COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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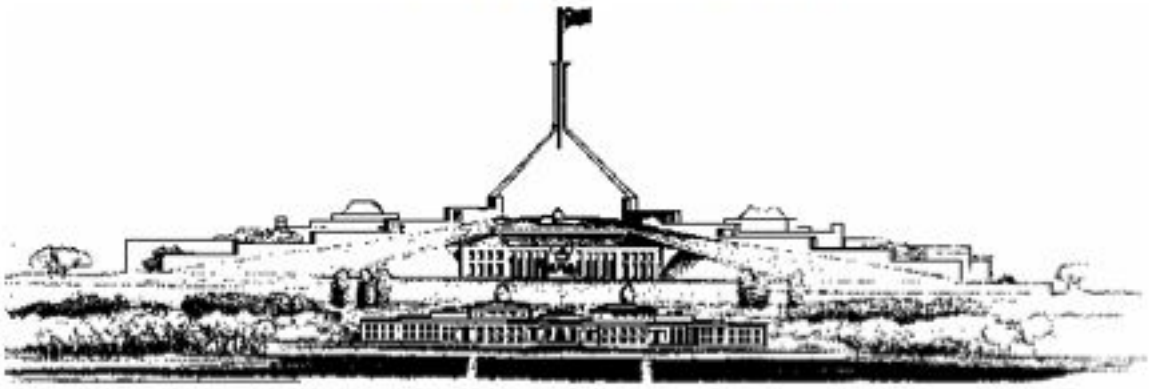

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Wednesday, 23 July 2025

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date	Wednesday, 23 July 2025	**Source**	House
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Questioner		**Responder**	
Speaker	Soon, Zhi MP	**Question No.**	

Mr SOON (Banks) (10:53): It is the honour of my life to stand in this house as the representative for the electorate of Banks. It is the electorate I grew up in, the area I live in and the place where I am raising my own family. Banks is located on the lands of the Bidjigal people. I'm so pleased to be able to recognise, in this great house, their culture and the custodianship of the lands, air and waterways of Banks, alongside the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of this region.

I would like to take you back to the night of 18 August 1989, to a small house in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. That night, as a three-year-old boy, I asked my parents why all our things were packed. My parents said to my sister and me that we were going to Australia. The next day would prove to be the most important day of my family's life. I'm told I would go on to repeat to myself for most of that evening, as kids do, the word 'Australia, Australia, Australia', unsure about what lay ahead.

My parents had chosen to come to this great southern land in search of new opportunities for the family but with an ever-present concern as to whether they and their children would be accepted. In particular, like so many migrants to this great country, they sought to give their children the best education possible, in the hope that that would make our lives easier than the ones they had experienced with their families but also to contribute to their new home.

We arrived into the arms of family in Sydney—all of whom are up there in the gallery—spending the first year of our new lives in Hurstville before moving to Revesby, where our family home would be. I started school at Revesby Public School and finished off primary at Picnic Point Public School. I then went to Hurlstone Agricultural High School, where I not only had a great conventional education but an education about the land and the importance of agriculture. I am also the proud product of public education.

I had a childhood in the nineties and the 2000s, soundtracked by 'Simply the Best', as the rugby league roared across the telly in the winter and we heard the voice of Richie Benaud in his commentary on the cricket in the summer. I once ate 20 oranges in a single sitting while watching a test match, much to my mother's bemusement. I also spent countless hours at Bankstown Basketball Stadium, imagining myself as a future NBL or NBA star, despite my smallish stature, and on the tennis courts across the area, preparing for my never-to-come debut at Rod Laver Arena. I could also be found, air guitar in hand, pretending I was part of Powderfinger, You Am I or Something for Kate.

