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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**PROOF**  
**GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH**  
**Address-In-Reply**  
**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 26 July 2022**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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<b>Questioner</b>		<b>Responder</b>	
<b>Speaker</b>	Sitou, Sally MP	<b>Question No.</b>	

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Ms SITOU (Reid) (18:09): I move:

That the address be agreed to.

This month is a special month for my family. My parents are celebrating 40 years of being Australian citizens. There is a beautiful serendipity about today—that I am now standing in this chamber as a member of parliament on the 40th anniversary of my parents' Australian citizenship. This moment here is surreal, in the best way possible—that one could dare to dream this big. For this was an improbable candidacy. Being elected into our federal parliament is a big deal, but it's an even bigger deal for my parents. They fled their homeland, fearful of what might happen to them because of who they were and the values they held. Even after arriving here they continued to carry that fear, not wanting to talk about politics, not wanting to share their views. And here they are, in the public gallery, watching their daughter speak in our federal parliament.

So you can imagine what this means for them: how much they've come to embrace the best of this country—our freedoms to speak out, to hold a faith and to build the life we want, and our responsibilities to those around us so that we may all prosper together. I marvel at how much has changed for my family in just one generation. That is the power of the Australian story, because stories like mine are possible only in countries like Australia. I am the daughter of migrants, a proud Chinese-Lao Australian. I grew up in Cabramatta in south-west Sydney. I'm the product of good public education. And now I'm the federal member for Reid.

I stand here on the land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and I represent an area that is the land of the Wangal people. Australia is home to the oldest continuing culture in the world, the significance of which should never be diminished. The culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has endured for more than 65,000 years, in all its richness and diversity. They were our first scientists, philosophers, teachers and bakers. They nurtured this land. We ought to celebrate the culture of Australia's First Nations people, acknowledge their rightful place as the traditional and first custodians of this land. We ought to enshrine their voice in our Constitution, and I want to be part of a parliament that does that.

For the sake of future generations, we must do more than pay our respects to their elders past, present and future. We ought to learn from them, continue their care of country and ensure that their culture remains the oldest living culture in the world. First Nations people have gifted us a tradition of custodianship: the idea that we are all here in service of others and must leave this country better than when we found it. When I acknowledge country I'm reminded that I am but a small addition to a long and continuing history. I am a custodian for the present so that future generations may also care for this country.

I stand here as the member for Reid, and I want to acknowledge the members who came before: my predecessor, Dr Fiona Martin, an advocate for improving mental health support; and thank you to former members John Murphy and Mary Easson for generously sharing their wisdom with me. To the people of Reid, thank you for trusting me to be your representative. This is a community I love. It's a wonderful microcosm of multicultural Sydney, imbued with the customs of migrants from around the world. They, too, enriched us with cultures and traditions that make our community stronger. I stand in this institution, as their representative, aware of the weight of responsibility, because it is in this institution that decisions are made that have a profound impact on people's lives. I know this not as an intellectual exercise; I know this because decisions made here have recharted the course of my family's story and the stories of so many Australians.

In 1977, then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser developed Australia's first comprehensive refugee policy. He may have been in a different political party to me, but on this I believe he was on the right side of history. He welcomed refugees fleeing Indochina following the Vietnam War, and one year later, in 1978, he welcomed my parents. My family is of Chinese heritage, but my parents were born and raised in Laos. They fled their homeland and were incredibly lucky Australia gave them refuge. When my parents came here, they had limited formal education and

spoke very little English. They worked hard in factories, where they were able to find secure work with good conditions. They gave my brother and me the work and education opportunities they never had, and my family was able to thrive here. I went on to have the most incredible career, working in international development in the Asia-Pacific and then in international education.

As I reflect on my family's story—a story shared by so many Australians—I also need to reflect on the journey we as a country have travelled to get to this point, because it wasn't an easy journey. Charting through the decisions that have shaped our country, it's important to remember that for much of our history the path on which we walked was not towards multiculturalism but towards a White Australia policy. It was a path that said there was no place in this country for people like me. It was a path that denied our First Nations people their identity, land and kin. Those decisions were made based on fear and a failure of imagination. But we were able to fulfil the potential and promise of Australia when leaders in this place were driven not by fear but by hope and compassion. They looked around and saw what was and imagined what could be. They imagined a country not weakened by diversity but strengthened by it.

In more recent history, when it looked like fear might again overtake imagination, Prime Minister Bob Hawke said in this place:

One of the great and rare distinctions of Australian political leadership in the last generation has been its bipartisan rejection of race as a factor in immigration policy. This has been a triumph of compassion over prejudice, of reason over fear, and of statesmanship over politics.

