

## GOVERNOR'S SPEECH: ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

**The Hon. WALT SECORD** [3.40 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I thank the House for its warm and historic welcome today. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered: the Gadigal people. I pay my respects to them, their elders past and present. Mr President, Australia has given me so many opportunities but none more humbling than to serve in the nation's oldest Parliament as a member of the Australian Labor Party. Honourable members will know me from my work with State and Federal Labor over many years, in both opposition and government. But there are many things about me that honourable members may not know: things about my background, my heritage and my personal story. I believe these things matter in public office so I would like to now share them with the Chamber and the people of New South Wales.

I was born in southern Ontario on Christmas Day 1964—four years after native peoples were given the vote in Canada. I grew up and attended school on the Mississaugas of the New Credit and Six Nations Indian reserves. I spent the first 17 years of my life on an Indian reserve until I attended York University in Toronto. I graduated from that university with a Bachelor of Arts with honours degree. Growing up on an Indian reserve in the 1970s politicised me and made me finely and deeply attuned to injustice. I am the product of an interracial bicultural marriage. My father, also named Walter, is a full-blooded Mohawk-Ojibway status treaty Indian. He came from a family of 10 and was born on a kitchen table during World War II. His childhood was soaked with alcoholism, poverty, violence and illiteracy. My father served time as a juvenile offender. His incarceration was the first time in his life that he had three square meals a day. Thankfully, my father rose above the circumstances life had dealt him.

In his early twenties he gave up the grog and became a teetotaler. He is a Christian. He refuses to swear. He prefers to live modestly and relishes time with his grandchildren. He is a great man. He is a quiet, giant of a man. I get my height from my Mohawk grandmother, my size from my Ojibway side, and my fair complexion from my Anglo-Canadian mother. My mother, Brenda, is in the gallery today. She completed a 27-hour trip from Toronto to hear these words. It was her first time on an aeroplane. She is a remarkable woman and she binds our family together. She was born in the Yukon Territory in Canada's Arctic. She left school at year 10 and when she fell pregnant with me, at the age of 15 years, she was rejected by her father. Sadly, I did not meet my maternal grandfather until I was 19 years old. My mother, Brenda, needed to be strong willed to stand up to members of my father's tribe, who gave her problems because she was not a native. You could say, Mr President, that between poverty, youth and race, my parents had many factors pushing against a successful marriage but, I am proud to say, my parents are going to celebrate their forty-eighth wedding anniversary this December.

My parents are active in all aspects of cultural activity in my father's tribe. My mother now teaches sewing. She also runs a craft shop for tourists. She is an artisan in her own right. She prepares native regalia. She even makes burial outfits for traditional funerals, which is a tremendous honour. My parents have shown that love and commitment can overcome any barriers that others may seek to place in their way. They have shown that individuals can be proud of their heritage. Accordingly, when I was sworn into this Chamber I held both the *Bible* and a stock of sweet grass—my ancestors' religious sacrament—in recognition of my unique heritage.

Sadly, my mother currently spends most of her time tending to my father, who is very sick. He has lung cancer and diabetes, is battling cataracts and is on kidney dialysis—all of which are common to Canada's native peoples, as is the case with Indigenous Australians. I am deeply

saddened that he is not here today to see and hear my speech. I know that he is deeply saddened that he and my mother must spend nights apart, for this has almost never occurred in the 48 years of their marriage. I am grateful to them both for their sacrifice and support.

There are three children in my family and we have all charted very different courses. My sister is a successful businesswoman. My much younger brother, Dan, is a budding native rights leader in Canada. Dan has just conducted a second annual Ojibway language camp and he conducts ceremonies for native prisoners in Canada's toughest prisons. Last year Dan missed out on a position in a tribal council election by two votes. But somehow I think one day he will lead the 1,800 strong Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. My father's tribe has come a long way since 1826, when it was on the brink of extinction. Back then only 226 members of the tribe had survived the smallpox, tuberculosis, cholera, violence and alcohol abuse that plagued their fellow tribesmen and women.

I am the first member of my father's family to complete high school, the first to go to university, and the first to fly in an aeroplane—my mother is now the second. In fact, in 1988 when I told an aunt that I was migrating to Australia she asked me if I was coming home on the weekends. I highlight these origins because they show my journey was possible because of access to education and equality of opportunity. These are two core Labor principles. If it were not for public education I would not be standing here today. Education was my way out of disadvantage, and it remains the great leveller in an unequal world. I share and embrace Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson's views on education: education is everything to Indigenous people. Noel Pearson said earlier this year on the ABC television program *Four Corners*:

At the end of the day if people ask me, what is your economic development strategy? I say the education at the end of the day.

