



Speech by

**Michael CHOI**

**MEMBER FOR CAPALABA**

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### FIRST SPEECH

**Mr CHOI** (Capalaba—ALP) (11.38 a.m.): It is indeed an honour for me to stand here today as an elected member of the parliament of Queensland. I acknowledge the indigenous Australians who are the traditional owners of the land on which the parliament is located and my electorate of Capalaba. I take this opportunity to reaffirm my loyalty to Australia, her democratic system of government and the people of this great nation. My sincere thanks go to the Australian Labor Party for giving me the opportunity to serve my fellow Queenslanders as a member of this House.

I inform the House that I regard myself as a product of successive Labor policies. I came to Sydney, Australia, in 1976 at the age of 17, shortly after the Whitlam government abolished the discriminatory White Australia Policy.

My father enrolled me in a local state school. It was a beautiful school with clean classrooms and stunning playing fields. It was also far better than the school that I attended in Hong Kong, where my father had to take a second job to pay for my school fees. However, I refused to go to that school, because I thought it would be very expensive and I knew that we could not afford it, until my father told me that the school was free.

Not long after, I was injured in a football game and I was possibly in need of hospital care. Again I refused to go to the hospital, because I thought it also would be expensive. Again my father told me that the hospital also was free. I found myself asking the question, 'What kind of a country is this that education is free and medical care is also free?'

One day I was learning to participate in one of Australia's favourite pastimes—lawnmowing—when a couple of old folks in the neighbourhood stopped to have a chat with me. When I asked them about the schools and the hospitals, they said, 'Son, this is the legacy of Labor policies: believing that education and health are a right for all and not the privilege of a few.' I gave my heart to the Labor Party then. Needless to say, my maiden vote in this country went to the ALP, and I have not looked back since then. I knew that one day I would repay my debt to the ALP, but little did I know it would be in this way 26 years later. I thank the men and women of the Labor Party before me who have fought the battles so that people like me are able to come to this beautiful country and receive free education and medical care. Without them I would not be standing here today. I salute them and I owe them my immense gratitude.

His Excellency the Governor of Queensland, in his address during the opening of this parliament, said—

There is strength in diversity. With this, our 50th Parliament of Queensland, we see the election of the state's first Chinese-Australian MP, which represents another step toward parliament reflecting the multicultural diversity of Queensland.

Chinese Australians have contributed to Australia in so many different ways for over 120 years, and they continue to impact positively on the landscape of our wonderful nation. I am, therefore, extremely privileged to be the first Chinese Australian to be elected as a member of this House. I am humbled by the experience and also by the gravity of my responsibilities.

I mentioned earlier that I like to reaffirm my loyalty to Australia. Few people would understand how important it is for me to be regarded as an Australian. Even fewer realise how serious I took the oath some 21 years ago when I was naturalised as a citizen of this country. Born to Chinese parents in

the city of Hong Kong at a time when it was still a colony of Britain, my existence was not recognised by the Chinese government and I was, at best, a British subject. I was therefore without identity, without nationality and without a foundation for national pride. I recall a sense of rejection and denial every time I picked up a form which required me to fill in the blank next to the word 'nationality' as I had none. This country accepted me with open arms, gave me a home and an education. Now whenever I have to fill in a form which requires me to put down my nationality, I proudly put down 'Australian' in capital letters.

If we can just pause for a moment and ponder about this, most of us would not think twice when we put our nationality on a form. I borrow a popular phrase from a song by a distinguished Australian, Peter Allen, who sang, 'I've been to places that never close down. From New York to Rio and old London town.' This is without doubt the best country in the world. Do we understand how precious it is to be called Australian? Do we realise that some people are prepared to risk their lives just to have a chance to be an Australian and that, sadly to say, some have paid with their lives?

As for me, in the year 1980 I was given a new identity, a nationality and a reason for national pride. I am now an Australian—a true blue, dinky-di Aussie. No-one, I thought, will take that away from me. I was wrong. Little more than four years ago I found myself once again searching for my identity. I was told indirectly that too much of my kind would be a problem and that this country was in danger of being swamped by us; I was not really an Aussie as we were supposed to have our own culture; we formed ghettos and we did not assimilate. Many fair-minded Australians rallied to our defence, but this fight, I said, needed to be fought by me.

I agree that we need to have an open and transparent debate about the costs and benefits of immigration to our nation. If we decide that immigration will continue to bring positive changes to the nation, then we should debate the intake level. I think as Australians we should be able to have an open and honest debate about issues of this nature without being branded with names. However, once we decide that immigration is to continue, the qualification for migrants should not, and must not, be based on the colour of their skin, their creed or their religion, but rather the content of their character. A potential good Australian is not determined by the pigment under the skin, but rather the goodness in their heart.

