



Local Government Amendment (National Competition Policy Review) Bill

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Second Reading

Debate resumed from 6 May.

The Hon. ROBYN PARKER [5.02 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): I support the Local Government Amendment (National Competition Policy Review) Bill. I have long wanted to sit in this place on these red benches, but to sit here in silence has been agonising. Those who know me know that sitting still and in silence is not something I do well! I thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak for the first time. No doubt there will be many occasions when you will wish that you had not. I am not the first person from Duckenfield to be a member of this Legislative Council. The Hon. John Eales Jnr lived on the very same property as my home. Although he was a member from 1880-94 we cannot find comments attributed to him in the Parliamentary records. I can assure honourable members that that will not be the case for me.

It has been suggested, even by some members of this House, that the Legislative Council is outdated and should be shut down. From the outset I totally reject that notion. To be fair, there certainly is a perception in the community that the Legislative Council does not do much. Only last week someone asked me "So what exactly is it that you do?" To those who are wondering, to me, the Legislative Council plays a vital role in the way our democracy works in New South Wales. It provides a checks and balances process for the people of New South Wales by considering bills, investigating serious public policy issues and amending ill-advised legislation. The Liberal Party did not choose me to represent the people of New South Wales or, indeed, the Liberal Party because they thought I would sit here just keeping the seat warm. Neither did they select me in the hope I might retreat to an ivory tower and make decisions, all the while being detached from the people of New South Wales.

I was asked recently also where I intended to set up my office, apart from my office in Sydney. As I said to this person, whilst there may well come a time when I do establish a second office, for now my main office will be where it has been for many years—in my car, on the road, out in the community. I have a simple life motto: If it's to be, it's up to me. But I will not fulfill that motto by sitting silently on the sidelines. More than 25 years after starting to make my way as an adult, I arrive here in this place having worked with children, families, the disabled, women suffering violence and some of the many in our community who have fallen by the wayside, often through no fault of their own. My party selected me because it had the confidence that I have broad life experiences: that I understand real people and real problems, and that I am capable of delivering real solutions.

When I was 10 years old my mother inherited a small amount of money. We all thought of great ways we could spend the money—a trip to Disneyland seemed like an especially good idea to my brother Murray and me. But, always the practical one, my mother announced that she had decided to use the money to buy a piece of furniture for our lounge room. Returning home from school one afternoon I was ushered into the lounge room to see what I thought would be a new lounge suite. My complete disinterest switched to excitement when instead there in the corner was our very first television set. At last I could see the programs my friends talked about. At last my television viewing was not restricted to watching through shop windows or at a neighbour's house. That television set certainly did entertain us and bring my family together as we shared some laughs over *I Love Lucy*, but it also gave me my first real view into the outside world: and it shattered my belief that everyone else was as fortunate as I was.

When I was 15 I had my first holiday job, working in the china section of White's department store. Although exhausted after a 40-hour week, standing in very uncomfortable but very fashionable shoes, I climbed the stairs two at a time to the paymaster's office to be handed my very first pay packet of \$35.00. My delight quickly turned to disappointment when I realised that the boy from my class who was the same age as me and who was working in the men's shoe department was given \$70.00 simply because he was a male. That was a stark demonstration to me that even in those supposedly progressive, no-war, hippy days discrimination was alive and well in

our society.

When I was 23 the police awakened me from a deep sleep. I was on 24-hour call as part of a family crisis team. They needed my help. A mother was standing on the median strip on the highway with her two children, drug-crazed, yelling at the top of her voice, occasionally stepping out into the traffic and totally oblivious to the danger in which she was placing herself and her children. As I bundled the 18-month-old baby and the 5 year old in my car to take them to a safe house, the older child pleaded with me to go onto the highway and fetch the dummy that his little sister had dropped. Although only five, he had already been forced to assume the role of parent—his eyes dull and his innocence lost. Of course, I could not go back. I purchased a new dummy from the petrol station nearby, leaving that original pink dummy lying on the median strip. It was still there for weeks and months afterwards, a bit more squashed every time I passed by and a harsh reminder of the importance of children, of families and of the need to care for and nurture the most vulnerable in our society.

My childhood was quite different from the childhood of those two children, but it was similar to that of many my age. We lived simply, but well. We knew everyone in our neighbourhood and life revolved around our home and our family. My parents, Adeline and Campbell McEwen—and it is with sadness that I note they are not with us tonight in what would have been their eightieth year—both left school at a young age to supplement their family's income. Through sheer hard work and determination they established a small, successful business. My father was a gentle man with strong Christian beliefs—the kindest man I have ever met. Passive by nature, it is amazing to think he sought permission from his father to sign up as an Anzac before his eighteenth birthday. He did that because it was important to him to stand up for our values, our way of life—a belief that he passed on to me from a very young age. My parents also encouraged us to appreciate diversity, to challenge and to think for ourselves.

