



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 14 May 2015.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER (Mr Thomas George): Order! On behalf of the newly elected member for Mount Druitt, I acknowledge the presence in the gallery of the former member for Mount Druitt, the Hon. Richard Amery; the former member for Londonderry, Allan Shearan; Mr Youssef Hassan Shawki, Consul-General of the Arab Republic of Egypt; and Father Gabriel Yassa from the Coptic Church, Mount Druitt Parish. I also welcome to the Legislative Assembly local government representatives, family, friends and supporters of the newly elected member for Mount Druitt.

Mr EDMOND ATALLA (Mount Druitt) [10.45 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Mr Deputy-Speaker, parliamentary colleagues, distinguished guests, His Excellency Youssef Hassan Shawki, Consul-General of the Arab Republic of Egypt, family and friends, I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Gadigal people, and pay my respects to them and their elders, past and present. I also acknowledge the Darug people of the land I represent and pay my respects to them and their elders, past and present. I stand before you today to address the Fifty-sixth Parliament of New South Wales as the member for Mount Druitt. I am deeply privileged to be given this opportunity. I would like to thank the wonderful people of Mount Druitt electorate for bestowing this great honour upon me.

Like many other migration stories, my family's story is one of courage and determination. Our journey began more than 45 years ago when my parents made the brave decision to migrate to Australia, a country where we did not have any family or friends. I was born in Sudan of Egyptian parentage. In 1969 my father, who was a young and adventurous accountant seeking a fresh start and new opportunities for his children, decided to respond to an advertisement in the local newspaper from a firm that was seeking accountants in Australia. I was only eight years old at the time. Together with my parents and my two younger siblings, we travelled to what seemed to be the end of the earth. Our destination was Melbourne, as this was where my father's new job was based.

We arrived on Anzac Day and my family immediately experienced the true meaning of climate change. Coming from a country of extreme heat, the cold weather in Melbourne caused the entire family to fall ill within a few days. My mother, who sadly passed away five years ago from cancer, insisted that we return to Sudan immediately. My father, on the other hand, suggested that we give Sydney a go because—and I quote—"I noticed that the sun was shining when we were transiting to Melbourne." Just a short five days later we arrived in Sydney, on 30 April 1969. Being complete strangers in a foreign land, our family relied on the advice of our taxidriver from the airport to help us find temporary accommodation. Redfern was our first stop. However, within a few weeks we moved to Marrickville, as it was where my father secured employment as an accountant. I was enrolled at Marrickville Primary School and, like many other students who were predominantly from a Greek background, I could not speak one word of English.

How we communicated with each other was a miracle—but kids being kids, we found a way. Within a few weeks, I mastered the Greek language and went home convincing my parents that I was speaking English. I guess my friends also went home speaking Arabic. Soon afterwards, my family discovered the newly established Coptic Orthodox Church in Redfern. The church was in its early inception and had a small congregation of about 100 members. We began to make new friends and assimilate in our new home. Please allow me to digress for a moment. From these humble beginnings, I am pleased to say that the Coptic Church in Sydney today has 29 parishes, three schools and approximately 70,000 members. I acknowledge the first Coptic Bishop to Sydney, His Grace Bishop Daniel, head of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Sydney and Affiliated Regions, who is represented here by Father Gabriel Yassa from the Mount Druitt parish. I would also like to acknowledge Father Shenouda Mansour, General Secretary of the NSW Ecumenical Council, and thank the Coptic community leaders and members for being here today.

Following our short stay in Marrickville, we moved to Prospect in Western Sydney in 1970. This decision was motivated by housing affordability and my parents' desire to embrace the great Australian dream of purchasing their own home. I am proud to say that Western Sydney is where my family placed their roots, and have remained ever since. So it should come as no surprise that, following my marriage in 1987, I moved to the Mount Druitt electorate, where I purchased my first home and raised my family. I first became interested in politics in the late 1980s when I had the opportunity to witness firsthand the hardship experienced by some people in the community. This defining moment occurred in 1987 whilst I was employed as a junior engineer at Holroyd City Council. I assisted an elderly gentleman who could not afford to replace his set of dentures after they fell down a council stormwater drain. Thankfully, I was able to retrieve them; however, his inability to afford another pair struck a chord with me. I became acutely aware that people within our community—many of whom we often call friends and neighbours—struggle financially on a daily basis.

