

SYDNEY AS A CITY OF OPPORTUNITY
ADDRESS TO THE COMMITTEE FOR SYDNEY BY
BARRY O'FARRELL MP, NSW OPPOSITION LEADER, 23 APRIL 2009

In 1991 NSW launched its bid to host the 2000 Olympics.

It did so despite the advice of the NSW Treasury, but after Cabinet had commissioned and considered a report from a group of the State's political and business leaders.

That report, by the Sydney Olympic Games Review Committee, set in train the greatest event to occur in this city in living memory.

Or, if you still need convincing about their significance, think about what this city and State would have been like if we had not staged the Games of the XXVII Olympiad.

Consider their impact upon investment, economic activity and employment. Consider their impact upon the world's view of this city. Consider their impact on the morale of our citizenry.

Nick Greiner's Liberal/Nationals Government launched that bid in an environment vastly different to that which permeates Sydney and NSW today.

It reflected a different style of planning – co-ordinated, comprehensive and competent.

It reflected a different approach of governing – one that understood the benefits, short term and lasting, that such a project could deliver to the whole State.

But for me the biggest difference is this: the launch of that bid occurred when the mood in this city and State was 'Yes we can!'.

Despite the prevailing economic times – Paul Keating's 'recession we had to have' – people, business, media and others got behind the bid.

My fear is that confidence and 'can do' attitude has been subsumed by a lethargy and cynicism encouraged by a style of governing whose hallmarks are complacency and 'short term-ism'.

This city's burden is, in part, its beauty.

Sydney's "natural" or inherent advantages mask too many of its flaws.

They seem to have allowed too many citizens to tolerate the fact that Sydney has lagged against other cities in our region.

Or as a friend recently said, with a shrug of her shoulders, "*I know that nothing seems to work, but we'll always have the Harbour.*"

The 'Sydney shrug' is replacing the 'Great Aussie salute' – and it's the type of habit that's hard to brush off.

Too many people in this city are shrugging their shoulders and seemingly accepting the view that *“this is the best you can expect”*.

Inadequate and overcrowded public transport, congested roads, power blackouts, even the lack of any State stimulus measures – our failures are too often met by the view that *“its too hard”* or *“what can we do?”*.

It reflects a sense of resignation that is unhealthy.

It’s an attitude that will prevent this city progressing.

It’s an obstacle that stands in the way of Sydney becoming a truly world class city – with all the attributes and opportunities that such a city should offer.

Many of us can recall trips to Melbourne and the good natured, but full of pride, quips made at the start of our meetings about that city’s failings.

Like the Walkman or hula hoops, they’ve become relics of another era. Other than the odd crack about Melbourne’s weather, Sydneysiders aren’t even bothering to try and get a rise from our southern neighbours.

But I understand our citizens are tired of defending or apologising for a failed government that has failed to keep Sydney as Australia’s leading city and NSW as the nation’s Premier State.

For this city’s greatest burden has been our current State Government.

An administration that has lacked a vision for this city.

A government that, when it has put forward good ideas, has failed to ensure their delivery.

A party in office that views politics selfishly – sees it solely in terms of the offices and perks it provides and ignores the needs of the public that good government is meant to serve.

So as one who wants to govern this city and State I want to share some of my thoughts about Sydney and where it should be going. I want to talk about what should be a “city of opportunity”, the barriers that currently block our path and the drivers we need to harness to achieve that status.

Barriers to opportunity

Things can’t stay as they are.

This city’s lost opportunities – their social cost – aren’t abstract or academic concepts.

Living in a city with dysfunctional transport systems isn’t a theoretical conundrum. It’s a reality that affects people’s lives, affects our ability to do businesses and imposes limits upon our vision for our community and individuals alike.

If unchecked, Sydney's decline will impose limits upon the opportunities that have always existed here and have always attracted people to our city.

So, if we want a more sustainable Sydney, we need a cold hard look at the barriers blocking our way. They are pretty clear.

There has been a failure to ensure we maintained a strong economy for this city.

Economic growth isn't an end in itself – it's the key to allowing individuals to achieve. It provides the jobs and living standards people rely upon; it provides the revenue for government to provide the basic services upon which people rely.

Bob Carr's complacency lost sight of the fact that a strong economy ensures a strong community. His successors show equal ignorance.

The view that because of this city's location we didn't have to compete for investment was wrong headed.

The view that you could get away with raising taxes and charges on business to make up for the mismanagement and a lack of budget discipline was disastrous.

The view that we didn't need to use the benefits of economic good times to return a social dividend to the public is the cause of much of the community's current pain.

There's been the failure to ensure that this city's infrastructure and services kept pace with its population and their needs.

Bob Carr's success in limiting Sydney's spread but ignoring the need to amplify and upgrade water, electricity, transport and other systems to meet the needs of a growing population has been ruinous.

Carr, Iemma and Rees have continually used infrastructure announcements as media props. Plans for the next election and Labor's electoral needs, not measures for the next generation that meet the public's needs.

Experts, business and community proposals for improvements have been ignored.

