



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Assembly, 12 September 2012, Corrected Copy)

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday, 12 September 2012.

INAUGURAL SPEECHES

Mr RON HOENIG (Heffron) [7.32 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): It is an honour and a privilege to speak as a member of this House. In so doing, I recognise the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I am particularly proud to have been elected by the people of Heffron. My electorate covers an area of Sydney where I have lived almost my entire life. During three decades representing the people of the City of Botany Bay as mayor I never looked backwards. To me, to look backwards has no point other than to learn. As Santayana said, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." We on this side of the House know the past all too well. The people of New South Wales passed their judgement and that is why we now sit on this side of the Chamber. New governments always begin their term spending time throwing blame. In my view, it has now reached an age when that time has passed. There are huge issues to be addressed and that is what Government should be about: looking to the future, planning for the future and acting for the future.

My input into debates in this House will, I hope, look ahead. There is much to be done in planning, law reform, transport, infrastructure, the environment, housing and many other areas. In the years ahead that is where my focus will be. I am the fourth member for Heffron since the electorate was created in 1973. The electorate was named after the late Bob Heffron, former Premier and member for Botany, and then named Maroubra. The Heffron electorate was first represented by the Hon. Laurie Brereton, followed by the Hon. Deidre Grusovin and in 2003 by my predecessor, the former Premier the Hon. Kristina Keneally until her retirement some two months ago. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Hon. Kristina Keneally for her outstanding service, not just to the people of Heffron but also to the people of New South Wales. I wish her well in her future endeavours and thank her on behalf of the people of Heffron.

I am the eldest child of Ernest and Edith Hoenig. My late father was born in Vienna in 1921 and my late mother was born in Prostejov, Czechoslovakia, in 1926. My mother was a Holocaust survivor. The Holocaust was never spoken about in our home, as was the case with many survivors. It was not until after her death—when I saw the video of her Shoah interview and did a search online of the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Jerusalem—that I gained some insight into her life. On 30 June 1942, at the age of 16, she was deported along with her mother, Ida, and father, Rudolph, by the most primitive and soul-destroying transport, a cattle wagon. It was train DA 404 to Theresienstadt, then to Rassika, Estonia, where her parents were, as she described, "shot naked into a trench" with thousands of others.

My mother survived because she was a strong, young girl who was fit to work. When liberated from the concentration camp she discovered two generations of her extended family had been exterminated. Prior to the Anschluss my father and his twin brother, Walter, had been sent by their father from Vienna and were among 1,800-odd Jewish refugees bound for Palestine. The British would not accept the Jews escaping the Nazis and deportation orders were issued. They were loaded onto the ship *Patria* at Haifa. The Zionist organisation Haganah, seeking to disable the ship to stop the deportation of the Jewish refugees, caused an explosion and the ship sank in Haifa harbour.

My father survived, when hundreds did not, by swimming to shore with a broken arm, and carrying a very small child. My mother and father met after the war and settled briefly in Czechoslovakia. Their stay was cut short when the communist regime gained power in 1948. They snuck out of the country, eventually coming by boat to Australia. No doubt, in modern political discourse I am the child of boat people, and I am pleased that the political leaders in 1948 were not calling to stop the boats. On arrival in Australia in 1948, my parents were initially accommodated in refugee huts erected in what is now known as Heffron Park, Maroubra. Their first home was a block of flats at Maroubra Beach, which still stands today.

That block of flats was home to eight families who had survived the Holocaust. Such was the social justice spirit in that humble block of flats that three of the children from those families became public defenders for the State of New South Wales. My association with the Heffron electorate was entrenched when I was five years of age and my parents bought their family home in King Street, Eastlakes. They lived there for the rest of their lives. I have never lived more than about one kilometre from my family home. I went to public schools at Eastlakes and Daceyville and then on to J. J. Cahill Memorial High School—named after another former Premier.

A university education was beyond the financial resources of my parents. At 19, after working in box and tile factories, I gained employment with what was then called the Petty Sessions Branch of the Attorney General and Justice Department. Following the

election of the Whitlam Government university and higher education was made available to all students, and with no fees to pay I enrolled with the then Solicitors Admission Board, gaining a qualification to practise at law. In those days the Petty Sessions Branch transferred its personnel to country towns. I saw service in Bathurst, Wagga Wagga and Lockhart. Those postings gave me an insight into the difficulties that people in regional New South Wales face, especially in terms of the lack of government services.

