

**Address by Barry O'Farrell MP, NSW Leader of the Opposition,
to the State Council of the NSW Division of the Liberal Party,
Terrigal, 1 November 2008**

Delegates, today is a day of both strong pride and strong concern for the NSW Division of our great Liberal Party.

We can be proud of our achievements in the by-elections recently held in the seats of Ryde, Cabramatta and Lakemba.

Our result on October 18th – including winning back a seat from Labor in metropolitan Sydney for the first time in 20 years – clearly show the Liberal Party is again on the rise at the State level.

Some commentators would have us believe that the results simply reflected Labor “being on the nose”.

And while it's true that Labor deserves the community's scorn, what those commentators ignore is how much the Liberal Party sought and indeed earned the community's trust in these by-elections.

How did we earn it? I would suggest at least four ways.

First, we put the community's interest first in all three seats and focussed on people's everyday concerns about their quality of life, about how day-to-day life in Sydney just seems to keep getting tougher while their Government stumbles and bumbles along.

We listened to people's concerns about not being able to spend time with their kids because they are stuck in traffic or stuck on an overcrowded, late train.

We listened to people's concerns that honesty and accountability in politics has been dispensed with in NSW.

We talked to them about our practical plans to restore services and restore the public's faith in its elected officials.

The second way we earned the community's trust is we showed ourselves to be of the community itself.

For too long, our opponents have sought to stereotype the Liberal Party in one predictable way or another. In particular, they have sought to suggest that we are in one way or another outside the mainstream of the community.

But the by-election candidates and campaigns gave the lie to that claim.

In Victor Dominello, in Michael Hawatt, and in Dai Le, we demonstrated that the NSW Liberal Party is representative of the diverse, contemporary community whose support we seek.

In their careers – solicitor, small business operator and even ABC-employed journalist, we demonstrated that our candidates come from all walks of life – not just the union movement or the political class.

We demonstrated that we are there for everyone in NSW – regardless of your background, your suburb, your kid's school or the size of your wallet.

Thirdly, we earned the community's trust by showing that we Liberals have absolute unity of purpose when it comes to winning the next election and putting NSW back on track.

We demonstrated not only in our words, but in the action that was the great teamwork by all Liberals during the by-elections, that our house is in order. That the reforms to structure and culture that you supported in May and August is paying dividends.

Finally, during the by-elections, we put forward practical plans for dealing with the fundamental problems that people in places like Ryde confront with no Government help everyday. Our role is not only to listen, but also to learn and lead.

In sum, the proposition the Liberal Party put to the public during the by-elections was straightforward:

- **We're committed to put public interests first;**
- **We're community-based and mainstream;**
- **We're a united and focussed team, and;**
- **We have practical plans for putting NSW back on track.**

I thank the people of Ryde, Cabramatta and Lakemba for supporting that proposition and for starting the change for the better.

So, delegates, we have much too be proud of. To use the words of one who has recently disappeared from the political landscape: there is much to do but we are headed in the right direction.

And this is where I wish to share my concern with you: there are still 125 more Saturdays between today and the general election.

For the people of NSW – if we see no fundamental improvement from Labor – that's more than two long years of having to endure basic services that aren't being delivered and core infrastructure that's always promised and never delivered.

Two more years of enduring the Dodgy Brothers in charge of the economy even as the consequences and implications of the international financial crisis mount.

Two more years of spin, scandals, stuff-ups and just outright stupidity from what can only be characterised – let's face it - as the worst government NSW has ever had.

And, it hasn't taken the community long to figure out the new Premier – a former advisor to Bob Carr and Morris Iemma – is the same old Labor.

A man who can find money for motor car races and Mardi Gras but not for basic services; a man who promises to end the spin but actually goes ahead and hires 19 more spin doctors.

To paraphrase a candidate for some job in the US: old fish wrapped in new newspaper still stinks.

Mr Rees seems to like good Aussie vernacular but he gives our colourful language a whole new meaning.

Who knew that “red hot go” actually meant “more mismanagement, spin and contempt for the community”?

And it's the distance to the next election why – while we are proud of our achievements in the by-elections – we must maintain the focus and hard work.

If we are to be true to our party's principles and true to the very purpose of Parliament, we owe the community much more than that.

We need to show the community that not all politicians are like the sorry Labor lot they are now stuck with.

We need to set ourselves the highest standard of public service and measure ourselves against it – every day – as we make ourselves ready to govern.

Indeed, the longer road ahead for the Liberal parliamentary team looks much like the short distance we have just covered for the by-elections.

Namely, it's about hard work and absolute commitment to the community's interests.

If we are to be successful in 2011, and if we truly want the chance to serve the people of our State and restore it's standing, we can't – and we won't – drop the pace.

In fact, we will quicken it. It could be all too easy to simply watch Labor continue its mismanagement and mistakes.

But that's not the responsible thing to do. That would be letting the community down.

While the opportunity may be to just let Labor lose, the challenge is for we Liberals to earn the right and the mandate for a change for the better in NSW. It's a challenge my colleagues and I fully embrace.

