



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Assembly, 10 May 2011, Corrected Copy)

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday, 10 May 2011.

Mr MARK SPEAKMAN (Cronulla) [6.24 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): For thousands of years the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal nation lived in what is today the Cronulla electorate. Then in 1770 Captain Cook landed at Kurnell and, as they say, the rest is history. Two hundred and forty-one years later, Cronulla is a vibrant community in the Sutherland shire—a microcosm of middle Australia. Its backbone is hardworking families from all walks of life. It has a strong sporting culture and a strong culture of volunteerism. One in four adults regularly contributes in this way—in surf clubs, sports clubs, parents and citizens associations, RSLs, aged care, motherhood support, disabled support, bush care, precinct committees and many, many more activities.

A new member of Parliament customarily waxes lyrical about his or her electorate. But let's face it: it is hard to think of any other electorate in New South Wales as blessed by nature as Cronulla. Most, but sadly not all, of the natural beauty the Gweagal people knew remains. The electorate is surrounded by water on three sides, with Sydney's largest and most spectacular beach to the east, magnificent waterways to the north and south, and the world's second oldest national park just across Port Hacking. The Kurnell peninsula is home to the Kamay Botany Bay National Park and to the internationally listed Towra Point Nature Reserve.

It is now my honour and privilege to represent the people of Cronulla. Cronulla is where I grew up, where I spent most of my adult life and where I have returned to live. I have been in the Cronulla electorate for many milestones in its history—and sadly we are still waiting for others. Firstly, I was there in 1965 when I went across the Captain Cook Bridge the day it opened. But 46 years later, we are still waiting for the rest of the F6! Secondly, I was there in 1970, when I saw the Queen drive down the Kingsway in Caringbah after the 200th anniversary re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing at Kurnell. But 41 years later, we are still waiting for Kurnell, the birthplace of modern Australia and the meeting place of two cultures, to be given the respect and funding that it deserves. And, thirdly, while I have watched other grand finals on TV, in 1978 I saw the Cronulla Sharks play in the rugby league grand final replay at the Sydney Cricket Ground. But alas, 33 years later, we are still waiting for a Sharks grand final win!

As to the first of those milestones, traffic congestion for Cronulla commuters is worse than ever and I will fight for the F6 extension. As to the second, I will fight for proper funding for Kurnell as in 2020 it approaches the 250th anniversary of the meeting of two cultures. But, following on from the third milestone, unlike some members of the national Parliament who left open the remotest possibility of playing full forward for the Bulldogs or captaining the Broncos, I can categorically rule out ever playing for the Sharks.

And I was in the Cronulla electorate for a fourth milestone—election night 1984. Now some people say that "Cronulla" is an old Aboriginal word that means "Malcolm Kerr". Election night 1984 was when Cronulla became the most marginal seat in New South Wales after Malcolm won it from Labor. Then over the next 27 years, "Killer" Kerr, who is here tonight in the gallery, set about transforming Cronulla into the jewel in the Liberal crown in Sydney's south. As we all know, Malcolm is widely respected for the quiet, unassuming and dignified manner in which he has served his constituents with enormous diligence over those 27 years.

I cannot possibly name all of the many supporters who worked hard on the Cronulla election campaign. At the risk of overlooking someone, I will name a few. Much of the heavy lifting was carried in particular by Hassan Awada, Marie Bonney, Margaret Driver, Tom Croucher, Matthew Daniel, Alex Gibson, Rhonda Holt, Karen Johns, Kent Johns, Fay Samuel and Kevin Schreiber. However, two people deserve extra special mention. First, my campaign manager, Michael Douglas, who is a veteran of over 30 years of shire campaigns and one of nature's true gentlemen. Second, David Begg from the Liberal Party state executive, who has supported me in every preselection battle I have fought, including my eventual victory in Cronulla. Above all I thank my family members here today—my wife Caroline, whom I met in this building in 1987, my daughter Kate, my son Matthew, my mother Beryl, my sister Dianne, and my late father Ray. Without their love and support none of this would be possible. They are and remain my number one priority.

I arrive here as a Liberal in the tradition of Sir Robert Menzies. Menzian liberalism has two limbs. First, liberalism stands for freedom. In 1964 Menzies spoke of the "Liberal Creed" as follows:

... men and women are not just ciphers in a calculation, but are individual human beings whose individual welfare and development must be the main concern of government ... We have learned that the right answer is to set the individual free, to aim at equality of opportunity, to protect the individual against oppression, to create a society in which rights and duties are recognized and made effective.