I agree with his comments wholeheartedly. Similarly, I would not be in this Parliament without the egalitarian nature of Australia: the "fair go" that Labor holds high and Labor defends. For my parents' story and mine is one that shows how our lives need not be determined by circumstances and by allowing people to pursue their individual potential also means supporting them through education and fairness of opportunity. My background will continue to inform the perspective and judgement I will bring to my role as parliamentarian.

After a short stint as a youth employment public servant and a reporter at the *Toronto Star*—Canada's largest daily newspaper—I migrated to Australia in September 1988. I became a citizen in June 1992. Shortly after arriving in Sydney I got a job at the *Australian Jewish News*. I worked there for almost four years. They also gave me a go as one of their first non-Jewish reporters. I am pleased to say that fair go was rewarded when I won an Australian Human Rights Award for a series of articles I wrote for that publication. But my proudest time at the *Australian Jewish News* was defending myself against British revisionist David Irving, who took legal action against me for appropriately describing him in print as a Holocaust denier. Let me say, I make no apologies for doing that. Denying the Holocaust is not just offensive, it is evil.

I am pleased to say that I have maintained my strong association with the Jewish community and I count amongst my closest friends Mrs Josie Lacey. I met Josie when I worked at the *Australian Jewish News* when she came to talk about her anti-racism and interfaith work. Our friendship developed and I have spent countless Shabbat and Passover meals with Josie, her husband, Ian, and her family. She lives by the adage that you should "take care of the stranger who comes in your midst".

My links to the Jewish community predate my coming to Sydney and stretch back to the Indian reserve in Canada. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to a wonderful Jewish man, a mentor from my childhood. He is the late Godel Silber, a Holocaust survivor who became friends with my father when they worked together in scrap metal recycling. Mr Silber always saw the best in people and supported anyone who asked to help. He lived by the Hebrew phrase Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. A loose modern interpretation means that Jewish people are not only responsible for creating a model society for themselves but they are also responsible for the welfare of society at large.

Mr Silber was extremely observant and religious. He told me about Jewish dietary practices, the importance of Israel, the Holocaust and the need to fight racism and intolerance. Mr Silber was born outside Warsaw in June 1921 and was transported to Auschwitz in late 1942. He played a role in the carrying out of the famous bombing of Crematorium IV in October 1944. He was lucky to survive this, as other participants were hanged as examples. But he did survive and made his way to Canada after the liberation. Mr Silber saw something in me and insisted that I go to university. He reinforced one message to me over and over again: Get an education. He used to say in a sweet Yiddish accent, "Walt, be a good boy and study, study, study." I am proud to have known him.

Mr Silber also sparked my interest in the prevention of genocide. I will never be able to fathom the desire of one group to want to exterminate another race or faith. I have studied the Shoah, the Armenian genocide, Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. Everything I have learned only reinforces my strong commitment to cross-cultural diversity and interfaith activities. I am also a strong and vocal supporter of Israel. I support a two-State solution. But I also believe that Israel has a right to defend herself within secure and safe borders. On that note, earlier this week I approached Leader of the Opposition, John Robertson, and obtained his approval to assume the Labor position on a reactivated New South Wales Parliamentary Friends of Israel.

One opportunity in Australia has led to another and over time I have come to work with such diverse leaders as Brian Langton, Bob Carr, Kevin Rudd, Eric Roozendaal, Justine Elliot and Kristina Keneally. Due to my heritage and the opportunities I have received, my areas of policy interest are obvious. They are Aboriginal affairs, education, aged care and health. I worked on the famous Kevin 07 campaign, as the communications director to Kevin Rudd, which brought an end to the Howard Government. The most rewarding time in Canberra was serving as chief of staff to the Minister for Ageing, Justine Elliot. It opened my eyes to the need for a comprehensive policy to respond to our ageing population.

Australians now have the longest life expectancy in the English-speaking world. With this great achievement come challenges but also opportunities for our nation's decision-makers. Within 40 years the number of people aged 65 and over will almost triple, from 2.8 million today to around 7.2 million in 2047, from 13 per cent to 25 per cent of the population. In aged care we worked tirelessly to improve quality and compliance in the nation's almost 2,900 nursing homes. I will always remember the outrage from aged care providers about the 7,000 unannounced visits that occurred under Justine Elliott's term.

But it was not all sad. I developed a deep admiration for the faith-based sector, the Baptist, Jewish, Anglican, Uniting and Catholic organisations that provided world-class facilities for people in their care. I also encountered people such as Bryan Lippman, who worked with homeless and alcoholic men needing aged care in Melbourne. They made my time in aged care rewarding. We also face the challenge of helping people remain independent in their homes by

finding ways to expand home and community care. The best way to help an older person remain active is to help them remain in their home.

