



## THOMAS EMERSON MLA

### Inaugural Speech

*5 December 2024*

It is an immense privilege to have been elected by the people of Kurrajong, and to take my seat as an independent member of this Assembly.

I feel grateful to have been given this opportunity to represent the community I love, and to serve the place I love to call home.

Becoming a politician was not a path I ever envisioned taking. Politics was not something that drew me in.

Instead, I studied philosophy.

Philosophy taught me to think more clearly.

To question the world around me.

And to question myself.

To adopt multiple perspectives.

And to be wary of the biases shaping my own.

To develop my own life philosophy.

Grounded in values considered and carefully chosen.

To be like the fish perceiving the water for the first time.

And to reach my own position as to whether or not that water made for a good place to swim.

Rather than just seeking to be a good swimmer.

Philosophy taught me that what makes human beings unique is that we can choose to live differently.

Although we are victims of our past, we don't have to be.

We can choose to change.

My studies taught me that meaningful change starts not out there — at the level of the collective — but right here, at the level of the individual.

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An extended experience with pain in my teens and early twenties reinforced that lesson, and taught me the value of the body.

Living with chronic pain showed me that regardless of what we *think*, much of what we *do* is driven by our physical state.

Over several years of study and practice, I learned how much power we have over our own state.

I also learned that so few of us grasp that power.

And do something positive with it.

That we absorb ourselves with what's happening out in the world while missing the fact that what we do each day — who we choose to practise being, how we carry ourselves, how we treat each other, and how we respond to what arises — is what most directly shapes the quality of our lives.

I learned through my pain that I was complicit in my own suffering.

And that it was up to me to create a different experience — a better experience — for myself.

To exercise agency over my life, and over my future.

Unlike the fish, which cannot separate itself from the water in which it swims, we can.

We have a choice.

We can choose to live with more love, compassion and courage.

To orient ourselves toward bringing about what could be, rather than resigning ourselves to what is.

These lessons motivated me to open Canberra's first holistic movement studio.

I wanted to create a space to share the tools that had been empowering for me, and had helped me understand and address my experience of pain.

To build a community around expressing our ability to choose, with a focus on choosing to be well.

I called the studio Praksis — an acknowledgement that our theories are nothing without the practices that make them real.

That ideas are great, but actions are better.

And that we only really learn by implementing our ideas and paying close attention to the consequences, not wedding ourselves to what 'makes sense on paper' without due consideration of the messiness of being human.

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I started a family in 2022, five years after opening my studio.

Having a newborn while running a small business during a global pandemic pulled my awareness outward.

I was prompted to begin paying closer attention to politics.

And I didn't feel encouraged by what I saw.

I looked for inspiring leadership.

But instead I found many people in positions of power making decisions to protect their own interests.

Serving themselves, rather than serving *us*.

I saw simultaneous climate, housing and mental health crises tearing at the fabric of our social contract.

Which demands that we leave this place better than we found it.

And that we offer the next generation a better life than what we were given by the generation before us.

I saw those crises met with complacency on the part of many political leaders.

And I felt frustrated to see people with the capacity to course correct refusing to do so.

Refusing to be bold.

Often refusing even to acknowledge that we *need* to course correct.

I ask my colleagues in this Assembly: are we on the right path?

Do we need to course correct?

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Half the population has a chronic health condition.

870 children accessed homelessness services in Canberra last year.

The ACT is the loneliest jurisdiction in Australia.

Young adults are the loneliest.

25 per cent of Canberrans report having a mental disorder — the second-highest rate in Australia.

When will we start talking about root causes?

Why are so many people in our community unwell?

And what can we do to turn things around, to help people *be* well and give ourselves hope for the future?

Hopelessness has become normalised.

The climate is changing rapidly.

65 local species face extinction.

Eco-anxiety has left more than 50 per cent of young people fearing the future.

While 80 per cent of our youth believe politicians think too short term.

Too many young people feel anxious and depressed, lacking the tools to express agency over their lives.

What if politics could help give them that agency?

Could give us *all* a say in where we're headed?

Then, would we course correct?

The ACT has the highest rate of persistent homelessness in the country.

The longest category two surgery wait times.

The highest Indigenous incarceration gap.

The worst criminal reoffending rates.

The second-largest disparity in educational outcomes between disadvantaged children and their advantaged classmates.

Canberra is the least walkable major city in the country.

With the lowest public transport usage of all our capital cities.

We have the fewest GPs per capita among major Australian cities and the lowest bulk-billing rate.

Too many people are being left behind.

People facing disadvantage in our city are, on many metrics, more heavily impacted by their disadvantage than they would be anywhere else in Australia.

That is the opposite of what would be the case in a truly progressive society.

Given what we know about the lives of people who most need our help, is it conscionable to proceed with business as usual?

Maybe business as usual is good enough.

