



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

## NSW election 2011

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*Weekend Today* program interview with Laurie Oakes, 27 March 2011

**Oakes:** Mr Burke, welcome to the program.

**Burke:** Morning Laurie.

**Oakes:** Well, Labor in New South Wales smashed, the Liberal government elected with the biggest vote any of us can remember, what does it mean federally?

**Burke:** Well, first of all congratulations to Barry O'Farrell. He gave a good speech last night, Premier of New South Wales, and we now have to as a government federally, work with the new Liberal premier, and we will be able to that constructively like we have with the Victorian Government and the Western Australian Government. So Federally we are dealing with a new government there but I think the relationship and the responsible dealings with that will all go forward properly.

**Oakes:** Do you subscribe to the view that getting rid of a incompetent, dysfunctional Labor government in New South Wales will actually take some pressure off Labor federally?

**Burke:** I don't think this will actually make much of an impact federally to be honest on that. This is something where it has been pretty clear for about two and a half years that we were heading towards this result in New South Wales and different attempts have been made to try to avoid it but it has been clear for some time that we were heading in this direction and not uncommon federally for there to be a different government in New South Wales to what there is federally. That has been the case more often than not for about forty years.

**Oakes:** It is pretty uncommon for Labor in this midst its best state historically to get 25.5% of the primary vote. I mean, surely that must worry you federally?

**Burke:** Oh, this is a bad result, it's a bad result. There's a few things that have come together in causing it. We were asking the people of New south Wales to keep

us there for twenty years. As a request it was a big one to start with and you need to be an extraordinary government to get away with a request like that. There had been too many distractions over the period but also we never recovered from the electricity debate of two and a half years ago.

**Oakes:** Well that's true, we'll talk about that in a minute. But you have now got a third Liberal premier, a third liberal government – you say will be about to work constructively with it, but that's another premier working to help Tony Abbott.

**Burke:** Yes, well from some of the articles in the papers today I'm not sure of the extent to which that assistance going back and forth is actually happening.

But ultimately there are moments when premiers play the political game against a Federal government. You actually don't have to be on the other side of politics to be in that space and so we've often seen things like that happen but I really think most of the business of government whether it is a health deal that was just negotiated which involved both the Victorian Liberal government and the Western Australian Liberal government. You can reach agreement for the interest of people when you work in a consensus fashion. That's what Prime Minister Gillard has been doing.

**Oakes:** Barry O'Farrell said in his victory speech last night, and I know you were listening and watching, he said he would take the fight up to Canberra on the proposed carbon tax. That surely makes it much harder for you to win that debate doesn't it?

**Burke:** I don't think so. I actually think one of the key lessons of the NSW experience is the importance of being willing to hold your nerve and win an argument. I remember having conversation with Bob Carr a few years ago now, after he had left as Premier, expressing his frustration about the fact that every time there was community opposition he felt the New South Wales Government wasn't holding its nerve and winning the argument. Now that's exactly what we have to do here on carbon tax, and on the issue of the carbon price.

Whichever way that debate is described, what matters is we do need to price carbon, we do need to have a system that makes polluters pay, we do need to be able to reduce our emissions. We won't shy away from that. Even if there's now a New South Wales Premier with a different view.

**Oakes:** Well Barry O'Farrell and the New South Wales Liberals clearly feel you are not winning the argument, they think they are. They advertised very heavily on your carbon tax in a state election, they thought it was a winner for them.

**Burke:** Now I've got to say, you have got to draw a long bow to say that any votes were changed over that part of the campaign. In fairness, there weren't many votes to be changed by that point of the campaign, but you'd really have to stretch the argument to claim that there was a change in voting intention over that policy. We have got no evidence from the internal research from the Labor Party saying that.

**Oakes:** The Liberals must have done research or they wouldn't have campaigned so heavily on it. What did your research show?

**Burke:** Well our research found that people were not changing their vote on this. When asked whether they thought it was a Federal issue or a State issue, they believed it was a Federal issue. They did not believe this was significant in changing their vote.

**Oakes:** Yet the former Premier Nathan Rees, who battled to hold on to his seat last night, he said that the proposed carbon tax was crippling Labor. He said there was no question at all that a carbon tax was hurting the party in New South Wales and he said "I have never seen an issue sink in so quickly", so that is up against your party polling. He's over there on the ground battling to save his seat.

**Burke:** Yeah and let's just remember before there was any announcement of a carbon price, where was the state party sitting in terms of popularity. It's not like we suddenly four months ago had an incredibly popular state government and that shifted following the announcement that we were going to act on climate change. There's always a choice at a Federal level between action or further delay. And some people are always finding excuses to why they'd argue that we should have had a further delay. We've been delaying too long on this policy area, and pushing ahead with it is the right thing to do.

**Oakes:** Let's talk about what Anna Bligh called the New South Wales disease. How do you get rid of it?

**Burke:** There's a few elements to it. The first obviously is if in one term of parliament you have got three different Premiers, the starting point of stability is not met, and you only have to look at the Coalition this time around. Ever since they went into Opposition for 16 years ago, four terms, this is the first term where they have kept the same Opposition Leader the whole way through. First time they've done it, we had three premiers in the course of the term, that in itself isn't going to speak of stability and isn't going to provide the level of public confidence that you need.

