

Legislative Assembly Hansard – 25 March 2021 – Proof

FRESHWATER MANLY FERRIES

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): Before the debate commences, and for the benefit of the public, I take the opportunity to explain the process and rationale behind this unique debate. It is unique because it enables the public to bring their concerns directly to the attention of the House. The intent of the procedure is that the petition debate will start with a speech from a member, which in most cases will be the member who lodged the petition, followed by up to four other members, followed by a Minister in response. To conclude the debate, the first speaker will speak in reply. After all members have spoken, the House will vote on the question that the House now take note of the petition. In most cases, the question will be determined on the voices and be passed. However, if it is challenged by a member it may proceed to a division where the bells are rung and the members vote on the motion to take note of the petition by moving to the appropriate side of the House.

The question is that the House take note of the petition.

Mr CHRIS MINNS (Kogarah) (16:00): It is an absolute privilege to speak on a petition to save the iconic Manly ferry from a permanent watery grave. I am honoured to introduce this take-note debate. However, the person who deserves the credit is Candy Bingham, the Deputy Mayor of Northern Beaches Council—who is a dynamo—and the Save the Manly Ferries committee. The campaign to save iconic heritage that has been taken away from the northern beaches by the New South Wales Government is the definition of a community-run, grassroots campaign. There is an old saying: Manly is 10 kilometres from Sydney and 1,000 kilometres from care. It seems the transport Minister has taken that saying to heart because he could not care less about the people of Manly. It is unsurprising. To remove the Manly ferry from Sydney Harbour would be like New York getting rid of its buildings, Athens tearing down the Acropolis or the Liberal Party getting rid of property developers. It just does not seem right.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): Order! The member for Ku-ring-gai will remain silent. He will have an opportunity to speak later in the debate.

Mr CHRIS MINNS: We must ask ourselves why a central, iconic and permanent part of Sydney's heritage should be lost. The history of the Manly ferry is engraved in the history of Sydney. It is said that Japanese mini submarines followed a Manly ferry through the anti-sub nets at the mouth of Sydney Harbour on the night of 29 May 1942. Apparently a late-returning passenger thought he saw the sub in the water before dismissing the idea. He was right—lurking in the water was a submarine. Lurking at the bottom of this debate is the issue of privatisation. It might be complicated, but I will explain what has happened. The services were privatised in 2013. The privatised lease was re-signed in 2019. The contract required Transdev NSW to purchase the new ferries on behalf of the Government, which it chose to build in China.

Andrew Constance has undertaken a fantastic jobs plan for China. We need one here in New South Wales. If members think that is complicated, they would be right. That messed-up ideology means that the people of New South Wales are presented with a false choice: either Chinese-built ferries or no ferries at all. What a load of rubbish! A ferry-building industry exists right here in New South Wales, and Austrade attempts to sell to other countries the ferries that are made here. I ask members to imagine a situation where the New South Wales Government invests in the ferry services that other countries buy from. That could lift capacity, produce jobs and achieve something good but, no, not on Andrew Constance's watch.

What is driving this? The Government and the Minister are not grabbed by the concepts of heritage and tradition. Watching the *Collaroy* turn the corner at Bradleys Head framed by the outline of the Sydney Harbour Bridge would make most people think, "God, I love Sydney!" Unfortunately, it makes the transport Minister think, "Who can I sell this to?" It is a perverted ideology that comes down to a fundamental mistake in economic policy. The Northern Beaches Council has discovered that every year 500 million tourism dollars flow into the northern beaches. Catching the *Freshwater* was the fourth most cited activity behind going to the beach and eating; so, pretty essential. In 2019, 2.8 million people visited Manly. That number is up 16 per cent on 2018 data. In 2020, 52 per cent of all visitors to Manly used the Manly ferry and visitor spending accounted for 12 per cent of all jobs created on the northern beaches. The New South Wales economy relies on tourism and tourism comes from the ferries. The member for Manly, who is meant to represent the people of his electorate, is getting rid of the ferries.

