

Legislative Assembly Hansard – 23 March 2022 – Proof

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**

The SPEAKER: Before I call the member for Strathfield, I announce that officers from the office of the Leader of the Opposition have been authorised to take photographs of the member for Strathfield from the side doors of the Chamber during his inaugural speech. I warmly welcome those seated in the Speaker's gallery and the Cooper gallery who are family and friends of the member for Strathfield and are here to watch his inaugural speech. There is a wide range of people, but I particularly acknowledge Meredith Burgmann, former MLC, and Guy Cooper, Janet Cooper, Lucy Cooper, Yasmin Li, Henry Li, Matilda Li, George Li, Pansy Li, Ben Ashton, Emma Cripps and Harry Cripps, who are all family members of the member for Strathfield.

Mr JASON LI (Strathfield) (15:18): Today was my first experience of an energetic question time. I found it very edifying. I look forward to bringing back peace, tranquillity and high-brow earnestness to the Chamber for the benefit of everybody here and my guests and friends in the public gallery. The story of Strathfield starts with the original owners of our land. My electorate is home to the Wangal clan, which is believed to have inhabited the Strathfield area for over 20,000 years. I acknowledge the clan's traditional custodianship and its ongoing connection to the land, the waterways and the community. I pay my respects to its Elders past, present and future. I extend that respect to all First Nations people.

This is a weighty time to be giving an inaugural speech. At home, the devastation in the Northern Rivers and, abroad, the suffering in Ukraine overshadow everything. When I worked at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, there was a quote from Dr Martin Luther King that we often saw. It read, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." It was a sort of informal motto for our work but also a reminder that we are all connected and that, even though we may live far from disaster, it touches all of us. Just two years ago, we emerged from catastrophic bushfires to confront a global health crisis. To face these challenges, we have relied on the qualities that make modern Australia great.

We found strength together by being connected and worked as a community. We protected our precious social cohesion. We committed to the service of others, with an active role played by government, the community and business. All these qualities—these strengths—define the wonderful electorate of Strathfield, which I am tremendously honoured and proud to represent in this, Australia's first Parliament. I am so grateful to this community that quickly embraced me and my family. By-elections are like speed-dating democracy. The former member for Strathfield and Labor leader, Jodi McKay, came to the electorate with a reputation for unbreakable integrity and tireless commitment. She only strengthened that reputation during her peerless service to the people of Strathfield. That is why Jodi is so loved. I pay tribute to her today.

The SPEAKER: Order! It is not appropriate for visitors in the public gallery to be clapping. I allowed it at the beginning and will allow it at the end, but not during the speech, please.

Mr JASON LI: The electorate of Strathfield is like a microcosm of the modern world. We reflect the diversity of Australia in our community, our people, our aspirations, our strengths, as well as our challenges. It is reflected in the diversity of our faith. Whether you are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Tamil, Sikh, Buddhist or any other faith, you will find company and a place for prayer in Strathfield. The people of Strathfield also come from many socio-economic backgrounds. Alongside the grand mansions of Strathfield, the bustling commercial energy of Burwood and the family-friendly villages of Croydon, Homebush and Enfield, there is also rental stress and homelessness and insecure work and housing.

Given we are so diverse, I ask myself what unites the electorate? What makes us distinctive? What are the unifying aspirations that residents share? What can we offer the State and the country? I believe we are a model, a kind of blueprint for how diversity can be cohesive and united and how it can drive economic dynamism, civic engagement and community resilience. I went to a service at the Intercession of the Holy Virgin, Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Strathfield, in early March. One of the Ukrainian Australian parishioners, with tears in her eyes, asked that I pray for the people of Ukraine, who were her family. Then she asked that I also pray for the Russian people and for the Russian Australians, who were her dear friends. In spite of the horror unfolding in Europe, there was no animus here, no hatred, just great sadness and distress, empathy and love. This is the unifying bond of our Australianness. The protective power of our social cohesion carried us through the darkest days of the COVID lockdowns, when the residents of the Strathfield and Burwood local government areas endured some of the toughest restrictions and curfews. We did our bit, and we did it with a spirit of togetherness, of solidarity and of collective responsibility.