When proposals have actually started, too often they have been marred by mismanagement, delays and cost blowouts. From T-card to Metro, we have a failure of effective planning and delivery.

There's been a failure to ensure that the resources of government are used to support the efforts of individuals, communities, organisations and business in furthering the interests and horizons of this city and its people.

Government has stopped helping and, too often, I am told stories of it hindering efforts to improve this city's facilities, functionality and future.

Our public service has been affected by the inertia of our State Government like every other sector of our State. After too many years 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 this city has suffered the consequences.

And finally there has been the failure of leadership.

Leadership by government has collapsed under Labor, replaced by management of the political minutiae, trying to control the media cycle.

That necessarily means not taking risks and the mind-set has now also permutated from political masters to the public service.

So now we have a city where the norm is “risk picking”. It’s extremely depressing when the starting point in debate about any new idea for Sydney’s future is listing all the reasons it shouldn’t happen, or how it will fail.

Anybody in this room who’s pitched an idea to government over the past decade knows what I am talking about.

The innovative capacity of agencies is at an all-time low, as quality public servants have either left or simply don’t feel they have the political backing to explore what’s possible.

If the starting point is an absolute aversion to risk, the end result is a lack of progress and a growing threat to our future prosperity.

Removing the barriers

My colleagues and I are aware of these problems.

We’ve discussed them – internally and with others, in business, the professions, not for profit sector and the community.

We’re determined to remove them – and we’ve already announced a number of ways to achieve that.

We intend to ensure that reviving our economic prosperity is the main priority of State Government.

We understand its importance as the enabler, the keystone of opportunity. We know its role in allowing government to create the environment in which people can fulfil their potential.

We’ve outlined in *Planning for Prosperity* our economic goals and fiscal commitments for the State.

Our plan recognises that without a clear economic framework for NSW, decisions made in Budgets and mini-Budgets can worsen and not improve the outlook for this city and State, its people and enterprises.

In the words of Yogi Berra which so aptly describe our opponents: *“If you don't know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else.”*

So the Liberal/Nationals are committed to restore:

- a competitive edge to our economy by reforming our taxes and aggressively cutting red tape; and
- discipline and accountability to our budget and management of the State's finances.

It's about delivering the sustainable economic growth upon which decisions by government and others can be made with certainty about our future paths.

We know the private sector must take a large role in the turnaround of the city and State and we are determined to do all that's necessary to establish a strong partnership with it.

We are committed to providing this city with the services and infrastructure it needs and deserves.

We will do it by improving the processes for planning and approving projects and by imposing constraints to prevent us – or future governments – from engaging in the type of politics that have left this city lagging too many others.

Let me use transport as an example of our approach.

Firstly we've committed ourselves to effective integrated transport planning. In our reshuffle that responsibility was given to the Shadow Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian,

It means that, in planning and deciding on this city's future transport needs, all the options will be weighed and the best options chosen.

It will end the unequal battle between those responsible for planning road improvements and those trying to plan improvements to public transport.

It will end the ability of politicians and governments to ignore certain modes of transport that could benefit this city – and I need only cite the current Government's blindness to the advantages of light rail.

Secondly, we are committed to a single Integrated Transport Agency. An agency that will leave the providers of transport services to concentrate solely on running those services.

We will remove from them – and give to the new co-ordinated agency – responsibility for issues like planning, infrastructure, fares and ticketing, customer information and marketing.

It will end the infighting and turf wars that have seen projects delayed, opportunities missed and too much money wasted.

And, finally, the political constraints are imposed – and the certainty is provided – by having an independent oversight body, a board of experts.

People who could, and would, blow the whistle should a future government seek to engage in the type of hoaxes perpetrated by Messers Carr, Iemma and Rees over the past 14 years.

We are resolved to use the full resources of government to fix NSW and ensure all of its public agencies are focussed on achieving the goal of a stronger, vibrant and confident city and State.

I have already outlined plans that will achieve this, including:

- implementation of functional portfolio groupings to eliminate the costs and problems caused by Labor's current silos;
- restoration of merit-based decision-making by a revitalised, professional and independent public service that is encouraged to make decisions and offer frank and fearless advice to government;
- reform of the State's creaking planning system and attainment of the goal of halving the lead times for major infrastructure projects;
- establishment of a Partnerships UK model to best harness the private sector in delivering better services and infrastructure to the community; and
- use of greater openness and transparency to restore honesty and integrity.

The need for these reforms is obvious – and we are determined to be a reformist government.

We're committed to end the complacency and determined to direct efforts to back and build this city and State.

We will start in areas where we have natural advantages or competitive strengths and better leverage them for the benefit of the city, including financial services, creative industries, logistics and transports and tourism and hospitality.

But we want to encourage growth and innovation across the economic dial by fostering new growth industries.

Areas like clean tech – environmental management and technology – offer the potential to convert significant environmental threats into social and economic opportunities. They provide a chance to grow our economy by diversifying its base and harnessing the skills of our community.

And we will use Industry Action Plans to achieve our aims. Plans that will practically assist and encourage their growth and will include benchmarks and milestones to guarantee delivery.

