



MARY WOOLDRIDGE, MP
Member for Doncaster

INAUGURAL SPEECH

Legislative Assembly
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Ms WOOLDRIDGE (Doncaster) —
Congratulations, Speaker, on your election to your office.

I recognise at the start the firefighters and emergency services personnel who are putting their lives at risk to protect families, homes and people's livelihoods throughout Australia.

It is an honour to be here today representing the people of Doncaster. In doing so I follow in the footsteps of two distinguished members of Parliament: Morris Williams, who initially represented the seat of Box Hill and then the seat of Doncaster from when it was formed in 1976 until 1988; and Victor Perton, who ably represented Doncaster for the subsequent 18 years. Victor has been a great support to me over the past nine months and I thank him for his assistance and encouragement.

Doncaster is a vibrant and active community best known to most as the home of Doncaster Shoppingtown. Retail and business services dominate the business activity. Doncaster stands out as an electorate due to its very high proportion of people born overseas, its ageing population and the fact that a disproportionate number of its people get into their cars every day to go to work. They do this because public transport options are limited and do not provide real choice for commuters. As the growth of Melbourne continues, government must not forget the much-needed infrastructure for established areas that has been overlooked to date.

It would be very easy to believe that a commuter suburb such as Doncaster lacks soul; however, nothing could be further from the truth. The heart of the Doncaster electorate is the thousands who volunteer to keep community, ethnic and sporting organisations alive. From the Manningham Men's Shed and Doncare (Doncaster Community Care and Counselling) through to the Doncaster Junior Football Club and the various ethnic senior citizens' clubs, everyday people are giving their time and skills to assist children and young people, recently arrived migrants, the elderly and families in need.

As a 16-year-old I went to Canada as a Rotary exchange student and ever since have moved regularly, living interstate and overseas. My one constant has been local activism for positive outcomes in and for the communities in which I have lived. This has taught me that those who have a voice must use it for those who are unable to do so. I see these actions throughout the Doncaster community and pledge to support all those who do so for the benefit of our community and I pledge to continue to do so myself for people in Doncaster and throughout Victoria.

A wonderful aspect of the Doncaster electorate is its ethnic diversity and the vibrancy that this brings, represented in schools and workplaces, shops and restaurants and community organisations. In Doncaster over 40 per cent of people are born outside Australia and speak a language other than English at home. Doncaster is a microcosm of the success of multicultural and multi-racial Victoria. This success is one of the key qualities that defines Victoria at the beginning of the 21st century. We are all the richer for the different backgrounds and the vibrant cultures we bring to our society and we are stronger when we live with respect and acceptance of our differences.

I come to this house as a Liberal. For me Liberalism is based on respect for the individual, on his and her liberty, dignity and freedom and on the right to be successful, to take on responsibility, to work as hard as one wishes and to be rewarded for it. The individual's success is the community's success. Milton Friedman said:

Some people see freedom as the promotion of greed and self-interest. But a truly free society is one that releases the energies and creativity and abilities of everyone. It prevents some people from arbitrarily suppressing others. Most important freedom means mobility and diversity. It enables today's disadvantaged to become tomorrow's privileged. And along the way it enables everyone from top to bottom to enjoy a richer and fuller life.

These are the principles that will form the basis for how I intend to represent the people of Doncaster, to hold the government to account and to develop policies that underpin my vision for Victoria.

My son, Jamison, is 18 months old and when I think of the future he will inherit I have some very simple hopes for him as he grows up. It is a future where he can achieve his potential surrounded by a supportive family and cohesive community, a future where he can learn the skills and develop the capabilities that will equip him for jobs as yet unimagined, a future where he can form caring and meaningful relationships with the rich diversity of people who make up our community and a future where he can contribute to the wellbeing of that community. This is a future for all Victorian children regardless of their social, cultural or geographic background. Liberalism is genuinely about equality of opportunity.

I chose to stand for a seat in the Parliament of Victoria as I am most passionate about the areas for which the state government is responsible — education, innovation, health care, public transport and community safety. Delivering effective policies and appropriate services in these areas has a real and positive impact on people every day and is fundamental to individuals and families being able to lead happy and productive lives.

However Victoria is at a crossroads. No longer can we assume the prosperity we have enjoyed in the past. In the 1800s Victoria enjoyed growth and income that came with the gold rush and Melbourne was one of the wealthiest and fastest growing cities in the world. Following gold we had agriculture, particularly from the Western District and then manufacturing as the drivers of our quality of life. At the same time Melbourne was the home of philanthropy and the business and philanthropic communities engaged like nowhere else in Australia with the medical fraternity, and, as a result, 10 out of 13 of Australia's largest medical research institutes are located in Melbourne.

This is what my generation has inherited, but the world is now globalised and highly competitive. It is knowledge that drives prosperity and there are no prizes for second place. As a State therefore, we have no option but to create an education system that stimulates, challenges and extends all children. In our competitive world we cannot rest on our laurels. While Australia ranks well in international comparisons in maths and science, there is room for improvement. Korea ranks the highest in the world, with Western Australia achieving similar results. Japan is the second-highest performing nation and South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory achieve similar results. While Victoria is above the world average, we do not achieve at the same level as those previously mentioned countries and Australian States. In a State that prides itself on its scientific innovation this will not underpin future excellence. In fact a 2006 report from the Productivity Commission shows that Victoria has the lowest public spending per student in both primary and secondary education in Australia.