I have spoken before about the special responsibility and challenge of being an Australian of Asian heritage in public office. I say it again: It was not okay that, during the campaign, my volunteers and I were subjected to racist comments that questioned our loyalty to Australia and were whispered into the ears of voters as they approached the polling booth. Our campaign team endured it. I am very thankful that we prevailed, not so much because of me but because the majority of citizens of Strathfield rejected this appeal to bigotry and distrust and saw me for who I am and the values that I represent. I thank the whole community of Strathfield for giving me this opportunity to serve and, most fundamentally in our democracy, for giving me their trust—their democratic trust.

When the first Chinese migrant to Australia, Mak Sai Ying, stepped off the convict ship *Laurel* in Port Jackson in February 1818, he probably thought to himself, "The food here is going to be really horrible." So began the deep and rich history of the Chinese in Australia. It is a very long history. Mak Sai Ying arrived just 10 years after the Rum Rebellion of 1808, eight years after the arrival of Governor Lachlan Macquarie and just two years after this building was built. It would still be 30 years before the gold rushes, 80 years before Federation, 100 years before the Great War, 130 years before the founding of the People's Republic of China and some 140 years before my father, as an international student bound for Sydney, boarded a small vessel in Hong Kong harbour with two suitcases and said goodbye to all that he knew.

Mak Sai Ying worked first as a carpenter at the Newington estate of John Blaxland who, in a serendipitous accident of history and family, is the ancestor of my brother-in-law Andrew Blaxland. He would have been one of the first non-British migrants to Australia and a pioneer for millions of others who came from all corners of the world to call Australia home in the centuries to follow. I often wonder how hard it must have been for him, how alien he must have felt and how resilient he was.

My parents came to Australia in 1960 with nothing but big dreams. This is not just my family's story. It is the story of thousands of residents in the electorate of Strathfield and millions of Australians who came here to build a better life. Having married in Auckland, New Zealand, Mum and Dad returned to Sydney, staying in a hotel in Kings Cross while they searched for a home and Mum applied for teaching jobs. One day as they were walking around the Cross, they met real estate agent John Barraclough, who also happened to be the Liberal member for Bligh in the Askin Government. Seeing the potential of two unattached and clearly clueless voters, he invited Mum and Dad to Parliament the following day, where they sat in this House's public gallery. Barraclough introduced them to the assistant education Minister at the time, the renowned World War II fighter pilot John Lloyd Waddy. Lo and behold, a week later Mum received a telegram advising her to report for duty at Bexley North Public School, where she taught until I was born in 1971. The Askin Government, after all, was known for its efficiency in some matters.

I grew up in a red double-brick house in Bexley, playing with my next-door neighbour, riding our BMX bikes up to the corner store to buy milk bottle lollies or to play the new space invader machines. We played cricket on warm summer afternoons in the middle of the street with an old bat, a tennis ball and those metal rubbish bins that used to line the streets of Sydney. But at school, kids would call me "Ching Chong Chinaman" and laugh at the soy sauce chicken drumsticks that Mum would pack me for lunch.

We did things differently from other Aussie families. We took our shoes off at the front door. We drank hot water, not cold. We showered at night, not in the morning. Dad would engage in guerrilla warfare tactics to pay the restaurant bill before his dinner companions even had a chance to finish their meal. Mum did not bake cakes or scones but made tofu in the kitchen. We only spoke Chinese at home, Mum and Dad knowing that as soon as I went to school I would refuse to speak Chinese because I would just want to fit in. And they were right. I wished I did not look different and sound different. I asked Mum to make me devon sandwiches with tomato sauce for lunch, like everyone else, and she dutifully made them with white bread stuffed with barbecue pork char siu.

Turning on the TV, watching cricket and rugby league, which I loved, no-one looked like me. The only time you saw Asians on TV were as drug dealers, waiters and kung fu masters but never as leaders, except Bruce Lee. I never felt like I belonged, even though I was born in Australia, and I never thought I would be here in this Parliament. My aspirations were never that high. It is hard to be what you cannot see. Last year an Australian senator demanded that three Chinese Australian citizens appearing before a Senate inquiry denounce a foreign government and affirm their loyalty to Australia purely because of their race. Russian Australians may now also be feeling the same creeping damp of distrust.

With increasing geo-strategic tension, we face a fundamental democratic challenge. But it is not just from foreign actors; it is also an internal challenge for our own liberal democracy. How do we manage geopolitical competition without it fracturing our social cohesion and causing distrust of our own citizens? Distrusting one's own citizens will corrode our democracy from the inside. It is what authoritarian regimes do, not liberal democracies that are confident about who they are. The best way to resist a drift towards authoritarianism is to make our own democracy stronger, more inclusive and more effective. The notion that everyone can belong and have a place, a seat at the table of our democracy, lies at the heart of everything I have done in public life before politics. It underpinned my work in the late 1990s, fighting racism, advocating for multiculturalism and campaigning for an Australian republic. What could be more democratic than the ability of any Australian, regardless of his or her background, to aspire to the highest constitutional office?

