



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Assembly, 26 November 2008, Corrected Copy)

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INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The SPEAKER: It is with great pleasure that I welcome family and friends of the member for Cabramatta, whom I am very pleased to call to the lectern to make his inaugural speech.

Mr NICKOLA LALICH (Cabramatta) [6.30 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): First, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we are meeting, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I acknowledge their elders and descendants both past and present. Their culture and traditions are important to us all, and are part and parcel of the history of this great nation of ours. It is with honour and humility that I stand in this House as the newly elected member for Cabramatta. I congratulate my colleagues the members for Lakemba, Ryde and Port Macquarie on their election. As the new member for Cabramatta addressing the House for the first time I recognise my predecessors. The first member for Cabramatta was the Hon. Eric Bedford who entered Parliament on 24 February 1968 as the member for Fairfield. In 1980 an electoral redistribution created the electorate of Cabramatta.

I first met Eric at Liverpool Boys High School where he was one of my teachers. My earliest memory of Eric was as the school's cadet master. I remember him vividly conducting the cadet parades in the school quadrangle and playing fields. I recall my horror at the sight of cadets collapsing in the heat during the appropriately called passing out parades. Eric was a decent family man whose interest was to serve the community as a teacher and later as a member of Parliament. On 16 September 2007 it was a great pleasure for me, with the assistance of the Hon. Gough Whitlam, to recognise the service of Eric Bedford posthumously by naming the education room in the new \$13.5 million Cabravale Leisure Centre the Eric Bedford Room.

Eric Bedford became the first Minister for Education in the Wran Labor Government in May 1976. He was the first teacher to become Minister for Education in a Labor Government in New South Wales. Eric was a close friend and his passing was a very sad time for all of us who were privileged to know him. Upon Eric's retirement the seat was contested and won by John Newman in a by-election in February 1986. John Newman was dedicated to the electorate of Cabramatta. He fought for the people of Cabramatta to gain the services required and expected by the community. John Newman was no stranger to politics and like many members in this place came from local government. He served as an alderman on Fairfield City Council from 1977 until 1987.

John Newman was an avid sportsman with a passion for karate. He spent thousands of hours instructing students at the local RSL youth club. John served on the New South Wales Health Advisory Council for three terms and the Sports House Advisory Committee. He was also a member of the Australian Sports Commission, President of the Federation Australian Karate-do Organisation and an organiser for the Federated Clerks Union from 1970 to 1986. John Newman was best known for being an outspoken anti-drug campaigner in Cabramatta and was actively involved with local ethnic community groups. We were all shocked and saddened at the untimely death of John Newman. On 10 November 2002, with the support of John's mother, Helen, and brother Peter, as mayor I had the honour of officially naming the Prairiewood Leisure Centre's new 50-metre pool and grandstand the John Newman Memorial Pool. This was in recognition of someone who had given so much of his life to the sporting youth of our area.

The passing of John Newman created a by-election, which was duly won by the Hon. Reba Meagher. Reba Meagher was a dedicated and conscientious member whose electorate at the time was plagued by drugs and crime. While drugs and crime were a problem nationwide, the media was obsessed with Cabramatta. Media reporting on the Cabramatta drug problem would provide break-up statistics on the ethnic composition of the region, directly relating the drug problem to our diversity and ethnic make-up. The media's treatment of Cabramatta was nothing less than racist in connecting the drug trade to the racial composition of our region. Cabramatta was continually reported as Australia's Mecca for drugs and crime, with the stories themselves serving to attract further crime and drug activity. This was the bias and reporting frenzy that Reba Meagher was up against as the local member defending the integrity of a community whose sole offence was its cultural and racial diversity. The media went so far as to connect Reba Meagher's performance as a member of Parliament with the cause of the problem. On some occasions the media questioned whether a woman was up to the job. As Cabramatta improved, the connection with the performance of the local member was conveniently forgotten.

During her 14 years as the local member Reba worked extremely hard to make Cabramatta a safer place. Her achievements speak for themselves. In April 2003 Reba was promoted to the position of Minister for Fair Trading and Minister Assisting the Minister for Commerce. During her time in Parliament Reba held seven different portfolios in total. Some of her many achievements as a local

member include a new police station for Cabramatta, funding for the Cabramatta Leisure Centre and redeveloping the Berrina Street overpass at Canley Vale. Reba secured a five-year, \$30 million anti-drug strategy, which returned the streets of Cabramatta to the community. She was the proud patron of the Fairfield Cabramatta PCYC and a major force behind the success of Cabramatta's City Watch Program, which was aimed at public safety. The electorate of Cabramatta is a much better place thanks to the dedication and service of the Hon. Reba Meagher.