In practical terms, my family life represented the vision that Menzies had articulated for society when first establishing the Liberal Party—the desire for a society built on deep respect for the dignity and freedom of the individual, where effort is rewarded and enterprise encouraged; a society of equality; a society of opportunity and choice. When it came time for me to make a decision about my career there were not a lot of options. It was not just an aversion to the sight of blood that saw me choose teaching over nursing. I have always thought that there is nothing as satisfying as watching the face of a person—either a child or an adult—when he or she grasps a concept or a skill for the very first time. I wanted to be a part of that. In those days both the teaching and nursing professions were highly valued. Society genuinely appreciated the role we played. As decision makers we need to do everything we can to ensure that the conditions and opportunities we provide in our schools and in our hospitals are the very best they can be, and that we value the role of those who provide those services.

Community services and social issues are just one passion that I am eager to address in this place. There is an argument to be made about going back to the future regarding the development of community services. The services that I established in the predominantly housing commission areas in the western suburbs of Melbourne were some of our first child care centres. They were neighbourhood centres, linking families with their communities. I later developed one of the first mobile community outreach programs in the city of Maitland in New South Wales. I called it the Community Activities Team—the CAT mobile for short. Many years later I still get a great deal of satisfaction when I see that van on the road making contact with isolated families and communities. Times have changed and the barriers and boundaries of neighbourhoods and families are less rigid than they may have been in the past. Technology now offers us more opportunities for connectivity than ever before, but there can be no substitute for providing that connectivity in more practical terms at a grassroots level.

The benefits of early intervention are so important. Example and experience show that if you become involved in supporting families and children early in life you can prevent so many problems later on. The Coalition's commitment to smaller class sizes during the recent State election was just one practical example of this theme and it is a commitment that we continue to stand by. The scary truth is that over 70 per cent of those who are in gaol are illiterate. As Mark Twain said, "Every time you close a classroom you may as well open a gaol." Those are very frightening words. Frightening—very frightening. Life in rural and regional New South Wales is different from life in Sydney. I can vividly remember my first trip to Newcastle some 20 years ago now. I drove over the Hexham Bridge to see the billowing smoke stacks looming on the horizon and I immediately thought, "This place really lives up to its reputation—an industrial city, a working town, but not the ideal place in which to live."

Fortunately, fate and an inability to read maps intervened. I travelled into Newcastle itself and I could not believe the contrast. I was transfixed by the view. I was home—hooked immediately. A great career opportunity and a certain handsome young doctor ensured that I stayed. My concentration on the physical attributes of that area on that first day failed to recognise the real beauty of Newcastle and the Hunter—the glue that holds us together, its people. In the Hunter we are parochial and proud of it. Anyone who has ever been to a Knights game will understand what I mean. We are proud of our origins; we are proud of our diversity, no matter what challenges are thrown in front of us, we are strong, united and resolute in our desire to succeed. The people of the Hunter are the salt of the earth, people who care about each other, people who rally around in times of crisis, people who support each other through both the good times and the bad times, people who ask for no more than their fair share, and people who expect no more than a fair go.

Throughout my career and during my role in the Liberal Party, travelling across New South Wales and back again, my view has been

reinforced has reinforced my view that these attributes and expectations could be used to describe any community in New South Wales. In short, these attributes describe the Australian way. I have now come full circle from my origins in the dairy farming district in Taranaki, New Zealand, to the dairying area of Duckenfield, New South Wales. There is a marked difference between my experience and that of someone from Sydney. There is a strong—and some would say justified—feeling in rural and regional areas that this Government strongly focuses on the Sydney metropolitan basin and only sometimes glances fleetingly past its boundaries. I say tonight that this attitude must change and I intend to be a catalyst for this change and to drive it from this place.

Look at the population of the capital. Look at the issues faced here in Sydney—the planning nightmares, the destruction of residential suburbs and the failure to provide adequate transport. Look at the incidence of people moving further away from Sydney both to live and to work. Abraham Lincoln once said:

The legitimate object of Government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do for themselves in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can do for themselves Government ought not to interfere.

What happened in Newcastle after the closure of BHP was a practical application of this philosophy. The strategic assistance provided by governments through public-private partnerships and seed funding has allowed the Hunter to thrive and expand. I am proud that I played a role in that process. We could apply this model further by assisting communities to develop to their full potential.

Encouraging people to move to the outer suburbs or to regional communities requires comprehensive planning and the provision of services. Whilst I support the notion of decentralising government departments and of providing incentives for businesses to relocate, this only puts more pressure on a community if its transport, health, communication and education services are already lagging behind those of other areas. Governments have a responsibility to provide a constructive hand up rather than simply a handout. This is also a basic tenet of Liberal philosophy. We want equality of opportunity, freedom of choice, a commitment to care for the disadvantaged and a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. Those goals are the very reason I stand here, humbled and privileged to accept the role of serving all the people of New South Wales.