I became an articled clerk and then a solicitor in the Public Solicitor's Office, where I practised in litigation and then in criminal law. In 1987 I was appointed as a Public Defender for the State of New South Wales. That was my dream job. As a young boy I imagined myself standing up in front of a jury advocating the innocence of my client, and becoming a public defender fulfilled that ambition. My great passion was and is the criminal law. The criminal law gave me an opportunity to make a difference. The difference was not made when appearing in high-profile cases but in rural and regional areas of New South Wales, where one can go quietly about one's profession fighting against oppression, standing up for people who have never had a chance in life and persuading courts to give the best the law can—reasonable and fair decisions. Being able to convince a court, in accordance with the law, to release young offenders, particularly Aboriginal offenders, and giving them a chance in life, has given me about the greatest sense of achievement I could have had.

My election to this House meant resigning the office of public defender and leaving a floor of talented and dedicated hardworking barristers. This was perhaps the hardest thing I have ever had to do. In 1975, when I was living in Wagga Wagga, I became involved in the Labor Party, as many young people did—particularly law students, spurred on by the sacking of the Whitlam Government. While my fervour was bound in ridding the country of Malcolm Fraser, when I transferred back to my family home and joined my local Labor Party branch I discovered that the main focus of the local branch was local government. I joined my first community protest when the council attempted to sack its garbage staff and award the garbage collection contract to its deputy mayor. We won that one.

But, following that victory, there was an expectation in the Labor Party branches that I would be a candidate at the 1980 local government elections. I heeded the call, and in September 1980 I was elected to the then municipal council and was elected deputy mayor at the age of 27. The following year I was elected by my fellow councillors as mayor. In 1983 I was elected as mayor by popular vote, a position to which I was re-elected at every election, serving just four days shy of 31 years. Whilst being mayor was never my profession, it did become integral in my life and the driver to be involved in change. When I was a young boy and represented my local schools people who knew I came from Botany or Mascot would look down their nose at me. The place I lived was the home of the largest concentration of petrochemical industries in the Southern Hemisphere. It had aircraft taking off and flying overhead and it was home to stinking tanneries and polluting industries.

We have always been people proud of our city and we were not going to be looked down on. I was determined, with my council colleagues, to give our residents a quality of life that they could be justly proud of and a city that would be the envy of others. I was determined to transform our dirty suburbs into a garden city. We had some success, and now the City of Botany Bay has a new lease on life, with families moving in. It has become a desirable place in which to live. I leave the office of Mayor of the City of Botany Bay, as at 2 o'clock this afternoon, with no regrets. It is in the safe hands of people for whom I have enormous respect. The Council of the City of Botany Bay has been able to renew itself, with its elected representatives receiving an overwhelming endorsement to continue to make it a great place to live. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

Proper planning was required to make the City of Botany Bay become a great place to live. As a member of this House I will contribute, with all the intellectual rigour that I can, to the overhaul of the planning system in this State. The Environmental Planning and Assessment Act of 1979 was perhaps the finest piece of environmental planning legislation enacted in Australia. Any ineffectiveness or actions that have brought it into disrepute are as a result of the constant meddling with this legislation, which, I submit with the greatest respect, has been occasioned by an almost total lack of understanding of what the legislation was designed to achieve. Planning decisions must be made by elected representatives—not bureaucrats. Decisions on developments—developments that may impact upon a city or a neighbourhood for decades—should only be taken by "local experts", with local experts being the representatives of the people. These experts may be councillors or, at times, Ministers responsible to Parliament. Reform that encapsulates this principle should be the essential reform of planning legislation.

Reform, genuine reform, is also needed in the criminal justice system. But criminal justice reform must not simply appeal to the lowest common denominator or adhere to community fears and prejudices. There is not a citizen who does not share the wish for a crime-free society. However, more needs to be done by government to support the very social infrastructure, or lack of social infrastructure, that is the source of most crime. As a public defender, and for several years as an Acting Crown Prosecutor, I have witnessed the worst of crimes. The outcomes always involve a loss of liberty, which is the right punishment. But loss of liberty does not mean loss of dignity, and that is what exists in the current corrective services system—and has for many years. Rehabilitation is not just for the benefit of those incarcerated; it is also for the benefit of our society. When these reforms are debated we should be cautious with that legislation and take advantage of input from the Law Reform Commission, the Bar Association, the Law Society, Crown prosecutors, public defenders and members of the judiciary.

