



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 25 May 2011.

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Ms ANNA WATSON (Shellharbour) [12.20 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to their elders both past and present. It is with immense pride and humility that I enter this place, Australia's oldest Parliament, as a representative of Australia's oldest political party, the Australian Labor Party. Australia is a wonderful country, free with spirit and a bright future. There is only one reason that we live in peace and harmony in this beautiful land—that is, because we have a democratic and parliamentary form of government. The word "democracy" is our greatest treasure. It is a word written with the blood of previous generations who are buried in cemeteries of foreign countries all over the world. They are the reason why a working-class girl from the suburbs of Sydney can stand humbly before you in this House today.

I would like to dedicate my achievement as an elected member of Parliament to my beautiful grandmother, Ellen Johnston, known as "Nan" to our family. Nan came from the generation born around the end of the First World War. I call them the no-frills generation. By the time they were teenagers, the world was plunged into the Great Depression and following that they were again faced with the greatest conflict the world has known, the Second World War. They fought for one reason only: freedom and democracy. Returning from that conflict they were told essentially to "get on with it"—and so they bloody well did! All that we have today—schools, hospitals, roads, bridges and all the infrastructure of this great country we take for granted—was built by them and thousands of new Australians, migrants from war-torn countries, all achieved under the banner of a democratic Australia.

The Australian Labor Party is an institution that has been steeped in my world from the time I could walk. I have been a member of the Australian Labor Party for 15 years. Labor traditions and principles such as equality, fairness, solidarity and social justice shaped my humble upbringing, and have run deep in my family for many decades and generations. I stand before you today with mixed emotions. It is hard for me to believe that I am delivering this speech to you today in this place of great tradition. I do so with gratitude to so many people who have brought me here, wanting so much to do a good job for the people of the Shellharbour electorate. Shellharbour is the fastest-growing electorate on the eastern seaboard of New South Wales. I moved to Shellharbour in 1992 and built a home there with my husband, Peter, and two children, Sophie and Joseph. My children were educated at the local Catholic school, Stella Maris, in Shellharbour village, then St Josephs in Albion Park, and my son attended Edmund Rice College—which I later learned was because the canteen was better there.

Today I will talk about the Shellharbour electorate and some of the people who live in it. My electorate starts from Kanahooka and continues to Dapto, Haywards Bay, Yallah, Albion Park Rail, Mount Brown, Oak Flats, Flinders, Blackbutt, Mount Warrigal, Warilla, Lake Illawarra, Shellharbour, Balarang, Avondale Penrose and Barrack Point. It comprises young singles, couples, married people with children and retirees. The electorate of Shellharbour is pure coastal bliss framed by the magnificent Illawarra escarpment. It is untouched with no high rise and its natural beauty is boundless. The people who live in my electorate are salt of the earth, working-class people.

The day after the election I visited the Surfrider Caravan Park, which had been devastated in a once-in-a-hundred-year flash flood. The owners and management of the Surfrider Caravan Park were explaining to me and to Narelle Clay from Southern Youth and Family Services that many of the residents did not have much to lose; however, they lost what little they had. We visited many of the caravans which are homes to the residents of the Surfrider. Many were elderly and lived alone. One couple, Jenny Stewart and her husband, are quite ill. Mr Stewart suffers from chronic arthritis and gout while Jenny has severe breathing difficulties and is battling cancer. The Stewarts' caravan was one of 173 caravans that were damaged or destroyed. While talking with the Stewarts about the problems they faced, Jenny sighed and said, "Oh well, there are people a lot worse off than us."

I could not believe how a family who had just lost everything, including floors, furniture, computers and fridges, could be so humble. As we continued to meet with residents of the caravan park we noticed that they were all out helping one another to clean up the mess that the storm had left. They were laughing and working with one another. I realised then that the people at Surfrider were a united, strong and resourceful people. It was heartbreaking to see what they had lost; however, they are very proud of what they do have. This spirit runs through the veins of people in Shellharbour. I take this opportunity to thank Kristina Keneally for her visit to

Shellharbour and for her kind words to the residents. Kristina has always been a good friend to the people of the Illawarra and she is warmly thought of by people in the south. Her compassion, friendship and understanding did not go unnoticed.