To that, just this week, we put forward two policy approaches that show how NSW will be different under an O'Farrell Government.

Both approaches adhere to the community's basic expectations of a government – the “bottom line” of what the public deserves.

They are truisms but, in NSW where a terrible government has trashed all truisms over 13 years, they bear repeating.

Namely: the community expects and deserves honesty and accountability from its elected government.

Namely: the community expects and deserves economic responsibility from its elected government.

In the first regard, this week I announced our detailed approach to upholding the community's right to know and released our plan to improve Freedom of Information in NSW.

I believe that community scrutiny of government – including through increased access to government information – both protects the public interest and pushes the public sector to make better decisions and better performance.

We need to break down Labor's "culture of concealment" and make easy access to government information the standard practice rather than the exception.

Key reforms under a NSW Liberal-Nationals Government will be:

- **pro-active disclosure of Government information as a guiding principle;**
- **"one-stop on-line shop" for information from all Government agencies;**
- **enforced public disclosure of Government contracts and grants;**
- **appointment of a fully independent Open Government Commissioner;**
- **and**
- **no cost for FOI applications and establishment of mandatory deadlines.**

Ultimately, the people of NSW have the right to know how they are being governed.

If honesty and accountability are one of the key cornerstones of any administration, another is the capacity to manage the State's economic and financial affairs.

If it's a cornerstone, then in NSW under Labor it's been chiselled away at and then totally removed, and the house has fallen in a heap.

Through waste, mismanagement and nepotism, Labor has squandered the revenue growth it enjoyed from the decade-long national economic boom, including windfall receipts totaling \$17.5 billion over the past 13 years.

Over the past three years – in fact, since another relatively unknown Minister was shoehorned into the Premier's job and promised fiscal responsibility – the State's debt has trebled from almost \$15 billion to \$42 billion – representing over \$6,000 for every man, woman and child.

Labor failed to invest in new infrastructure or improved services, nor put aside in the good times to help us deal with the bad times. As a result, just yesterday, we saw the ultimate act of political bastardry – the cancellation of the NW metro project.

Nor did Labor keep our tax levels competitive with neighbouring States or make NSW an attractive place to invest or grow your business.

What is at the cause of this disease? Simply, Labor just doesn't get it.

Labor just doesn't understand that only a strong economy can secure the State's future. It's the foundation upon which all government does – or wants to do – is based.

Only a strong economy – including business growth and new investment in NSW – guarantees the continuation of the high standards of living we deserve.

The State needs a fundamentally different approach.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition believes the effective management of the NSW economy and State budget has to be based on a clear set of economic goals and fiscal commitments.

These goals and commitments are vital to guide government's planning and decision-making, especially in the delivery of essential services and infrastructure.

Without these the government risks proceeding without purpose.

It is through a strong economy and disciplined budget that governments are able to deliver high quality services and infrastructure in areas like health, education, transport and policing.

Ultimately this strengthens community well-being and environmental sustainability and improves people's quality of life.

The case for a solid economic and fiscal framework has only been made stronger by the international financial crisis.

Today, we put forward our economic goals – our long-term objectives for the NSW economy. They embody a vision for the NSW economy. They are:

- **NSW to lead Australia in sustainable economic growth;**
- **NSW to be Australia's 21st century state;**
- **NSW to be Australia's first place to do business; and**
- **Regional NSW will be a place of equal opportunity.**

And it's not just about bold statements.

Each of our goals will be underpinned with measurable targets and provides strategic direction for every budget that we undertake in Government. And the community for its part will measure us on our progress in achieving them.

Equally, we put forward our fiscal commitments - our approach to the budget process that's at the heart of the State's economic management.

These commitments will set clear rules and parameters around government expenditure and revenue, and more generally how we do business. They are:

- **Maintaining the AAA Credit Rating;**
- **Ensuring expense growth will be less than, or equal to, revenue growth;**
- **Restoring and enhancing the level of front line services; and**
- **Ensuring all Cabinet ministers will be accountable for fiscal direction and infrastructure delivery.**

What does all this mean in short?

It means running a government with an actual plan for the economy. It's that simple.

But in NSW – after 13 years of Labor – it's almost like turning the world on its head.

But it's about doing what every small business and every household in our community – but not our current government – does: managing your money wisely. Taking responsibility. Keeping an eye on the bottom line and your future needs.

And it's because we respect those businesses and those householders that we are also seeking to actively involve the community in further developing our economic and fiscal policy.

Through both submissions and meetings across NSW, we will be accepting contributions, ideas and concepts on how we can best meet our proposed goals and commitments – and I invite each and every delegate and observer to State Council to let us know their views too.

Delegates, we meet here on the Central Coast which is an area of opportunity for us at the next election.

Unless we win seats here we cannot expect to be elected in 2011.

Last month we tasted here – and elsewhere across the State – electoral success at council elections. We increased the number of Liberal endorsed candidates from less than 100 to more than 130.

It's an achievement upon which we must build.

Your parliamentary party is hard at work. Your organisation has new leadership that is delivering results. And I look to you – and your branch members across the State – for continued support, renewed effort, as we offer NSW the hope of responsible government once more.