Mr Alister Henskens: There will be more ferries, not less. Can't you count?

Mr CHRIS MINNS: I say to the loudmouth member opposite that the Minister for Transport and Roads said the reduction in the number of Freshwater ferries was necessary because they would normally cease operation if swells reached 4.5 metres. He then said that although the new ferries would also cease operating at that point, the old ferries did too. Opposition members checked data from the Manly Hydraulics Laboratory and found that while the swell exceeded 4.5 metres on 15 occasions, the ferry was cancelled only six times. The Government's decision will result in more cancellations and a worse service for the community. I cannot believe the member for Manly would endorse it. It is time to reverse this decision and save the iconic Manly ferry. The Government should not be so reckless.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): I remind members that interjections are disorderly at all times. Some members in the Chamber are already on three calls to order. I do not want to throw any members out because this is a very good petition debate.

Mr JAMES GRIFFIN (Manly) (16:05): I thank the member for Kogarah for his wonderful advertisement for Manly. I also thank the constituents of Manly who have supported this petition. I recognise the Deputy Mayor of Northern Beaches Council for her wonderful advocacy for this very important issue. Over the past 24 years I have commuted from Manly by ferry. In fact, this morning I caught the ferry on my way to Parliament and the swell was alright. Make no mistake, the Freshwater ferries are an icon of Sydney Harbour. This morning I saw one going past as I went past the heads. They have played and will continue to play an important role in transporting people around the harbour. The patronage on the Manly to Circular Quay route declined by around 15 per cent between 2017 and 2019, and on most days the ferries run well below capacity.

Ms Trish Doyle: Do you catch the ferry?

Mr JAMES GRIFFIN: I just told you: I catch the ferry to work every day. During the average morning peak, on a 1,000-person vessel the number of customers ranges from 30 at 6.00 a.m. to around 280 at 8.00 a.m. However, those figures are no reason to retire all the beautiful old boats. Members will be aware that I have campaigned with members of the Manly community to retain the Freshwaters. While I have not secured the retention of all four of the ferries, two will continue to operate every weekend and on public holidays for many years to come—and so they should. It would be great if the other two ferries, the *MV Freshwater* and the *MV Collaroy*, could stay on the water and continue to operate. The Government is currently seeking interest from organisations to continue operating the ferries for tourism and heritage purposes.

Retaining the ferries would require a partnership between the Government and an interested organisation, and a fantastic collaborative opportunity has arisen with the new Museum of Sydney Harbour. The museum will be the home of Sydney Heritage Fleet, which is internationally recognised as a leading maritime heritage organisation. It will be a place for visitors to enjoy and learn about the cultural importance of heritage vessels. As well as exhibits, the museum will include berths for historic boats and a ferry wharf. It will also run tours on heritage vessels. The Museum of Sydney Harbour presents a purpose-built opportunity for interested organisations to retain the use of the two remaining Freshwater ferries. The Government has been presented with the opportunity to explore the electrification of ferries, which is an exciting and timely development that I wholeheartedly support. The Northern Beaches Council has also said how easy it would be to retain the Freshwater ferries. I am advised that the decision by Transport for NSW to retain the ferries is final.

I am calling on Transport for NSW to provide as much support as possible to the Northern Beaches Council to undertake a feasibility study or business case to retain and operate two of the remaining Freshwater class ferries. In October the council passed a motion to save all large Manly ferries. The deputy mayor of the council and Chair of the Save the Manly Ferries group has made many good points, including that the Freshwaters have been rigorously maintained up to now, are fit for service, have decades of life left and the cost of maintenance programs for the Freshwaters should be seen as an investment. In line with its campaigning to save all ferries, I have written to the council, encouraging it to undertake a business case or feasibility study. That would be real and meaningful action on its behalf. I also reiterate my call for Transport for NSW to assist the council where possible. The Freshwater class ferries are an icon of Sydney Harbour. The compromise of retaining two of them will not please everybody, but year-round, for years to come, they will remain on Sydney Harbour.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): I remind members to be COVID safe by spreading out in the Chamber.

