



Local Government Amendment (National Competition Policy Review) Bill.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK [5.31 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): I support the bill. A famous woman once remarked that she was born somebody's daughter, became somebody's wife and would probably end up being somebody's mother. A great measure of my own identity is captured in those words, and I am very proud of it. I acknowledge today the presence of my parents, Dorothy and Greg Cusack, who have given and made me everything; my sisters Jane and Sara; my brother Greg; and my husband, Christopher Crawford, and his mother Anne. While my sons, Joshua and Lachlan, are physically absent from this place, I also acknowledge their presence—wherever we are, our family is always together.

I am not the first Cusack to be elected to the New South Wales Parliament. Nearly a century ago my great-grandfather, John Joseph [Jack] Cusack, was elected as member for Queanbeyan and later as member for Albury in another place. He served as a Labor member from 1910 to 1917 and later in the Federal Parliament as a Labor member for Eden Monaro. Our family is extremely proud of his service. Many members like to boast of their achievements in attracting new government services or, best of all, relocating entire government offices to their electorates. I feel certain nobody ever has or ever will top the achievements of my great-grandfather who succeeded in his passionate advocacy for the national capital to be located in his electorate.

In addition to being a daughter, sister, wife and mother, I am one of the rarest of creatures in New South Wales politics—a Liberal from the New South Wales country north. By country north I refer to a province established by the Liberal Party to cover a band of 11 State electorates north of the Hunter Valley. This vast and stunningly beautiful area from outback to coast covers some 200,000 square kilometres and has a population exceeding that of Tasmania and the Northern Territory combined, 75 per cent of which live on the coast. This proportion continues to rise and brings special challenges and opportunities for future economic and planning development. The greatest challenge of all is to find ways to permit the accumulation of wealth in these regional and rural areas. The single most valuable thing government can do is to develop viable transport and communications infrastructure in the country. The other key to success in non-metropolitan areas will be finding the means for government to stop spending time and money on programs that do not work and instead invest resources in programs that will work. It sounds so simple and yet it seems so complicated.

The proverbial hard heads and soft hearts approach is needed. It will be hard work and requires strong and committed leadership, but sustainable economic growth is, in my view, the only way forward for our regional communities. There has never been a lower House Liberal member represent any of these 11 State—and 6 Federal—electorates, and I fear it shows. Indeed, I am only the second upper House Liberal, and I follow the pioneering efforts of Dr Brian Pezzutti, to whom I pay tribute tonight. Brian, like myself, owes his career to the support of Liberals who are Liberals in seats where there is little or no history of liberalism and who are physically isolated from the support and camaraderie of party membership. These members are the truest of believers and I am in awe of their persistence and the courage of their philosophic commitment in the face of the greatest setbacks imaginable. Through their idealism and loyalty they set for me the highest obligations possible. My solemn duty in all that I do as a member of this Chamber is to keep faith with their example.

Politics is for all of us a journey of self-discovery. I do not mean that in the sense that it can be self-fulfilling or self-rewarding, although of course it can be both of those things. By self-discovery I mean the constant, sometimes onerous process whereby you genuinely challenge yourself: What do I think of that? Why do I think that? In 1994 I served as a member of a committee consulting the community about priorities for International Year of the Family. A member of our committee suggested we should examine the notion of "boys' policy". This was in 1994, and I instantly rejected the idea. Later I asked myself why. The answer was that I had become blinkered in my thinking. It was something of a shock to realise this and I began to research the issue in order to test my assumptions against reality. I started with the New South Wales mortality rates and was stunned by what I found. The death rate amongst boys in all age groups massively exceeded that relating to females, and yet there is no physiological reason why this should be the case. In accidents, pedestrian deaths, suicide, and disease—even as babies—boys are twice as likely to lose their lives. I calculated that if in New South Wales we could reduce male mortality to equal that of female mortality—again there is no physiological reason why we cannot—thousands of boys and young men under the age of 45 would survive each year.

The same is true in education. The McGaw report showed that boys in south-western Sydney had Higher School Certificate English marks 20 per cent below those of girls on the North Shore. Crime rates showed boys as not only the major perpetrators of crime, but also overwhelmingly likely to be the victims of crime. I could not avoid the conclusion that addressing the problems of boys would make New South Wales a safer and happier place for all

members of our community—male and female. In other words, contrary to my initial thinking—which I now accept as blinkered—boys policy has a legitimate role to play. I believe we have a duty to our fellow citizens not only to be open in our thinking but to seek out and test new ideas. The search for knowledge is, after all, what makes us a civilised people. Our willingness to adapt to new thinking is what preserves our democracy. Edmund Burke said, "A state without the means of change is without the means of its conservation."