Without doubt, the Fairfield local government area is the most multicultural area in Australia. It is unique, diverse, vibrant and colourful. Communities respect and support one another, shops trade seven days a week and tourists come from all over Sydney. Cabramatta will continue to demand the attention of governments, and I can assure my electorate I will be knocking on Ministers' doors to secure the support necessary to address our needs. Two major challenges face my electorate. The first challenge relates to the need for more car parking in the Cabramatta CBD. The uniqueness of Cabramatta means that 12,000 to 15,000 people visit the CBD every weekend. This places enormous stress on our limited car parking. A combined effort between the Rees Government and Fairfield City Council will be needed to meet the demands of a very popular tourist destination that supports the livelihoods and recreational activities of thousands of people weekly.

The second challenge is the Southern Sydney Freight Line, which rips through the heart of Cabramatta. I understand the importance of this line and its future economic benefits to Australia by removing heavy transport off our roads and onto rail. Nonetheless, this freight line will smash through the heart of Cabramatta and the proposal to erect Berlin-style walls to mitigate noise, splitting our town centre in two, is simply not good enough. When fully operational, half-a-kilometre-long freight trains will travel through the centre of Cabramatta every 30 minutes, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Apart from the second-rate noise solution, the proposal also involves resuming nearly half of Broomfield Street and the loss of 170 commuter car parking spaces on the east side of Cabramatta.

The proponent, Australian Rail Track Corporation [ARTC], has publicly conceded Cabramatta will be the worst affected area on the whole line. Compensation so far offered by Australian Rail Track Corporation is to replace the loss of these spaces somewhere within 400 metres of the railway station and a one-off payment of \$750,000. That is just not acceptable. Commuters cannot be expected to walk half a kilometre to the railway station. Australian Rail Track Corporation should be an equal partner in building a new multi-deck car park within 50 metres of the railway station on land earmarked by Fairfield council. I will continue fighting for a better deal from Australian Rail Track Corporation with the support of Federal members Jason Clare and Julia Irwin.

I would now like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the people who have supported me throughout my personal and political life. Without their involvement I would not have the honour of standing here before you today. Firstly, I thank my father Sava and my mother Stefanija for their strength of character, vision and capacity for self-sacrifice in bringing us to this wonderful country. I am grateful to my sister and brothers, who have supported me wholeheartedly through this journey of life. I thank the mother of my children, Barbara, and place on record our extreme pride in the professional and personal success of our son Paul and daughter Kerrie, both qualified lawyers with happy and healthy families. They are our proudest contribution to Australia.

My father was very proud that his grandchildren had obtained a level in life that would never have been available to them had they not come to this wonderful country. My grandchildren, Nicholas, Claudia and Liam, whom we spoil terribly, will hopefully never know the poverty my family endured. I place on record my sincere thanks to my campaign directors Kaila Murnain and Sam Dastyari from the Australian Labor Party head office. Their expertise and guidance was invaluable during the election campaign. A special thanks to Premier Nathan Rees, Deputy Premier Carmel Tebbutt, and the Hon. Graeme West, Joe Tripodi, Michael Daley, Dr Andrew McDonald and Federal members of Parliament Jason Clare and Julia Irwin for their assistance on my campaign.

I also thank my parliamentary colleagues Ninos Khoshaba and the Hon. Grant McBride for their ongoing support and help in adjusting to this role. I thank Tom Hollywood, Adrian Wong, Tom Pacey, Lenda Oshalem, David Saliba and the many Young Labor campaigners involved in this Labor victory. I thank my councillor colleagues, past and present, who have supported me throughout my 21 years in local government. In particular I thank and acknowledge former mayors Anwar Khoshaba, OAM, and Lawrence White, councillors Sam Yousif, Albert Mooshi, Frank Carbone, Sarah Trapla and Dennis Huynh, and my branch members from Mount Pritchard, Cabramatta, Canley Vale and Parkes areas who are the backbone of the Labor Party within my electorate. I make special mention of Syd Hugen, Joan Windsor, Emma Brindley, Tk Ly and Tony Mittiga, who have helped me with many campaigns. I thank Del Bennett for her many years of friendship, support and assistance. My greatest thanks go to the people of Cabramatta who have shown their faith in electing me to this office of honour and trust. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

As a migrant boy born in a refugee camp in Egypt I could never have fathomed in my wildest dreams the prospect of becoming mayor of a city and a member of Parliament. It has happened many times in this wonderful country and I believe mine is just one of the millions of great Australian stories worth placing on the record. My family came to Australia from the former Yugoslavia via Egypt. In 1944, during the Second World War, my parents and their five children fled their homeland just before the invasion of their village. The invasion of neighbouring villages led to the execution of all adult males. At the time it was understood simply as war but it formed part of what is now recognised as ethnic cleansing.

The escape through Italy of my family and many other families involved the risk of being caught by enemy soldiers. The number of children involved heightened the risk. Mothers were required to keep their children absolutely quiet, particularly at night when any noise jeopardised the whole group. Mothers were warned that if children could not be kept quiet for whatever reason, the children would be suffocated or have their throats cut to protect the rest of the group. This was horrific for mothers and, thankfully, to the best of my knowledge, no child was killed during my family's escape. On crossing into Italy, families gave themselves up to the Italian army, who gave them the option to either return home or be transported to the international refugee camps in Egypt. Returning home was not an option.

