

Address by NSW Liberal Leader, Barry O'Farrell, to the 2008 Ku-ring-gai Business Breakfast, Hilton Hotel, Sydney, 29 February 2008

REVITALISING NEW SOUTH WALES

The Liberal legacy

Next month marks the twentieth anniversary of the election of the last Liberal/Nationals Government.

It's a victory Nationals leader Andrew Stoner and I am determined to emulate at the next election.

That Liberal/Nationals Government served the State for just seven years – half the duration of the current administration.

It inherited a mess, coped with Federal Labor's 'recession we had to have', and by any measure left the State in remarkably good shape.

Cast your mind back thirteen years.

NSW was outperforming the other States in eight of 11 key economic indicators, including

- private business investments (growing at 28%); and
- building approvals for homes and commercial premises (15% and 36%).

Having won the right to host the Olympics two years earlier, there was an air of expectancy and excitement and associated construction and employment was starting to gear up.

Sydney's trains ran more frequently, travelled faster, carried increasing numbers of passengers and exceeded more stringent on time running targets than today.

New Endeavour, Explorer and XPT services had been introduced to serve country and regional NSW.

Additional public transport links had been established, including a return of ferry services to Parramatta River for the first time in a century.

Toll roads were under construction under a model that guaranteed to motorists an untolled alternative route.

The 3 x 3 fuel levy ensured the upgrade and maintenance of roads, with 60% spent in country areas.

Investment in our health system saw the average waiting time for those wanting elective surgery at a record low 25.5 days.

Even the Opposition health spokesman, Dr Andrew Refshauge, praised the system, in 1994, as 'the best in the world, certainly it is the envy of the world'

Basic skills tests were introduced into our schools and results reported to parents. School communities were empowered to make decisions.

We set up the Environment Protection Agency and operated the toughest environment protection legislation in the nation.

Services for people with disabilities were overhauled to promote greater independence.

Dedicated beat police were introduced to deliver safer communities.

And a genuine partnership existed with local government.

The establishment of ICAC, Freedom of Information and Whistleblower legislation had restored confidence in public institutions.

It's a review that can't help but impress – especially from our current position.

Of course no government is ever perfect - but it's an ideal they should at least try to achieve!

Between 1988 and 1995 government in New South Wales was focused on reform, results and responding to the community's needs.

It determinedly faced up to the challenges and assuredly sought to deliver better outcomes.

It serves to remind that NSW can lead the nation and it offers inspiration about just how much the State and its people could achieve.

Above all, it's a record of which the Liberal/Nationals can be rightly proud.

Labor's reality

But it stands in stark contrast with our current condition.

Over its term in office, Labor's lack of imagination, focus and discipline has seen the State's performance falter and its public services fail.

Instead of being the nation's leading economy, last year NSW recorded Australia's second lowest rate of economic growth (1.8%).

There are fewer train services operating at slower speeds across our rail network – and last year fewer people used trains than in 2000/01.

Country and regional trains struggle with reliability and rollingstock is in need of replacement.

Over the past three years use of our ferries has dropped by 380,000 trips – putting more people onto Sydney's roads – and services to Parramatta are to be axed.

Labor has debased the toll road concept by the introduction of upfront payments that deliver higher tolls and tunnel 'funnels' and road closures that restrict motorists' choice.

Country councils struggle to maintain roads and too many bitumen surfaces are reverting to gravel.

The average waiting time for people needing elective surgery in our hospitals is almost double that of 1995.

Despite all our population growth, last year there were fewer students enrolled in public schools than in 1994. School buildings are poorly maintained and the autonomy of local school communities has been steadily eroded.

Environment policy seems driven by electoral preferences, despite expanding National Parks a lack of funding hinders their proper management and we follow, rather than lead, Australia on sustainability.

Despite Labor's claim of compassion, people with disabilities are waiting in record numbers for supported and respite accommodation. Just ten per cent of 1500 requests for supported accommodation were met last year.

Incredibly, there are fewer highway patrol police on our roads than in 1984.

The State Government – or at least Frank Sartor – seems to be at war with local government.

And to top off this morality play, faith in our public institutions has been trashed.

Freedom of Information laws are circumvented, Whistleblowers discouraged and punished and ICAC – established because of corruption during the last period of Labor government – seems more lapdog than watchdog.

This at the very time when there has never been a greater need for openness and accountability to inspire confidence in government.

Yesterday in Parliament I told Morris Iemma to resign.

Instead of fixing the State's problems, he's distracted by scandals and controversies.

Scandals and controversies caused by the incompetents he has appointed to critical portfolios and by ministers he refuses to ever hold accountable.

But even where solutions are obvious he displays little stomach for the task of implementing them.

A person who ignores ICAC changes that would have prevented recent controversies involving his Planning Minister is obviously not engaged in the task of either running the State or his party.

Morris lemma is part of problem in NSW, not part of the solution.

The State's greatest energy challenge is the lack of energy displayed by Morris lemma as Premier over the past two and a half years.

As it stands, the NSW Labor Government is the perfect case study in how not to run a State.

Labor has presided over the unacceptable decline of NSW. A decline I am committed to reversing.

Role of government

As a Liberal I have a clear view about the role of government.

For me the goal is to create an environment in which individuals and enterprise can thrive.

An environment where people can realise their potential, for their own benefit and that of the wider community.

One where private enterprise thrives not, as an end in itself, but as a means to securing economic growth and lasting improvement in living standards.