It was an appeal to turn to the better angels of our nature, and turn we did. In just over half a century, we have moved from an embrace of a White Australia policy to a country that is now a majority-migrant nation. But what is more remarkable is how this news was received—not with backlash but with a genuine embrace of modern Australia. And there is no better display of that than in our federal parliament.

As I look around the House today, it feels like finally it is starting to live up to its name—a House made up of people who truly reflect and represent the communities in which they live. I believe it was important I put my hand up to stand for Reid, a thriving multicultural and multifaith community, because, as audacious as this dream was—to run for our federal parliament—it has never been more important for someone like me to dream it. I grew up watching *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, but I also grew up with a slight unease, not sure of who I was, not sure if I'd gone to the right schools and acutely aware of the postcode I grew up in—not sure of my place in this country. That's why I think it's important to have someone like me in our federal parliament, not for diversity's sake but because representatives that embody all of the Australian story make our parliament better and our democracy stronger.

I speak about my family's story because it is core to who I am. It's what shaped me and the values I want to bring to our parliament. It also connects me to my community. The men on the factory floor in Silverwater remind me of my dad, who worked in an automotive factory for 35 years. Religious leaders who fled their homelands because of persecution—their stories remind me of my own family fleeing their homeland. Parents talk to me about wanting to give their kids good-quality education. It's the same desire I have for my son and the same desire my parents had for me. When I encounter racism and prejudice, I know firsthand how it corrodes our community and holds Australia back from being the best country we can be. And this is a message I'm going to share with all young Australians: you are not defined by your postcode, the school you went to or where your parents came from; in this country, you are defined by the content of your character and what you want to do for others, where the potential and promise of this nation is only limited by our imagination.

On 21 May this year we faced another key turning point in our nation's history: do we continue on with another decade of inaction on climate change or do we imagine a better future for our kids? It was, again, an appeal to turn to the better angels of our nature, and turn we did. We chose care for country and future generations over fear. In the six short years my son has been alive, he has experienced the consequences of climate change, events described as 'once in a generation' experienced in just a few short years. He has now lived through the 2019-2020 New South Wales bushfire season, a once-in-a-generation event. This year he lived through a once-in-a-generation rain and flooding event and now heatwaves breaking records across Europe, all once-in-a-generation events. Surely we can no longer look at the situation before us and believe this is okay. Surely we cannot say to my son and his generation that what we are doing to address climate is enough. Surely it is time to be audacious dreamers and imagine a better way. It is time for us all to learn from our continent's First Nations people and take

on roles as custodians of country. The policies and decisions and values of governments matter. The decisions made today matter for our generation, my son's generation and generations to come.

Good governments change lives. I know because they changed mine. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating said education provided the keys to the kingdom because it unlocks opportunities for all. I was fortunate enough to have teachers who not only guided me through my academic life but also taught me about life outside the classroom—teachers like Craig Cantor, who volunteered to take six year 8 kids camping. It was the first time I'd pitched a tent and slept under the stars, and I loved it. My history teacher, Frank Federico, taught me that progress, while not always linear or guaranteed, was possible if there were enough brave people willing to stand up for what's right. I didn't just get an academic education; I got an education in life. And that is the power of education.

But we have lost sight of that in our current education system. We have failed to value our teachers. After 2½ years of COVID, our teachers are exhausted, and yet we've never asked more of them. We need to radically overhaul the administrative burden we place on our teachers. They should have more time doing what they love: teaching. We need to value them and finally pay them what they are worth. Sometimes we have even failed to provide our students with the most basic infrastructure. There is a school in my electorate where the toilets are so terrible students elect to drink less water to avoid going. There is a community in my electorate who have waited so long for a promised high school the kids are now at university. Our concept of education, too, needs an update. It doesn't start in kindergarten. We should instead think about education as starting from birth. Our early childhood educators are as vital to educating our kids as our primary and high school teachers and university lecturers are.

We have allowed our university and TAFE sectors to languish, and, worse still, the previous government actively undermined tertiary education. They oversaw the most job losses the sector has ever seen—estimates of around 12,000 jobs lost in the higher education sector because of the pandemic. And the sad irony is that it was our university researchers we relied on to help us manage the pandemic: epidemiologists, virologists, public health experts. But it's not just applied research that matters. We also need research in our arts, mathematics and basic science to be valued, because they provide the essential foundations for all future applications. If we can get this right, there is a kingdom that awaits us all, one made up of highly skilled and fulfilling jobs, an economy that is productive and makes the most of our talents and where imagination is valued.

