

“PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST”

Address by Barry O’Farrell, NSW Leader of the Opposition
Speech to the “Start the Change” Dinner, 26 March 2009
At Le Montage, Lilyfield

Introduction

Close by the gates of the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park on Sydney’s northern outskirts you will find one of the State’s more unique war memorials: a one-eighth-scale, sandstone model of the Great Sphinx of Giza.

It was carved by Private William Shirley who lived in Leichhardt and worked as a builder before enlisting for the Great War.

During the memorial’s construction Shirley was a patient of the nearby Lady Davidson Repat Hospital.

Its creation is a remarkable story.

Shirley suffered tuberculosis, which restricted his work to just a few hours a day.

Combined with the friable nature of the sandstone with its veins of iron, it meant the project took Shirley more than two years to complete.

And, in one of those cruel twists of fate that seem to shape history, Private Shirley died a year after he finished his work, never to see it publicly unveiled.

Shirley’s Sphinx now stands as a tribute to fallen comrades and to the triumph of human spirit.

I begin with the story of the Sphinx Memorial because it encapsulates the values I want my leadership to reflect:

The importance of hard work. Despite his poor health William Shirley found the strength and discipline to complete his task.

The importance of service. Shirley dedicated his final years to creating an enduring tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

And the importance of humility. His modesty and its isolated bush setting magnify Shirley’s effort and the memorial he carved.

Tonight marks a milestone in the Liberal/Nationals’ goal of achieving Government in 2011.

But it is more than a halfway point.

It is the point at which we focus our attention away from Labor’s failures and on to the approach and plans of the Liberal/Nationals Coalition.

Whether you speak to the young trainee recently retrenched in western NSW, the time-poor parents struggling to cope with traffic in western Sydney; or two generations of women from the same Central Coast family trying to get hospital treatment: for most of the community the case for change in NSW is overwhelming.

And the time has come to begin talking more, not just about the need for change, but what that change will look like.

The simple point I wish to make is that the character of my government will be shaped by not only what I stand for, but also for whom I stand – **the forgotten and frustrated families of NSW.**

Real leadership finds its inspiration in more than personal experience.

It's grounded in learning and listening to the life experiences of others – the ability to walk a mile in the shoes of another.

The great trait of the Liberal/Nationals, in all our successful periods in government, is that we have always balanced idealism with realism.

Whether your reference point is Robert Menzies' middle classes, Nick Greiner's honesty and inclusiveness, or John Howard's battlers, our approach has been underpinned by a deep understanding of the people we sought to represent and the beliefs our parties hold dear: freedom, competition, choice and responsibility.

Our approach to 2011 is no different.

It won't be driven by any rigid adherence to ideology or some cult of the leader; but rather by an unswerving commitment to better serve the community – to put people first.

Simply put my colleagues and I are determined to better represent the forgotten and frustrated families of this state.

Economy

In the far west of NSW, I recently heard about a young Australian named Amanda Miller.

A year ago Amanda was named the Apprentice of the Year in her local business awards.

Now she has been retrenched with a year and a half remaining in her traineeship, as her employer struggles to run their business during these difficult economic times.

Amanda is the human face of a government whose economic vision for the State ends at Wollongong and Newcastle.

She lives in the only State that has failed to introduce its own stimulus package to try and protect jobs and help families and business at this time.

While I can't say any single policy could have saved Amanda's job, I can say the State Government wasn't even trying.

Good economic management has always been the cornerstone of Liberal/Nationals' government.

As important as it is in its own right, its true worth is its ability to improve people's quality of life and return a social dividend to the community.

As a team, my colleagues and I are united by a shared belief that government isn't meant to dictate and direct, but rather to lay the foundation that lets people – as individuals, families and businesses – claim opportunity and fulfil potential.

It is my belief that government should be the force that liberates individuals, not one that imposes barriers to success.

Never has this philosophy been more important than at the present time.

It's why my team has already put forward a practical package to respond to the global financial crisis.

Our plans are twofold in nature.

First – those that focus on providing a stimulus to mitigate the short-term impacts of falling economic growth.

For example, we recently called for a one off 15% reduction in payroll tax that would inject close to a billion dollars into the economy, the equivalent of 16,500 jobs.

And secondly those that focus on building the basic infrastructure that will let NSW adapt quickly to the future and make the most of economic recovery.

It also includes our commitment to develop industry action plans for high potential industries, which will ensure NSW is the home to new generation jobs that will define the 21st century.