Ms YASMIN CATLEY (Swansea) (16:10): I too thank the Manly community and, as the member for Kogarah has said, the work of the Deputy Mayor of Northern Beaches Council, Candy Bingham, to ensure that these signatures were collated and distributed to the Legislative Assembly. We all know the commitment required because getting a lot of signatures for a petition it is not easy. The more than 20,000 signatories to this petition know what we feel and understand in our bones in the Labor Party. We support the Manly ferries. Our harbour ferries must be safe, reliable and iconic. The Manly ferry run is a major tourism drawcard and an essential public service. It is important to remember that it is a public transport service. They are also a definitive aspect of our harbour's culture and history. The double-ended harbour ferries have been a part of Sydney's ferry network since 1879, when the *Wallaby* was first introduced by the North Shore Ferry Company. Over the past 140 years we have had a series of similar vessels, many of which have entered the lexicon to describe and typify Sydney Harbour, including the *South Steyne*, the Lady class ferries and, finally, the lovely Freshwater class.

The State Government refused to consider retaining the *Lady Northcott* and the *Lady Herron*, even though they were loved by tourists and locals alike. Those two grand old dames were towed in the darkness of night to Newcastle Harbour and put up for sale. Once again we see that the Berejiklian Government knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. We must not allow the Government to do the same thing with the lovely Freshwater class. They are the last remaining link with Sydney's rich and storied maritime past, but that does not make them obsolete. Those four ships provide many thousands of miles of reliable, safe and efficient services every week for many thousands of commuters, tourists and local daytrippers alike. We can take no comfort from Andrew Constance's proposal for a staged scrapping of the Freshwater class ferries. The suggestion that one or two boats would be kept for summer holiday trips is fanciful. In practice, the boats will be scrapped by the Liberal Government the moment any costly maintenance or repair work is required, without the economy of scale provided by maintaining a fleet of four.

The Labor Opposition has been campaigning hard on the importance of local jobs. We want to see local manufacturing workers supported to build the world's best trains, trams and ferries for New South Wales public transport passengers. But we also respect the work and expertise of the past. The Freshwater class ferries were built in Newcastle, and their longevity and reliability is a testament to the skill and quality of our local shipbuilders. When the Freshwater class vessels reach their end of life they should be replaced by high-quality, fit-for-purpose vessels built by a local shipyard using the expertise and amazing skills of local workers. We have seen what happens when a replacement fleet is built offshore for the cheapest possible price.

Mr Alister Henskens: Forgacs forever!

Ms YASMIN CATLEY: I note the interjection by the member for Ku-ring-gai. Unfortunately, Forgacs is closed because this Government sent every contract overseas and ferries are no longer built in Newcastle. I know the member for Ku-ring-gai when he lived in Newcastle went to the State Dockyard. We have seen what happens when a replacement fleet is built offshore. We get the cheapest possible price and we get a floating bunch of junk. The Rivercat class vessels shipped in from overseas were riddled with asbestos and have hundreds of manufacturing and engineering faults, which seven months later are still not resolved. Nobody benefits from the Berejiklian Government's hatred of our maritime heritage and our manufacturing sector, except offshore shipyards and offshore workers. We will need a steady supply because there is no way we will get 40 to 50 years of reliable service out of the cheap junk that the Minister for Transport and Roads, the Hon. Andrew Constance, has lumbered this State with. However, the real madness of the transport Minister's decision is a practical one. The replacement ferries will seat only a third of the passengers as previously and cannot handle the big swells between Sydney Heads and Freshwater.

Mr Andrew Constance: Are you serious?

Ms YASMIN CATLEY: They would not have handled last weekend's and last week's swells—we know that for sure—but the current Freshwater class did not miss a beat. These icons and traditions must be preserved and built upon. They should not be torn apart in some kind of bureaucratic sport, just to run the cheapest possible service.

