



## Inaugural Speech of the Member for Newcastle

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 9 May 2007.

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**Ms JODI McKAY** (Newcastle) [11.56 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I speak today with some trepidation and great excitement. It is an honour to stand in the place where so many before me have stood to change, to improve and to expand the way we live in New South Wales; from the pre-Federation days of Henry Parkes, George Reid and Chris Watson, to the great builders of the last century such as Joe Cahill, Bill McKell and Neville Wran, to those who have carried their Labor tradition into the twenty-first century, such as our current Premier, Morris Iemma. It is indeed a special honour for me as the first woman to represent Newcastle in this Chamber. I am a country girl. I grew up in one of the prettiest places in Australia, in the foothills of the Barringtons.

When the Hon. Leon Punch was Gloucester's local member, I am sure this Chamber would have heard about the beauty of the district and the hardworking life of the dairy farmer. I had a privileged childhood—not in terms of money or harbour views or private schools; we had none of those in Gloucester. I grew up in a community where people did not have to lock their doors, where hard work was prized, where friendships were necessary and strong, and where helping each other was a way of life. I grew up in a loving family. My father left school when he was 12 and worked in the dairy industry, and like many was forced to find work elsewhere. He mowed lawns for a time before he went to work for the local council. We did not enjoy all the aspects of life that some other families did, but I did learn a lot about the way people live in this State, about the hardships some endure and about sharing what one does have. I learned the value of hard work, respect for others, and that tough times are a way of life: it is how one faces up to the difficulties that shapes one as a person.

Living in that community developed my interest in improving the opportunities and the help available to all: those who work hard, those who suffer setbacks, those who just are not given the same opportunities as others. We know it as social justice. In Gloucester it was just keeping an eye on friends and neighbours to make sure they were okay. I was educated in a small town public school and on completing my Higher School Certificate I left Gloucester. Not everyone in Australia lives within commuting distance of a university. This is a point lost, apparently, on the Commonwealth Government, which has drastically reduced the assistance to students, which the people of Australia made a Commonwealth responsibility at the referendum of 1946. I appreciate that this is my first speech in this place, but this issue is of great concern to me, Mr Deputy-Speaker, as you will see.

My desire was to study at university with a view to a career in journalism, but I was one of those whose parents could not afford to keep me there, and I had to put aside my studies in Newcastle to find a job. It was very exciting when I was 18 to move to what seemed such a big city. Although my personal situation seemed fragile, there were more employment opportunities in Newcastle—and there still are. The longer I live in Newcastle, the more I come to understand the opportunities it offers. Without exaggeration, I say it is practically abuzz with ideas, and bursting with creativity, invention and talent. Without a degree, there seemed little prospect of my entering journalism but I was offered a position in the library at NBN Television. I must have proved assiduous because within the year I was offered the chance to go on the road, and on camera, as a reporter. At age 20, I brought news of an earthquake to the people of our region. I did that under the spotlight of hand-held torches. The electricity had been cut, the television station had been evacuated, and I was told to take cover under the news desk in the event of an aftershock.

When working in regional television, nothing stands in the way of bringing information and news to the community. This was in the first years of aggregation of television in Australia, and it might interest members to know, if they do not already, that the highest rating television station in Australia under aggregation is NBN in Newcastle. As a reporter, I had the opportunity to meet many of the people and follow many of the issues—positive and otherwise—that have shaped the growth and change of Newcastle. Just as others come to this place with fond memories of a favourite school teacher or university professor, I will always be grateful to the station's news director, Jim Sullivan, its former news producer, Mary Boddy, and so-called mother of the newsroom, Janette Redpath, for the opportunities, the training and the encouragement they gave me. I am also grateful to the many colleagues who shared the television and journalism experience with me and became my friends.

Ask Newcastle people what were the great changes. Without a doubt most would say that chaotic and terribly sad day of the earthquake of 1989, which I had to report, and whose dreadful results I witnessed firsthand. Another great change occurred with the closure of the BHP Steelworks. In many ways, though, the greatest change was the dredging of Newcastle's magnificent port. The first export income earned by the fledgling colony of New South Wales came from a shipment of coal from Newcastle to the colony of

Bengal. The dredging of the harbour, an initiative of the Wran Labor Government, has turned Newcastle into the world's largest coal port. Some 7,000 families in the Hunter rely directly on coal for their household income. Several times that number derives some of their household income from the industry.