My family is here today in the gallery. My father, John Harwood, is here and I know he is immensely proud. My mother, Maria Harwood, cannot be with us today as she has recently suffered a minor stroke and is still in hospital. My parents are and have been the best parents anyone could ask for. They never stop giving advice, whether or not one wants it. My twin brother, Sean, and his wife, Jenny, are also present in the gallery, and their children, Sam, Nathan and Alana, are in the front row. They are great kids and they take pleasure in tormenting their auntie at every opportunity. My sister, Kate, and her husband, Lander, and her children, Calum and Finn, could not be here today, but again the kids are lovely. I would like to mention my younger brother, Tim, who cannot be here today as he lives and works in Dubai with his wife, Rhonda, and their children, Sarah and Xavier. My daughter, Sophie, who is a journalist, is in the gallery with her partner, Andrew, and my son, Joseph, is also here with his partner, Katie.

My grandmother passed away a few years ago. However, I know that as a loving grandmother and a staunch Labor comrade from long ago she is watching and looking down on me today. I would also like to mention my extended family, the members of whom are here today. My mother was one of 12 and my father one of five. I am lucky enough to have some of them here today and I thank them for making the journey. I was born and raised in an amazing extended family, all staunch Labor and trade union supporters. I have early memories of painting banners for waterside workers marches and demonstrations. My Nan, whom I mentioned earlier, was the live-in caretaker of the union rooms in Sussex Street. I spent a lot of time there as a child: most of my uncles and my father were waterfront workers, as well as both my grandfathers. My twin brother, Sean, is a captain of the pilot boat at Port Kembla. I am very proud to say that now my son, Joseph, is carrying on the tradition—securing a job as a linesman also at Port Kembla. Joe is a fifth generation member of the Maritime Union of Australia. I can remember people crowding the hall and singing songs of solidarity accompanied by a woman on the piano. The wharfies had their banner room out the back, which was a constant source of amusement for Sean and me.

I come from a working-class world. My mother worked at the shop assistants union for Ernie O'Dea. The love and support of my family is what has brought me to this point in my life, along with the education I was given both in and out of school. I can remember sitting at our dining room table and talking about industrial matters on the waterfront and stop-work meetings. The conversation more often than not revolved around politics. My family members were outraged after the dismissal of Gough Whitlam. I am a product of my upbringing, and I am very, very proud to have been born into a family where social justice, fairness, compassion and unity were central to our lives. My two brothers and my sister often discuss politics, and I have always wanted to make things better in the community. I could see as I got older the divide between the haves and the have-nots. It always seemed unfair to me—and even more so given that we are such a young country, where opportunity should be a result of hard work and determination, not the bank balance of one's parents or the school that one attended.

In 1992 I was living in my parent's garage with my husband, Peter, and our babies, Sophie and Joe. It was a difficult time, but once again the unconditional support of my parents continued to serve us well. Land and house prices in Sydney had become far too expensive, so we decided to look further afield. By chance one day, I found a block of land on Cygnet Avenue in Blackbutt, Shellharbour, behind what are now Bunnings and Woolworths. The block had beautiful views over Lake Illawarra and the escarpment. We purchased the block, and we built our first home. I can tell members that the best move we ever made was to the Illawarra over 20 years ago. Shellharbour was a fledging area which offered everything for young couples starting out, and we soon became part of the community. Our children had all their schooling in Shellharbour, culminating two years ago with our beautiful daughter graduating with a degree in journalism from the University of Wollongong.

My husband, Peter, has been a truck driver and, for the past nine years, has owned and operated his own transport business. I first worked for the Commonwealth Bank, then St George Bank, followed by several years at a medical fund. It was there that I rediscovered my strong belief in workers' rights, and I became the union delegate. My passion for fighting for the rights of workers was noticed by a union organiser named Rudi Oppitz. He asked me whether I would be interested in pursuing that passion as an organiser with the then Australian Services Union. I accepted the offer and it changed my life forever. I found my true vocation in life: working and fighting for what people like my Nan had established long ago. So I feel it is a natural progression for me to move from the trade union movement to politics.