It was at this point I resolved to help ensure that all people would have better access to what I believe are the basic necessities in life. I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless in our community, and fight for equal access to health, education and basic services. I strongly believe every person should be treated equally, with respect and dignity, regardless of their postcode or where they come from. So in my pursuit to make a difference and with a strong determination to be part of the political process, I joined the great

Australian Labor Party some 23 years ago. I was attracted to the party's principles of social justice, including equal access to health and education, employment opportunities, and greater equality of wealth and power. I was fortunate to be elected as a local councillor to Blacktown City Council in 2004 and as deputy mayor in 2006-07.

Over the past 11 years I have worked tirelessly to stand up for our community and make a positive contribution to our great city. My fellow councillors and I have recorded many achievements, and I make special mention of reopening Mount Druitt swimming pool, saving more than 800 homes from compulsory acquisition, stopping the privatisation of council's childcare centres, preventing the sale of many of our small parks and reserves, and restoring the 50 per cent pensioner rebate on rates in the upcoming budget. All of these triumphs have greatly benefited many residents and helped to improve their standard of living.

The Mount Druitt electorate encompasses 15 suburbs, with a population of more than 83,000 people. The area was named by Major George Druitt after he was granted 2,000 acres by New South Wales Governor Lachlan Macquarie. A local landmark cottage known as "The Manse", which is situated in The Avenue, Mount Druitt, was built as part of Druitt's property. It was later sold to Robert Kennedy, who, upon his death, bequeathed it to the Presbyterian Church. In 2000 the property was acquired by Blacktown City Council and I am pleased that, as a newly elected councillor, I was able to advocate and achieve the full restoration of this historic building. It is now the headquarters of the Mount Druitt Historical Society and open to the public. The building is listed on both the local and State heritage registers.

Since the inception of the seat of Mount Druitt in 1971, we have had three great Labor stalwarts representing our community—Jim Southee, Tony Johnson and, as many of you will agree, the greatest representative of all, my good friend and mentor the Hon. Richard Amery. To Richard, on behalf of the residents of Mount Druitt, I thank you for the distinguished service you have provided over the past 32 years. I wish you and Marie all the very best as you embark on a new chapter in your lives. I also sincerely hope you will continue to have an involvement in our community. There is no doubt that I have some very big shoes to fill and I will work extremely hard to address the needs of our constituents as the fourth Labor representative of this electorate.

My campaign slogan was "Standing up for us", and that is exactly what I intend to do during my time in public office. I will be a strong advocate for the electorate and will fight to secure the services and facilities that our area richly deserves. I am committed to having our community's voice heard in this great Parliament of ours, and I will lobby for changes to help improve the daily lives of our constituents. These changes include restoring local health services, improving local roads and transport services, increasing maintenance on public housing, addressing homelessness, retaining essential public services such as electricity in public hands, and reinstating funding to TAFE. I strongly believe education should be recognised as an investment in our nation's future and not as a burden on our budget.

I am pleased to say that the constituents of Mount Druitt are hardworking and honest people who are simply trying to get ahead in life. Despite the ongoing misrepresentation of the electorate by some media, Mount Druitt boasts a strong sense of community and unity. It is time we put a stop to the stereotypes and the stigmatism often associated with the electorate, and start highlighting and promoting the positive aspects of our area. Mount Druitt is home to Blacktown International Sportspark. Initially constructed for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, this multi-sports venue is now utilised by many professional sporting organisations. They include Sydney Blue Sox, Western Sydney Wanderers Football Club, New South Wales Speed Blitz Blues and Sydney Thunder, and the Greater Western Sydney Giants. The precinct attracts more than 500,000 visitors a year and offers world-class sporting facilities.