Perhaps nothing needs to change.

This is, after all, the second-most liveable city in the world.

I have to say, it's a very liveable city for me, thanks to the privileges I've been afforded.

I love living here, on beautiful Ngunnawal country, and I feel incredibly fortunate to do so.

It isn't a liveable city, though, for the woman I spoke with who needed a new public housing dwelling because she was living in constant fear as she was soon to testify in court against her violent neighbour — who had attacked another

neighbour with a hammer — but couldn't get her case manager to arrange a transfer before the trial.

It isn't a liveable city for the young man who introduced himself to me at my local shops and, despite sleeping rough in a tent nearby, couldn't get homelessness services on the phone to seek help.

It isn't a liveable city for the woman I met recently who has been walking with a cane, waiting for a hip replacement in our public health system since 2018.

It isn't a liveable city for the parents I met who lost children to catastrophic road accidents involving repeat offenders.

It isn't a liveable city for the woman in her 90s who supported my campaign because she hopes to see improvements to her local footpaths, so she can get around her suburb in her wheelchair.

After 26 years without any independents having been elected to this Assembly, Canberrans voted independent because they *do* want change.

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What I heard from those who hoped to see independent voices in this place is that people want politicians to be more than administrators.

They want politicians to be leaders.

To take responsibility for what is and isn't happening in our community.

People want politicians to be ambitious not for themselves, but for us — for the people they represent.

Because, for too many, the system is not working.

Canberrans have a strong social conscience.

Failing those facing disadvantage is un-Canberran.

We expect ourselves and each other to do what's right.

I hope that, in this the Eleventh Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, we uphold that expectation.

And that we do what people wish politicians would do

That we put 'the politics' aside and work together to tackle the challenges we face.

Surely that is the true purpose of politics.

To come together as a community and decide, collectively, what we want for our lives — for our children, and for their children.

To exercise our shared agency over our future.

So I ask my colleagues: do we want a future characterised by inequality, poor health, pessimism, social isolation and fear?

Will we ignore the statistics and the story they tell about the suffering in many pockets of our community?

Will we fail to engage with that suffering because *our* lives are okay?

Or, instead, will we choose to take ambitious action for the sake of current and future generations.

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I believe we can solve our problems.

We don't need to be victims of history.

The ACT is a small jurisdiction with one level of government that could move quickly.

We have the highest median income in the country.

And there's a social licence here to show ambition when it comes to pushing for progress.

Being progressive in the best possible sense.

We are innovators.

We have a highly educated, highly skilled population

Canberrans are ready and willing to offer their expertise, and to come up with solutions that work.

We should be leading the nation, rather than dragging our feet and falling behind other states and territories.

We should be looking up and out, drawing on best practice from across the world,

While leaning on all the knowledge and wisdom we have here in our nation's capital.

I believe we can make Canberra a model city that others seek to emulate.

A place that's designed specifically to support *everyone* in our community to live full, meaningful lives.

A place where quality housing, healthcare and education are available for all, not just for those who can afford it.

Canberra can lead the way in answering the question of how to bring people together and build connected communities in a post-pandemic, working-from-home world.

Our national capital should be a hub for the creative arts and major events — a place that people celebrate for its thriving nightlife and local music scene.

A home for meaningful reconciliation, where we go beyond symbolism, and commit to taking ambitious action to close the gap for Indigenous Canberrans.

We can draw on First Nations wisdom about responsible stewardship over the place we call home, and learn to live in harmony with nature — as part of nature.

Canberra should show ambition in transitioning to a better, more sustainable transport system that prioritises public and active transport.

We can be agile and punch above our weight as a first mover by accelerating and implementing forward-looking innovations.

Canberra should offer fertile ground for people who feel inspired to come up with new ideas and to turn those ideas into successful businesses that support our community.

It's time for our city to become a place that offers young people a future they feel excited about.

And we can start by making the ACT the first jurisdiction in Australia to legislate a Future Generations Act.

I believe all of this is possible if every Member of this Assembly uses their privileged position to make it so.

And if we make our decisions as if not from a privileged position but, instead, as if from a position without privilege.

Acting in the interests of those in our community who will not be found in this building.

Who may not see themselves as being represented here.

Who, owing largely to the circumstances into which they were born, struggle even to conceive of this place – or of this kind of place – as a place for them.

Those who are most distant from politics.

But whose lives will often be most heavily impacted by the actions – and inaction – of people in power.

This place should serve such people.

I hope to play my role in ensuring that is the case by serving as a good local member.

Making clear to those whom I represent that I want for them to share their ideas, concerns, and experiences with me.

My aim will be to make them feel it was worth having done so.

And to prove to people in my community that this is *their* Assembly.

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I will also use my time in this place to repay the efforts of those who got me here.