During the first two months in Egypt my mother lost three children to sickness and disease—Zoran, six, Stana, three, and Todor, 18 months. They lived in Egypt for four years where, in the beginning, the death of children and the elderly was a daily occurrence. In 1945 I was born in the city of El Shutt, just outside of Cairo. We lived in makeshift tents. Sand was everywhere—in your clothes, your hair and in your food. There was no certainty or hope about the future as practically every country was at war and no country or government was in a position to assist. In 1948, under the Ben Chifley Labor Government's new immigration policy, my family was accepted for immigration to Australia. On 20 October 1948, my father Sava, mother Stefanija, sister Angela, brothers Peter, Alan and I boarded the ship *Wooster Victory* from Port Said and started our exodus out of Egypt to the promised land of Australia.

My family arrived in Melbourne on 17 November 1948 and was moved to the immigration camp at Bonagilla in Albury where we were processed. After six weeks we were relocated to the immigration hostel at Uranquinty where we spent some six to nine months. Before arriving in Australia my parents had an extremely difficult life. They had no education, were forced to leave their homeland and mourned the loss of three children. Australia was the first opportunity life had presented to them. Under the terms of the immigration policy, my father was required to be with the Water Board for two years in work gangs laying water and sewer lines throughout the Botany area. Even though he was earning a minimal wage, barely sufficient to sustain five children and two adults, there was always food on the table.

Like many of the poor immigrants of the time, we did not enjoy the privileges commonly experienced by average Australian families. For example, while we celebrated Christmas and birthdays with family dinners, we could never afford presents, and the concept of a holiday was out of the question. We were not alone in this predicament as most migrant families experienced the same difficulties. As children we understood we were poor but we always felt safe, strong and secure thanks to the love and support my parents gave us. In late 1950 my youngest brother George was born and in the same year my father found employment with the Post Master General's Department at Leightonfield, where he worked for the next 23 years as a cleaner until his retirement.

In 1951 friends of my parents from the former Yugoslavia convinced them the way to prosperity was to buy a farm and become market gardeners. In 1952 my parents purchased an 11-acre farm at Bonnyrigg for the princely sum of £320. My mother had the difficult role of raising her children and also working the farm seven days a week. My father would help after work and on weekends. My brothers and I worked on the farm as best children could, both before and after school. Life was hard working in those harsh and demanding conditions. The promised prosperity was slow coming as many migrant families took up market gardening. Whilst it was a difficult life for my parents, we enjoyed our childhood playing in the bush and swimming in the creeks and dams throughout the area. We made our own fun as our parents were always working the farm.

My school life began at Granville Primary School in 1950. Upon moving to Bonnyrigg in 1952 I transferred to St Johns Park Public School where I spent the rest of my primary school years. In 1958 I started my secondary education at Liverpool Boys High School, gaining my Intermediate Certificate in 1960. My father's aspiration was for his sons to have a trade so in 1961 I started as an apprentice with Braybon Brothers Pty Ltd as an electrical fitter mechanic. Within the first month of my employment I became a member of the Electrical Trades Union. I remain a member of that union to this day. During my apprenticeship I attended Granville Technical College where I completed my trade course in 1966. In 1967 I started with Prospect Electricity—now Integral Energy—where I worked for 23 years.

In late 1971 I joined the Liverpool West branch of the Australian Labor party through a friend Kevin Napier, who had been the mayor of Liverpool. In a very short time I was introduced to our Federal member, and soon to become Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. During the ensuing years I got to know Gough very well. He was a mentor and friend. I was extremely moved when on the day before the Cabramatta by-election I received a call from Gough wishing me all the best and good luck for the election. In 1987 I was elected an alderman to Fairfield City Council. In 1991 I served as deputy mayor, and later in 1993 I was elected mayor for the first time. In 2002 I was re-elected mayor for an 18-month term. In 2004 I was endorsed unopposed to stand as the first popularly elected Mayor of Fairfield and won with 62 per cent of the vote. At the recent local government elections I was re-elected by popular vote and I am now one of the longest serving mayors of our city.

In concluding, on reaching the sixtieth anniversary of my family coming to this country I must say that Australia is truly a country of hope and opportunity. It has afforded a refugee the chance through commitment, resilience and ambition to have the honour of representing his community. I know Cabramatta as well as I know myself. I wish for it what all of us wish for the communities we

serve. In the case of Cabramatta, the heart of Australia's most diverse city, that just means giving them a "Fair Go"—a core Australian value. That is all we ask for and that is all we need. I thank you, Mr Speaker, and my parliamentary colleagues for the courtesy you have extended to me this evening.