




Speech By  
**Peter Russo**

**MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK**

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Record of Proceedings, 5 May 2015

**MAIDEN SPEECH**

 **Mr RUSSO** (Sunnybank—ALP) (9.08 pm): For the last 26 years I have had the privilege of representing people in my work as a solicitor. This has given me the opportunity to experience, observe and learn of the diversity of the lives that we live in Australia and, hopefully, to have helped my clients chart their way through difficult times. I now have the privilege of representing the people of Sunnybank, a diverse electorate. For all that diversity, similar challenges confront the various people who live there. I will speak of some of those challenges shortly.

Firstly, I start by thanking my family and friends who are here in the public gallery and particularly acknowledge my father-in-law, Brian Mellifont, a life member of the Labor Party, who served 24 years as an alderman in the Brisbane City Council and who has just recently celebrated his 80th birthday. I also acknowledge Michael Zarew, who has travelled from Sydney to be here tonight.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians on whose ancestral lands we gather today: the Turrbal peoples north of the Brisbane River and the Yuggera peoples to the south. I acknowledge their elders, past and present, and acknowledge all who are present today. I would like to take this opportunity to pause and reflect on the millions of footprints that have travelled the Dreaming pathways and to pay homage to the ancestors who have walked and cared for this land for thousands of years. This year celebrates the NAIDOC theme of 'We all stand on sacred ground. Learn, respect and celebrate'. It corresponds with the 30th anniversary of the hand back of Uluru to its traditional owners, the Anangu people of the Northern Territory, and the importance of respecting and acknowledging the continued survival, strength and resilience of our Indigenous population of Australia.

My electorate is located 15 kilometres south-west of here. It spans the suburbs of Sunnybank, Archerfield, Acacia Ridge, Coopers Plains and Robertson and includes parts of Macgregor, Eight Mile Plains, Durack, Runcorn, Sunnybank Hills and Willawong. I wish the former member Mark Stewart, his wife and family, all the very best. I am grateful to many people who, through their generosity and time, helped me get here and to the people of the Sunnybank electorate who have put their trust in me. In recent months I have had the great fortune of making new friends: good people sincerely and genuinely committed to bringing back some sunshine to the Sunshine State—to borrow a theme used by Uncle Joe Kirk on the opening of this parliament. I thank those who helped me get here: Lewis Lee and Annie and Richard Huang for their kindness and generosity. There are many others—too many to name—but tonight I can acknowledge Stanley Hsu, Sacha Marin and Michelle McJannett and express to them my sincere thanks. I thank Ricky Lee, Alice Orwat and Courtney Trevascus for their work in getting my electorate office up and running.

I thank my running mates, Ministers Mark Bailey and Leanne Enoch and Duncan Pegg. Mark, Leanne and I shared a campaign office in Archerfield and we now share some special memories. During the November hailstorm Mark was a sight that I do not particularly want to see again, with his trousers rolled up, skinny ankles deep in water, sweeping the water that had flooded the garage of the office. I offer a special congratulations to Leanne, the member for Algeester and the Minister for

Housing and Public Works and Minister for Science and Innovation. Leeanne is our first Indigenous minister. We are fortunate to have her in this role. She will serve with dignity, integrity and intelligence.

I thank Eoin Mac Giolla Ri, who gathered supporters to my functions at Michael's, and Peter Davis and Belinda Davis, who were central to the organisation of my Jail House Rock function, held at Boggo Road jail, and to making sure that my volunteers on election day were fed and watered. I also thank my mate TP—Terry Peters—for plugging election day holes. Boggo Road jail was a place that I had often visited as a lawyer and I must say that I had mixed feelings about holding a function at a place that used to be fundamentally one of misery. The aim of the night was to try to have so much fun that some of that misery was cancelled out. Many gave it their best shot. The success of that function was due in no small way to the support of Rod Hodgson and Peter Koutzoukis of Maurice Blackburn. I also thank the staff of Russo Lawyers, who were frequently asked to do things that were slightly beyond their job description in the lead-up to the election. I thank the Premier, the Hon. Anastacia Palaszczuk, for her support, and the Deputy Premier, the Hon. Jackie Trad, who has always been there to help and guide me. Mark Dreyfus, the federal member for Isaacs; Graham Perrett, the federal member for Moreton; Senator Penny Wong; and Senator Claire Moore and her staff all lent valuable support at my fundraising functions.