My parents were laser focused on ensuring my brother and I had a good education. They had to be, because their life in Australia was precarious—they did not have the comfort of being able to fail. We were lucky, though, because we had two communities supporting us. The Chinese-Lao-Australian community were like my big extended family, because I always had a collection of aunts and uncles watching over me. It's a resilient community, too. We've had to be, because we've spent two generations searching for a place to call home, and now we've finally found it.

The second community who supported us was the mighty trade union movement. When my dad was injured at work, it was his union that stepped in to help negotiate a new role that would accommodate his injury. When the company my mum worked for went insolvent, it was her union that stepped in to make sure she got her entitlements. I want to thank the union movement. You stood by my parents when they came to this country, just as you stand with all working people who want a better life. I acknowledge and thank all the union representatives present in the gallery here tonight.

During the campaign I had the great privilege of meeting dedicated people who work to make our local area a community. I met Vicki Liubinskas, who started Let's Get Going because she wanted to ensure that adults with disabilities were able to exercise in a fun and safe way. I met Paula Nicolas from St Merkorious Charity. She gives people who are homeless dignity and respect by inviting them in for a hot meal and fellowship. I met the Wentworth Point Residents Action Group—a group of determined locals who got together to make their voices heard and advocate for local infrastructure in their community. These are people in Reid who looked around at what was and imagined what could be. They imagined a community where we were supporting each other, and I am inspired by their example and am determined to continue their good work.

Throughout my campaign I had the support of volunteers who were committed to creating a better future for this country. They stood beside me and made me believe it was possible. They were my campaign community. It's thanks to them that I am the federal member for Reid.

I want to pay tribute to the Australian Labor Party, a movement I joined when I was young and idealistic. I am older now but no less idealistic. To Kevin Rudd, Maxine McKew, Jason Li and Linda Voltz, thanks for the frequent special guest appearances on the campaign trail. There are many in this House I have admired for so long. That I now get to call you colleagues and friends brings me sheer delight. I want to thank the members for Watson, McMahon, Greenway, Chifley, Sydney, Kingsford Smith and Cowan for your support throughout the campaign. Thank you to Senators O'Neill and Sheldon for your generous help. To Senator Wong, thank you—not just for your guidance but for the leading example you have provided to me and so many others. And to my old boss, the member for Blaxland, you bring a level of decency, respect and empathy that I hope to emulate. To the Prime Minister, thank you for bringing compassion back into fashion.

The audacity of this dream was only possible because of three people. They believed in me long before I believed in myself: Jodi McKay, Kirsten Andrews and Dom Ofner. To the campaign team—Mitch Wright, Emma Ross, Ed Saloman, Louise Tran, Jacqueline Price, Phillip Kim, John McManus and LJ Margeit—you were the engine room of this campaign, making it all possible. To Greg and Felicity Davis, Karen Pensabene, Kym Ralley, Jacqui Thorburn, Tom Hore and Susan Yates, thank you for looking out for me and for your continuing support. To all the wonderful women associated with Asian Women at Work, particularly their drumming group and the Sydney Chinese Drum Art Troupe, thank you for helping me connect with my community. To all my Labor family in local government, our mayors and councillors, and to all the branch secretaries, presidents, local branch members and volunteers, you kept the light on the hill shining brightly. I will carry that passion for a better tomorrow with me every day.

I'm lucky to have an incredible family. My brother, Law; sister-in-law, Sharon; and niece, Haegan: it has been such a comfort knowing you are always there for us. To my parents-in-law, Shounan and Jian: thank you for your continuing support and love. To my parents, Phet and Syphan: for the sacrifices you have made, the love you give and the inspiration you have provided, thank you. To the two people who have been my biggest cheerleaders in life, my husband, Rui; and my son, Max: you are my reason for being, and I love you both.

I want to dedicate my first speech to my ama, my maternal grandmother. She was the most remarkable woman. Ama was a widower and a single mother of eight. She had to uproot her life twice, first from China to Laos and then from Laos to Australia. I think about her often because so much of her life happened to her. She had very few choices. She didn't get to choose a career or even where to live. The last photo I have with her is on the dance floor at my wedding in Laos. Ama stayed on in Laos after the wedding, choosing to spend her final years there. It was one of the few choices she had an opportunity to make. It's because of her and the sacrifices she has made that my life was possible, where a world of opportunities has been unlocked for me. I have been able to make choices about what I want to study and what career I want to pursue, and the choice to stand for parliament. While we still have some ways to go before we achieve gender equality, when I think about how different my life is compared to Ama's, I know we're on the right path. If my ama were with us today, I think she would have been astounded but very proud too.

**The SPEAKER:** Before I call the honourable member for Swan, I remind the House that this is the honourable member's first speech. I ask the House to extend her the usual courtesies.