



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 22 February 2017.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Geoff Provest): I acknowledge in the gallery Federal member for Barton and former member for Canterbury, the Hon. Linda Burney. I also acknowledge Federal member for Dobell Ms Emma McBride and Consul General of Greece Stavros Kyrimis, guests of the member for Canterbury. Pursuant to an earlier resolution, I invite the Auslan interpreter to take their place at the left shoulder of the member for Canterbury.

Ms SOPHIE COTSIS (Canterbury) (17:02): I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay tribute to their elders past and present. Last August my family and I drove to Canberra to watch the first Indigenous woman elected to the House of Representatives give her inaugural speech. Member for Barton Linda Burney, who is here today, made history that day. I pay tribute to her hard work and commitment to the people of Canterbury. It is with great humility that I am elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, the oldest Parliament in the land. It is a privilege to represent the community I grew up in. I was born in Canterbury Hospital and baptised at the iconic All Saints Belmore. I thank Father Chris for 40 years of service. I was educated at Canterbury South and Kingsgrove High, attended Greek school at Earlwood and spent many Saturdays at Mitilinian House.

Canterbury has changed a lot, but the traits that make it great are more apparent than ever. We are a proud, tough, hardworking, vibrant and diverse community. Fifty per cent of all residents of our community were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. We speak different languages and follow many religions. But in the Stewart Stand at Belmore Oval there is only one faith—the Bulldogs! Some would dispute that and say the Dragons. Since the end of the Second World War Canterbury has been a first point of settlement for many migrants. They were factory workers and tradies by day, helping to build modern Australia. By night and on weekends they were building their communities. Our electorate is home to strong and proud Chinese, Irish, Greek, Lebanese, Korean and Vietnamese communities. They have been joined more recently by growing communities from the Pacific Islands, Africa, Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Syria, who are weaving their stories into multicultural Australia. This is a country of community, of hope and of progress. Within a single generation the children of migrants have achieved more than our parents ever dreamt possible. I acknowledge and pay respect to my parents and the millions of migrants who left their homes to come to Australia for a better future for themselves and their families.

I have been fortunate to grow up in a country that is at its heart generous, caring and accepting. It is a country that has prospered and where so many cultures have created that prosperity. The work of elected representatives is never done. One of the most important tasks we share is to ensure that Australia extends the hand of opportunity to all, so that everyone gets a fair go. That is who we are as a nation. We do what we can so no-one is left behind simply because of where they were born, their cultural background or their disability.

My migrant story is now a familiar one in our nation's oldest Parliament. It is a story I proudly share with many from the Australian Labor Party, including figures such as Morris Iemma, Barbara Perry, Amanda Fazio, Shaoquett Moselmane and Ernest Wong. It is a story shared with some members opposite also, including the Premier. The story may no longer be new, but the message remains the same: Australia is a land of opportunity. Visionaries like Chifley, Whitlam, Wran, Hawke and Keating put important rungs on the ladder so that all Australians could continue to climb towards a better life. Their achievements include fair wages and conditions, including penalty rates for working unsocial hours, Medicare, a strong education system, nation-building infrastructure and public transport, superannuation, child care, equal opportunity for women, and the policy of multiculturalism to ensure that inclusion and diversity is at the heart of what it means to be Australian.

We are a nation that welcomes people from every faith and land. I, along with my colleagues, will work hard to keep the toxicity of extremist views from destroying what we have built together. To racism and intolerance I will not yield an inch. On 31 March, with my friends the member for Watson, Tony Burke, and the member for Lakemba, Jihad Dib, and many of our community ambassadors we will Walk for Respect in Lakemba. I call on everyone to join us. One group that has done so much for



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working men and women in our State is the New South Wales union movement. We are lucky to live and work in a nation that values fairness and opportunity so highly, especially in the workplace. It was not always so. That is why I pay tribute to Mark Morey from Unions NSW and his colleagues for their work and dedication on a daily basis to protect the rights of workers, to ensure fairness and to work together to advance the future of New South Wales.

When I entered the Legislative Council 6½ years ago Labor confronted defeat on a scale not seen since 1988. The Australian Labor Party faced a task of monumental proportions, but we have worked really hard. I am proud to have been part of Labor's rebuild from day one. I acknowledge John Robertson for his efforts and commitment to the task. In 2015, under Luke Foley's leadership, New South Wales heard our message again for a decent public health system, TAFE and schools, essential public services, a strong economy that creates opportunities for everyone, the right investment in the right infrastructure, and an environment that is properly protected. Now, after a little over six years in opposition, we face a Government already on its third Premier and racked by poor decisions such as selling off assets that belong to and serve the New South Wales taxpayer. The sale of our Land and Property Information service is a short-sighted cash grab derided by experts for the higher risk of fraud and lower levels of service it would deliver.