As for culture, everybody who comes to Australia introduces culture, with the exception of the indigenous Australians. People sometimes speak as if culture is a dead, non-living thing, but culture is a living organism. It is a living reflection of the people and the land they live on. The culture that somebody is seemingly trying to protect is vastly different to the culture of their parents. Do we know who changed it? They did. So, too, did their parents. We are doing it right now. It has been part and parcel of cultural evolution since the dawn of man.

As for religion, men and women of the Christian faith gave up the comfort of their homes, left their loved ones and travelled to lands far away only to live in substandard conditions and risk their lives to do one thing: to spread the gospel that they believed in. Now we bring the unconverted to our doorsteps and they want to keep them out. If Christians—and I am one—believe our God to be all-powerful, everlasting and ever present, why should we be afraid of competition? One of the most precious things that separates us from animals is the ability and the opportunity to choose. It is a God-given right: free will for mankind, as recorded in the Book of Genesis. No-one can take that away from us. You cannot choose if you have no choice. Genuine Christian faith can be spread only by persuasion, not by exclusivity or by imposition.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I can go on and on. As you can see, I am passionate about defending myself against oversimplified, stereotypical comments that are neither factual nor accurate. However, standing in this House today on behalf of Asian Australians who love this country, who have contributed so much to the wellbeing of our nation and who have called Australia their home, I once again pledge our undivided loyalty to Australia and the people of this great nation. It is my hope that never again will we have to reaffirm our loyalty to Australia, never again will we have to be questioned about our identity and never again should Australians be divided based on the colour of their skin.

I notice the presence of foreign press in the gallery. I will make a few comments and I hope that they will be reported accurately in the foreign media. I want to tell the world that, despite some narrow-minded, uninformed and oversimplified comments from certain high-profile politicians, Australians are not racist and, in fact, are very fair-minded people. The supporters of One Nation are mostly people who, in essence, are no different to us. They have their dreams and aspirations, they have their family to raise and job to protect, and they also have fear and apprehension in a changing world that is getting quickly away from us all. They look for leadership and support from the major parties and, frankly, we have failed them, particularly the National Party. The Beattie Labor government can now claim that we represent all Queenslanders—from the bush to the beach. It is therefore my hope that we are able to face up to the challenges and are able to show clear leadership, understanding and compassion to our fellow Australians who have been alienated and marginalised.

In her maiden speech two days ago, the honourable member for Aspley, Ms Bonny Barry, gave us an account of her multicultural background. She told us that her multicultural background is, in fact,

the strength of her family. I can see that she is immensely proud of the diverse mixture of her heritage, and so she should be. Multiculturalism has brought richness to Australia. Before multiculturalism, a seven-course banquet was a six-pack and a meat pie. Now it is a six-pack and a spring roll. I am so glad that some good things in life do not change.

Multiculturalism is not about taking one previous culture into this country lock, stock and barrel, it is about keeping the good and discarding those things that are perhaps incompatible. But only the beholder can make that decision. No-one has the perfect culture. There are parts of my parents' culture that I would not want my children to learn because I know that they have no place in this country. But there are other parts of the Chinese culture that I want not only my children to learn; I would dearly like my fellow Australians to embrace them also, because they are simply good for our nation building.

Yesterday in his maiden speech, the honourable member for Lockyer mentioned that the Chinese and most Asians respect their elderly. I am so pleased to hear from one of the One Nation members of the House that Asian culture can contribute positively to the fabric of this nation. Multiculturalism is about being the best of the best. I do not want Australia to be Asianised, whatever that word means. I do not want Australia to be Europeanised, whatever that word means. I definitely do not want Australia to be Americanised, and I know what that word means. I want Australia to develop her own culture and be the envy of the world because she has developed her culture from the best of the best. I want the world to know that we respect the environment because we have learned that from the indigenous culture. I want the world to know that we have a strong sense of justice because we have learned that from the Irish culture.

I want the world to know that we are adventurous and innovative because we have learned that from the Anglo-Saxon community. I want the world to know that we value family and respect the elderly because we have learned that from the Greek community. I want the world to know that we are hard workers and entrepreneurs and able to sell ice to Eskimos because we have learned that from the Chinese community and that we look like a million dollars everywhere we go because we learned that from the Italians. I want the world to also know that we have a dry sense of humour and are easygoing and fun loving because we have learned that from nobody else but ourselves. I am very proud of my Chinese heritage. However, after all is said and done, we must realise that we are first and foremost Australian. The fact of the matter is that I am Chinese by birth, Australian by choice and Labor by conviction. I am very proud of all these heritages.

