

# SPEECH NOTES

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## Address to YWCA of Wellington & Hutt Valley AGM 2009



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YWCA of Wellington and Hutt Valley

Good evening, thank you for having me here tonight.

As most of you will know, I had the good fortune and pleasure to attend the University Presidential Inauguration Conference (UPIC), in January just gone. The conference was held in Washington DC. Before I begin recounting my amazing journey and passing on the lessons learned I will begin by telling you a bit about myself.

As of last month I am 21 years young, the eldest of 5 children, with my youngest sibling having just turned 5. I was brought up in the rural areas between Wanganui and Waverley. My father has been a prison officer and hobby farmer my whole life and my mum was a teacher aid and is now training to be an ambulance officer.

For as long as I can remember, I have been passionately interested in New Zealand Politics, and I can pin point the moment I decided I wanted to be an MP, to when I was 9 going on 10. Jill Pettis the Wanganui Labour MP, visited my class at Waverley Primary to talk about her job and how interesting politics is. While most class mates took this time to perfect the art of paper plane making, I sat awe-struck. But it was the comment that she made just prior to leaving that has stayed with me these last years. She turned to us and said that perhaps 1 day 1 of us, in this class could be the PM of NZ. I felt a warm glow and dared to dream that maybe that person could be me. A dream I have made no secret of, and copped much flak over.

That is how I ended up here in Wellington. I chose to attend Victoria University to study a Law and BA in Politics and Anthropology. Four years on and I am still here.

However last year in June, I was offered an opportunity that would break up the monotony of my study. I was sent a letter inviting me to attend UPIC. My first thought was wow! How amazing, what an awesome opportunity! Immediately I wanted to go, but it didn't seem in the realm of possibility, I had no savings, in fact I was living in overdraft so how could I go? With the support of family and friends I set out to raise the \$2600USD required for the tuition. I was surprised at level support I received, including that from the YWCA. I raised the full tuition amount prior to the payment deadline only to be told that the conference was full I would be put on the waiting list. I was dumbfounded, but I did not give up. After a few more ups and downs I was finally fully enrolled October.

It felt so good to get on the plane on the morning of January 16<sup>th</sup>. I arrived at Sydney airport where I had a 7hr stop over before departing to LA. Only that turned into 8 hours when my flight. This meant that I missed my connection from LA to Washington, by the time I got through immigration and customs the next

connection flight was full so I had to wait 6hrs for the third connection flight. Finally I arrived in Washington after midnight, and was so grateful I had had the common sense to pack my coat, scarf, and hat in my carry on bag. I was even more grateful for this foresight when I got to baggage claim to discover my suitcase was still in LA! So I had arrived, but I was feeling exhausted, miserable and cold. Everything I thought wouldn't happen to me, did happen and all I could think about was how I wanted the comfort of home. I didn't have time to feel sorry for myself because I still had to get from the airport to my hotel for the night. It was then I learnt just how strong I could be.

The next morning I woke up and decided to start the day fresh, I told myself that from here on everything was going to go smoothly. I made my way from the hotel to the conference venue, successfully using the underground metro, all by myself, and stopping for a pick me up muffin and hot chocolate at star bucks. The Conference hotel was huge and rather plush. My room was on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor and had a view over the tree tops to the top of the National cathedral.

Although I had promised myself to start the new I still had what if's lurking in the back of my mind as my luggage had still not turned up. The first day was meet and greet, this is what you will be doing for the next week type stuff. My room mate was lovely and I gained much attention for being part of the minority without and American accent. And alas, my suitcase finally turned up just after 11pm!

The next day began early, with breakfast being served just after 5 and buses were to be boarded for a 6am departure to go to Gen. Colin Powell's keynote address. I will talk more about him later.

Back at the conference we heard from speakers who discussed how the youth vote played an important part in Obama's victory, how the biggest challenge facing him is not the wars or the global financial crisis, but whether he can keep Americans interest, whether he can maintain their confidence and support. Just days after his inauguration the press were already criticizing him. We also heard an interesting story about an occasion that led to Hillary Clinton pulling the fingers at someone yelling abuse through her car window; this was used as an example of how she is strong enough to handle one of the most difficult positions in the Obama administration, secretary of state.

