



INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK (18:00): There is almost nothing more futile than a politician without conviction. In the end, they have no credibility and deliver little for those they serve. With those words, I began my first inaugural speech as an elected member of the New South Wales Parliament. While I have seen much in the past 12 years, one thing has remained constant: the unshakable certainty within me of the truth of that statement. It falls to me now to make a second inaugural speech, and I am acutely aware of the rare privilege that has been bestowed on me to serve in both Chambers of this great Parliament.

When I first entered Parliament in 2011, I was one of only 20 Labor MPs, following the Coalition's return to government for the first time in 16 years, with 69 seats and a 23-seat majority. The world was still dealing with the aftershocks of the global financial crisis. The world economy was reeling from the worst recession since World War II. Yet despite the terrible economic upheaval sweeping the globe, our economy was proving remarkably resilient in weathering the storm. By almost all indicators, we were performing better than most other advanced economies. While there was a downturn, a recession was avoided. Inflation was sitting at 3.3 per cent and would stabilise at an average of 2.5 per cent over the following five years. Some 12 years later, I re-enter as an MLC for One Nation, with Labor back governing in minority.

We find ourselves in a world that is only beginning to grapple with the economic aftershocks of another global crisis: the COVID pandemic. This time, however, our nation cannot boast of the same economic resilience. Inflation is now at 7 per cent, a figure that we have not seen since 1990. Our people are hurting. Mums and dads across the State are struggling with ever-increasing mortgage repayments on top of soaring weekly grocery and utility bills. Our businesses and industries are crying out for help. From bricklayers to diesel mechanics, to chefs and kitchen hands, reports from hiring managers are the same: it does not matter how high a salary is offered; hundreds if not thousands of vacancies are just not being filled. Scores of medium-sized businesses across metropolitan Sydney that formerly had upwards of 75 employees on their books now have only 15, not because there is a shortage of work but simply because they cannot fill their vacancies.

In the regions, our abattoirs and poultry plants need workers, our farmers need harvesters and shearers, and our regional businesses need staff. Those skills shortages are being felt acutely by the New South Wales mining industry, which last financial year contributed \$16.7 billion in direct spending to the New South Wales economy, while supporting over 30,000 direct jobs and another 180,000 indirect jobs. But the industry is desperate for skilled workers. The average number of New South Wales based mining engineering vacancies is 128 per month. That figure exceeds the national total of 100 mining engineering students who graduated for the entire year during 2022. Vacancies in mining companies across the State, whether in the Illawarra, the Central West or Muswellbrook, are staying open for months and are often remaining unfilled.

We live in an era when more young Australians than ever before are going to university. I have always valued education, but increasingly we are hearing of the inadequacy of universities to equip our young people with real-world skills to contribute to our workforces. In a recent survey of New South Wales businesses, 29 per cent of respondents felt that existing training does not match their business needs. One survey respondent said, "Finding staff who are adequately trained and qualified is so difficult. Universities are failing to provide a genuine education to students." However, universities are booming, with 43 per cent of Australian 20-year-olds in university. Yet only 12 per cent are in vocational training. Young people are increasingly willing to have the university experience but are less willing to get their hands dirty doing the real work that fires the machinery of our nation's economy.

There is a real disconnect between our industry needs and educational curricula. In my time in this place, I intend to get to the bottom of how that rift can be mended. I want to shift our focus back to an education system that focuses on the basics that mums and dads care about: literacy, numeracy and the commonsense fundamental skills that lead to jobs, rather than left-wing indoctrination. As a society, we need to impart to our young people the abilities and skills to be productive citizens, and the motivation to pull together for a cohesive, prosperous nation. Yet during the pandemic our governments thought it was a good idea to get large swathes of our population accustomed to being paid double the dole to stay at home. Our welfare system seems increasingly to be entrenching long-term unemployment rather than helping the unemployed get themselves back to work.