No wonder after six years of the Coalition Government there are very much two New South Wales—one New South Wales for those on the Government benches, the New South Wales where essential public services are an optional extra or at best receive minimal funding to provide minimal services. It is a New South Wales where public assets are there only to be sold off because of an ideology that entrenches disadvantage. And there is the other New South Wales, the one where the rest of us live, the New South Wales where it gets tougher every day to make the household budget work, where families have to do more with less because of cuts and bad decisions by this Government.

This Government gloats about bulging property receipts, yet families across the State struggle to afford to own their homes. Families are concerned about the privatisation of our public health system. Our prized electricity assets have been sold, entrenching crippling household energy bills forever. It is a New South Wales where TAFE, the institution that helps our young people to learn a trade, has been gutted and slashed, local council democracy has been plunged into turmoil, our students and dedicated teachers confront an ever-growing school maintenance backlog, and where domestic violence is a scourge we know we must wipe out yet we face cuts to women's refuges and services.

A stroll through any shopping centre will tell you that for all of this Government's glossy brochures the people of New South Wales are finding it tougher to get by. If things are as rosy as this Government would have us believe, why are the people we all serve—the people of New South Wales—not reaping the rewards? The next election is just two years away. The message from this side of the Chamber could not be clearer: NSW Labor is standing firm with the people of New South Wales and is ready to govern. For my part, the continuous work of rebuilding will be where I can most make a difference. My electorate of Canterbury has been the target of Coalition cuts before. In 1993, the Coalition Government tried to close Canterbury Hospital. A grassroots campaign followed. Bob Carr pledged to save it and to invest \$180 million in its rebirth—a promise delivered to the letter.

Two decades later Canterbury Hospital is again under strain. With a growing and ageing population it needs to be ready for the future, but it is not even meeting the needs of today. During the by-election campaign we met thousands of people who made it clear what mattered, from small business owners in Earlwood to parents outside Harcourt Public School, to tradies in Belmore with Barrie Unsworth or to bus drivers at Kingsgrove depot and people waiting in general practitioner rooms. They asked us to send a message to this Government: Canterbury Hospital must always stay and it must be properly funded. The Government might not want to listen, but Labor is listening, and we have heard the people of Canterbury loud and clear. That is why Canterbury Hospital will be a priority in a Foley Labor Government.



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The jewel in the crown of my electorate is the band of waterways that runs through the region like a silver thread—the Cooks River and Wollie Creek, and the parklands that enclose them. They bring joy to people from across New South Wales, only thanks to a community campaign to secure local, State and Federal Government cooperation and funding. I thank the Wollie Creek Preservation Society, whose dedicated members have worked tirelessly to secure this precious part of Sydney. The expansion of Wollie Creek Regional Park is a Labor commitment we made during the by-election because we saw first-hand just what this meant to the community and the environment. Working with the society, Labor gave notice of a bill to secure the transfer of Roads and Maritime Services land to the park. Subsequently the Government came to the table to support this transfer. But there is still much more to be done to complete the Wollie Creek Regional Park, and I will continue to work with the society to make sure the job is finished.

In our region unemployment is above the State average, but even worse is the scourge of underemployment—the defining feature of the twenty-first century labour market. In Canterbury one-quarter of all workers are stuck in insecure jobs. They do not have the full-time status that allows them to get a home loan and to provide for their kids. Our young people are also struggling. One in seven young people in Canterbury cannot find work. Last year, I held a multicultural youth roundtable. The strong message from youth leaders was, "We need jobs, jobs, jobs." And yet more barriers are being put in their way. Public sector apprenticeships, cadetships and traineeships have dried up. Good governments create opportunities for work. But this Government has the wrong priorities. It spent \$200 million on consultants last year when it could have funded more than 2,500 apprenticeships and the like. For NSW Labor government is always part of the solution when people are doing it tough, and there are many of them under this Government. We have double-digit underemployment, double-digit disability unemployment and double-digit youth unemployment. This is a crisis.

On the streets of the real New South Wales there is a vacuum where government should be showing leadership, especially when it comes to job creation and economic opportunity. We have a truly powerful weapon in our economic toolbox that should make it even easier for local businesses to compete in the global marketplace. Ours is a place where many languages are spoken, where so many skilled workers from so many countries have chosen to build their lives and raise families. In twenty-first century Australia our local businesses compete in markets around the world. Their know-how, innovation and specialist services are valued. The 8,847 small businesses in the area are the backbone of the local economy. They contribute so much but are often unseen. Hardworking local businesses like Frutex, which exports dried snacks across the world and which employs many local people. It is a real local success story.

