



Legislative Council

25/08/88

GOVERNOR'S SPEECH: ADDRESS IN REPLY

Fifth Day's Debate

Extract

The Hon. HELEN SHAM-HO [10.52]: I seek leave to open my maiden speech with a few words in Chinese, which is my mother tongue.

Leave granted.

The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse, once said,

“千里之行始於足下”，

which translated is, "The journey of a thousand miles must start with the first step". This is my first speech, which is the start of my journey in serving the people of New South Wales who have vested their trust in me. Sir James Rowland has almost completed his journey with his significant contribution as Governor of New South Wales. I wish Sir James and Lady Rowland all the very best and good health. I have approached this day with humility and pride. The honour of having been called to represent the people of New South Wales in this history-filled Chamber is overwhelming. I thank you, Mr President, and all other honourable members, for the warm welcome that has been extended to me. My appreciation goes to Mr Jeckeln, Clerk of the Parliaments, and all staff members for the courtesy, co-operation and assistance that has been given to me since my entry into Parliament.

I thank my family and my many friends and colleagues who have been so supportive and patient with me in my campaign to become a member of the Legislative Council. I thank them most sincerely for their time, effort and guidance. I especially want to acknowledge the presence of my husband, Robert Ho, in the President's gallery today. He has given me much encouragement and help. I congratulate the other new members who have already made their initial contribution in this House.

Like most members on the occasion of their first speech, I would like to say something about myself, my beliefs and a lot about my work ahead. In this address, I will introduce myself to you, Mr President, to fellow members of the Legislative Council and, of course, the men and women in the community I represent. What motivates me, my political philosophy and my aspirations, are now matters of public scrutiny. This fact will always inspire my public life—awareness of my accountability to the public whose confidence brings me here today. The achievement of becoming a member of Parliament makes me realize the faith that has been bestowed upon me. But for a person like me, born outside Australia, who came to Australia as recently as 1961, the election says more about the openness of this country and the opportunities it offers for the individual, wherever he or she came from, than about the personal achievement of the politician involved.

That I am the first Australian parliamentarian of Chinese origin is no secret. In fact, I am proud, as an Australian, of having been born in Hong Kong and that the first language I learnt was Chinese. In a sense, I represent the aspiration of thousands of Australians who migrated to this country to seek a better way of life, to make their homes in one of the great democracies. Although I am typecast in this role, I like to think that first and foremost I am an ordinary Australian woman who has a great love for this nation. I will always put Australia first. Indeed, I am conscious of being an elected member who is also a woman and a mother. Only 10 years ago it would have been rather visionary to think of a combination like this to occupy a post in Australian public life, let alone a seat in Parliament.

When the Hon. Franca Arena was elected in 1981 as the first woman migrant ever to an Australian Parliament, she said in her first speech that she would like to have seen more immigrants, more

women and more Aborigines in Parliament. I share the view that a broad cross-section from the community is necessary to ensure true democratic representation. In 1977 the Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales, Paolo Totaro, with whom I had the pleasure of working as a part-time commissioner for almost three years, pointed out publicly the dearth of people of non-English speaking background in elected positions in Parliament, and in appointed positions as judges and senior public servants. The 1978 report of the commission was called "Participation" for this very reason: to make integration a working concept, not leaving it as a distant ideal. We should become aware that participation in public life of different groups, such as women, and immigrants, is something that can be measured. It becomes an indication of how such groups are progressing.

It is not only heartening, but also exciting, that we can claim in New South Wales that the first ever head of government from a non-English speaking background was achieved in the election of an Hungarian born, very Australian Premier. I believe that Mr Greiner will be a great Premier. He has shown courage and vision in all he has done. I am also grateful to my party which, in line with the great Liberal tradition, has taken a leading role in the development of equal opportunity policies for all.

