overlooked or ignored and try to foster a positive, cooperative spirit in all that I do. There are many challenges facing us—in the bush, the regions and the cities—but without engaging the people we are doomed from the start. I believe this engagement should begin by respecting the views of young people.

One of the biggest disappointments during the campaign was the general disinterest and lack of engagement of young women in their 20s. Yet if you peruse social media platforms they are ablaze with ideas, views and commentary. Young people, male and female, have the largest stake in the future of the community, and many of my youngest volunteers think and feel that way. I had a number of young people who were still at school helping out on my campaign. They had that spark of social justice and they wanted to help the Labor cause. The one thing they could not do, of course, was vote.

I think that is a failing of our system. That is why I will be seeking to have this Parliament lead debate on changing the legal age of voting in New South Wales to 16 years of age. The idea is not new, but we have never had a real conversation with the community nor young people on this issue in New South Wales. I believe we should. I see allowing 16- and 17-year-olds the opportunity to have a say is simply the ongoing extension of democracy in our community. If we want them engaged then let us see what they have to say.

In the mid-nineteenth century it was enfranchisement for all white men—wresting political power away from the landed gentry. At the turn of the century it was the hard-fought campaign for women. And it is a national tragedy that it took until the 1960s to finally allow Aboriginal people to vote. Finally, in 1973 the Whitlam Government lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 years. These young people I speak about—Rose Cox, Ibrahim Taha, Sarah-Jane Yagky, Anna Keaney and Emma Ross—are here this evening. They gave their all during the campaign. They doorknocked, leaflet dropped and made phone calls. Each of them had a personal motivation for their involvement, yet we have a law that prevents them from having a say in the outcome of an election.

I would like to tell Rose's story. Rose is a year 10 student at Strathfield Girls High School who, along with Sarah, approached me at Strathfield station to sign her petition for a new school hall. Her argument was strong and her passion palpable and, of course, in the lead-up to the election Labor committed \$4 million to upgrade the hall. One of my tasks will be to make sure we get the same commitment from the Government. I know Rose and Sarah will make sure of that. Rose is the primary carer for her mum, Carolyn, who has multiple sclerosis. She is on the NSW Carers Advisory Council, she is a young care leader for Young Carers NSW, the Sydney Inner West Volunteer of the Year and the first youth ambassador for the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation.

One of the first official letters I received in my new role was from Rose, asking that she undertake work experience in my office in November. Rose is intelligent and informed, yet she does not have the right to choose who represents her in government. The fact that these young people are unable to have an immediate say on the future of education and TAFE, the environment, health

services and public transport does us a disservice and so I will seek in the first instance to have the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters consider lowering the voting age, even on a voluntary basis, to 16 years. I see the committee leading engagement with the community, especially young people.

Four years ago Labor was wiped off the electoral map and Strathfield suffered one of the largest swings in the State. The idea that Labor could regain that electorate after a redistribution that favoured the Liberals was, to many, inconceivable. But I was fortunate to have an army of true believers who worked indefatigably to ensure our return. Some were members of the Labor Party and some were not. Some had never voted Labor before. What we had in common was a belief that politics could and should be better. Many of them are here this evening.

What buoyed my spirits daily was the involvement of young people like Jennifer Light, who is my campaign manager, James Hammerton, Sarah Enderby, Sravya Abennini, Jason Cranson, Michael Murdocca, Lachlan Forster, Georgia Valis, Monica Tanika, Keiran Ash, Jessica Darke, Fahad Ali, Yang Yu, Tracey Tang, Thomas Hore, Tom Morrison, Leo Solomon and Gavin Sellars. I had a lot of Young Labor help. I also pay tribute to one of the most incisive and clever young men I have ever met—my campaign director, Dom Ofner. Dom is a wonderful asset for the party, and someone who unites head office with a genuine love and passion for the Labor cause—not just winning elections. We really did win, Dom. I could not convince him that we had actually won. I had to say, "Yes, we did win!" I also recognise Jamie Clements, who directed that difficult 2011 Newcastle campaign. I thank Jamie for allowing me to make this right. I cried during my first speech!