Our cultural diversity means there are many more businesses that could be following in their footsteps by making the most of language and culture in an online economy that has overcome the tyranny of distance. That is why Labor's languages policy is so important. One of the most precious gifts my parents gave me was the Hellenic language. My husband, Arthur, and I are passing on that gift to our children, George and Cassandra. At this point, with the indulgence of the House, please allow me to honour my bilingual tradition:

Ευχαριστώ όλους και όλες που με βοήθησαν να εκλεγώ.

Ευχαριστώ την ελληνική παροικία. Υπόσχομαι ότι θα δουλεύω πάντα για το καλό του λαού.

I said, "I thank everybody that helped me get elected. I thank the Greek community. I will always work for the good of the community." Across Canterbury, in Campsie and Kingsgrove, it is clear that Sydney's many cultures and languages are our strength and part of our economic arsenal as we compete across the Asia-Pacific and an increasingly digital global economy. Under a Foley Labor Government primary school students will learn a second language. Diversity is a source of strength and economic prosperity. For Canterbury, Labor's languages policy will only strengthen local businesses and give them a competitive edge in a twenty-first century economy. But we can do even



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better. We can lift our vision higher. In a part of Sydney that is feeling the strain of underemployment, of high youth unemployment, we must do better.

Canterbury has always been an important part of Sydney's economic success. It was at the forefront of job-creating innovation from the first Sugar Mill of the 1800s to manufacturing in the 1960s. There was Sunbeam at Clemton Park, one of the factories where my mum worked. Giving small business better access to the professional skills our multicultural community offers is a critical next step if our area is to play its part in modern Australia. We have seen how start-up hubs have driven the digital economy, keeping Australia competitive because they foster collaboration and new ideas and couple it with harder-edged business smarts. That is why I will advocate very strongly to see the establishment of a multicultural hub for start-ups and small businesses to make the most of what Canterbury has to offer so they can tap into the global marketplace to connect the expertise of local professionals, traders and entrepreneurs via a network that reaches across languages and cultures to drive the local economy, to harness a multicultural workforce that offers employers an unprecedented knowledge base to tap business opportunities at home and abroad, and to create ventures that will unlock jobs for our kids into the future by removing cultural and language barriers so we better understand the opportunities of overseas markets. Turning the tide of inequality is the job of every government.

Before closing, I want to say a word about disability employment. I am so proud that Federal Labor set the gold standard by pioneering the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and I acknowledge the efforts of leader Bill Shorten. The next step is to stop the talents of Australians with disability going to waste—people who cannot get work of any kind because they have a disability. That is un-Australian. The unemployment rate for people with disability who are ready, willing and able to work is at 10 per cent—an absolute shame. Among developed countries our record is not great. While other countries and trading partners like China are charging ahead with effective policies, such as tax incentives for companies that exceed quotas, in New South Wales we have gone backwards. Not so long ago 4.8 per cent of State Government employees were people with disability. But in recent years that has dropped to 2.8 per cent. Jack, a young man that Helen Westwood and I met recently at Labor's Auslan Branch, told us of his struggle to find work simply because he is deaf. He said:

People dismiss you if you can't communicate in the same way they do ... just because you're a deaf person, you shouldn't be left out on the fringe.

Leaving Australians out like this tells me that we need to be kinder, but also that we have to be smarter. Inclusion is a basic human right, but it is also an economic necessity. If we matched the average for the top Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in terms of disability inclusion, we would add \$50 billion to our economy by 2050. I want to see genuine policy reform for government agencies and the private sector to employ more people with disability. We need a bipartisan approach, and today I will commit to working with the Government, with business and with the community to ensure that not only is our public service a model employer for Australians with disability but also other companies demonstrate what they can do in employing people with disability.

Being a member of Parliament is an immense privilege, but no-one gets to this place alone. I had a huge army—an army of amazing people, many of whom are in the gallery—and I thank them all from the bottom of my heart. I thank my amazing family, my wonderful colleagues, Labor branch members from my local area and from across New South Wales, and friends—long-time friends and friends I went to kindy with—who believed not just in me but also in my story and in the values that I represent. I could not be more grateful and humble for the people who have supported me over many, many years. I offer my profoundest thanks to the incredibly dedicated team at NSW Labor, led by our amazing and hardworking brilliant General Secretary, Kaila Murnain. I thank the next Premier of New South Wales, Luke Foley, and the next Deputy Premier of New South Wales, Michael Daley. I thank



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Linda Burney, Kevin Moss, and the wonderful Jean Stewart, widow of the late Kevin Stewart, whose memory we honour tonight. Thank you for being here; it means a lot to me.