Having grown up and lived in such an environment, it is no surprise that I ventured into a career with the trade union movement. I worked as a union organiser with the United Services Union [USU] for 12 years. In that role I advocated and represented workers in the services area, including local government, and I learnt that local government workers are the backbone of the community. They build and maintain roads, bridges, parks and gardens, water and sewerage, and local swimming pools. They patrol our beaches, educate our preschoolers, and administer civic centres and offices throughout New South Wales. The United Services Union is the principal union in local government in New South Wales and it has delivered a better way of life for its members and employees in local government, such as by negotiating the award and collective agreements, protecting rates of pay and conditions of employment, and protecting workers from unfair dismissal through conciliation and/or arbitration.

The United Services Union is responsible for campaigning around the health and safety of workers in local government and for providing industry reference groups with appropriate information. The achievements of the United Services Union, with over 40,000 members across New South Wales, are many. I am honoured to have been a part of that success. I was fortunate to have wonderful mentors, who are now lifelong friends, at the United Services Union and in the Wollongong office: Graeme Kelly, now General Secretary, and Jack Klower, now retired but who held the position of the southern regions industrial officer. I recall one occasion when a dispute at the Cudgegong Abattoir saw approximately 300 employees retrenched without notice, leaving them with wages and entitlements owing to the value of \$5.3 million. This was after the directors of the company increased their director fees, which they paid themselves, and then announced they would be closing as the company was broke. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

The United Services Union led by Graeme Kelly, Jack Klower, union local organiser, rugby league legend "TV" Ted Ellery, then General Secretary Brian Harris and all the union members fought tirelessly for months organising picket lines, food hampers and financial assistance for members to help them through a very dark period in Mudgee's history. After almost 10 months of intense campaigning, the members received all moneys owing to them through the collective efforts of the United Services Union and the New South Wales Labor Government—in particular the Hon. Tony Kelly, then Minister for Local Government, and Premier Bob Carr—and Mr Garry Styles, then General Manager of Mudgee Shire Council. That is only one story of what the United Services Union has done for its members.

People such as Graeme Kelly and Jack Klower had such an impact on me as a union official. While at times I was often the target of torment and jest, were it not for Graeme Kelly and Jack Klower I would not be standing here today delivering this speech. It is with the greatest respect, gratitude, admiration and friendship that I thank both Graeme and Jack for their continuous support and assistance throughout my time at the United Services Union. I also thank the executive of the union. I will always treasure my time at the United Services Union and remember it warmly. I take my role as a newly elected member of Parliament very seriously, as well as my obligations to represent the constituents of the electorate of Shellharbour. It is without doubt an honour and a privilege. I believe the electorate of Shellharbour is the best electorate in the State; it has the most down-to-earth and the lovely people in New South Wales. I will not take my position as their voice in this place for granted, and I will work hard for the trust and confidence that has been placed in me.

During the campaign and since my election I have talked to numerous people as well as countless groups, community organisations and businesses. I look forward to being a part of the New South Wales Parliament because government has a responsibility to do far more to eliminate, or at least progressively reduce, poverty, homelessness and unemployment. We can work towards increasing awareness about the importance of safety for women and children, and we must implement strategies and direct resources to reduce the incidence of domestic violence and child abuse. The structural causes of these social problems can be addressed with policies, resources and political will. I believe we need to deliver government in a way that delivers human rights to the people of New South Wales and of Australia. The human rights of our citizens can be upheld in many ways. The essential role of government is to ensure the provision of public, affordable, accessible, quality and appropriate goods and services to all in the community, not just those who can afford it. Schools, hospitals, health services, emergency services including short supported accommodation, support services, legal services, social housing and public transport must be available and accessible to all. This will contribute to an improved quality of life for all and to a strengthened and responsive community. We all want a socially just society.