A lazy attempt to fill workforce shortages by simply turning up the immigration tap is not the answer either. With no real plan to funnel skills into industries and regions that need the help and no real plan to house new arrivals, that slapdash approach defies common sense. I echo the sentiments recently expressed by the Mayor of Fairfield. The ruling class cannot continue to view Western Sydney as the landing pad for their expansive immigration policies. We in Western Sydney have indeed always been generous and welcoming, but it is about finding the right balance. Whole suburbs worth of people cannot continue to be placed in the same areas. With the immense burdens already placed on housing, the health system and infrastructure, an indiscriminate opening of the floodgates will stress already burdened communities to breaking point.

Recent surveys show that 70 per cent of voting Australians think we need to lower levels of immigration, which is why the Prime Minister was not up-front about his real immigration agenda before the last Federal election. When I speak to the businesses starved for workers, they tell of the immense frustrations in trying to navigate the process of obtaining overseas labour. Having to reapply every time and wait over a year for anything to progress does very little to alleviate job vacancies that are required to be filled immediately. If we are serious about looking overseas for skills, start with the businesses that actually need the help and let them recruit who they need without the stranglehold of red tape. The Federal Labor Government's plan to indiscriminately bring in 700,000 migrants by the end of next year will not effectively address those real problems and will simply place further stress on communities that are in need. It is a far cry from the sensible skilled immigration policies of yesteryear that were targeted to the skills we need and specific projects to build up our nation.

In the post-war era, migrants came to our shores to seek a better future in exchange for their vital contributions to our nation's infrastructure and industry. Of the 100,000 people who worked on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme between 1949 and 1974, more than 65 per cent were migrants from over 30 different countries. Those people brought their expertise and hard work to our shores, enriching our nation in the process. When my parents came to this country in 1959 and 1960, they were not looking for a handout but for an opportunity to contribute to the Australian way of life. My father worked at Australia Post and later telecom. My mother worked as a comptometrist at Myer and later in aged care for two decades.

Within a week of arriving in 1972, my husband's parents were supporting regional industry. They both worked for Email—Electricity Meter and Allied Industries Ltd—in Orange on the production of white goods. Most fridges and white goods in the seventies and eighties came from Orange. My father-in-law worked on the manufacturing side and my mother-in-law worked on the assembly line. I make a special mention of my parents and in-laws. They arrived in Australia with nothing. They brought with them their traditions, customs, faith, language, good values and terrific work ethic. They instilled in their children—my husband and I and their grandchildren—a love of the nation of Australia and a sense of gratitude. I pay tribute to the governments of the time that allowed my family to come to Australia and be afforded the many opportunities that were bestowed on them.

I was also privileged to experience the positive fruits of immigration in my previous roles representing the people of Bankstown and growing up in south-west Sydney alongside my fellow citizens of migrant backgrounds. There I found a hospitable, welcoming community made up of 130 cultures with 60 languages spoken. These people and families came to our country and helped make it a better place. From the different cuisines to the plethora of cultural holidays that are celebrated throughout the year, to the vital roles diverse small businesses contribute to the local economy, the richness of multiculturalism is there to be enjoyed by all.

I was not able to deliver a valedictory speech from my time as member for Bankstown, so I am eager to place on record my enormous gratitude to the people who elected me as their MP for 12 years. While I am now honoured to have the whole of New South Wales as my constituency, I will never let go of my special loyalty to Bankstown and its people and I will continue to fight for some of the core issues that I campaigned on during my time as their MP. Throughout my term as the member for Bankstown I campaigned tirelessly to upgrade both Bankstown Hospital and the car park. As a Bankstown local who gave birth to my children at Bankstown Hospital, I know how important it is for our community to have a world class and easily accessible hospital.

In March 2019, after many speeches in Parliament and sustained pressure the New South Wales Coalition Government finally came to its senses and backed my calls for improved public health services by announcing a new Bankstown Hospital. But the fight did not end there. It took four years to establish where this new hospital would be. Finally, in March 2023, the Perrottet Government pledged to build the new hospital across from the existing site. I have not heard anything from the new Labor Government about when and where the new Bankstown Hospital will be built. I will continue pressing the new government to honour the pledge its predecessors made to the people of Bankstown, East Hills and south-west Sydney to rebuilding the hospital across the road from the existing site.