We also discovered that the Howard Government had neglected Indigenous Australia when it came to the elderly in remote Aboriginal communities. We set up a \$46 million Indigenous Aged Care Plan to lift standards and establish and improve overnight aged care in remote Northern Territory communities, such as Mutitjulu and Docker River. It was about finding a delicate balance between cultural sensitivity and ensuring the health and welfare of old and frail Indigenous people.

Members of this Chamber would also be aware that I worked for Premier Bob Carr for more than 10 years. I stand here proud to be associated with that legacy. Mr Carr was the first political leader in Australia to apologise to the Stolen Generation, and, I might add, against strong advice from the Cabinet Office. Adam nods. They warned that we would be flooded with claims. Well, that did not happen. Carr held his ground and delivered a historic apology. He introduced Australia's first medically supervised injecting room. Again, he prevailed with courage and strength of argument. He took up the cause of asbestos victims with then Australian Council of Trade Unions head Greg Combet and the late great Bernie Banton, forcing James Hardie to account. His achievements in literacy mean that a whole generation of New South Wales children had the best start in life—again, something close to my heart. Carr implemented the recommendations of the royal commission into police corruption and developed a national parks system, protecting almost 9 per cent of the State.

As for my most recent stint, I thoroughly enjoyed my time as chief of staff to Kristina Keneally. Kristina, you are an inspiration. No-one worked harder than you and I have never seen a campaigner like you. I know you are proudest of your achievements in disability services and Stronger Together 2, your environmental protections such as for the Riverina red gum forests, your electoral and political donation reforms, as well as your famous steak dinner with Kevin Rudd on the Central Coast before securing a historic agreement on national health reform.

A few more things about me: I am a staunch republican. I would like to see Australia become a republic. However, this would horrify my father, as his tribe is fiercely proud to be monarchist natives. They fought proudly with the British against the Americans during the United States War of Independence and again during the War of 1812 when the Americans tried to invade Canada. In fact, the monarchist streak is so strong in our community that we have a tradition where Queen Victoria's representative provides an annual gift of bread and cheese for our loyalty. Last weekend was the 114th annual Bread and Cheese Day on my parents' reserve.

I also fiercely oppose the death penalty. I am a nominal member of Reprieve Australia, an international anti-death penalty group based in Melbourne. In 2005 I served on the New South Wales Australian Labor Party [ALP] international foreign affairs committee. We actively campaigned for Australia to oppose the death penalty in the Asia-Pacific region. I believe the death penalty is abhorrent.

A few people I wish to thank. A special thankyou goes to Sam Dastyari, general secretary of the New South Wales ALP. About three years ago when I had a very difficult period in my life Sam showed up to my home unannounced. There was no business to be done; he simply knew I was hurting. He showed up with a pizza, we watched television and chatted late into the night. Sam, you have been a very good friend. Sam is now embarking on major reforms of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Labor Party. His proposed reforms are both courageous and necessary and I wholeheartedly support these measures.

I would also like to thank John Robertson, Chris Minns, Michael Lee, Tara Moriarty, Mark Lennon and Bernie Riordan for their support. I would also like to thank my girlfriend, Ruth Johnstone, an elegant farmer's daughter from Boggabri. Ruth has been patient while I have charted my course into this Chamber. My daughter Rachel: you are special to me, and as my only blood relative in Australia I realise that puts a lot of pressure on you. My good friend Wajiha Ahmed: I cherish our friendship and your guidance.

A few more to whom I say a special thank you: Kirk Fitis, Pat Garcia, Kate Iffland, Samantha Dawson, Maria Catanzariti, Sam Maresh, Timmy Gleeson, Jeremy Jones, Eric Roozendaal, Richard O'Neill, Bruce Hawker, Bevan Lisle, Rebecca Nicholson, Susan Bures, Cherie Burton, Tess McLennan-Allas, Craig Elliot, Patrick Muhlen-Schulte, Dr Richard Stanton and Jacquelynne Willcox. And, finally, Sabina Husic: you remind me of my younger sister, Lisa. Sabina, you were the youngest communications director to a Premier in this State, and you are destined for even bigger things.

Finally, it would be out of character if I did not state for the record that I will work tirelessly to help restore a Labor government in New South Wales. I will work with and for the union movement to protect workers' rights and entitlements, which are currently under threat. Conservative members of this Chamber know in their hearts that they did not level with the community about these plans. They know they did not have a mandate for such radical changes. And they know that if the Premier had revealed his plan to give himself unprecedented power to strip the wages and conditions of more than 400,000 workers at the stroke of a pen, then the community would never have voted for such a plan.

In conclusion, as my story shows, my presence here today is thanks to education and egalitarianism, two great Labor values. It will be my honour to defend those values in this place and serve the hard-working families in New South Wales.