As I mentioned earlier, at the time of the election some parts of my electorate were flooded. The speed at which it happened was frightening, and many people were unprepared. Sadly, the flood resulted in the death of one man and many people suffered damage to their property. On the Sunday after the election I spent some time with residents of the caravan park at Barrack Point. Some still had no hot water while others had not yet been able to return. Some of the residents were confused, some had serious health problems and many had no financial resources in the form of savings. Many were on social housing waiting lists. Many were unemployed. Many were elderly. Many needed practical assistance. Yet their courage was obvious and their resilience was clear. Their optimism was high and they showed genuine appreciation for any help they received. It was heart warming. I saw generous people bring cooked meals to them. Staff from Southern Youth and Family Services showed up with crates of baked vegetables and chickens—a home-cooked baked dinner. Neighbours and community workers rallied to provide support. A church group arrived with a barbeque to cheer up the residents, and the State Emergency Service [SES] volunteers did a sterling job. This is a strong, well-linked, kind and generous community—one that I am proud to support and represent.

Governments should direct resources to overcome disadvantage. When listening to a speech given by Narelle Clay, a long-term community worker from Shellharbour, at the recent May Day celebrations I was reminded of the importance of holding firm to our values regarding what sort of people we are and what sort of communities we want. Narelle commented that her family had drummed into her that she was fortunate—she had a loving family, secure housing, and education leading to employment. As a child and young person she was constantly reminded of the responsibility that went with that fortunate upbringing: responsibility to "contribute and give back to the community" and "not to whinge but do something about what's wrong". This leads to the responsibility to advocate and to speak up for those who are doing it tough in the community. As a member of Parliament, and as someone who has also had a fortunate upbringing, I commit to working towards improving the standard and quality of life for all in New South Wales. I commit to upholding the responsibility bestowed on me to represent and to advocate for those who need our

support and our assistance.

A strong community is one that has strong infrastructure and strong and productive industries. The Shellharbour area is part of the broader Illawarra, and the steel industry, the port and the mines are proud industries essential to the prosperity of that area. The public service, the retail, the hospitality, the tourism and the community services industries, and the health and education sectors are also important and essential to the area's economy. I am committed to supporting the growth of Port Kembla. I would like to thank the people of the Shellharbour electorate for their support—I will not let them down. I have been inspired and supported by some good people and will mention but a few of them today: Garry Keane of the Maritime Union of Australia, Andy Gillespie of the Australian Workers Union, Narelle Clay, Tye McMahon, Jenny Kazman, Lou Stefanovski, Tome Dimovski, David Hamilton, Dana Nelse, Young Labor members such as Sara Howson, Peter Hughes and Dom Wilcox, and, of course, the Macedonian community. I sincerely and respectfully thank those from the head office of the Australian Labor Party, in particular Sam Dastyari, Courtney Roach, George Houssos and Chris Minz. I also thank all who volunteered on the day of the election. I take this opportunity to also thank Noreen Hay, who gave freely of her advice, encouragement, knowledge, support and friendship.

[Interruption]

She was busy doing her own doorknocking. Noreen, I will not forget your contribution and your kindness. I appreciate your assistance more than you may ever know. I will continue to seek your counsel, and I look forward to working with you. The people of Wollongong are fortunate to have you represent them. The people I have mentioned give of themselves every day to the community. They fight, they advocate, they support, they stick out their necks and, win or lose, they come back time and again. I am fortunate to call these people my friends. I love the Illawarra region. I have a vision for the area. One of my many concerns is youth unemployment, and I want to attract business big and small to the Illawarra. I have strong views and beliefs about the environment, advances in technology, the energy crisis, teenage binge drinking, the economy, health and hospitals, the ageing generation, infrastructure and education.

I have a whole laundry list of issues. More than anything, I want prosperity for the Illawarra, the State and the country. I intend always to honour my family, and I hope that they will be proud of the way I represent my electorate. I also intend to honour the people I represent in my electorate and across New South Wales. But most of all I intend to honour not only what is right but what is fair. I have pledged to the people of Shellharbour that I will spend my time working tirelessly to make our small corner of heaven an even better place than it is already. Before I conclude today, I will leave you with the following story. When my husband, Peter, was a boy his primary school, like any other, had a motto: Nothing without labour. My fellow parliamentarians, I can say unequivocally that I, my family, this State and this great country of ours would be nothing without Labor.