The agents of change are all around us—in the media, in our universities, in our communities and even in our home life. But it can all get blocked up here in this Chamber if we are backward or blinkered in our thinking. The purpose here is to do justice to our future. All that has gone before is merely an investment and a down payment on what I hope and believe can be achieved in the future. Liberalism is a forward-thinking philosophy and the Liberal Party pledged at its formation to provide forward-thinking leadership to the people of Australia. In the immortal words of Sir Robert Menzies—words first quoted to me when I joined the Young Liberals:

We took the name "Liberal" because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments, in no sense reactionary but believing in the individual, his rights, his enterprise, and rejecting the socialist panacea.

Believing in the worth and dignity of the individual is the essence of liberalism. It is for me a black and white test. You either believe we are all equal and deserving of equal consideration or you do not. It is not something you can believe a little bit; it is not some little thing to be quoted in the morning but dispensed with in the afternoon. And from this belief everything flows. For example, in his famous dissertation "On Liberty" John Stuart Mills warned against the tyranny of the majority:

Like other tyrannies, the tyranny of the majority was at first, and is still vulgarly, held in dread, chiefly as operating through the acts of the public authorities. But reflecting persons perceived that when society is itself the tyrant—society collectively over the separate individuals who compose it—its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries. Society can and does execute its own mandates; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.

As a Liberal I believe I have a duty to defend the dignity and worth of the individual. But as Mills makes clear, this goes beyond working for good legislation—it also means providing social and political leadership to resist a culture of bullying and oppression of individuals by other institutions. There are many pressures—the media is increasingly proactive in public policy debate; a new era of what is being termed "grass roots politics" refers to the increasing influence of pressure groups. They are new challenges, but it is an old problem—to listen and be relevant to our communities, ever mindful of our responsibility to merge these views into our leadership. Our role is to determine and represent the public interest and to resist and condemn the lazy, rudderless course which would simply parrot the views of vested interest.

Like all Liberals, I cherish our system of democracy. Two weeks ago I attended Government House with other members of the Chamber to present the President and office-holders to the Governor. There was a short ceremony in which Madam President, on behalf of this House, laid claim to the rights and privileges that are exercised by members on behalf of the citizens of New South Wales. It was a dazzling moment. I confess a profound sense of awe at the perfection of the democratic principles that underpin the work we do. The day I am not dazzled by these footprints of democracy—the sight of ordinary Australians casting their votes, the swearing in of new members, even the scoop on the front page of a daily paper—the day I am unmoved by these things will be the day my usefulness to this place has reached an end.

If I had a seminal moment in my political education, it was the day the unions set up a picket at the front gates of our family property at Yass. It happened to us during the 1970s union recruitment drive targeting farmhands—the so-called glory days of the Whitlam Government, remembered so fondly by people who did not have a firsthand taste of what it really meant. When you picket someone's farm you are of course also picketing that someone's home. The victims have no ability to conceal the event from their children, and we had three large families living on our farm. The men at Walgrove had met with the union representatives, but decided not to join. So the unions in turn decided to make an example, and nothing was to get through the picket. At the time my father was in the middle of building a large new shed for his bulls. It was his own revolutionary design, providing for vast amounts of space, air and light, with a large concrete aisle, wide enough for a tractor to travel down the middle. The trucks, which were filled with wet concrete, arrived at our gates and were stopped by the picket. All pleas for commonsense were rejected and the trucks had to discharge their loads up and down the sides of Gundaroo Road. To this day, the waste and the sheer stupidity still boggle my mind.

A second seminal stage in my political education occurred soon after I joined the Young Liberals. Remember: I was on a promise from Sir Robert Menzies that the party was "progressive" and willing to experiment with new ideas. I took him at his word! It was 1983, and at age 19 I had read a book which alerted me to the plight of Islamic women in religious Islamic States. On the strength of this I made an authoritative—albeit naïve—address to

the Young Liberal Council supporting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I think I was the only person in mainstream Australian politics to take this position. I received no votes, but some earnest applause. Only later did I realise it was not for the speech but because people admired what they thought was my bravery in having a go.

They were really stimulating years for a young person in politics. At a State level a Corrective Services Minister was put in jail; there was the Neville and Marmaduke saga; the Roger Rogerson inquiries; the Baldwin bashing; and the loveboat story. It was the era of Mike Stekatee, Denis Shanahan, the *National Times* and David Dale's wonderful "Stay in Touch" column. Overseas there was a crisis in the Vatican with the death of the new Pope; the Cold War intensified. In our generation polling showed over 90 per cent of us believed we would die in a nuclear war. Then suddenly it ended. Solidarity prevailed in Poland; the Berlin Wall was dismantled; the Russian Parliament faced down the Kremlin; and, incredibly, Nelson Mandela was set free.