It has been a 25-year journey that has led to the great honour of becoming a member of this House. I thank those who have shared it with me. Thank you to my wife, Lucy. You are still my magnetic north after all these years, grounding me in what is important. Nothing that I do is important if I cannot share it with you. To my kids, Yasmin, Henry and Matilda, you are the centre of my universe, my purpose and my courage. I love you guys. To my Mum and Dad, thank you for making me who I am today, for giving me my most fundamental values and for the huge sacrifices you made for me and my sister. To my sister, Peony, and my brother-in-law, Thao, thank you for your boundless generosity. To my parents-in-law, Guy and Jeanette Cooper, thank you for your love and support. I do not think you ever voted Labor before I came long, but I am glad you do now.

I also thank my long-time mentors and friends, Wendy McCarthy, Sam Mostyn, Bob Carr, Tony Burke, Chris Bowen, Meredith Burgmann, Linda Burney and David Dawson, for their always available counsel and support. Thank you to Sam Mattila, who stewarded my reputation for the past 25 years, protected me fiercely and gave me confidence in my own voice. Thank you also to the NSW Labor Party and our Labor movement for embracing me as an outsider in every sense. Thank you to NSW Labor leader Chris Minns and deputy leader Prue Car for making me feel so welcomed and so much a part of our amazing team.

To the many parliamentary colleagues who supported me during the campaign, I am deeply grateful. Not only did you share your advice and your experience with me but also you gave me the most precious thing that a busy politician could give, which is their time. To Bob Nanva, Dom Ofner, George Simon and all of the New South Wales party office, thank you. To Mark Morey from Unions NSW and the members of the trade union movement across the State, thank you. I thank my amazing campaign team and wonderful members of our Labor family from far and wide: John Faker, Karen Pensabene, Kym Ralley, Raj Datta, George Mannah, Cathy Callaghan, Mark Drury, Jo Carlisle, Kath Cummins, Alex Yang, Sherry Xiao, Emma Ross, Sravya Abbineni, Aruna Chandrala, Sharangan Maheswaran, Liam Rankine, Leon Pun, Max Kennedy, Cindy Tan, Jessica Wei, John McManus, Nicholas Faulks, and the hundreds of members of the mighty Strathfield branches and Young Labor.

As I said earlier, Mum was a public school teacher for 40 years before she retired. She instilled in me a fundamental belief in the transformative power of education. That is another way of saying she was a real tiger mum. This is the same belief that brings hundreds of families to Strathfield, attracted by our outstanding schools, and underlies my commitment to the tertiary education sector through my work with the University of Sydney and the George Institute for Global Health. I am a great believer in university research in New South Wales and its importance not only for our future prosperity but also for our State's contribution to tackling humanity's grand challenges. The first person in the world to release the genomic sequence of the COVID-19 virus was University of Sydney's Professor Eddie Holmes. He did that through a research partnership with Fudan University. Without that research and international collaboration, there would no vaccines.

Dad was a small business battler. I remember the smell of the soldering irons and the metal shavings on his dusty factory floor. I also remember how he treated his staff like family, always making sure that they were paid before he was. He would plead with his customers to pay him on time after the three- to six-month terms they demanded, whilst fending off the bank who threatened to take our home. His customers were far bigger companies. They would seize the more lucrative servicing contracts and squeezed the margins of small manufacturing subcontractors. Sometimes, they would put their companies into liquidation only to phoenix them again, and Dad would get nothing.

I got a lot of my Labor values through experiencing the hard-hearted factory floor, not as a worker but as a business owner. I believe that the Labor Party can, and should be, the party of small business, contractors and the self-employed, as we evolve from outdated concepts of class to an inclusive narrative about power and aspiration. In other words, we bat not only for employees and the disadvantaged but also for anyone facing unequal power in society as they chase their dreams—for tradies and owner-operators sick of being done over as subcontractors; for retail share investors who are fleeced when powerful insiders manipulate share prices and benefit from privileged information; for migrants who come here with no contacts, no family and no local knowledge; for women standing against sexism and harassment in the workplace; for young professionals facing unaffordable housing, insecure work and unequal bargaining power. The local shopping strips in my electorate are still graveyards of small business—not only suburban retail but also tourism, the creative industries and the arts, education and training. We must do more to support our small businesses.