I thank the branch members, many of whom are here today, who accepted me and supported me. I will not name you all, but I know that I know who you are, and that you know who you are. I do want to thank the old timers—and that does not mean you are old—who stuck with Labor through the bad times, and there have been some bad times. In particular, I thank Bill Thompson, Clyde Livingston, Jon Breen, Vel Maverica, Mike Ryan and Mr Lam. I also thank former Federal member Mary Easson. You are definitely not an old timer, but you are the unofficial matriarch of Labor in Strathfield.

I thank my branch, the Ashfield branch—one of the best branches one could ever hope for. It is a welcoming, engaging branch whose members initially gave me the hope and courage to stand for Strathfield. In particular, I thank Mark Drury, Jo Carlisle, and Rory O'Connell for their support over the past six months. I also thank the Subcontinent friends of Labor, in particular Aruna Chandrala and her ever-patient and supportive husband, Vishi, as well as the newly formed Korean Friends of Labor. I also acknowledge Elagupillai Vijayaratnam, known by all us as "Vijay", a gentle and kind man who has long supported the Labor cause and continues to be a strong advocate for the Tamil community. I also bring to the attention of this House a group of volunteer diehards—"Jodi tragics" some have called them—who had faith in me and what I was about: Jill Biddington, Kym Railey, Corrine Gaston, Kate McLearn, Jacqui Thorburn and Kevin Bolton.

This campaign reinvigorated the Labor Party in our area and our ranks are swelling. Repaying their trust and their faith in what we are trying to do will continue to strengthen my arm and steady my resolve as I carry out my duties over the coming years. It became clear over the course of the campaign that the last thing the Liberals wanted was me back in this Chamber. I think Strathfield was robo-called to the point of surrender: "Hello, I'm Mike Baird"; "Hello, this is John Howard." I am surprised they did not try to summon the spirit of Billy McMahon! I genuinely thought that I was fighting the heroes of the Liberal Party, past and present, rather than the local Liberal candidate. Yet for all the Liberals' automated bombardments, we had real people, real locals, talking and arguing for our vision for Strathfield and the State.

For the many who volunteered their time, I am forever grateful. I thank two people in particular, the Fenns of Ashfield. I thank my husband, Stephen. He is the smartest person I know and he supports me not just by accepting that I will never ever, ever cook a meal, but also by putting me first each and every day. He likes to fight Tories and he sees them as a pernicious force in society. I like to make peace and I try to see the best in every person. Together we make a great team. He is pretty good at high views as well. Importantly, I want to thank Madeleine, my 14-year-old stepdaughter. Since Madeleine was small, politics has been a part of her life, but my arrival simply put that into overdrive. One of the rays of sunshine during my four years out of politics was that we were able to bond and truly get to know one another. Madeleine is a remarkable young lady—patient and giving—and I am so fortunate to have her in my life.

It is an honour to speak this evening as the newly elected member for Strathfield. It is a privilege to represent people in any forum, but no more so than in Parliament. We should all dwell on that each day. A vote is a precious part of our democratic life. Blind to wealth, privilege or situation, it is a right built on freedom, strengthened by equality, and a symbol of our common purpose in defending and enriching our democratic nation. The vote reflects the battles of ages past. It is an arbiter of our present state of play as well as a reflection of our hopes and our ambitions. It is a contract between Parliament and the people that should never be weakened, attacked or abrogated. I am someone who has seen the best and the very worst of politics—and someone who has been given a second chance. Have I cried more than anyone else?

Mr John Robertson: Yes.

Mr Luke Foley: Steve Kamper hasn't made his speech yet.

Ms JODI McKAY: We still have Kamper to go. I have been given a second chance to play a positive role in the oldest Parliament in our nation. Today I commit myself to seeking to ensure that we do our best to lift our game and strengthen our collective resolve in making politics, and politicians, more worthy and respectable in the eyes of the people. This requires courage, boldness and a practical honesty with the people in having the conversations that need to be had when we face the many challenges confronting this State, the first State, in the twenty-first century. I sincerely thank the people of Strathfield for giving me that opportunity.