I thank the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union; the Electrical Trades Union; the Together union; the Maritime Union of Australia; the Rail, Tram and Bus Union; United Voice and the Plumbers Union. I offer my sincere gratitude to Jules Campbell, my campaign manager, whose hard work and calm guidance were invaluable. I also want to thank Terry Wood. He is an old campaigner who does not mince his words. He does not say a lot, but you are never left in any doubt as to his message. I got to know Evan Moorhead as I became interested in running for a seat in state parliament. I always had the desire to be part of the process and not an armchair critic, so I took the plunge and ran for preselection. Evan has been a great mentor to me and I valued his advice and guidance.

I also want to thank my family. I thank my brothers and sisters for their support of me in my campaign and their contribution to its success. I thank my four beautiful children—James, Katy, Grant and Joe—for all they give me just by being around. To Kerri, my wife, you are an inspiration. You help me in so many ways. Together we have had a lot of fun and continue to do so. Kerri previously banned me from talking law at home. Hopefully that ban will not be extended to discussing the needs of the people of the Sunnybank electorate.

The seat of Sunnybank incorporates a thriving multicultural society, 15 schools and countless community organisations. I have already had the pleasure of attending a diverse range of social functions. My constituency has a wide range of concerns and I will give all my efforts to ensuring that their voices are heard. I firmly believe that, in order for me to do my job properly, proper engagement with the community is vital. I believe in the ownership of issues, of seeing things through. So I am looking forward to listening to my community, to learn from them and to do what I can to improve the lives of my constituents.

Today I wish to touch on a few issues: education, infrastructure, justice and the better welcoming of refugees. Already many of my constituents have expressed concerns about the need for this government to commit to providing resources and innovation to deliver better education in Queensland. Parents and children depend on this government to ensure that, by the time children are old enough to enter the workforce, they can not only hope to find a job but also possess sufficient drive to know what careers they want to pursue. Labor's progressive policy for education will ensure that that happens, with better student-teacher ratios and guidance officers to make the experience of school a more rewarding one not just in the Sunnybank electorate but also across the state.

I am determined to work hard to bring about infrastructure improvement on the south side, which has sadly missed out on any real infrastructure programs over the past three years. Let me give members just two examples. The Coopers Plains crossing is one of the most dangerous level crossings on the south side, if not in Brisbane. We need to make the roads around our schools safe for our children, for our parents and for our teachers. MacGregor State School desperately needs a drop-off zone and I plan facilitation between Education Queensland and the Brisbane City Council to make that happen.

I turn now to juvenile justice reform. Children should not be kept in adult prisons. Of this I am sure. Seventeen-year-olds should not be dealt with as adult offenders. Of this I am equally sure. Yet this is how the criminal justice system deals with 17-year-olds. They are treated as adults, rather than when they are 18. In this respect, we are out of kilter with the rest of Australia. We are out of kilter with what is right.

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the present state of Queensland law is inconsistent with that convention. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also expressed concern a decade ago that Queensland continues to be out of step with most western democracies. Twenty-two years ago remedying legislation was passed in this chamber and yet the changes have not been implemented. The necessary regulations need to be proclaimed. I hope to be a strong voice to make that happen and I trust I will not be alone in advocating for this fundamental and important change.

Another serious concern I hold is the creeping change that has occurred resulting in significant increases in mandatory sentencing in this state in the last three years. Mandatory sentencing is disliked by prosecutors, defence lawyers and judges for good reason. It takes away the flexibility of dealing with people as individuals. Judges and the courts are well capable of making appropriate decisions. Parliamentarians in this chamber must have the courage to let the judiciary do its job.

Protection for the rights of ordinary Queenslanders will be a guiding principle for me in my time in this parliament. It has been a fundamental driver of my professional career to this point. More than 10 years ago the Australian Capital Territory introduced a bill of rights. The state of Victoria followed two years later. The legislation provides protection for the rights of ordinary people and gives government officials clear and unambiguous guidelines under which to operate. It is time to reignite the conversation about a bill of rights for the state of Queensland.