I commend the New South Wales Government for its Net Zero Plan and its Hydrogen Strategy, but I must ask: How do the commercial opportunities of net zero and hydrogen flow to small- and medium-sized businesses and not just to billionaires and large corporates? And with the growth of megacities around the world—dynamic clusters of economic activity and connected networks of capital, people and information, and ambitious populations of hundreds of millions—where does Sydney fit in? Where do we plug into this, so that our small- and medium-sized businesses are not left out in the cold?

Twenty years ago I led the sustainability team at a major Australian insurance company. We explored how the business model of insurance meant that what was good for the community—fewer road accidents, less illness and injury, less property damage—was also good for the company because it resulted in fewer claims. Twenty years ago, we modelled the impacts of climate change on extreme weather events such as bushfires, storms and floods. Twenty years ago we warned of the catastrophic future consequences of inaction. Now, 20 years of policy failure has meant the future has arrived. If there has been one common lesson from the pandemic, the bushfires and the floods, it is that community solidarity, being in it together, is central to our national character. From border closures to lockdowns, wage subsidies and the willingness to get vaccinated, there is strong public support for collective responsibility and for government leadership directing and correcting the market if necessary. People need and want strong institutions.

In corollary, small government and rugged individualism offered no real solutions to the COVID pandemic or to other crises. It was, at best, impotent; at worst, dangerous. It is very hard to get the image out of one's mind of citizens rescuing their neighbours from the roofs of submerged houses in canoes and dinghies. Yet, some are now urging us to regard the pandemic, the bushfires and the floods as anomalies, regrettable exceptions, 1-in-100-year events. They want us to see this period of mutual support and solidarity as an idealistic fever dream, to be shaken off as fast as possible, so we can get back to business as usual, with a weakening of government and everyone looking out for themselves. The so-called "freedom" narrative can be superficially appealing. After all, none of us want lockdowns again. But it misses a fundamental point: The wicked challenges facing our society are not going away. COVID and pandemics are here to stay. So too is climate change and the extreme weather it brings, the disruption to entire industries from technological change in the fourth industrial revolution, and the rewiring of global supply chains and centres of economic activity—and we need government leadership and capability to manage these challenges and opportunities together.

What we need is not an individual freedom narrative, but a narrative of community resilience. We have seen how the community has stepped up in responding to crisis and disaster. In Strathfield, in the darkest days of lockdown, who delivered food to families who had no income? It was community associations, like St Merkorious Charity, Cottage Kitchen and St Paul's Parish Pantry. This should trigger an epiphany in how we govern our society and institutions. Government and organisations alike must embrace not just efficiency and growth, but also resilience and sustainability as core organising principles. We must invest in and build our care infrastructure and the capability of our public service and community sectors. To meet the massive and increasingly complex challenges of our society today, government must not only partner with the community and business but also lead and enable those partnerships. Because, with climate change upon us, neither COVID, nor the 2020 bushfires, nor the recent floods will be the last nor the greatest emergencies that we will face together.

I come to this House as a businessman, lawyer and community advocate. I have never been a politician before and, to be honest, I am not entirely sure how to be one. For me, being here is not a job and it is not a career—it is service. I regard all of you here as my colleagues, for whom I have great respect. We are all driven by just causes that are bigger than us and, in the words of Simon Sinek, we pursue "something that is infinite"—for all intents and purposes, unattainable. I hope to learn from you, to collaborate and, where we disagree, to disagree well. I finish with three aspirations for all of us: first, that we can be non-ideological problem solvers for our constituents and collaborate to tackle the great challenges that only broad-based collaboration can solve; second, that we can make this place genuinely representative of the community, so that any one of our kids can see themselves reflected in our leadership and can genuinely believe that they can belong here in Australia; and, third, and most fundamentally, that we can rebuild the public's trust in politics and politicians.

Last week, when visiting a high school in my electorate, two girls ran up to me for a photo. One was Asian and the other one Eurasian, like my kids. They said to me, "We are really proud of you. It's good to see some representation!" If I achieve nothing else in politics but to inspire a few more young people who are wondering where and whether they belong, that they can and should be leaders in our Australian democracy, then I will be happy. Thank you.

Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.

The SPEAKER: I join the House in congratulating the member for Strathfield on his speech.