It was a childhood rich in diversity. My sister and I were welcomed into the households of families of backgrounds from all around the world. They took us in and treated us as their own. Whether they came from Egypt, like the late Mrs Zammit, Lebanon, like the Abrahams, Vietnam, like the Tans, India, like the Vengurlekars, or otherwise, they showed me that multiculturalism was not just a word but a way of life. It involved sharing food, sharing traditions, sharing hardships and sharing laughter. One moment I was eating a devon sandwich, the next a curry laksa, a kibbeh, a banh xeo or a panipuri. I'm a proud Asian Australian. I'm a proud Malaysian Australian. I'm a proud Chinese Australian. But, most of all, I am a proud Australian.

I was lucky enough to attend university, where I studied law and a broad range of subjects, from political science and international relations to economics. During uni I had a range of jobs—everything from putting up Christmas decorations in a shopping centre to serving food at a football stadium and from shouting, 'Out!' as a tennis linesperson to working as a management consultant. Since then I've had the privilege of a career that has taken me from the prime minister's office here in this house to serving as a diplomat in Afghanistan and working with governments, not-for-profits and businesses all around the world on the application of behavioural economics and improving education standards globally.

In Afghanistan I saw firsthand the horrors of war and conflict. I learnt the importance of having trusted institutions, of combating corruption and of the basics of economic growth. I also learnt about large-scale

poverty and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. More broadly, though, in my time in diplomacy, I saw how international agreements were negotiated and the work of our security services and defence force. I saw our alliances in practice and what they mean. Through my time in behavioural economics and education, I've had the honour of travelling to dozens of countries, seeing firsthand how different governments do things. It gave me ideas on how Australia, as great as it is, could do things better. Having high expectations of your government is a good thing.

I've also had the pleasure of working with teachers, school leaders and education policy experts across our great country. I have seen their hard work in action, the profound role they play in our communities and the lengths they go to to make sure no child is left behind. I've also seen their innovation, creativity and empathy. This extends to teachers in regional, rural and remote communities. Unsurprisingly, the research is clear that the biggest in-school impact on a child's outcomes is their teachers. Your work will never go unnoticed in this House.

Whilst I've had the opportunity to travel around our country and to places around the world, I live about a five-minute drive from the house I grew up in. My parents are still in Revesby, albeit on the other side of it now, and my sister is close by. We are now raising our own families in the electorate of Banks. As I told all those I saw at early voting or on election day, I drive the same streets you do, I shop at the same grocery stores, I eat at the same restaurants, I go to the same doctors and hospitals and I'm about to experience, as a parent, the same early childhood education and schools you do. Your problems are my problems, your hopes are my hopes and your joys are my joys.

As a new member, you get asked what you believe in. For the more academically inclined, I am largely a Rawlsian; I subscribe to the beliefs of the great John Rawls and his principles of justice. What that means is I believe we should have systems of government that, no matter what circumstances you are born into, allow people to live happy, healthy and successful lives, and a society that is productive and supports each other, understanding that true achievement is one that is shared and widespread. I also believe strongly in aspiration. Wanting better for you and your family is to be supported. We must have intergenerational mobility, learning from the research of people like Raj Chetty about the barriers to it and what can be done to facilitate it.

I'm also a big believer in social capital, in the value derived from social connections and community. My friend and former colleague David Halpern often refers to this social capital as 'the hidden wealth of nations'. I also share Bob Putnam's views on the importance of social trust not only for social cohesion but as a foundation for economic growth. Social policy is economic policy, and vice versa.

I'm also a great believer in making government more human. People are not just numbers and we should ensure we have the systems in place to reflect that. We should make government processes easier for people to navigate and demonstrate compassion in our delivery. We can strike the balance between fiscal responsibility, accountability, transparency and humanity. Often governments have sound strategic visions for their policy agenda but do not give enough thought to their implementation or how people experience said policy. The details matter.

I'm a person who believes strongly in evidence based or informed policymaking. We should rely on robust evidence to guide our decision-making. Where we know what works, we should adopt. Where we don't, we should try and evaluate. As governments, we need to be humble in recognising what we do and do not know and what we do and do not do well. We must test, learn and adapt.