We also had the issue with the electricity debate, where the party declared war on itself. You had in that conference the senior people shouting and screaming at each other, and then ultimately on what we'd argued was a major reform, and an important reform, we blinked. It ended up not going ahead in that fashion. Now, you can't do that. If you believe in something, you have to pursue it, argue it, and you have to try to win the debate.

**Oakes:** Obviously there were Federal lessons in what you talked about. Let's talk about stability and the idea of disposable leaders, which the New South Wales right, your faction, pioneered. You were included in the group that brought it into Federal Parliament with the assassination of Kevin Rudd.

**Burke:** Well obviously I am not going to use the language you used there, Laurie. These are decisions that when you make them, you have got to make them for the right reasons, you have got to make them carefully and, it's a big threshold to cross. Now obviously I'm not going to want to revisit everything about that period. The decisions that were made at the time I think were right.

I think what we have got to do now is if the only discussion we get involved in is a discussion of the politics of an issue, and not the policies of an issue, then we fall into the worst trap of all. I think if the different issues that will come out and be discussed out of New South Wales if it is entirely about politics and political management, it will always fall short.

One of the problems, I think, that the people of New South Wales got very frustrated about was stories that they had seen in the papers, conversations that they'd be hearing, interviews they'd be hearing, were always an analysis of the politics, and not enough about the issues affecting their lives.

**Oakes:** You also talked about the damage done by the scenes at the conference, the battle over electricity privatisation. Now of course, the union boss who caused all that, and the people on the other side say he spent a lot of time attacking the State Labor Government, John Robertson, is about to become leader.

**Burke:** When you say one person caused all that, I think when you get an issue like that, we actually all have to take responsibility. I think you have to work on the basis when relationships break down in that way, and a policy is put forward as something so important and not proceeded with, and you get those scenes, no-one should walk away from responsibility, and to land it all on one person.

**Oakes:** But he was rewarded with a seat in parliament and now with the leadership.

**Burke:** As I say, the context of that question is on the basis of can you pin it on one person. I work on the basis that we all take responsibility.

**Oakes:** Should he be leader?

**Burke:** If there's one thing – I was briefly in the State caucus, I'm now in the Federal caucus, if there's one thing I learnt very strongly, from the brief time I was in the State caucus, federal members of parliament telling them what to do, isn't going to be helpful, isn't going to be well heeded, they'll sort that out.

**Oakes:** Paul Keating wrote to John Robertson in October 2008 and said 'if the Government goes down the lethal tally of men and women who lose their seats will be to your account'. Should a bloke like that be leader?

**Burke:** Paul doesn't mince words, but as I say for me to comment on that – it's not helpful, the State caucus will sort out those issues.

**Oakes:** The State caucus hasn't been sorting them out. They've been sorted out by the machine, the New South Wales right. That is happening again. This bloke is foisted on them as leader.

**Burke:** As I say, you are talking and predicting a chain of events I'm not involved with, I'm not giving people direction as to what they should do.

**Oakes:** Let me quote Paul Keating again. It's a great letter. He said 'not a skerrick of principal or restraint is shown, you behaved with reckless indifference to the longevity of the current Government and the reasonable prospects of it being re election'. Now Paul Keating predicted then what happened yesterday, sheeting it home to John Robertson, and New South Wales Labor is about to make him leader, have they learnt nothing?

**Burke:** The prediction of what was going to happen from that moment that Paul Keating moment is right. The issue of 'Can you land all that responsibility on one person', I think we have got to work on the basis that we all take a level of responsibility. In doing so – and there'll be a lot of criticisms over things that happened in the last term – we don't fall for the argument that somehow we should forget the legacy of the entire period of Government. There's a whole lot of things that happened, cleaning up the police force, what happened in literacy and numeracy, what happened with infrastructure like the M7, the saving of the river red gums, there's a lot of the issues there of Labor legacy that people will easily get caught up in the politics of the past few years and disown, and that would be the biggest error, it's a mistake that we made after Paul Keating lost, that we stopped owning the good economic outcomes that happened during that period of Government and the economic reforms.

**Oakes:** OK, one portfolio issue before you go, among your many hats, you are Minister for water, that includes the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, you have now got a New South Wales Liberal Government. Will it cause you problems, and the last thing we saw about the Murray-Darling authority was people burning the plan that was put forward. Have you sorted that out?

**Burke:** To say it's settled and sorted out fully, no, it's not yet. But there's been real progress made and a whole lot of messages that Government needed to hear that we have now heard. The importance of involving local communities, the fact that we need to have a system where we are looking at the environmental health, and making sure we are looking at communities and the future of food production. Importantly, like with what the issues we were talking about before, with price on carbon. Not falling for the excuse of let's have further delay. I don't know when the next drought will be. I don't want it to look like the last one in the Murray-Darling, and that means we need to hold our nerve and pursue the reform.

**Oakes:** Barry O'Farrell will help or hinder.

**Burke:** I don't think Barry O'Farrell wants the next drought to look like the last one, this will be a sensible outcome for all the basin States. We can't look at the Murray-

Darling basin as though rivers respect state boundaries, they don't. Most generations have this reform wrong, we don't intend for the current generation of people as Ministers to make the same mistake.

**Oakes:** Minister we thank you.

**Burke:** Pleasure.

**ENDS**