A 2005 national benchmarking report shows that the Victorian curriculum has the least evidence of academic rigour of the mainland States in the areas of physics, fractions and decimals, literature and early-years reading. What this translates to in terms of outcomes is that in year 10, 19 per cent of students cannot read, 18 per cent cannot write and 27 per cent cannot do mathematics — and that is from the Government's own budget papers. How will we have an innovative business environment which encourages the growth of small business and therefore jobs if our children cannot do maths and science? Why will global companies choose to locate in Victoria if our young people cannot read to the standards achieved in other Australian States and by our Asian neighbours? Why do we have no sense of urgency as our children keep slipping behind? Our children must have a top-class education to ensure their future opportunities in a prosperous and successful state.

At the end of the 1980s, as an ambitious young person, I felt I had to leave Melbourne. I moved first to Sydney

and then to the United States of America to pursue opportunities and to develop my career. Ten years later I returned to Melbourne because I love Melbourne, I am a proud Victorian and this is my home. It is my aim over the coming years to work to ensure that our children can compete in the international market where skills, knowledge and human capital will flow even more freely than they do today. More importantly, we must ensure that they do not feel they have to move interstate or overseas to find opportunities; but if they choose to do so, we must create a State to which they will want to return.

With one eye on my son, but also understanding the trends more broadly, I am also particularly concerned about boys' education, as I see the results for boys slipping further and further behind those for girls in terms of literacy, retention rates and participation in higher education. This is not to take anything from the strong push over recent years to attain excellence in girls' education, but it shows we must also focus on boys. We must recognise different learning styles and approaches and encourage more male role models in schools.

I also wish to talk about community cohesiveness. Individual and collective grassroots action is what brings about positive outcomes and sustainable change. There is a role for government to encourage, facilitate and fund such activities, but it must be driven from the community for the benefit of the community. There has been concern about the decline in social cohesion, but there are positive trends such as the emergence of social entrepreneurship, a growth in volunteering and an increase in business, family and individual philanthropy.

Community building has become a topic of debate and investigation and while citizens turn their backs on formal structures they are forging ahead with initiatives to craft their own community rather than passively awaiting it. At the same time corporate social responsibility is being widely incorporated into business strategies as directors and management recognise the mutual benefit from engaging with the communities in which they operate. My Liberalism says we must enable communities to get on and make the change they wish to see, understanding that government's role is as a facilitator and it is individuals who will successfully drive change.

Finally, on federal and state relations, there is ongoing debate about the relationship between Federal and State governments as we see further involvement by the Commonwealth Government in areas that were traditionally thought to be State responsibilities. I say it is not unreasonable for the Federal Government to get involved when that involvement is as a result of a

vacuum created by State inactivity. Why does the Federal Government have to put \$19 million into a program for boys when education is a State responsibility? Why does the Federal Government have to put in place programs for drug and alcohol rehabilitation when it is a state responsibility? Collectively, again and again, the states fail to take the lead on areas of core responsibility. However, it has been shown that when a State chooses to take the lead it can influence a nation.

Maree Tehan's activism when she was health minister in this place had a direct consequence in terms of creating the national mental health strategy which over 15 years has transformed mental health in Australia at the same time as Australia leads the world. Through their service delivery role the States have a unique knowledge and connection to the needs of the community that the Federal Government does not have. We must use this knowledge to ensure we are taking responsibility as appropriate but also to inform federal policy agendas for the benefit of this state and for the country as a whole.

In raising these issues I am mindful that I have not talked about mental health or aged care, for which I have shadow ministerial responsibility. I have done this deliberately, as I will have many opportunities to talk on these particular matters.

No person gets to this place without incredible support and encouragement. I would like to acknowledge my parents, Anne and Philip Wooldridge, who are here in the chamber today and who taught me that individuals have to take responsibility for the change they wish to see, that doing your best in any endeavour and doing it with integrity, is more important than the outcome but that hard work and perseverance are the most likely characteristics of success. My family is no stranger to parliamentary representation, with my brother, Michael, a former federal health minister, who is also here today, having made a real difference to the Australian

community in many areas including immunisation, medical research and indigenous health. He has always been and continues to be a role model, mentor and friend, which I value enormously.

An overwhelming aspect of running a local campaign is the support which comes from hundreds who believe in Liberalism and are prepared to put their effort and time into convincing the community of the benefits of a Liberal government. I thank many personal friends, the Doncaster branches of the Liberal Party and in particular my campaign manager, Brent Rodrigues, for a substantial effort which was reflected in our result in Doncaster.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Andrew Barling, for his unwavering support. Andrew grew up in the Mallee and continues his commitment to the country through the two days every week that he spends in Bendigo as a specialist surgeon. I strongly support this work, as I believe people who live in rural and regional Victoria have a right to access local specialist services. Andrew is a true example of an individual making a difference, having founded, raised funds for and run the Otis Foundation, a network of rural retreats for women with breast cancer. Over the past six years he and the Bendigo community have raised over \$1.8 million for the Otis Foundation. I am proud to work with him on the Board of Otis for the benefit of women all over Australia at a particularly vulnerable period in their lives.

I am here because I believe that a committed and passionate individual can make a difference, be it at a local level, in a community or for a State. I will support those who seek to bring about positive change, I will champion communities who work for a better future and I aspire to make the changes which will ensure that a future Victoria is a State built on world-class education, cutting-edge innovation that creates wealth and employment and engaged and vibrant communities.