The second limb of Menzian liberalism is open-mindedness and decision-making based on facts. Menzies famously said that we took the name "Liberal" because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments, in no sense reactionary. Menzies wrote:

If I were to become leader of a great non-socialist party, I must look at everything in a practical way,

This involves pragmatism. But that pragmatism does not equal ad hocery or expediency. It means being empirical, discovering the facts by observation or experiment, and then deciding the most practical approach. As Menzies noted in 1970, Australia inherited the British nature of mind, which is predominantly not deductive but inductive. Principles, if and when they evolve, are the result of experience and practice. That is the process by which the English common law has evolved over a course of centuries.

The day-to-day application of that liberal philosophy with its two limbs may change. Particular policies that suited the time of Menzies may be outdated today, but the golden thread of liberalism remains: freedom empowering individuals and open-minded fact-based practical decision-making. Critical to my world view is a Christian faith. But I emphatically believe in the separation of church and State. I know that I have been elected to represent people of all faiths and none. I know that I am in no position to judge myself as morally superior to others, but I know that my Christian faith is the context in which in this Parliament I will seek to serve others.

My time here will be guided by, among others, four applications of Menzian liberalism. First is application to the main function of State Government, which is very simple. It is to deliver the best possible services at the lowest price to the consumer and the taxpayer. Second is the application to ensuring housing affordability for all our citizens. Third is the application to protecting our environment. Fourth is the application to improving our federal system.

Returning to the first matter, best services at lowest price to the taxpayer and the consumer involves the Menzian liberal tenet of looking at what works. Best services at lowest price means a strong public education system as a way of empowering individuals and promoting equality of opportunity. All my education was at comprehensive public schools in the electorate that were attended by children of doctors and children from caravan parks. Best services at lowest price means equipping all students with the skills they need for the workforce and life, and not merely with a politically correct agenda. Best services at lowest price means an expert body like Infrastructure New South Wales determining infrastructure-spending priorities in the public interest. Best services at lowest price means fixing the blowout in public transport commuter times. In particular, train journeys between Cronulla and the city are now often slower than 50 years ago.

Best services at lowest price means involving the private sector in service delivery, but only if the sums add up. Lowest price not just to the taxpayer but also the consumer means that if we consider private-public partnerships or privatisation, we have to ask not only what maximises the sale price for consolidated revenue, but also what delivers the best deal for consumers. Replacing a public monopoly with a private one may not make any difference at all to consumers.

The second matter I mentioned was housing affordability. The Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey compares median incomes with median house prices in housing markets in the English speaking world. It describes the Sydney housing market as "severely unaffordable". The latest survey shows Sydney is second only to Hong Kong as the most expensive city out of 82 major metropolitan housing markets surveyed. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

The median house price in Sydney is 9½ times the median household income. That multiple of 9½ is to be contrasted with, for example, London, which is around 7, New York and Los Angeles, which are around 6, and Toronto and Montreal, which are around 5. Members should not think the problem is Sydney-centric; Newcastle and Wollongong share a multiple of around 7 with London. In my view, this is a major failure of public policy. It is a betrayal of ordinary workers—nurses, policemen, teachers and the like—if they cannot afford to live here or, if they can afford to live here they just do so but have to struggle to make ends meet for purchasing other goods and services.

Of course, housing prices are a function of supply and demand. On the supply side, we could probably solve the problem of exorbitant housing prices by allowing either unlimited urban sprawl or rampant urban consolidation ruining established neighbourhoods, or both, but neither is acceptable.

It is an enormous paradox that city real estate is so expensive when Australia is one of the largest countries in the world and is relatively sparsely populated. No doubt some land releases on the city edges and some in-fill in existing localities will continue to be necessary, but there is a compelling case for far greater reliance on decentralisation. That does not just involve tax incentives; it requires government leading the way by relocating, over time, many departments and agencies which, in the era of the information revolution, can operate just as effectively—and probably at less cost to the taxpayer—in regional locations. An effective decentralisation policy also means lessening our reliance on stamp duty. Stamp duty impedes a mobile labour force and is a disincentive to relocation. Trying to move jobs to Dubbo or Tamworth or Bathurst or Albury in the face of exorbitant stamp duty may be futile if workers will not relocate to those areas because it will cost them tens, or even many tens of thousands, of dollars to relocate.