I will not walk away from those good, hardworking Hunter families. However, Newcastle as a city and a region must look bravely to new industries, including alternative energy, to cement our growth. That is a challenge before us. Coal is far from Newcastle's biggest industry: neither was steel, as we all realised after BHP closed its works, if we had not realised it already. The electorate I represent has the highest proportion of residents who work in the health sector in any electorate within New South Wales. The city's great teaching hospital, with the busiest emergency department in the State, John Hunter Hospital, is not even in my electorate. It falls within the electorate of my colleague the newly elected member for Wallsend, as does the University of Newcastle's main campus. These are the two biggest campuses of employment in Newcastle: the hospital and the university.

Newcastle city is, as it always has been, a centre of services. According to the last published census figures, there are 16,000 workers in the central business district every day. That is four times the number who live in the central business district. Figures such as that—more workers than residents—occur generally only in Sydney, North Sydney and Botany Bay. Inner Newcastle has 1 per cent of the population of the lower Hunter region and provides 10 per cent of the region's jobs. This is the heart of Newcastle, a genuine central business district where decisions influence growth, employment, and the future of the region. This is the feature that makes Newcastle the second city of this State.

As more people recognise the advantages of being in the inner-city area—close to all services, yet also close to the magnificent beaches and the harbour—the number of residents grows. Newcastle has, for example, an extraordinary proportion of residents in the transition-to-work age group. They come for the educational opportunities in a university city and they come for the employment. While many of Newcastle's young people seek work in even larger cities, many more come from towns along the North Coast and from inland New South Wales to a city that offers many opportunities. As a city, we must continue to find opportunities that create jobs to ensure these smart, young people find the career paths that will encourage them to stay in our great city.

On the former BHP site, we have a tract of land that will provide new, diverse growth for our port. At Honeysuckle, we have harbour-side land creating a new commercial epicentre for our city. Newcastle East is also changing with the development of the former Royal Newcastle hospital site. We are a city in change. Like most other cities, Newcastle's development in the latter twentieth century was shaped by the motorcar, which filled the spaces between the bus routes and the rail lines with residents. It is little wonder that the issue of transport was raised with me so often during the election campaign. I doubt whether there will be a single solution because the city is changing so fast that as soon as we find one we will have to find another. Nevertheless, I am committed to identifying solutions capable of being delivered on the ground and then, when it is necessary, finding more.

I believe that with a strong voice in government and a community willing to become involved we can meet the challenges we face as a city and a region in transition. This is one of the reasons that my Labor colleagues and I resolved to work together to give the Hunter a voice in this Parliament. I mentioned that Newcastle has the highest proportion of health sector workers of all the electorates. It also has research capabilities beyond the expectations of a city of its size. In 1997, following my involvement in a telethon that raised \$3 million for children's cancer, I was part of a small group of people who made a bold decision to grow the medical research industry in Newcastle. We brought together the University of Newcastle, Hunter-New England Health Service and the community to form a Hunter Medical Research Institute [HMRI].

Ten years on I am recently retired as a director of the institute, but I am very proud to see the Hunter Medical Research Institute as one of the country's foremost medical research institutes. We have 400 researchers working collaboratively on world-leading research and our institute is part owned by our community, and that is very Newcastle. It is also typically Newcastle that, while we live in a city built on coal, literally as well as figuratively, we have researchers working on slowing climate change. After all, where but in the heart of the coalfields and the power generators would you find so much experience of energy and so much appreciation of its possible future directions?

The real story of Newcastle is its diverse capabilities. Perhaps the diversity was indicated by the fact that I was one of nine candidates at the recent election, a figure equalled in Epping, Hornsby and Marrickville but exceeded nowhere. Personally, I found it daunting. Among the candidates were the popularly elected lord mayor and the incumbent member with a combined experience of 42 years in elective office. Newcastle's great capabilities was shown by NBN television's decision to produce a debate among the candidates who had declared and to broadcast it in prime time. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

I know of no other place in Australia where a candidates' debate, other than between the party leaders, has been televised. I know of no other place where it would be done or could be done, and that is Newcastle. Imagine it and then do it and, if it has not been done before, all the more reason to try it. Newcastle has a long history to look back on. It is one of a handful of permanent settlements with a history of more than 200 years. It is something to be proud of, in particular, the way the community has overcome challenges that other Australians have never dreamed of facing. I mentioned the earthquake of 1989. I hope that, when I speak of the way the city has

rebuilt, no member will overlook the fact that 13 people died in that natural disaster.