Mr ALISTER HENSKENS (Ku-ring-gai) (16:15):No-one can deny the iconic nature of the Freshwater class ferry. Before the member for Kogarah was even born, the great Melbourne band Australian Crawl embodied the romantic quality of the Manly ferry at the beginning of its hit song *Reckless* with these words:

Meet me down by the jetty landing

Where the pontoons bump and spray

All the others reading, standing

As the Manly ferry cuts it's way to Circular Quay

As a Newcastle boy, in my first days in Sydney I missed the saltwater in my nostrils, so of course I followed the advice of Australian Crawl and went to Circular Quay. I got on the Manly ferry for the first time, and how beautiful it was. No-one with a heart in their chest can deny that the Manly ferry has a special place in our city. I commend the way in which the member for Manly, James Griffin, has courageously fought to retain the Manly ferry by a blended approach of retaining the Freshwater ferry on the weekends and introducing the Emerald class during the week. I think we can all admire an MP who stands up for his community, unlike the member for Kogarah who suffered a massive swing against him in his electorate at the 2019 State election.

The Emerald class ships on Monday through to Friday will provide 328 faster services on the Manly route each week, which is an increase of around 67 per cent. These more frequent services hopefully will encourage more people to use public transport. The ferry service is incredibly important not only to the character of our city but also to our natural environment, which I know the people on the Northern Beaches feel very strongly about. Every extra person on a ferry represents one fewer person on our roads. On top of that, the Emerald class vessels are more fuel efficient and their engines are more environmentally friendly in comparison with the existing Freshwater class vessels.

There is no better way to get to work than on the ferry. It is much better for our spirits and frame of mind at the beginning and end of the day to avoid traffic jams and glide by the Sydney Opera House, the most beautiful building in the world, perched on a prominent location facing the most beautiful harbour in the world. The new Emerald class ferry will provide commuters with a more frequent and faster service and commuters will be able to use their weekly Opal card cap on fees. Freshwater ferry patronage year on year since 2017 unfortunately has been declining, which demonstrates a serious issue of commuter choice. Patrons have argued loudly for improved commuter services. Between 2017 and 2019 patronage on the Freshwater Manly to Circular Quay route unfortunately has declined by 15 per cent—from 5.2 million in 2017 to 4.5 million in 2018 and even less in 2019.

On average, weekend patronage on the Freshwater Manly to Circular Quay route declined by 12 per cent between 2017 and 2019. Contrary to common misconceptions, the Emeralds can handle conditions around Sydney Heads. These vessels have been purpose built to operate the Manly to Circular Quay route. There are currently six Emeralds in the fleet and they often travel to Manly when a Freshwater is unavailable. There are also some conditions, such as when there is a high frequency of waves near a dock, where the Emeralds can operate when the larger Freshwaters cannot. During the busy summer period, in addition to the Freshwaters on weekends, the new Emerald class vessels will operate every 10 minutes every day and move up to 2,400 customers per direction per hour. Furthermore, on our busiest days in summer, an additional Emerald class vessel will operate and services will be delivered every 8½ minutes, providing seven trips an hour, moving 2,800 customers per hour per direction.

Modern public transport has to be relevant and attract customers. With the Emerald class, passengers can sit outside. The vessels have wi-fi and bike racks, and they are disability and pram friendly. The Freshwater class vessels have 200 external seats for customers. The new Emerald class vessels will have 140 external seats for customers; so with more frequent services, this means more external seats for customers to enjoy on weekends, public holidays and during summer. On weekends the number of outdoor seats will increase from 400 to about 700 on average. I will finish as I started, with the words of Australian Crawl, "Throw down your guns. Don't be so reckless. Throw down your guns. Don't be so ..."

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): Order! I remind members that there are 20,000 people online watching us right now, in theory.

Mr Gareth Ward: You rounded that up a lot.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): Order! I do not want to have to throw the member out.

Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (16:22): First, "We don't like that kind of behaviour." A ride on the Freshwater ferry from Circular Quay to Manly is a rite of passage. While some may see the ferry as just another mode of transport, just another way to get from point A to point B—and that obviously includes the member for Ku-ring-gai—this is not the case for the several million international tourists who visit this city during normal times. Nor is it the case for the many regional visitors from across the State, and indeed the entire country, who bring their children to what is inarguably this country's finest capital city to experience it and all it has to offer. For those visitors, a ride on the Manly ferry is considered an essential Sydney experience.

A ride on the Freshwater class ferry is not just about the destination it takes you to; it is about how you travel. It is about seeing this city from the deck of the ferry, with the wind in your hair and the saltwater on your skin. Riding on a big ferry is an experience that ranks alongside other must-do activities while visiting Sydney, such as visiting the Opera House and viewing the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and visiting Bondi Beach and Taronga Zoo. It is one of Sydney's quintessential experiences. It is a journey that has been immortalised in songs, books, films and indeed our collective memory since 1850 when the first big ferries took to Sydney Harbour. It is a voyage that contributes to the northern beaches' \$500 million-a-year tourism industry by delivering many of the several million people who visit Manly each year. The removal and reduction of the Freshwater class ferry from Sydney Harbour will surely land a major blow to the businesses and the people of Manly. It is a travesty that this Government is leading that.

The Government wants to replace all but two of the Freshwater class ferries with smaller foreign-made Emerald class ferries. The remaining Freshwater ferries will run on weekends and on public holidays. That is yet another of the Government's short-sighted, cost-cutting measures at the expense of the people of Manly and the local businesses. Like the 22,000 people who signed today's petition, I hold serious concerns about the Government's plans for the Manly ferry service. That plan is to replace the Freshwater class diesel-engine ferry with another diesel-fuelled vessel, which has no capacity to be retrofitted with an electric engine, unlike the Freshwater class of ferry. It is beyond short-sighted. It reeks of the kind of planning the Government is renowned for, which is ad hoc, ad lib, absurd, impromptu and myopic planning.

Most shocking of all is that there are real concerns about the Emerald ferry's capacity to handle the large ocean swells that regularly roll through Sydney Harbour's headlands. We know that when the smaller ferries get cut, they get replaced with buses. We know that the large Freshwater class ferries can handle much bigger seas than the smaller ones. When the Emerald class ferries first arrived in Australia, more than 80 defects or safety concerns were identified by inspectors. Those defects included faulty windows, poor plumbing in the engine rooms and, unbelievably, as the member for Swansea raised, concerns that the hulls were too thin to hold a rigid form. They are problems that would not have occurred had the vessels been manufactured in New South Wales—perhaps in Newcastle where they used to be built. Those problems would not have occurred if the Government did not undertake this exercise in lunacy.

The Freshwater ferries, which have been well maintained, potentially have decades of service ahead of them and must be retained. The petitioners are calling for a scheduled maintenance program, which must be put in place for all four ferries, and for a new replacement plan which includes double-ended vessels with a capacity for 1,000 passengers on the Manly route. That plan must be developed. I thank and congratulate the deputy mayor of Northern Beaches Council, Councillor Candy Bingham. I recognise the Save the Manly Ferries group and the work it has done in getting more than 22,000 signatures. I recognise the protest that the group held earlier today in Martin Place. I also recognise that the group travelled to Martin Place using the Manly Freshwater class ferry. I call on the Government to listen to the more than 22,000 people who have signed the petition. Those 22,000 people represent only a fraction of those who oppose the plan. The Government must go back to the drawing board and work with all stakeholders to develop a commonsense approach that will see all four Freshwater class ferries retained.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE (Bega—Minister for Transport and Roads) (16:27): I thank the 220-odd people watching this debate online for tuning in. I think they will see the importance of this debate. I thank the member for Manly in particular who saved the Freshwater ferries. The initial decision was to take them all away. One of the reasons for that was because of reliability and the requirements of commuter services. As the community has come forward, we have maintained them, particularly for tourist purposes on weekends and public holidays. The reason for retaining the two ferries is focused on tourism. The Government wants to increase ferry services. That is why we are delivering an increase of 256 services to the commuters of the Northern Beaches. The ferry service transport data shows that between 2017 and 2019 there has been a big shift away from ferries to the B-Line. There has been a drop in patronage and the Freshwaters are not operating to full capacity, particularly during peak hour. That is because a lot of commuters want a fast service into town and a fast service back home.