Let me say at this point that social cohesion and unity for Australia have been paramount in framing ethnic affairs and multicultural policies. The Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1979, the first such Act in Australia, was created with bipartisan support. It clearly spelt out that the commission's main task was to encourage the participation of individuals from ethnic groups in the political, social and cultural life of Australia, having as the paramount concern the unity of all Australians in a single society. As the Premier has recently restated, there is no more cherished Australian and Liberal value than that of a fair go, and that applied to the cultural diversity in a nation, became known as multiculturalism. I am in full agreement with the Premier. And multiculturalism means giving everybody a fair go, irrespective of the culture, the language, and the religion of one's background, while always stressing the need to keep as our first concern the unity of Australia.

I came to Australia as an overseas student attracted by that notion of fair go. It was, and is, immensely attractive to immigrants, that Australia, with its institutions, its laws, and its customs so clearly linked to Europe, is also open to understanding its immediate Asian and Pacific neighbours. It was as an overseas student that I first learnt about Australia's history, forged and developed by the mass movement of people from all parts of the world. Since European settlement in 1788, Australia has relied on inviting people from other countries for its work force, to increase commerce, to develop science and enrich the culture. Like Australia, other advanced free countries, such as Canada and the United States of America, have been shaped, not only in their economic structure but also in the cultural make-up, by immigration.

The United States of America had a successful Secretary of State, Dr Kissinger, who was of German origin. American science and art is represented by names which clearly reflect other parts of the world, and the same applies to Canada. In Australia, at least four out of 10 Australians are directly related to recent immigrants by having been born, or by having at least one parent born, in an overseas country. About four million people have come to live in Australia since the end of World War II, and 60 per cent of the post-1945 demographic increase is due to immigration. Given the size of Australia's population in 1945 and in 1988, it can be said categorically that no other developed free country in the world has relied so much on immigration for its economic and cultural development. This great development has also created a national cultural change without precedent in the modern world.

Prior to the second world war Australia was a monolingual society, consisting mostly of English-speaking peoples from the British Isles and Ireland. In 40 years, Australia has changed to become one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. The reality is that, including the many Aborigine languages, a countless number of languages and dialects are spoken in Australia. All these facts reflect our diverse and enriched ways of living. I do not want to sound trite, but I truly believe that this country is a miracle. Australia has been able to turn diversity from a potential source of conflict into a unique asset. We can say that this is uniquely Australian. This is one of the original traditions of our great country, and it has happened because Australia moved from an immigration policy based on racial exclusion to a policy of non-discrimination.

This Council knows that the first immigration legislation enacted by the colonies more than a century ago was specifically aimed at making immigration of the Chinese very difficult. The Chinese had come with other immigrants from all parts of the world in the middle of the last century during the gold rush. There is no need for me to emphasize how much they were unfairly blamed and mistreated during times of economic depression. It was classical racial intolerance. It found its way into federal legislation when, at federation time in 1901, the Immigration Restriction Act was passed. It came to be known as the White Australia policy, and was supported on both sides of the political fence. Racial purity was the aim.

When the Labor Prime Minister, Arthur Calwell, the undisputed planner of post-war immigration policy, initiated the largest program of planned immigration in Australia since convict settlement. White Australia was still his target with nine out of 10 immigrants to be of British origin. However, the intention of racial purity which underpinned the 1901 legislation could not be realized after World War II. Australia could not get enough Britons to fill Calwell's immigrant target. What happened then was that, in the absence of explicit quotas, unstated priorities were adopted. The gaps the British could not fill were first filled by Europeans of the northern countries, then others, and finally the people from Asian countries. Before 1972 the White Australia policy was supported by all parties. From 1972, a policy of non-discriminatory selection replaced the so-called White Australia policy. This enlightened decision for a non-discriminatory immigration policy attracted the support of both Government and Opposition. In my view, and many will agree with me, the development of our country has benefited tremendously from this.

I believe that all members of this Council are dedicated to their work. They represent a large electorate—indeed, the whole of New South Wales. Some of us do, however, have special areas of interest. I am the first person of Chinese origin to be elected to Parliament in Australia, and there is an expectation that I shall take a special interest in matters relating to the Chinese, as well as people of Asian origin. I am also a woman, and I perceive that some expect that I should take a special interest only in matters traditionally concerning women politicians. I have carefully considered these expectations and have consulted both with my party and others. I have decided that I am, and want to remain, an elected member who will take an interest in all issues which face this Chamber. Therefore, I trust my gender and my origin will not preclude me from participating in any issues that arise in this State.