Experience shows that Australians invariably respond to challenges by focussing on the basics – a commitment to discipline and simple hard work.

In the midst of economic turmoil, NSW families are not looking for miracles or messiahs.

They're working harder and tightening their household budgets or, like Amanda Miller, fighting to return to the full-time workforce in her chosen trade.

And they expect the same hard work and fighting spirit from government.

The public's patience with political promises and ambitious plans has fallen faster than the Australian dollar.

People expect us to show discipline and work harder.

They expect a return to commonsense politics, the delivery of real results and prudent use of taxpayers' dollars.

They expect plans with real goals and shelf lives longer than media cycles.

And it's those practical and realistic expectations that will shape the Liberal/Nationals policy agenda.

Infrastructure

Brooke and Cyril Logoitumua are young parents in southwestern Sydney.

They proudly make their home at Narrellan Vale along with their two daughters – 22 months and 4 months old.

They had hoped to give birth to the girls at Camden Hospital, only to find its maternity unit shut after 2003 election. It wasn't available for post-natal care either.

Like most families, the Logoitumua's are just trying to get ahead.

But it's a task not helped by the lack of transport infrastructure in their rapidly growing region.

Brooke works locally in Campbelltown as a swim instructor because transport out of Sydney's southwest is so poor.

It take can Brooke 40 to 45 minutes each morning to drive the 10kms to work because traffic volumes have brought roads to a virtual standstill and train projects have been cancelled.

Cyril was a removalist who got sick of fighting traffic across Sydney everyday. His eight-hour workdays became 10 to 12 hour days that denied him time with his daughters.

Now Cyril works as a labourer on local building sites. Just to avoid that traffic.

Brooke and Cyril aren't political.

They're not members of any party.

They're not associated with any peak group or the face of a community action group.

They're not known to the media nor are they seeking personal publicity.

They're just hard working Australian parents who believe time wasted in traffic or waiting for buses could be better spent with their children.

They're a family that has every right to be frustrated.

New transport infrastructure is one of the most tangible ways we can improve the quality of lives of people like Brooke and Cyril Logoitumua.

It's the reason we have committed to completing projects like the South West and North West rail links and argued they are needed more than a Metro to Rozelle.

It's why we have asked Max Moore Wilton to advise us on achieving our goal of halving the delivery lead-time for infrastructure.

But, as Labor continues to demonstrate, promises are easy to make.

Our focus is not just on planning and announcing improvements, it's on how to ensure they become reality.

The idea that a Cabinet Minister – such as our current Premier – could try and claim ignorance about State finances and key infrastructure delays and cost blowouts defies belief.

It's akin to a director of a collapsed company refusing to take responsibility for key financial decisions. Shareholders would not tolerate it and nor should the voting public.

It is why an O'Farrell/Stoner Government will make all Cabinet Ministers accountable for fiscal direction and infrastructure delivery.

It will involve a complete overhaul of the Cabinet reporting framework to allow for:

- independent verifications of costings;
- clear statements on the costing impact on forward budgets; and
- quarterly briefings on time and costing variations.

It's a clear signal that our focus is on the processes that will guarantee promises are delivered.

Another sign is our understanding that government can't do it alone.

Rescuing this State after what will be 16 years of failure will require effort from us all.

My colleagues and I especially understand the importance of the private sector to the State's economy and economic prospects – and people's jobs and standards of living.

We are committed to building better partnerships with business to help resolve the problems confronting NSW.

We are determined to end the prevailing 'decisions for donations' culture and restore merit-based decision-making.

And I make this pledge: our Liberal/Nationals Government will have a front door open to business and the community – and a backdoor nailed shut.

That's important in returning honesty and integrity to government in NSW.

It's important in providing business with the certainty it needs to thrive.

It's essential in restoring faith in our State's system of government from the very people it is meant to serve: the public.

It's critical in providing fair and proper representation to the forgotten and frustrated families of NSW.

Services

There is no more basic role of government than the provision of health services.

And there is no issue that better illustrates the case for change than Labor's failure in hospitals.

People like Vivianne and Eileen Coleman of Wyongah on the Central Coast need no convincing – they've found out the hard – and painful – way.

Recently Vivianne went to her local hospital with pain in a leg and was sent home with Panadol. She was later diagnosed with a broken leg.

Only two weeks ago Vivianne's mum – Eileen – was in hospital and was denied medication for an entire weekend because the pharmaceutical section was closed.