Then we were bussed into the city and got to attend the inauguration opening concert. This was held on the steps of the Lincoln memorial. Porter-loos and jumbotrons lined the national mall. As I arrived Mary J Blidge was singing lean on me. This was followed by a speech from Martin Luther King III. Other headlining acts and speakers were Tom Hanks, Bruce Springsteen, Ashley Judd, Jack Black, Tiger Woods, Samuel L Jackson, Sharkira, Usher, U2 who sang one love, and to my delight the whole Obama family and the Bidens who danced and sang in their seats to Garth Brooks' American Pie. With Beyonce performing the finale, I was already star struck with all the celebrities there, that when Biden and then Obama were introduced to speak, my mind was well and truly blown away. Obama was wonderful to listen to, his passion resonated across the National mall as his words sent shivers down the spines of the several hundred thousand attending. His speech for the occasion was a mixture of celebration and somber realism in the face of the task that stands before him.

On the Monday, we had Al Gore to look forward to after I attended a seminar on US election campaign strategies, headed by John McCain's Campaign managers. Al Gore did not disappoint. He was a very passionate, emotive and engaging speaker. His message was one of climate change. He said that if world leaders focused more on creating sustainable sources of energy, there wouldn't be the war in Iraq over the oil. He said that building dams and wind power farms would create a large number of green jobs, lessening the effects of the recession. If there were alternative energy sources then millions of dollars would not be poured into the military to stay in Iraq, again lessening the effects of the recession. He was definitely thought provoking.

Monday night saw me in bed early as I had set my alarm for 2.20am the following morning, as on the first day we were told that gates opened at 4am to the National Mall. My room mate, a few friends and I that we wanted to be there in front of the US capitol building when Obama took the sacred Oath, after all I had flown half way around the world to be there, so 2.20am is the time we decided we would need to be up by in order to leave the hotel by 3 and walk from the hotel to the mall by 4.

For the early hours of a Tuesday morning, the city was anything but dull. Already thousands of people were up and making the trek to the parade route or the mall. At every corner there were police and military personal. The city was covered in red white and blue and Obama memorabilia. There was no doubt that something big was going to happen that day.

After walking a very round-about way and getting lucky with the trains, we made it to a gateway into the mall. There we were told that gates actually opened at 8. Someone in the crowd had other ideas because 10minutes later there was a crash and we were being dragged in with the crowd as security pleaded for us to calmly walk not run. There in Washington DC, just after 4am in temperatures that were some 15degrees or more below zero, my room mate and our friends linked arms and ran towards the well lit Capitol building illuminating the night sky with promises of hope.

Then just as suddenly as we started running we screeched to a halt as we reached the barrier separating us from the lucky few who had tickets. Moments later we were hemmed in with people tightly packed around us in all directions and there was still nearly 8 hours until we would see and hear Obama's words ring out across the mall as he took the oath. There was no way to get out to use a porter-loo, or get food. We had already made the decision not to drink anything before we left that morning.

Cold and tired, and having stood for over an hour already, my room mate and others decided to save their energy and sit down. A short while later a man was attempting to force his way through the crowd to get closer to the front. But there was not room to move. Upon seeing my friends sitting down he began to lecture them about how much extra room they were taking up and how if they stood up there would be room for him. They defended their right to sit. As tired and cold as I was I could not help but secretly smile because I realized then that we were there on that morning in January because around 50years ago one brave woman defended her right to remain seated on a bus. It was her actions in part that had paved the way for me to be there then. It was a very humbling feeling to witness the dreams of my idol Martin Luther King, come full circle. Never did I ever imagine when I sat in 5<sup>th</sup> form history class, learning about American the civil rights movement, that I would be there to witness the first African American man take the oath of office. I too sat down with my friends.