Allied with that reform is the role of police. Two years as an Acting Crown Prosecutor gave me a unique insight into the workings of the NSW Police Force and the investigation of serious crime. I was deeply impressed by the talent and the dedication of a number of detectives who investigated and gave evidence in trials that I prosecuted. Murderers were convicted because of the individual work of local detectives—men and women who were then, as they are now, impacted by budget restrictions imposed by a bureaucracy more concerned about bean counting than results. The present oversight of police has led to a situation where there are so many bodies watching over the men and women who are the first responders to crime that their ability to respond is often hamstrung. This should not be the reality. And we should never equate police numbers with police effectiveness. Effectiveness costs money—money for the latest surveillance technology, money for the latest and faster forensic examinations. But an effective and resourced police force is the greatest protection for our community.

On my election on 25 August 2012 I said, and I restate for the benefit of the House, that a number of issues concern the electors of Heffron. Whether it is gridlock in the road system, inefficiencies of public transport, the quality of maintenance in public housing, the quality of law enforcement, the cost of living, the availability of car parking—all those issues can be grouped together as quality of life and the need to improve it. That is where people are coming from. I said then, and I say again, that people are looking to their elected representatives to care, and to care about their quality of life. People do not believe politicians have a magic wand. People do not, as a prerequisite, even want to agree with the government of the day. What they want is leadership. They want to be inspired. They want genuine hope for the future. I see my role in this place as working towards these aims and aspirations.

The great honour of being a member of this House for me has occurred only through the contribution of many people. To the people of Heffron, I say thank you for entrusting me as your representative. I will do my very best and not let you down. To the people of the City of Botany Bay who overwhelmingly supported me for 31 years, I thank you sincerely for your trust and your warmth. To my fellow councillors on the City of Botany Bay, both past and present, I thank you for your warm and generous support and friendship over many years. They are just as much a part of this success as I am—particularly the deputy mayor, my good friend George Glinatsis, who has been more than a deputy. He has been a true friend and confidant and, for that, I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

To the Labor Party branch members throughout the electorate of Heffron, your support was generous and warm when I was selected as Labor Party candidate and I am extremely grateful. To the much-maligned Australian Labor Party officials, who impressed me with their professionalism and energy, particularly Kaila Murnain, I thank you sincerely—as I thank the Young Labor team, who never stop. The Labor Party's future is bright with these talented young people, and I thank them sincerely. I thank my parliamentary colleagues who gave so much of their time supporting me in the by-election. I particularly thank the Hon. Bob Carr, Minister for Foreign Affairs and former Premier of New South Wales, because if it were not for him I would never have had the opportunity to be a member of this House.

I thank my late parents, who went through so much in their life. Although they always wished I was not involved in politics, I know they would be proud of their son today. To the staff of the City of Botany Bay, who have served for many years with such dedication, I say thank you. To my dear friend Peter Fitzgerald, who served as Director of Personnel and then as General Manager for much of the time I had the honour to be the city's mayor, I thank him for his professionalism, his wise counsel and his friendship. I will be forever grateful. To the genius of Brian Dale, who for 15 years has been an inspiration in so much of what I have done, I say thank you for your friendship, your support, your guidance and for never being afraid to tell me like it is.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank my wife and children. Those who serve in politics often say when they leave that they wish to spend more time with their family. Those expressions are often viewed with cynicism. Being a mayor was a second job after your real job, and then there was your family. My eldest son, now 22, brought this home to me when he was nine. He asked me if I was going to his school speech day, adding, "Dad, how come you've gone to everybody else's speech day and you have never been to mine?" To my children, Ben and Matthew, thank you for lending your father to the people of the City of Botany Bay for the term of your entire lives. Just when you thought you might see more of me, I have taken on another role. But I have always been there for you when it was important, and I always will be. To my wife, Christine, who has supported me so completely, professionally and personally, and who has put up with me for almost 30 years, I thank you.

I will discharge my duties as a member of this House to the best of my ability. It is often not understood by those who seek to judge members of Parliament that we are not perfect. We are, after all, human beings, subject to the same human failings and shortcomings as the rest of the community. If it were otherwise, how could a member of Parliament really understand or relate to his or her community? If anyone expects perfection in any member of Parliament they will be disappointed. Being human, there are times when one is going to be wrong or to make errors of judgement. All we can hope for is that when we err it happens less frequently than when we do not. It is an honour and a privilege to be a member of this House.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Mr Gareth Ward): I join all members in congratulating the new member for Heffron. I welcome him to the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales and to the Fifty-fifth Parliament.