The people who backed me from day one –  
Leigh, Rob, Dani, Malcolm and Clare  
David Pocock, Fiona, Rory, Linc, Sam and Tash  
And the entire Praxis community

Fellow candidates supported by the Independents for Canberra movement –  
Sara, Ben, Sue, Tenzin  
Anne-Louise, Paula, Nathan, Robert, Kathleen  
Mark, Leanne, Suzanne  
Vanessa, Riley, Elise  
David, Sneha, Vikram, and Trent

Having heard across our community that people wanted to see a different kind of politics, we built a movement based not on ideology, party membership or factional battles.

We built a movement based on principles.

10 principles intended to communicate the kind of political representation we're seeing from community independents across the country.

1. Every voice is heard — working to ensure nobody gets ignored or left behind.
2. No vested interests — basing our decisions solely on the needs of our community.
3. Empowering locals — taking a collaborative approach where we support local initiatives, businesses and community organisations.
4. Accessibility — being active participants in the life of the community we represent.
5. Hard work — doing everything possible to deliver for Canberrans.
6. Integrity — following through, being accountable and admitting to any mistakes.
7. Long-term thinking — making decisions that reach beyond the election cycle.
8. Evidence-based policy — grounding our views in evidence and updating them when new evidence emerges.
9. Collaboration — working constructively with other elected representatives.
10. Independence — remaining free of influence from any party interests.

These are the principles I intend to uphold during my time here.

I know it is possible to uphold these principles despite perhaps being incentivised, at times, to violate them — and I know that thanks to the Independents for Canberra movement.

We proved that, despite the apparent contradiction, there can be such a thing as a party of independents.

We showed that it is possible for a group of political candidates to make a firm commitment to work together while always retaining their full freedom to disagree.

Our candidates were people whose voices you could believe, and whose actions you could trust as authentic, because there was no mechanism within our organisation to force anyone to say or do anything.

They put their hands up not because they believed in a suite of prescriptive political dogmas – we didn't have any of those – but because they believed in a new approach to political representation.

Our principle-based approach allowed for honesty, for individuality, for a multitude of perspectives, for constructive disagreement, and for genuine consensus building.

Each of us did and said things that others in our group disagreed with, and that was fine because we understood the grounds for the disagreement, and the divergence was at the level of policy, not of principle.

When we were tempted to be sucked into 'the politics' rather than sticking to our ideals, we used our principles to remind each other of ourselves – and of the fact that we'd all come together not because we wanted to become politicians, but because we wanted to see positive change for our community.

Without a party machine, a head office, or any paid staff, we – the candidates – used our 10 principles to build a policy platform grounded in the diversity of our experiences and of the views among our respective electorates.

We developed policies that made our principles tangible, and we did so by listening to what people wanted to see change.

We heard our community wants this to be **a fair society**.

- The best place in Australia to grow up, regardless of your background.

- Where housing is treated as a right, not a luxury.
- Where we support our most vulnerable.
- With a criminal justice system that reduces recidivism and keeps our community safe.

We heard that people across the ACT want to live in **a healthy Canberra.**

- Where we remember that health doesn't start at the hospital.
- Where community sport and wellness programs are available to all.
- Where women and children feel safe, free from the pain and trauma imposed by family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Where transport infrastructure is viewed through the lens of our health, and the health of our environment.
- Where we bring people together to strengthen community bonds while celebrating our diversity.
- And where we have access to a nation-leading healthcare system that doesn't keep you waiting.

We heard that Canberrans want our government to invest in **a flourishing future.**

- To lay out a vision for Canberra that prioritises the wellbeing of current and future generations.
- That tackles root causes of the housing, mental health and biodiversity crises.
- That fosters a diverse economy where we back people who back themselves, supporting small businesses and local producers to thrive.
- That steps into Canberra's potential as a test-bed city, pulling together ambitious ideas from around the world to be bold and take risks as a nation leader.

We heard that people believed these changes could be brought about by **a new kind of politics**.

- By making our government accessible, giving community members a say in the decisions that affect them.
- By making ourselves accountable, always doing what we say we will do.
- And by taking action, focusing ourselves on deliverables rather than announceables.

Although I hoped to have the company of some of my fellow candidates in this Chamber, to carry this platform forward together,

I am proud to be here representing them and the success of this movement.

Thank you to the dozens and dozens of volunteers who put their hands up, and put their faith in us.

Who mobilised behind our principles and our objectives, with the hope that we could come together as a community — through politics — to realise an ambitious shared vision for our future.

Just as you pushed us forward, I will push forward the possibilities you believed in.

Thank you, also to my parents, Cathy Hudson and Craig Emerson, for believing in me, giving me a privileged start to life, embedding in me the importance of social justice, and modelling for me what it means to be a leader.

To my wife, Chana Rose, for your patience, support and resilience. And for providing our children, Sebastian and Luna, with a home full of love.

I hope you will continue to keep me honest.

Thank you.