As the sun began to rise we could clearly see the silhouettes of snipers lining the roves of the Smithsonian buildings around us. Moral was boosted around 8am when a recording of the concert from Sunday afternoon was played. Again, the crowd that had gathered, joined together to sing American pie. At about 10am I was colder than I thought possible, but was relieved that the day's events were beginning as Supreme Court judges and governors arrived, followed by past presidents. Every time Obama's name was mentioned the biggest cheer rippled through the crowd. When the time finally arrived for Obama to take the sacred oath the air was electric, everybody was poised, on tip-toes with their ears pricked. There were nearly 2.5 million people standing in the National Mall that morning, but when Obama stood and put his hand on Abe Lincoln's bible, it truly felt like everything and everyone stood still and held their breath to make sure they heard history being made with their own ears. The cheer that echoed through Washington and surely the whole of the USA when Obama said, "so help me God" there was nothing like it, everyone was swept away by the moment, I had never before seen so many people smiling so hard, as tears soaked their cheeks and they cheered and screamed for joy and at the words of their hero, the man who carries the hopes of the nation and even the world. It is an image I will never forget. Obama's

inaugural speech echoed the emotions of everybody standing before him, he spoke of hope, pride, humbleness, and reiterated his message that it will take time to fix their great nation.

It was 3 hours later that we arrived back at the hotel, time to have a quick half hour nap and then prepare for the inauguration ball to be held at the Air and space museum at the Smithsonian. It was stunning. I was amazed at how I still functioned happily on so little sleep on top of jet lag.

Now I want to come back to Gen. Colin Powell's address. He spoke to us about the importance of being a person of purpose. To be a person of purpose, you must have a dream, you have to believe in that dream and sell it. You must make others believe in your dream like you do. He also spoke of the importance of keeping your team prepared and informed. After all if you have not fully prepared your team how can you expect them to follow you into the unknown? So you need to give everyone the best possible chance to prepare. He told us about when he was in charge of a battalion, and they had soldier of the month competitions with other battalions. One day one of his soldiers approached him and said sir I am sorry I have let you down. It turns out this soldier had been nominated for the competition. When asked by the General when the soldier had been informed of his nomination, the soldier replied, last night. It was then that Colin Powell apologised to his soldier for letting him down as he had failed to adequately prepare him for the task. Colin Powell then issued a warning that no soldier will ever be notified at the last minute of his nomination again.

Gen. Powell's message on preparedness and leadership has stuck with me since my return and is one I endeavour to apply in my own life.

While in America, I learnt a lot about their political structure and processes. I never really understood why Americans seem to value, above all else, democracy. But after returning to uni this year and undertaking a research project on Burma I think I understand. It is very empowering being able to participate in one's own country politics, as I found out when I voted for the first time last November.

But, imagine now, if you didn't have that ability to vote, to participate and the power to choose. That is the situation in Burma other countries throughout the world. Burma has had an authoritarian regime forced on them by a corrupt military who continue to authorise and instigate gross abuses of human rights. The majority of Burmese do want democracy. In 1990 general elections were held in Burma and the National League for Democracy party won with 60% of the total vote. The military then declared the elections illegitimate, placed the party leader under house arrest and imprisoned other supporters and candidates. This along with Obama's inauguration really makes me appreciate democracy, something that I previously took for granted.

During my first trip to America I heard the testimony from a 47yr old woman, recently emancipated from her life as a slave. I was shocked to learn that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the biggest humanitarian crises are said to be AIDS and poverty, that there are still well over 73 million slaves world wide. I sat in disbelief as this woman stood before us and spoke emotionally about having her hands ironed, and being beaten then left tied to a tree for days after her first attempt to escape from her master.

It is this that makes me glad to live in a democracy. It is these images burning in my mind that inspire me to keep going when I think well I am just 1 person what can I do? 1 person can refuse to give up her seat, 1 person can unite a group to stand together and non-violently resist. 1 person can tell another and spread awareness, invoking condemnation of wrongful conduct. 1 person can do a lot. These are the images I carry with me as I embark on the beginning of my career in politics and leadership. They inspire me to bring to NZ politics the passion that we see in politics and leaders around the world.