The third matter I mentioned was the environment. The Menzian liberal approach is to look at the facts. That liberal approach means that we must approach climate change on the available evidence. Much in science can never be certain. Some sincere and highly qualified people will hold dissenting views. The available evidence may change in the future. But we must loudly and unequivocally formulate environmental policy on the basis that most evidence points to human activity being the principal cause of potentially very significant climate change.

That evidence could eventually turn out to be wrong. But I'd rather be safe than sorry. That of course does not mean that Australia or New South Wales should adopt policies that will simply drive polluting industries offshore and cripple our international competitiveness, with no discernible impact on global emissions. Ultimately a global solution is required. But so long as Australia remains one of the world's highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases, we will have little moral suasion when we tell China, India, Brazil and the like what they should be doing. Reducing our carbon footprint here in New South Wales of itself will make only a negligible difference to world emissions. But every bit we can do in New South Wales to reduce Australia's emissions will help Australia's diplomatic efforts on the world stage to reach a comprehensive world approach to the problem.

The fourth and final matter I mentioned was federalism. The constitutional issue that attracts the greatest passion seems to be whether Australia should become a republic. But the most pressing governance issue is reform of our broken Federal system. State governments as an institution are now unpopular. Many perceive State governments to be an unnecessary duplication, a relic of colonial times. A common view is that the States should be abolished. A second view is that the Federal Constitution should be amended so that we give the national Parliament an open-ended law-making power. I disagree with both these views—not because I have some sentimental or crusty old belief in so-called States' rights, not because I think wasteful duplication between Federal and State governments is a good thing, but because there are many other reasons to disagree with those two views.

The first reason is the safety offered by a diffusion of power. Power corrupts: absolute power corrupts absolutely. Second, in a country as vast as Australia, those closest to a problem are best positioned to understand it and make better decisions. Witness in contrast the one-size-fits-all approach of Building the Education Revolution school halls. Third, the federal system allows States to compete with each other and to experiment. For example, when random breath testing cut the road toll in Victoria, other States followed. Fourth, there is no reason to think Canberra would be better at day-to-day administration of the basics—witness pink batts. Fifth, there is no reason to think that the regional governments that would presumably replace the States would be any better at service delivery. Sixth, quality is more important than uniformity. Seventh, where harmonisation is desirable, it does not require national control. Eighth, constitutionally the States are here to stay anyway. The referenda needed to abolish them will not pass, so we need to make the most of them.

If we are over-governed, it is because the feds have increasingly occupied the field. There is no need, in my view, to have a Federal education department second-guessing and increasingly directing what the States do. We do not need both the feds and the States looking after hospitals. There is no need for the feds to become involved in city planning. If cutting red tape in business regulation is desirable, as it is, harmonisation across the States, not national direction, will commonly be the answer. Nor should we accept that centralisation is an inevitable trend. It is not a worldwide trend—look at devolution in the United Kingdom and federal systems in Germany, Switzerland, Canada and the United States.

So that is all the theory. What can and should be done in practice? At the moment, it is a bit like the frog in boiling water. At the moment, to ask the feds, holding the cheque book, to butt out of education or hospitals would provoke a bemused or incredulous response. A reversal requires three things. First, it requires those in this Parliament and elsewhere to take up the cause of arguing for a clear demarcation of Federal and State responsibilities. Second, we must win the hearts and minds of the general public by governing with excellence and integrity. Part of the attitudinal problem to the States as a tier of government has been their chronic mismanagement, particularly here in New South Wales. But the governments of Greiner, Kennett and so on show that this need not be so. State governments of reforming zeal can leave lasting legacies. I am confident that the O'Farrell Government will be such a government.

Third, against the background of attitudinal change brought about by those two matters, we then need a constitutional convention that will explore constitutional amendments which create a vertical fiscal balance between the States and the Federal Government and which enact in the Constitution specific powers, such as in the area of education, where State law clearly prevails. And we need to cap in some way the external affairs power and the corporations power to the extent that they were originally intended. All political careers end in failure, or so the common misquotation of Enoch Powell goes. But success and failure are relative. The ambitions of a parliamentarian need to be measured and realistic. So when the time comes for me to leave this place, my hope is not that people will say he came, he saw, he conquered, but simply that New South Wales is a better place for his contribution.