It's about helping to build an inclusive and fair society, where opportunity and choice abound, where initiative and responsibility is encouraged, and where individual freedom is safeguarded by institutions of government that people can trust.

It's about effectively marshalling the resources of government to provide essential public services.

It's understanding that working in partnership – with individuals, communities, organisations or business – can achieve better results faster.

To achieve these goals, government must be focussed on performance and results.

Government requires discipline if it's to deliver improvements and create a sound, sustainable foundation for future growth.

It needs to acknowledge that you cannot judge the 'quality' of a government by its size.

It must be made up of people who recognise that an ever-increasing agency budget is no guarantee of better services.

It has to understand the importance of openness and accountable in both protecting individual freedom and lifting performance.

The return of a government committed to these goals – and determined to deliver for this State – is the task to which my Liberal/Nationals colleagues and I are engaged upon.

We believe the State deserves better – we know that NSW and its people can do better.

Priorities for government

My priorities for government are shaped by my view of its role.

The strength of our economy determines the capacity of government, business and families to meet their obligations.

Government can help deliver a stronger economy by creating conditions that make investment and enterprise attractive.

Putting an end to the current complacency, and driving NSW to be more aggressive in attracting and expanding investment, is essential.

We must aim to create a competitive climate in which business can thrive.

Where the State's taxation and regulatory regimes promote, rather than prevent, investment.

Regulatory regimes like the State's occupational health and safety regime.

Where, despite our State having the most workplace inspectors, highest number of fines and prosecutions in Australia, NSW still records a workplace accident rate above the national average.

We need a State where services and infrastructure keep pace with community and industry needs.

And where we are actively planning to meet tomorrow's needs, instead of catching up on those that should have been met yesterday.

Delivering our goal of a strong NSW economy must inevitably start with disciplined management of the State's finances.

We've watched and learned as Labor failed to turn record revenues and windfall tax receipts into benefits for either families or business across the State.

We fully understand that these revenues can and must be used to make NSW more competitive for investment and enterprise.

My second priority is revitalising our public sector worn down by Labor's inability to manage and its failure to care about the consequences.

Labor's mismanagement and failures come with a human cost.

Whether the family fronting up to an emergency department or the child at risk of harm waiting for a response to warning calls to DOCs, Morris lemma's failing government directly affect lives.

Yet for all its claims of compassion, Labor seems not to understand or care.

Turning this State around, restoring quality government to its people, requires a strong public sector.

We're committed to a public sector that can care for those in need; one that can provide quality, essential services to all who choose to call upon them.

We aim for a public sector populated by people qualified for task, enthusiastic about the challenge and who look forward to breaking free of a system shackled by Labor inertia.

Whether DOCs or transport, hospitals or schools, the task will be the same: delivering improvement by re-focussing services on outcomes and results.

It's about setting benchmarks across State agencies and measuring performance against standards in both public and private sectors.

That's something Kevin Rudd understands and is trying to impose on the States as he seeks to lift hospital performance.

It's about applying the rigour of private sector-style annual performance reviews to inject accountability and lift performance.

It's about ending Labor-style appointments that bypass merit-based selection panels. Turning around our failing public services will require the very best people available.

Our task also requires a rethink about the shape of government.

Instead of portfolios created to suit political whim, we're determined to apply the resources of government effectively and collectively to drive improvements in services for the public.

Gladys Berejiklian's proposed single transport co-ordination agency offers a new model for planning and delivering transport improvements focussed on the goal of increasing patronage.

A renewal of public services that better meet the needs of families and businesses is essential in creating the society I seek.

My third priority centers upon community renewal.

Communities like families are important social units.

Properly functioning communities are best placed to identify and respond to needs, they foster social participation, including volunteering and have been shown to be helpful in a range of areas including tackling crime rates.

They are able to achieve outcomes that government couldn't deliver or would struggle to deliver as well.

So it makes sense to support and renew communities.

Our system of local government owes its origins to 1906 and the State's first Liberal Government that understood the significance of communities.

Regrettably it's seems clear the next Liberal/Nationals Government will face the task of restoring to health our third level of government.

Local government is important. Local government is no more – or less – frustrating than State or Federal government. It's in no less need of reform

Problems with the State's planning laws frustrate residents and industry alike.

But proposing to take the 'local' out of local government and simply transfer the problems and delays to the State isn't the solution.

Undertaking fundamental reform, working with local government, offers the best hope of achieving better outcomes.

Local government fulfils what should be regarded as a valuable role in serving local communities in ways that State and Federal government never could.

It offers a possible avenue for State Government to more effectively deliver some of its services to families and communities.

My commitment to establish a genuine partnership with local government is based on a desire to strengthen communities.

It's based on my view about the significance of that objective in the task of securing the State's future success.

Conclusion

These priorities offer the hope of a better future to a community that has grown tired of Labor's hollow promises.

A Labor Party that's arrogant and distracted.

A Labor Party that's out of touch.

A Labor Party that's out of leadership.

For our part, strengthening the State's economy, revitalising its public sector and renewing local communities provide the foundation upon which we will build for government.

It's about returning people to the centre of government.

It's about better meeting their current and future needs.

It's about giving them greater choice and freedom in their lives.

Providing them with the opportunity and responsibility to help government provide a better future for our State and its people.

This term of Parliament we are determined to get it right.

We know that winning requires effort over 208 weeks.

We seek your support and advice in the task.

This time we intend to do more than simply offer the hope of better government and a better future for families across the State.

This time we're determined to win and deliver it.

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