The hardworking doctors and nurses of our hospital system aren't to blame. They too are victims of the maladministration caused by incompetent Ministers and centralised bureaucracy.

The Liberal/Nationals have already started articulating our solution to the health crisis.

In January I announced the creation of Australia's first ever Shadow Portfolio for Healthy Lifestyles.

It recognises that reducing demand for hospital services can help ease pressure on hospitals. It also acknowledges the importance of linking sport and recreation policy to the State's health objectives.

Tonight I am announcing a further commitment – the break up Labor's centralised and dysfunctional Areas Health Services and replace them with smaller, community-focussed Health Districts.

Oversighted by Boards, the Districts will ensure our hardworking health professionals – and the communities who support them – are again actively engaged and valued in the decision-making process.

This is essential if the Garling Inquiry reforms are to be achieved. Without it there can only be 'business as usual': more promises, different titles but no real change.

Our approach in health practically highlights a key direction a Liberal/Nationals Government will take: devolving decision-making and re-empowering communities.

Or, put another way, giving greater authority for making decisions and achieving results to those who are most directly affected.

Our approach to re-empowering the public is one of the most fundamental philosophical differences between Labor and the NSW Liberal/Nationals.

Our opponents prefer government that directs and dictates.

They seek to centralise bureaucracy and power:

- around departmental head offices distant from the reality of the services they provide;
- around Ministers locked away in Sydney offices isolated from the public who rely on government services; and
- around a Premier too preoccupied with clinging to office to appreciate the problems faced by families and business across the State.

The Liberal/Nationals are willing to put our faith in the wisdom and power of communities.

We believe local staff and communities better understand local problems and opportunities – and are best placed to tackle them.

We intend to provide communities with the resources to help themselves; to equip and empower people to drive solutions.

There are no stronger advocates for this style of community-based governance than my colleagues in both the Liberal and Nationals parties who represent rural and regional NSW.

They understand the importance of services to their communities and the initiative, innovation and self-reliance that thrives within those communities.

Those looking for code in our approach can stop wasting their time.

I understand the critical importance of the State's public service.

None of what we want to achieve can be achieved without them.

The inertia imposed on this State by our current political masters has affected our public service like every other sector.

After more than a decade of politics, political appointments and spin over substance, many fine public servants have left and those who remain feel under valued.

For too long, public servants have been punished for the misdeeds of their political masters, discouraged from showing initiative or making decisions – and the State has suffered as a consequence.

I started my working life in the Australian Public Service. I value the work of public servants.

I believe the State's public service should be revitalised – not denigrated.

And I am determined to give it fresh life, restore its reputation for excellence, lift its productivity and enhance its independence and professionalism so it can deliver better outcomes for the people of this State.

That's why I am committed to establishing a Public Service Commission.

The Liberal/Nationals intend to re-create a world-class public service that:

- attracts and nurtures the best talent;
- has the confidence and skills to make and implement decisions, and;
- offers government the frank and fearless advice required to meet people's needs.

We intend to unleash the potential of the NSW public service and engage them, along side other sectors of our State, in solving the problems we will inherit.

Conclusion

Like everyone who lives in this State, I again want NSW to be Australia's Premier – or Number 1 – State.

I want to see the economy fixed, infrastructure modernised and services improved. I want opportunities increased. I want honesty and integrity returned.

But I also understand that to succeed we have to unquestionably put our priority on the people of this State.

I stand for people like:

- Amanda Miller of Cobar who deserves a government fighting for whole-of-state economic prosperity;
- Brooke and Cyril Logoitumua of Narellan Vale who deserve to be able to spend time with their daughters and have access to world class transport systems; and
- Vivian and Eileen Coleman of the Central Coast who deserve a health system where patients are assured of responsive, dignified quality care.

I stand for government that puts people first.

That represents the forgotten and frustrated families of NSW.

I encourage you to take a trip and visit Private William Shirley's Sphinx Monument in the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park.

You will find its inscription reads "To my glorious comrades of the A.I.F".

I have a deep appreciation for the values Private William Shirley embodied – hard work, service and humility.

But what truly amazes me was his belief that the greatest tribute he could pay to his colleagues – the men and women who sacrificed their lives for this nation to guarantee the freedom we enjoy today – was to ensure that they would never be forgotten.

As those who want to govern this State – and again allow its citizens to take full advantage of the opportunities freedom allows – we can ask no less of ourselves.

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