Another issue I fought for as the member of Bankstown was the restoration of the Liverpool via Regents Park train line. I will never forget when that was removed by the Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian, on 20 October 2013. It caused major upheaval for the residents west of Bankstown. It meant that a direct service to the city was replaced by three trains with commuters having to change trains twice. Finally, after much campaigning and petitioning, it was agreed that there would be a partial restoration of the service. I hope that this Labor Government respects all the communities west of Bankstown who voted for Labor and that it restores that service to its full capacity. I pay tribute also to the many community members who helped me campaign for the easy access lifts at Birrong and Yagoona railway stations. Chester Hill and Villawood railway stations are still waiting for theirs. I remind the Labor Government that it has a duty of care to the many marginalised communities in Chester Hill and Villawood to ensure that easy access lifts are built at those stations in the future.

It was my privilege to work with countless community leaders to obtain better facilities for local organisations, including sporting grounds, clubhouses, church halls, school playgrounds, cultural associations, community service providers and many more. Some of the greatest pleasures of my role as the member for Bankstown was meeting so many good people and working with them towards a common goal of positive outcomes for community participation, inclusion and cohesion. I am not afraid to focus on and fight for the issues that really matter to families and communities across south-west Sydney, and for every person who supports common-sense policies throughout New South Wales. In late 2020 I remember clearly just how frustrated my constituents in Villawood, Georges Hall and Bass Hill were by the constant and frequent power outages they were experiencing due to our failing energy grid—4,600 customers and 1,200 households did not have access to power. Those kinds of outages in summer will only get worse with this ridiculous obsession to transition to unreliable power sources, while Liberal and Labor neglect our existing energy grid.

As the member for Bankstown the largest street meeting I ever coordinated was with residents who were fed up. I remember writing to both Ausgrid and the then New South Wales Government to ensure that every resident received the compensation they were entitled to. When the power goes out at local businesses like Chinchilla Express cafe in Bankstown Plaza and Toscano Gelateria in Georges Hall, they lose revenue and stock, and in the end they have to put people out of work. These mum-and-dad businesses are some that I have assisted in the past. I assure every small business owner and resident in New South Wales that I will not let an obscene obsession to transition to a different form of energy source impact their access to a fundamental right like electricity—and it is a fundamental right.

Australian Energy Market Operator and New South Wales Government documents forecast blackouts in our State will occur after the closure of Eraring Power Station in 2025. That is nothing short of a looming disaster for the New South Wales economy, but it is particularly damaging to the industrial base of western and south-western Sydney. As a member of this place, I am prioritising jobs in the regions also, like in the Hunter, that are reliant on our natural resources and forestry sectors, as well as the industrial heartlands of western and south-western Sydney. They simply need a reliable electricity grid that provides low power bills and jobs that are not offshore.

A strong New South Wales also needs a strong construction sector with an ability to deliver good homes. In the other place I spoke up, urging the former Coalition Government not to water down home building statutory warranties for defective apartment construction work. That was several years before the Mascot and Opal Tower sagas. I always felt a great sense of disappointment that my former Labor colleagues never quite understood the gravity of the issue in 2014, despite my warnings that are on record for all to see. Quality, affordable, fit-for-purpose homes for families, coupled with sensible planning should be the priority, not making a quick buck for developers. The best way to address the housing affordability issue is by abolishing the green tape that is adding hundreds of thousands of dollars to the cost of a family home. We have a timber shortage in our State, which is being exacerbated by the left who are completely opposed to sustainable native forestry. The last thing that first home buyers and young families need in places like Picton, Camden and Leppington is unaffordable building costs due to mandated net zero nonsense and imported timber from overseas.

I have spoken up before about the dire situation of timber shortages in our State, which is impacting not only vital jobs but also indirectly on whole communities. As families leave town to find work, they leave those remaining bereft of local skills and services. This is happening already in the timber towns of the Illawarra and in places like Tumut where the timber shortages have caused a reduction in shifts for workers, which has in turn forced workers to leave town. Meanwhile, our construction industry is scrambling to overcome a shortfall of 1.7 million tonnes of timber. While we all talk about housing, we might want to think about how houses are built.