Only a fundamental shift in the way we plan, implement and operate government in NSW will guarantee to this city and its population the future they deserve.

The future

You should have no doubt: my colleagues and I intend to win the next State election.

And having won we are determined to drive change across this city and State to improve its citizens living standards and their outlook.

As I have previously said, people aren't looking for or expecting miracles or messiahs in the context of the current economic turmoil. They simply expect the same hard work that they're putting into their own lives and jobs from their political representatives.

A New York politician said it well: *"We need to be tougher than the times."*

Indeed, it's about practical and realistic plans and diligently working with what we've got. It comes down to harnessing the drivers of opportunity in this city. Not sexy but necessary.

We will look beyond the media and election cycles for what Sydney needs.

I have already committed a Liberal/Nationals Government to building the rail links to the south west and north west promised for so long.

Rail links that, when built, will provide the residents encouraged to the areas by Labor's planning policies with the realistic public transport needed to move around this city.

But we'll also be about dealing with those issues that Labor has ignored for too long.

It's about ensuring we end the lethargy that has failed to provide additional convention and exhibition space for Sydney.

Last year John O'Neill identified that Sydney had lost 500 events over the past four years, in part, because of a lack of convention space. A loss estimated to represent some \$477 million and 3000 jobs per year.

A year on little has changed.

A Liberal/Nationals Government focused on economic growth would not have allowed the situation to develop. We would have worked with the sector to ensure that we had the capacity required to capitalise on the economic benefits conventions and exhibitions offer.

We appreciate the advantages Sydney can offer to the sector. We know that our competition shouldn't be restricted to just Melbourne and Brisbane – who are currently outpacing us – but must include Singapore and Hong Kong.

Refocussing government on opportunity is also about delivering a solution for the brightest spot in a tourism industry suffering badly from the GFC.

The growth in visits of cruise liners to Sydney is a terrific boon for this city. But the failure to provide the passenger facilities needed to serve those vessels is unforgivable for a sector that contributes over \$100 million annually to the local economy.

With berths fully booked, with an increasing number of larger vessels visiting, new facilities east of Harbour Bridge are critical.

A government with a strong relationship with the private sector and capable of planning and delivering the improvements needed to drive economic growth would never have ignored this problem for so long.

A government focussed on the needs of this city would, by now, have raised and resolved with whoever was Prime Minister the opportunity Garden Island offers in fixing this problem.

A Liberal/Nationals Government will also build on the work Morris lemma started – but no one has completed – in supporting this city’s creative industries which employ an estimated 120,000 people.

Employment in this sector has increased over the ten years to 2006 at twice the rate of other industries. Yet for three years we’ve waited for a promised Creative Industries Strategy.

Investment in the sector would more than justify the return and, for us, would be an example of how we could harness drivers of both current and future opportunity.

And finally, a Liberal/Nationals Government would be positioning Sydney for the international economic order in a post-GFC world.

I note, for instance, analysts suggesting the post-GFC international financial system may be less focused on the US and more focused on Asia. They suggest it will exhibit the same prudent attributes of our own banks.

It suggests an opportunity for this city, including leveraging the Barangaroo development as a platform for launching Sydney into the post-GFC financial world.

To do all of this will require government characterised by:

- an openness to ideas and proposals;
- competency in planning, co-ordination and delivery of projects;
- determination to replace politics with leadership; and
- with a comprehensive and long term view of infrastructure needs and opportunities.

A Liberal/Nationals Government will reflect these traits.

We know cities are not – and cannot – be static. Change and progress is central to their vibrancy.

We recognise State Government can make a huge difference by developing a better “choice architecture” for Sydney’s future.

We also understand that Sydney is the heart of NSW. And just like a strong heart, a strong Sydney offers benefits for the whole State.

Our Liberal/Nationals Government will have a bias in favour of progress and action, not one for the status quo and inertia.

We will eliminate the “Sydney shrug” by searching for what’s possible and better – every time.

And we will do so to restore belief to the people of this city and State.

To rekindle the spirit, boldness and vision, the Nick Greiner used in 1991 to start the process that delivered the 2000 Olympics to this city.

It took almost ten years to realise the dream of staging the Olympics in Sydney – two and half parliamentary terms and two different governments.

As we approach 2011, my colleagues and I understand that settling for second best isn't good enough. We know that Labor's refusal to even try has limited opportunity in this city.

Conclusion

Neither my wife nor I grew up in this great Sydney.

But we both – separately – made decisions to live and work here. It's the city in which we have chosen to raise our family.

We were attracted by its diversity, its culture, its cosmopolitan character, its confidence and, yes, the opportunities it offered.

It's a city that has been very good to us. It's a city we love.

That's just one of the reasons I am committed to restoring Sydney as a beacon of progress and prosperity again.

A city for which there is a vision shared by the community, business and government alike.

A vision of Sydney as the world-class city of opportunity.

Where the public sector helps and doesn't hinder.

Where our diversity and tolerance, our people's skills and ingenuity are unleashed.

Where citizens have every opportunity to strive and thrive.

Where the spirit of the Olympic bid, the confidence and 'can do' are restored.

Where people's dreams can become reality.