The electorate also has a number of other quality community and recreational facilities such as the \$8 million state-of-the-art Mount Druitt Hub, Emerton Leisure Centre, Mount Druitt Swimming Pool, Western Sydney International Dragway, and Nurragingy Reserve—a popular regional parkland. On the business front, it is anticipated that the soon to be developed Sydney Business Park will deliver some 17,000 direct jobs to Western Sydney. Located only a short distance away, the 256-hectare site will integrate industrial, commercial and bulky goods and service the Mount Druitt electorate. Labor has a proud tradition of delivering for the electorate of Mount Druitt. As the newly elected member, I will aim to continue this long and distinguished tradition.

In 1955 New South Wales Labor Premier Joseph Cahill introduced electric train services to Mount Druitt. This initiative put Mount Druitt on the map and connected it to other parts of Sydney. The availability of public transport also expanded job opportunities for constituents who could now travel more easily to their workplace. In the early to mid-1970s, the Whitlam Government directed large amounts of funding to Western Sydney, which resulted in sewerage being introduced to countless suburbs. The Whitlam Government was also responsible for the construction of Westmead Hospital. On a personal level, I was a beneficiary of the Whitlam Government's decision to abolish university fees in 1974. This enabled me to obtain a Bachelor of Engineering degree from the University of Wollongong and pursue a career in civil engineering for more than 25 years.

The Wran Labor Government, which was elected in 1976, delivered Mount Druitt TAFE and expanded the railway tracks between Blacktown and St Marys railway stations from two to four lines. Most significantly, it also delivered Mount Druitt Hospital. This was a direct result of constituents experiencing difficulties in accessing medical services at either Blacktown or Nepean hospitals. Sadly, over the past few years services at the hospital have been progressively downgraded. The cardiac ward was closed in the last term

of government, forcing constituents to travel further to receive treatment for often life-threatening conditions. The health service was also renamed Blacktown Mount Druitt Hospital in a strategic move to reduce the importance of Mount Druitt as a stand-alone hospital.

Successive Labor Governments and continued Labor representation have resulted in the construction of a number of new schools throughout the electorate, including the establishment of Chifley College, the first senior-only high school; upgraded facilities and a new hall at Colyton Primary School; new libraries at Rooty Hill High School and Eastern Creek Primary School; the expansion of Mount Druitt TAFE; the construction of a new palliative care ward at Mount Druitt Hospital; lifts at Mount Druitt railway station; a bushwalkers rescue centre at Rooty Hill; a \$12 million courthouse at Mount Druitt; and a commuter car park at Mount Druitt railway station. In spite of all those achievements, more needs to be done for our growing electorate.

I will be actively lobbying for vital infrastructure works that are urgently required, including easy access lifts at Rooty Hill railway station and the duplication of the Francis Street overpass. I will also be very vocal in my efforts to restore full services at Mount Druitt Hospital; abolish the Smart and Skilled reforms to TAFE colleges, which resulted in many tertiary students abandoning their studies; and increase funding for the maintenance of public housing, which in the past two years alone has been cut by more than \$107 million. It is time that the constituents of Mount Druitt receive the basic facilities and services that others in Greater Sydney take for granted.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank a number of people who have helped me to stand in this place today as the new member for Mount Druitt: former New South Wales Premier, the Hon. Kristina Keneally, for taking the time to officially launch my campaign; Federal member for Chifley, Ed Husic, MP, for his continuous support and encouragement—I look forward to working with him in representing this great electorate; former Opposition Leader John Robertson, MP, for his ongoing contributions to the party; Michael Daley, MP; Guy Zangari, MP; the Hon. Sophie Cotsis, MLC; the Hon. Shaoquett Moselmane, MLC; and Opposition Whip Noreen Hay, MP, for their invaluable guidance and advice.

I thank the Mayor of Blacktown City Council, Councillor Stephen Bali, for leading our city and delivering the largest infrastructure works program in the council's history—may we continue to represent our community and our residents to the best of our abilities. I thank Councillor Tony Bleasdale, a wonderful friend and supporter throughout my time in public office, and his wife, Nina, for being here today. Councillor Charlie Lowles is a great champion of social justice, and I have learned so much from you. I am grateful for your leadership, friendship, loyalty and unwavering support. I also thank Councillor Susai Benjamin, Blacktown City Council General Manager, Kerry Robinson, and the directors and managers from Blacktown City Council who are here this morning.