New South Wales is rich in natural resources, but the left wants to ban coal and forestry. This insanity will send electricity prices and the cost of building materials to record heights. Only last week it was reported that Australian energy prices are among the highest in the world, with Sydney household bills forecast to rise by another 20 per cent. New South Wales can and should be a global energy superpower with flourishing coal, gas and nuclear power, including the renewables that have already been built. In the Labor caucus room I was often the lone voice that could be heard standing up for the tens of thousands of jobs in our State that are supported by mining and forestry. I will continue to make my voice heard, albeit now through One Nation, which is a party that wholeheartedly supports the natural resources industry.

I intend to continue striving for better protection for our vulnerable children. I have been deeply passionate about that work in the past and will continue to be. In the other place I called for reform on many occasions, including in 2016 when I introduced a private member's bill to protect children from parents who have previously been found guilty of serious offences against children. We as a society must be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable among us and no-one should rest easy while those that we are duty bound to protect cannot be protected.

As a person of faith, I put on record another important issue that I am most passionate about and that is the ability to express religious freedom in our State. In 2019, I was proud to help form the New South Wales Parliamentary Friends of Religious Freedom with colleagues from across the political divide.

New South Wales is blessed to have many communities of faith, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and many more. Families from all walks of life can be assured that I and my One Nation colleagues will protect their interests when it comes to freedom of religion. Mark Latham was an absolute champion of religious freedom during the Joint Select Committee on the Anti-Discrimination Amendment (Religious Freedoms and Equality) Bill 2020. Over 10 months that committee examined 192 submissions and held four days of hearings, with evidence provided by 57 witnesses from 47 organisations. The report published by the committee should be enacted in full. It lays out clearly the absolute necessity for enshrining legal protections against religious discrimination.

Some 65 per cent of New South Wales residents identify as religious. Yet, alongside South Australia, we are the only jurisdiction that does not have protections against religious discrimination in State law. We know that the left, which dominates this Parliament, does not care about or value religious expression as a fundamental right of social policy in New South Wales, but I will fight to make sure that religious freedom becomes enshrined in law in this very Chamber. I cannot stand in this place today without offering my profound thanks to all those who assisted me on my journey to One Nation: my One Nation colleagues, in particular to the New South Wales leader of One Nation, Mark Latham, Rod Roberts and our Federal leader, Pauline Hanson. I also acknowledge the Federal and State executive of the One Nation party. In particular, I acknowledge Neil Turner, State director Amit Batish and, indeed, all the many candidates that I met throughout the campaign.

I acknowledge the 17 candidates who stood for One Nation across New South Wales, their families and friends, and thank them for flying the flag for One Nation, along with all the volunteers who fought so hard on the ground. I assure each and every one of those candidates that I will continue to take up the fight every day that I am in office. I also say a big thank you to the tens of thousands of people who voted One Nation all across the State. My electorate is now the whole of New South Wales. It is very exciting. I hope to go out there and meet many people across different towns and regions. I am delighted if I have the opportunity to have many street meetings. As somebody who came from local government, I enjoyed having street meetings and meeting people. You should be going to the people. There is nothing better than being in a neighbourhood and catching up with people and actually asking them what the true issues that matter to them are and how you can actually assist.

Of course, I need to thank my family. I particularly thank my mother. Sadly, my father has passed since my first inaugural speech. I thank my children and my extended family. Thank you for always being a rock of support to me throughout my time in public life. We have certainly had some difficult times throughout my public life, and I particularly thank my family who have gone through a lot with me together. In my first inaugural speech, I said:

We all have and represent different views and opinions. What determines whether our views and opinions will influence public discourse and public policy is whether each of us has the strength of our convictions and the fortitude in character to prevail in the rough and tumble of our political process. This is what people judge us on today: conviction and character.

As politicians, we stand before the public to be judged on our performance of service. I can only renew the same earnest and unequivocal commitment I made 12 years ago to do my best to serve the people of New South Wales. Whether I will be judged successful or found wanting, I do not know, but let this be the metric of the judgement: conviction and character.

Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.