I thank my good friend the amazing Tara Moriarty, whom I admire and respect. I thank the hundreds of rusted-on Labor Party members and supporters in Canterbury and across New South Wales for their support, and I thank the hard work of my State Electorate Council led by David Bailey McKay and George Bousamra. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my very good friend Tony Burke, and I thank Anthony Albanese, Morris Iemma, Kristina Keneally, Carmel Tebbutt, Robert Furolo, Kayee Griffin, Leo McLeay, Chris Bowen, Michelle Rowland and Emma McBride.

I would also like to thank the following people who have supported and stuck by me for many, many years and since the early days when we were in local Young Labor: Bill Kritharas, the Koutoulas family, the Faros family, Karl Bitar, Jim Tsolakakis, Jim Bakopanos and Shane Prince. I thank our incredible campaign team led by the wonderful Jack Power—we worked so hard day in, day out because I could hear the leader's voice in my head, "We will not take Canterbury for granted." They are: John, Sravya, Vanessa, Rob, James, Jennifer, Thomas, Emma, Taylor, Bobby, Michael, Dobby, Katherine, Todd, Nikitas, Lynne and the Cox family, Di, Anne, Esta, Floris, Rod, Paul Reid, Clare Raffan, Maria Rallis, Kirsten Andrews, Annette Mastrangelo, David Dawson, David and Jane Jones, Angela Song and Ellen Hart.

I also thank the fantastic people I have met over the past 6½ years from regional New South Wales when I used to be the duty member of the Legislative Council for Maitland and Port Stephens. I thank them very much for their support. I thank many councillors: John Azarias, Eamonn Fitzpatrick, Tom Hollywood, Daniel Barbar, Dom Ofner, Deb and Michael Costa, Magda and Steve Kamper, Prue Car, Irene Anestis—Labor Life member and local stalwart—and Father Nectaros. I thank the Labor friendship groups that supported me throughout the campaign, headed by Kenrick Cheah, Louay Moustapha, Ernest Wong, Hassan Kureshi and Frank Chiment.

I am a proud unionist and I thank the many unions that have supported me and workers in New South Wales through the union movement: Mark Morey, Graeme Kelly, Bernie Smith, Bob Nanva, Alex Claasens, Gerard Hayes, Natalie Lang, Scott Weber from the NSW Police Association and Tony Sheldon. I thank my friends from the Australian Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union, the Public Service Association, the Nurses and Midwives' Association, my good friends from the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union at Campsie, and Theo Samo and Con Tsiakoulis from the Plumbers Union.

I am a shadow Minister and I have seen so much good work from many community organisations not only in my electorate but also across New South Wales. I want to acknowledge them because they deserve an acknowledgement—and I am sorry if I miss anybody out. I thank the Chief Executive Officer of the Deaf Society, Leonie Jackson, for coming today. I thank the many disability and carer organisations for the amazing work they do. I thank the Council for Intellectual Disability; Carers NSW; our multicultural media; the Greek Orthodox Community of NSW and long-serving president Harry Danalis; and the chair of the Sydney Greek Festival, Nia Karteris, which starts this Sunday. I hope to see everyone in the next few months.

I thank Maha Abdo from the Muslim Women Association, the Chinese Australian Support Services, the Korean Society, the Korean Welfare Service, the dynamic and vibrant parents and citizens community of Canterbury, St Basils services, Co.As.It, the Canterbury State Emergency Service, Canterbury Meals on Wheels, Metro Assist, Asian Women at Work, the Rotary Club of Campsie, the local chambers of commerce, the Federation of Community Languages, ECC, Sydney women's domestic violence counselling services, the Australasian Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, the Hellenic Lyceum, the Women's Electoral Lobby, LAMP, Canterbury Bankstown Harmony Group and the wonderful parliamentary staff.



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I thank very much the clubs in my local electorate that do fantastic work: Canterbury Leagues Club, Canterbury Hurlstone Park RSL and Campsie RSL. I wish a special happy ninetieth birthday to the Hellenic Club. A number of people have supported me but are no longer with us; they are here in spirit. They are: the late Mr Psomas, Emmanuel Tsardoulis, Mr Anestis and Mr Spencer.

I thank my incredible husband, Arthur—he is my soulmate and the love of my life—for his encouragement. I thank my beautiful children, George and Cassandra, who keep my feet firmly on the ground. I am very proud of them. I have spoken a lot about my mum and dad in the other place—I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. I thank my wonderful brother, Billy, my opinionated father-in-law, George, and my beautiful late mum-in-law Maria—Mikri YiaYia—who is looking down on us tonight and is very proud. I thank my extended family and friends. To all those whom I have not mentioned by name but who are deep in my heart, I say thank you. I also extend my congratulations to both the member for Orange and the member for Wollongong. November 12 will always be very special to the three of us. I will work hard to serve and represent the people of Canterbury and New South Wales. I thank the House.