Another thing you get asked about as a new member is what you want to contribute. First and foremost is my commitment to the people of Banks. Whether you live in Milperra, Revesby, Panania, East Hills, Padstow, Picnic Point, Riverwood, Narwee, Punchbowl, Roselands, Penshurst, Oatley, Lugarno, Mortdale, South Hurstville, Hurstville Grove, Carss Park, Kyle Bay, Connells Point or Blakehurst, I will work day and night to ensure that your voices are heard, that you have the services you need and that government is focused on improving your lives. As I've told every person who has walked through the Banks electorate office since I have been elected, that office is not mine but yours. It is the community's office, and I hope to use it to make the lives of every single person in the electorate better. My campaign slogan was Because You Matter, and I really mean it.

I'm also deeply passionate about education. Education is transformational. It was my life and has been for generations. But my passion for education runs deeper than overarching statements, understanding what makes good education and how we can translate what we know from research about effective teaching and learning into classrooms around our country. This means supporting teachers and school leaders, equipping them with

the tools to support generations of kids to explore what they are good at, what they are interested in and what is productive to support our continued growth and development as a country.

I see Australia's potential as an education superpower, one that is a world leader and is at the cutting edge of teaching practice, the adoption of technology and student empowerment and agency. This is not only in our schools but in our early education centres and our higher education institutions, including universities and TAFEs. Good education policy is good economic policy. I can remember the name of every single teacher I've had since kindergarten. That is because of the profound effect they've had on my life.

I also believe we must think about economic policy more creatively than we have in the past. We can do more as government to promote well-functioning markets. There is comprehensive research by economists like Alvin Roth on how to make markets more effective. We should look to intervene in order not only to prevent market failures but also to boost efficiency and productivity in different markets. We should also explore how we can use data held by government more effectively to support business growth. Do we have information that we can share to equip a small-business owner with data to inform their business decisions and to increase their likelihood of success? Equally, can we equip consumers with more data to help support them with their decision-making? I mentioned previously my interest in social capital. We can also do more to explore how this can be utilised to understand and drive economic productivity.

I'm also deeply passionate about Australia in the global context. Having served as an Australian diplomat, I know how important Australia's voice and actions can be on the international stage. We have a role to play demonstrating how people of different backgrounds, creeds and interests can come together, living peacefully and harmoniously together. Australia is respected by the international community. We can be leaders galvanising action on issues such as climate change and trade cooperation, addressing human rights violations and ending conflicts. Whilst we are not a big country by population, we are a great one. We are uniquely placed in the Asia-Pacific. We have strong relationships in our region but also across the world, allowing us to be a leader—something we should continue to embrace. I have always believed that a threat to peace and security anywhere is a threat to peace and security everywhere. This is why international relations and diplomacy are so important.

In order to be here, I have stood on the shoulders of giants. I would first like to thank the people of Banks for entrusting me to represent you at federal parliament and to be your champion in accessing the services and support you need. I would like to pay tribute to David Coleman, the previous member for Banks. Thank you for your service to the community and the work of you and your staff over the years. I would like to pay special tribute to Daryl Melham, who was the member for Banks for 23 years. Daryl might not remember this but I first met him as a year 6 student from Picnic Point primary school in this House. Daryl has only ever asked one thing of me, and that was to be myself. Daryl, I know you couldn't be here today in person, but we did it.

Thank you to the countless volunteers that helped support the campaign in Banks. There are simply too many individuals to name them all, but I would like to recognise some people who made particularly important contributions over the course of our campaigns in 2022 and 2025. My sincere thank you to the Banks Labor federal electoral council leadership, namely Andrew Ogden, Noreen Whittaker, Karno Gangopadhyay and Peter Gayton.