Throughout this period and in keeping with its spirit, the Young Liberals enjoyed a freedom of political expression unique in Australian politics. The Liberal Party forgave us the inexperience of youth. It was I think prepared to tolerate our outspokenness, believing that by fostering a robust level of debate it was building substance and confidence for the future. I contrast the joy of intellectual freedom with the mentality of the picketline at our front gate. I cannot deny I loved those days of endless discussion. It was here that I became a "policy junkie" and a notorious reader of footnotes in the appendices of annual reports. You had to be sharp! To those who fear the so-called recklessness of youth, I say that to tame our young lions, to crush that spirit before it can roar is not only a crime against those we seek to suffocate; it is also contrary to self-interest, for it means dumbing down our own future.

There have been only three women Presidents of the Young Liberals, and with this election we are all three in Parliament. The others are Marise Payne, who was Policy Vice-President on my executive, and Gladys Berejiklian, who has now won a famous victory in Willoughby. I count myself lucky to have these two outstanding women as friends. There are now nine New South Wales Young Liberal Presidents in Parliament, including the Hon. Don Harwin, the leader of our party, John Brogden, and the leader of the Federal Party, Prime Minister John Howard. I also note the past two Presidents of the Women's Council—Judy Hopwood and Robyn Parker—are now in Parliament. The previous president, Chris McDiven, is serving her third term as party president and has made a major contribution to supporting the large number of Liberal women elected to Parliament. Counting the Hon. Melinda Pavey, the Hon Robyn Parker and me, three of the four newest faces for the Coalition are women. All three of us are from the country, and we have young families to support. The fact that the Liberal Party's numbers in this Parliament have not changed as a result of the election belies the extent to which we have modernised and renewed our party room. Nine of our 29 members are new faces—four of whom are women. This renewal is timely and will have a profound effect on our performance over the next four years.

I congratulate the Government on its re-election and look forward to closely monitoring its progress in office. On this side of the House we rightly describe the election outcome as a status quo result. Regrettably, those who would gloat have mocked the status quo interpretation. An examination of recent New South Wales political history demonstrates why the election was very much a status quo result. I begin by noting that in terms of election records, four terms is the post-war record set by the Askin Government and later shared by Neville Wran. The apt comparison for Bob Carr's third victory in 2003 is Neville Wran's third victory in 1981. At the 1981 election, the Wran Government won or held Liberal seats such as Cronulla, Gosford, Wakehurst, Albury and what we know today as Southern Highlands. The Liberals today retain all of these seats. In 1981 the Wran Government achieved a six-seat increase, from 63 to 69 seats. It thus began its third term with an increased majority—from 27 to 39 seats. That is a non status quo result.

In contrast, the 2003 result has seen the Government win 55 seats—exactly the same number it held in the previous Parliament. No change. The Liberal Party holds 20 seats—exactly the number it held in the previous Parliament. No change. The outstanding feature of the election was the extent to which sitting members increased their primary votes. It was clearly an election for incumbents, where only two full-term sitting members lost their seats. All other changes were in electorates in which members elected in 1999 had retired. The Government today has the same unchanged majority of 17 that it had in the previous Parliament. This majority is more akin to the 15-seat majority that the fourth Wran Government held after the 1984 election. That majority was swept away at the very next election, with the ascendancy of the Greiner-Murray Government in 1988.

These figures clearly show that the 2003 election result was status quo. After only one year as Opposition Leader, John Brogden has halted the 15-year trend against the Liberals, and achieved it one election sooner in the political cycle. My entry to this place is not so much an arrival at a destination as it is a beginning. My shoulder is now set firmly against the wheel that will carry the Liberal Party into office. Again, this is not a destination, rather our search for a new beginning in a government where the journey will see our ideas finally put into action. Along the way I will work hard to remind myself and my colleagues of our ownership of the greatest intellectual legacy of them all, liberalism. I will be a stubborn thorn in the sides of those who oppose or seek to block us.

I ask to be judged on the honesty of my work, the calibre of my research and the integrity and creativity of my ideas. To see our policies implemented is the whole point of this grand endeavour. There can be no rest or relaxation along the way. That is my only true focus, my simple aim. It will give meaning to all that I have done, to

all that has been done for me and to all that lies ahead. I close by drawing on the great example and words of the Hon. Virginia Chadwick on the occasion of her maiden speech some 25 years ago: It is my hope that I may give account of myself in this Parliament so that at the end I can say, in the words of St Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

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