Having the right to practise law has been a great honour, but to have the privilege to work for the people of my community and to be involved in the making of law that will make the lives of Queenslanders better is something that I eagerly look forward to being part of. The decision to run for politics was a long time in gestation. The trigger was watching the last government treat Queenslanders of all ilk with a complete lack of respect. I was alarmed by the attack on our judiciary, perhaps the worst of which was the disgraceful and misguided attack on the integrity of the president of the Court of Appeal. That came with an obvious lack of understanding of the separation of powers. I decided to run because I believed that Queenslanders were not getting a fair go. So many people unnecessarily lost their jobs. To this day I still have difficulty understanding why public servants in this state were treated this way. I was alarmed at the speed of the change that was being brought about in this great state. The climate of fear was obvious. The fear was very apparent to me when school principals told me they were concerned that their jobs would be in jeopardy if I was allowed onto school grounds during the campaign period—not to politic, simply to attend a fete or function. As to legislative setbacks, there were many. I will name only two. The unnecessary cuts to the workers compensation scheme took away the ability of workers injured in the workplace to receive compensation for their injuries; and the so-called bikie laws meant that people lost rights and liberty based on who they associated with, not what they did.

This was not the Queensland that my father, my mother and my grandparents worked so hard for. Their Queensland, the one they hoped for for their children and their children's children, was one where the government governed the citizens with respect, intelligence, transparency and integrity. My dad came to Australia from Sicily when he was eight years old. His dad, my grandfather, had come to Australia as an economic refugee. He worked very hard to eke out enough savings to bring my grandmother and my dad to Australia. Like all new arrivals, Dad always had interesting stories of the cultural divide that sometimes occurred, not least between immigration officials and new arrivals. Among them were stories of having salami confiscated, a staple diet if you are on a ship from Sicily with very little money and no way of feeding yourself when you arrive in your new home of Australia.

One thing that I treasure about living in Australia is our multicultural society. The contributions of immigrants to Australia to the richness of our lives cannot be undervalued. I am proud to have Italian heritage. I am proud to represent a community that has people from all over the globe. I am proud to know people who have, by their kindness and generosity, given others the chance they need to grow and thrive in this country. I wish to tell just one story in this respect. My father was interned during the Second World War. Because he had not yet got his Australian citizenship he was regarded as the enemy and interned. That was the rule. One day when working at the internment camp in Western Queensland he cut his head on the jagged edge of a donga. He was transported to Brisbane for treatment. The doctor recognised that he had flat feet and thus was not fit to fight in a war and gave my father an opening that another doctor may not have been prepared to give him. He told my father that if he got a job within 24 hours he would certify his release from the internment camp. The kindness and wisdom of that doctor was followed by the kindness of another, a barber at Spring Hill who agreed to hire him on the spot. And so his internment ended.

The opportunity given to my father, and by association to me, by those acts of generosity and inclusion contribute to my passionate belief that we must do all we can for this country's more recent arrivals. They are an asset that we must embrace. Australia needs to come up with better solutions, solutions steeped in compassion and recognition of the contribution that refugees have and will continue to make to our country.

Dad passed away when he was 52, leaving behind my mum and six children. I was the eldest at 21. To say that Mum has had it hard is a massive understatement. Gladys Maureen Russo nee Tunny, who is in the gallery tonight, raised all my brothers and sisters on her own by working as a nursing sister at the Ingham Hospital. She made ends meet on the smell of an oily rag. The only thing that I can possibly complain about with respect to my mother is that too often she sides with my wife. Let us just say that when that happens in our house they are governing with a clear majority.

In relatively recent times we have lost great icons in Wayne Goss and Gough Whitlam. Recently we lost another icon in Queensland Labor's history. I wish to pay tribute to a man who spent his life fighting for a better Queensland—Terry Hampson, a true gentleman whom we lost last September. Terry was a key figure in the 1980 reforms of the Queensland Labor Party.

We have at our helm two very capable people, the Premier and the Deputy Premier. They are the people to help us navigate a difficult course. I look forward to working with them and each of my parliamentary colleagues to build a stronger, more stable Queensland. My dad taught me that you should always leave your children better off than when you came into the world. I hope to leave this place in a better condition than when I arrived. It is a great honour to now represent the people of Sunnybank. I promise to work with them in making my community, the electorate of Sunnybank, an even better place to live and raise children.