I turn now to the electorate of Capalaba. The electorate of Capalaba consists of the suburbs of Capalaba, Alexandra Hills and part of Birkdale. It is the gateway and the commercial hub of the Redlands area. The people of Capalaba are very proud of their environment and their heritage. Redlanders, as we are called, are strongly conscious of environmental issues. On Clean Up Australia Day on 4 March I participated with the locals to clean up Valentine Park. I was impressed by their enthusiasm and determination to ensure that their living environment is well looked after.

Since the election I have been invited to numerous schools in my electorate to present badges to students. Nothing is more pleasing to me than to see young children full of energy, full of life and full of enthusiasm. At every school I have been to I have witnessed the strength of our public school system in full and proud display. I witnessed first-hand how hard parents try to support the school to raise money to improve the facilities. This also makes me angry, because I know that our federal government has poured millions of dollars into private schools while the state is left holding the babies of the public school system. I acknowledge that some parents send their children to private schools for a variety of reasons. Some of them have to make great sacrifices to do that, and I applaud them for it. Nevertheless, they have a choice between public and private school. Many people in my electorate do not have the luxury of that choice. That is why we must keep education totally free. We must maintain public education at a high standard if we want to produce a well-educated work force and a Smart State.

This federal government has failed to look after the interests of middle-class Australians. Government is supposed to be of the people, by the people and for the people. Unfortunately, Mr Howard's government is a government of the big business, of the wealthy, by the influential and for the powerful. Let us take national competition policy as an example, which breaks the backbone of not only rural Australia but also outer metropolitan areas such as Capalaba. No-one is arguing about the necessity for competition to improve efficiency and to be competitive in a world market. However, the playing fields are not always level and the federal government has simply failed to understand the local implications of its decisions and keeps refusing to readdress the issues.

Let us take petrol prices as another example. When petrol prices are going through the roof, all we get is a cold, unemotional explanation that any reduction of prices by the government will easily be offset by the fluctuation of the Australian dollar. Mr Howard must stop treating Australian people with contempt. Australians are smarter than Mr Howard cares to give them credit for. Of course we understand that we are unable to control world oil prices. Of course we understand that petrol prices are also affected by the strength or weakness of our dollar. We know that. All we are asking Mr Howard to

do as our leader is to show us that he understands that we are hurting by not adding further burden on the family, by not adding fuel to fire. Is that too much to ask for? But, of course, he would not understand that. When was the last time he filled his own petrol tank and paid for the petrol with his own money? When was the last time he had to skip lunch so that petrol could be put in the car to take the kids to school? Australia does not need smarter leaders or more intelligent leaders; it needs more compassionate leaders. The federal government has become so arrogant and out of touch with the people that it does not deserve to have another chance.

I am honoured to be elected by the people of Capalaba. However, I am under no illusions and understand that this is a vote for good Labor policies, good and open Labor government and the personal integrity of the Premier. I promise the people of Capalaba as their member that I will be honest, open, transparent and accessible to them.

In conclusion, I thank my campaign manager, Alan Roche, for being there for me; Andrew Soter for believing in me from day one; Warren Christensen for giving me invaluable suggestions; Anastasia Palaszczuk for fishing me out of deep water; Mary North for looking after me beyond the call of duty; the Honourable Con Sciacca, my federal colleague, for his advice; Craig Emerson, also my federal colleague, for his daily encouragement; the Honourable Bob Hawke for his effort to come to Brisbane especially to render me his assistance; Senator Joe Ludwig and the Australian Workers Union for valuable assistance; Peter Low for his phone call which changed my life; and Peter Schmith for the endless hours he put in and his devotion to the company I started 12 years ago.

I pay a special tribute to Jim Elder, the member whom I replaced. He was a good member for Capalaba and a good and respected minister. Nothing can take that away from him. To the Premier and the Deputy Premier, I offer my heartfelt thanks for believing in me. It was not an easy call. I can assure them that I will be a member of this government that they can be proud of.

To my children Priscilla, Rachel and Claudia: thank you for your understanding and patience. All of you are indeed a godsend. I love you all, and remember to do your homework! To my wife Doris: thank you for standing by me for what I wanted to do, for the tears you have shed for me and for what I have put you through, for your courage to stand up and brave the world when the world has so wrongly turned against us, for the immense spirit of forgiveness which you displayed when politics claimed its first victim—the truth—and for praying with me when I am hanging on only by your love and our faith. You asked me if I will change after I get into politics. I already have: I have changed from someone who has a wife to someone who cherishes his wife, from someone who knew love to someone who lives love, from someone who was married to someone who would want to get married again to the same woman. Doris, I love you.

Lastly, as a Christian I thank God for seeing me through some very tough times. I know that I am not here by coincidence. There is a purpose, and I pray that I am worthy of that purpose. I look forward to serving the people of Queensland in a way that is also worthy of their trust.

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