I will also certainly take an active role in expressing the aspirations of Australians who are concerned about race relations. Racism is a form of violence which I abhor. It has caused the deaths of millions and untold suffering. I am sure that all who came to Australia regarded this country as a sanctuary, where racism would be left outside, and I am committed totally to this viewpoint. I shall make every effort to co-operate with the Government and with all the people to ensure that racism is not allowed to flourish. I do not want to speak of racial prejudice; I wish to emphasize racial tolerance. It is my unshakeable belief that democracy must ensure that all citizens are equal, that all people have equal opportunity, that no one is discriminated against, and particularly that every person, no matter where he or she was born, is guaranteed equal rights in every area of human endeavour.

In my work as an ethnic affairs commissioner, as a social worker, and as a solicitor in Cabramatta, a suburb which has undergone great change in recent years, I have learnt that there are some basic rules that those who deal with the public must follow. First and most important, I have learnt never to prejudge any person on the basis of stereotypes. The stereotypes that we all carry with us were given to us through education, by the family, by the school and through friends. According to these prejudices, a Mediterranean woman would be emotional, a Chinese would be inscrutable, an Englishman would have a stiff upper lip. and so on. These stereotypes must be rejected. My experience has shown that it is the individual that matters. That is why I am a Liberal. Our philosophy recognizes the dignity and value of each individual. This is also the basic principle of social work: the importance of an individual's own worth.

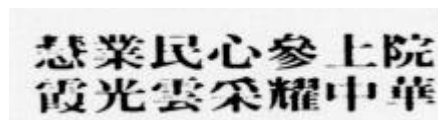
To give newcomers a fair go, we must also show patience where there is a difference between our language and our religion. We must never allow intolerance of any kind, and especially racial intolerance, to poison the natural tendency of people to extend care and support to those in need, no matter who and what they are. We must accept and tolerate the differences of others in order to maintain the cohesion and stability which are basic facts of Australian life. The older we are the more difficult it is to change our everyday and traditional way of being. It is not only pointless but also dangerous to force people to make unnecessary adjustments, such as those that go beyond what the free market requires, to work and live together, or to

integrate. The old policy of assimilation placed unreasonable demands on people to suppress some of the things dearest to them, such as their original language, with a view to guaranteeing social cohesion.

I am absolutely convinced that both in private and community interactions we must never suppress what people cherish most in their lives. The way to reach social cohesion is the way Australia has chosen in our generation; that is, to allow people to retain their individual identity with the aim of living and working harmoniously with others. The recently arrived non- English speaking migrants are likely for many years to face a period of great stress and confusion. They are here because they have made that choice, and that determination to become Australians deserves our assistance and respect. Such assistance should not be too little, nor should it be too much. We must avoid the creation of dependencies, which are difficult to shake off. This is also a principle that must be applied in offering assistance to all needy individuals and disadvantaged groups.

Before I conclude my first speech, I would like again to express my profound gratitude to Australia, my country. To Australia I owe my allegiance. I am like all citizens, whether born here or overseas. I owe a great deal to Australia. I have endeavoured as a parent and through my work to repay some of this debt, and now as a parliamentarian I will continue to strive for the good of Australia and all its people. In this I believe I am no different from all other Australians who have contributed to our growth economically, as well as socially and culturally.

Mr President, I seek permission again to end my speech with a short Chinese poem. This was composed for me by a scholar to celebrate my success in the election. He has used my Chinese name, Wai-Har, as part of this poem. I would like to share this with all honourable members:



Translated it means:

With Favourable Heart you have won the way to Parliament.
Behold the Splendid Sunshine radiating over Your People

I thank all honourable members for extending to me the courtesy of listening to me in silence.