Solutions to problems are never found in an ad hoc way. Throwing money at a problem only ever meets a short-term goal. I joined the Liberal Party because it is a party of long-term vision, progressive rather than reactionary. This is the approach I will take to my role in this place. The Liberal Party is a great party and I am honoured to have so many of our members in this place today. I thank you for your hard work over many years because without your contribution I would not be standing here. I have learnt a great deal from Liberal Party members—skills that will stand me in great stead in this place. My colleague the Hon. Patricia Forsythe encouraged my involvement in the Women's Council of the Liberal Party, and it is an honour to be joining her in this place, along with our other Coalition colleagues. It is significant to note that all of our Coalition women members of the Legislative Council come from rural and regional backgrounds. We understand the needs of country residents; we understand the difficulties of balancing work and family.

I follow a number of other Liberal women into Parliament, most notably the first female President of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Virginia Chadwick—another Hunter woman and a great role model. I have great admiration for all of their achievements and I thank them for blazing the trail and for setting the path for me to follow. Increasing the number of women in the parliaments of Australia is a goal that the Liberal Party has been working towards for a number of years. Whilst supporting the notion of selection based on merit rather than adopting a quota system, the mentoring, training and support provided by the New South Wales Women's Council and the Liberal Women's Forum have been instrumental in our success. As we celebrated 100 years of women's suffrage in 2002 we also celebrated the contribution that Liberal women have made to the parliaments of Australia. We have come a long way over the past 100 years, but there is still more to be achieved. I look forward to continuing to mentor more women to take up the challenge of political representation.

I have been mentored and encouraged by so many in the Women's Council on my journey through the Liberal Party. I have been inspired by the integrity of Marise Payne and by the strong community-based representation of our class of '96: Danna Vale, Jackie Kelly and Johanna Gash. I acknowledge the significant role played by our party president and former Women's Council president, Chris McDiven. It is a great delight to me that I am joining our immediate past president and my friend Judy Hopwood, the member for Hornsby, in this Parliament. To Betty Grant, Betty Coombe and Betty Davy—who are affectionately known as "the Bettys"—Marie Wood, Linde Jobling, Mary Ingal and many others, thank you for your guidance and wisdom. I am honoured to be your representative. To John Brogden and Don Harwin, thank you for your guidance and support. I have been fortunate also to have the support and assistance of Mike Gallacher, Chris Hartcher, Bob Baldwin and John Tierney over many years. I will join with them as we combine all of our energies to keep the focus firmly applied to the Central Coast and Hunter regions.

I wish to acknowledge my family and friends, not only those present tonight but also those unable to be here, who have faith in me and my ability and who have helped shape me to become the person standing before you today. I thank them for their love, their guidance and their support. They have been aware of my desire of many years now to be a participant in the law-making process for the people of this State. They know why I wanted to be here; they know the sincerity of my motivation, my level of commitment and the energy and enthusiasm that I apply to everything I do.

I have mentioned my role in the Liberal Party and my career before coming to this place, but it is my role as a wife and mother that is the most significant one. I thank my stepchildren, Ben and Tim, for teaching me the importance of good parenting. My children, Dylan, Chelsea and Heath, are my greatest inspiration. They quickly learnt that the Liberal Party did not involve lots of party food and balloons. They have been victimised for their parent's political beliefs but, in spite of this, they are always there lending support and involving themselves as part of team Parker—one of the most formidable campaign teams in the party. They do that because they know it is important.

The upside at least for them is that, although still in school, they already have an impressive curriculum vitae that includes an understanding of all facets of mail distribution, successful marketing techniques, an ability to talk to a broad cross-section of the community, an appreciation of a strong work ethic, and an ability to deal with aggressive dogs and to answer the phone in an intelligent manner. Above all, they can add to their already significant attributes an appreciation of the diversity of opportunity provided in this great State. My husband and soul mate in life, David, continues to be my greatest role model, mentor and supporter. I would most certainly not be standing here today without the benefit of his love and motivation.

I am incredibly honoured to be standing in this House, filled with anticipation at the opportunity I have to work towards a better quality of life for all the people of New South Wales. I am a woman, a mother, a wife, an advocate and a daughter. I have concerns, aspirations and ideas. And now, as a member of Parliament, I make a commitment to you and to myself that I will not take this opportunity for granted. I will not squander this chance to work for the betterment of us all. I will stay strong, I will maintain my integrity and I will represent the State of New South Wales to the very best of my ability.

I have talked today of communities, of people, of life philosophies and of journeys. I have talked about some of the things that I believe are important in life. When I asked my children for some advice today they gave me one of their current sayings: "Keep it real, Mum." I will keep it real; I will not forget the real people of New South Wales whom I am here to serve. At the end of my days when people discuss me I hope they will say, "She was enthusiastic about life, about people; she cared. She worked tenaciously to make a difference whilst at the same time she was a wonderful wife and mother."