In the hours, the days and the months that followed I saw a city overcome the shock of losing so many of its citizens in one fell swoop, of seeing 1,000 people made homeless in minutes. Yet, where there was a disaster, a phoenix has risen—not a ghostly remake of the old but a new living city that embraces its harbour and its beaches alongside its business centre, and that cherishes its history while building on its future. The new boom industries are in the construction and servicing of super yachts, and with tourism as we attract more and more cruise ships—perfect for a maritime city. Along the southern shore of the harbour, restaurants and bars have flowered like crepe myrtle at Christmas time, with a ridiculous ease that invites the question, "Why didn't we do this years ago?"

It is a recipe for tension, of course. Growth always is. The local daily paper recently editorialised on the changes, counting my election as a symptom. It is, I suppose, a small indicator of change to have a woman represent the city in this Chamber after only 150 years of representative government. To me, though, change in the city was the rationale for my candidacy. I believe that we could not go on doing things in the old ways. The choice that the people of Newcastle made on 24 March was a victory for change. I acknowledge that change and I will try, where and when I can, to manage it so that it enriches life in Newcastle and expands the options that Newcastle people have.

Social cohesion depends not on clinging to the past but on listening to the needs of people. It depends on ensuring that, from the greatest to the least, they are effectively represented. My principal goal in this place is to represent all the people of Newcastle. That is what the Australian Labor Party does. All who worked for this day—and they came from many places, many jobs, many unions and many backgrounds—can hold their heads high. I thank them all for keeping me in tune with the ideals of the great party that I represent. I thank the Premier for his leadership and inspiration. I thank both Mark Arbib and Luke Foley—two sides of our party who came together to give Newcastle the opportunity to embrace the future.

What followed was a mammoth seven-month battle, one of the toughest in living memory in the Labor Party. I thank Peter Bentley, Korena Flannagan, Lenda Oshalem, Lauren Suttner, Lisa Sutton, Jen Flemming, and my campaign director, Kaye Simmons, for their support night and day. I would also like to thank my family. It will be a year next week that my father suffered a massive stroke. He moved into aged care during the campaign. My mother has always been the backbone of our family, and she continues to be an active member of our local church and the Gloucester community while supporting my father. My dad is wheelchair bound and has difficulty with everyday tasks. He is much admired in Gloucester for his gentleness, fine intelligence and great religious faith.

My hope is that, maybe not today but possibly by the day my time in this Parliament concludes, I can make my mother, my father, my sisters and my brothers as proud of me as I am of them for all they have given me. I know that my nephews, Joshua, Lachlan, Alexander, Keilyn, Nicholas and Benjamin, will grow up knowing the great bond of family, and that opportunity is theirs just as it should be for everyone. I have chosen to fight for the people of Newcastle, to rally for those who have less and deserve more. Whatever path my nephews choose and however tough the fight, they will have my support and enduring love.

I have met many wonderful people on this election journey. I met them in their homes, I met them in the street, and I have seen in Mayfield and in Waratah, in Georgetown and in Hamilton North, in Merewether and in Adamstown, on Stockton and on Carrington, that Newcastle has more than its fair share of talent, invention, strength, kindness, generosity, and brave, brave hearts. I look forward to working with the Council of the City of Newcastle where our responsibilities overlap, as they often will. I am confident that we can work together for the betterment of this city and for the region as a whole and, by doing so, help build a better Hunter region to contribute, as the Hunter always contributed so handsomely, to the greater wellbeing of this State.

When the people had their say on 24 March they chose courageously in Newcastle, as in New South Wales. I bring to this Chamber the hopes and aspirations of a city in change—a city that has taken the brave step of saying yes to its future. The people of Newcastle chose the future over the past, they chose imagination over doubt, and they chose boldness over fear. That is what I hope to return to them. In the words of Georges Danton, one of the leaders of the French Revolution: Boldness, and again boldness, and forever boldness.