I would also like to recognise the Labor stalwarts in Banks: the Melham family, Linda Downey, Alan Ashton—and the whole Ashton family—Ian Stromborg, John Rodwell, Morris Iemma, Kevin Greene, John Choueifate, the Gambian family and the Bai family. There are also wonderful elected officials in Banks that have supported me: Mayor Bilal El-Hayek, deputy Mayor Karl Saleh, counsellors David Walsh, Kathryn Landsberry, Elaina Anzellotti, Leon Pun, Gerard Hayes and my new colleague, the member for Barton, during her time in local council. There were also many volunteers that kept on showing up, time after time: Derek Russell, Michael Warner, Vince Smith, Aaron Choy, Mary Studdert, Jaden Kelly, Graeme Wilkinson, Margaret and Patrick Brady, Chloe Walsh, Wendy and Kim Stevenson, Sue Wyatt, Paul Judge, Margaret Hermann, Gerry Selvaraj, Andrew Galuzzo, Bethany Pankhurst, Kate Rainbird, Veronica Ficarra, Matt McDonald Ronnie, Simon Byrnes, Roy Cho and Ronnie Wang. I can see many of you up there today. We did it, thank you!

Also, I send a massive shout-out to the team from the Riverwood Community Centre, who are here today. Every time I visit your centre it reminds me of the greatness of multiculturalism in our community. Thank you for coming. I'd also like to recognise the Rotary Club of Padstow and the Lions Club of Lugarno.

My thanks also goes out to the mighty union movement, with special thanks to the United Workers Union, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Financial Sector Union and the Electrical Trades Union. Thank you, also, to the whole team at the Revesby Workers Club for all your support and for flying the flag for working people in South-West Sydney.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the New South Wales Labor head office and the national secretariat, particularly Dominic Ofner, George Simon, David Dobson, and Paul Erickson.

Thank you also to the Young Labor movement whose hard work has helped me and so many in this chamber.

To not only Thomas Arthur, who led the 2025 Banks campaign, but also to Declan Davis and Thomas Gao who led my campaign in 2022: for your intellect, tireless work and commitment, I will forever be grateful. You were the architects of our success. I look forward to seeing your amazing careers ahead. Thank you also to Teryn Crick for all of your support with the campaign.

My sincere gratitude goes to my colleagues in the federal caucus for their encouragement and support, both during the election and since. This gratitude includes the Prime Minister, who came to Banks during the campaign, as well as the many ministers who came out to campaign alongside me during the campaign and who have visited me since. Also, thank you to my New South Wales state parliament and ministerial colleagues, including the Premier Chris Minns and the member for East Hills, Kylie Wilkinson, for all of your support.

Now, for my family. To my parents, Beow Hong and Ee Lay, you have shown my sister and me boundless love and we are who we are because of you. You worried, before we came to Australia, whether we would be accepted. Hopefully me speaking here today in this House and the achievements of your daughter are testament to the fact that we have. To my sister, Dr. Yin-Lan Soon: you are my hero. Thank you for always being here for me.

To my aunties Barbara and Meilin, to my uncle Yeow Leng and my late uncle Nelson, to my cousins Wayne, Ryan, Stacey, Lennox and Aubrey, to my in-laws—the Smith, Lawrence and MacPherson families, to my brother-in-law, Kevin, to my nieces, Elinore and Abigail, and to my lifelong friends Scott Walters, Wilson Kwok, Victor Hua, Edwin Ho, Jerry Lee, Kim Nguyen, Henry Huynh, Stefan Heap, Rey Reodica, Ronny Azzi and, and Chris Kazanis, as well as the rest of my family and friends in Australia and Malaysia: you have been with me every step of the way. Thank you

To my partner, Bridget: you inspire me every day with your kindness, intelligence, can-do attitude and sense of humour. Thank you for your incredible and unwavering support. To our lovely little girl, Dorothy: you mean the world to us. Dorothy is named after the great Labor senator Dorothy Tangney, her fifth cousin, or great aunt, as we like to say, and the first woman elected to the Australian Senate. What we do, we do for you, Dorothy.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (**Ms Claydon**): Before I call the honourable member for Barton, I remind the House that this is the honourable member's first speech, and I ask that the House extend to her the usual courtesies.