I acknowledge the support I have received from NSW Labor, in particular Jamie Clements, Kaila Murrain and Dave Latham. I make special mention of Dom Ofner for being such a fantastic campaign organiser and thank him for his continuous support and guidance. I thank also former Consul-General to Chicago and former Federal member for Chifley, the Hon. Roger Price, and his wife, Robyn, for their assistance on polling day. I thank former member for Londonderry, Mr Allan Shearan, for his friendship and support, and the three branch campaign directors, Brad Bunting, Phil Desveaux and Peter Clapham, for their outstanding organisational skills and contribution to my campaign.

I express my gratitude for the continued support of various union representatives, including my union, Professional Engineers Australia, New South Wales Director, Paul Davis; Unions NSW Community Organiser, Alison Rahill; Australian Workers Union, New South Wales State Secretary, Russ Collison; Rail Tram and Bus Union State Secretary, Alex Claassens; United Services Union State Secretary, Graeme Kelly; and Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Industries Union State Secretary, Jim Metcher. I thank the State Electorate Council [SEC] Executive, Gayle Barbagallo and Tom Kenny, along with the many volunteers who worked tirelessly and contributed in many ways during my campaign. More than 200 people volunteered to help me in the run-up to the election, but time does not permit me to name them all. I offer my heartfelt and sincerest thanks for your invaluable contributions.

I thank also Derek Margerison, Anthony Pereira, Sophie Young, Fraida Pisani, Rosa Sharp, Mila Martin, Edith Johnson, Sam Barbagallo, Kate Barbagallo, Ben Price, Roy Amery, Richard Hoskins, Ted Kaciewicz, Arnold Metcher, Julie and Robert Muir, Lyn Muir, Alfred Said, Nicole Seniloli, Selepa and Pesa Tualai, Jela Villagas, and Shirley and Ian Watt for going beyond the call of duty. I also extend my appreciation to various local organisations, in particular the Egyptian, Sudanese and Filipino communities. I thank the Sub Continent Friends of Labor, represented today by Dr Moninder Singh and Ejaz Khan.

I thank my hardworking parliamentary staff, Sarah Hatch and Phil Desveaux, for all the great work they do in serving the people of the Mount Druitt area. Last but not least I thank my wonderful family—all my relatives who assisted with campaign activities. My 83-year-old dad, Mamdouh, in spite of his poor health, campaigned continuously on my behalf. Furthermore, I publicly thank my parents for their extraordinarily brave decision to move to Australia. Their desire to build a better life for their young family ultimately enabled my siblings and me to embrace the opportunities afforded to us in this great country of ours.

I am immensely proud of my siblings' achievements. My brother, Adel, is a commander in the NSW Police Force whilst my sister, Lillian, and her husband, Dr George Ibrahim, own and operate a medical centre in the Mount Druitt electorate. When my parents

embarked on their remarkable migration journey, I am sure they never imagined that I would one day be standing here before you as an elected representative in the New South Wales Parliament.

My daughter, Tina, and son-in-law, John, I thank you for your continued encouragement and support. I look forward to becoming a grandfather for the first time when you welcome your child in August. My youngest daughter, Natalie, was only one year old when I was first elected to council. I thank you for your patience and understanding of my commitment to our community. I am confident that you are learning the value and importance of helping others. My mother-in-law, Mary, has lived with my family for many years. She is always looking after me and ensuring that I have eaten. My stomach and I thank you. Finally, I thank my beautiful wife, Dimyana, for all her love and support in my pursuit of public office. Dimyana has made many sacrifices over the years and I am extremely lucky that she has been beside me every step of the way. As they say, behind every man is a great woman; and let me tell you, she is the greatest.

Once again, thank you all for your support in this incredible journey. It is truly a great honour and privilege to have been elected as the new member for Mount Druitt. As part of Luke Foley's team, I look forward to working with my Labor colleagues in delivering services and infrastructure for Mount Druitt. I will be a strong advocate for the electorate because it is my home. I am committed to representing our residents and ensuring our community's voice is heard loud and clear in the Fifty-sixth Parliament of New South Wales. Thank you.