Another important point to address relates to the headlands. The advice I have received about the manoeuvrability of the Emerald class is that it is a lot better at handling the swell, particularly in and around Manly wharf. Again, that was one of the factors in our thinking. I have heard discussion around international manufacturing. We all want Australian manufacturing to be successful. In fact, as Minister I was able to directly procure Emerald class ferries from Tasmania in the first instance. In addition, Transdev was engaged by the Government to run the franchise and it procured the ferries through Birdon at Port Macquarie. I reiterate that Birdon does about 70 per cent of the build in terms of the design—

Ms Yasmin Catley: They were brought out here on a cargo ship. You know that.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: No, just please—

Ms Yasmin Catley: I'll bring the photos down and show them to you.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: Well, I've actually been to see them.

Ms Yasmin Catley: I have too.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: Yasmin, I would like you to go and talk to them.

Ms Yasmin Catley: I have. I have met them here.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): I remind the member for Swansea she is on three calls to order.

Ms Yasmin Catley: Well, he is speaking to me across the Chamber.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): The Minister will direct his comments through the Chair.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: Anyone can go and run the type of campaign that you guys do. Birdon would have well and truly explained to you the contribution that Australian workers—

Ms Yasmin Catley: And they were not built here.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: Sorry, the other day you were on the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* saying they were designed overseas. I read that. It was in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Ms Yasmin Catley: No, that's not what it said at all. You did not read it right.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: Sorry, you have been caught out.

Ms Yasmin Catley: No, that's not what it said.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans): Order! I direct the member for Swansea to remove herself from the Chamber under Standing Order 249A for 15 minutes.

[Pursuant to sessional order the member for Swansea left the Chamber at 16:30.]

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE: I note that those opposite believe in net zero admissions. I would be interested to know how they would achieve that. We will see the electrification of ferries in the future, and that will be exciting. But if you were to put a battery on this vessel, it would be so big the boat would sink.

Mr CHRIS MINNS (Kogarah) (16:30): In reply: I thank Candy Bingham, Charlotte Rimmer, Paul Garrett from the MUA, the Good for Manly Community Group, Northern Beaches Council, the Manly Community Forum, the Save the Manly Ferry Facebook Group and Action for Public Transport for their enormous, active fight on behalf of the Manly ferry. It was an interesting debate, I think you would agree, Mr Temporary Speaker. We heard the member for Manly heroically order a review into the Manly ferry, so we can all look forward to that. Interestingly, the member for Ku-ring-gai praised him for his courage for ordering a review. Dunkirk and Gallipoli were certainly heroic retreats but, I mean, this is ridiculous. He would stick a medal on Daryl Maguire for services to investigations.

Mr Alister Henskens: Half a per cent, mate. You're good at losing battles. What are you like at winning?

Mr CHRIS MINNS: You know what? Unless you are on script, you are hopeless. You are so overrated. Anyway, I digress. The big problem with this is that Andrew Constance is the transport Minister. He might be a good member for Bega but he is not a very good transport Minister. A few months ago he announced a compromise position, which was trumpeted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 November with the headline "Compromise position". The headline continued, "Minister saves one Manly ferry, offers to sink another". That is fair dinkum. The Minister said he was hopeful tourist operators or heritage organisations would be interested in the retired Freshwaters, while he was open to considering sinking one of them. Sinking one of them! The community in Manly wants these as public transport alternatives and the Minister for Transport and Roads actually said in a major metropolitan newspaper his compromise position is to sink one, presumably off Sydney Heads, as a dive site. That is not a commitment to public transport. This is, at the end of the day, a disgrace. The member for Manly is in a position to influence his own Government to save public transport for his own community. It is time to save the Manly ferry.

Petition noted.