



Inaugural Speeches

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The SPEAKER: Order! I welcome the former member for Maitland, the Hon. John Price, local government representatives in the gallery, family, friends and supporters of the member for Maitland.

Ms JENNY AITCHISON (Maitland) [12.33 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Madam Speaker, parliamentary colleagues, special friends and family, I thank you for your generous welcome. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Gadigal people, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where I live, the Wonarua people, and pay my respect to their elders, past and present. Maitland is one of the fastest-growing cities in New South Wales and our Aboriginal community is growing at an even faster rate.

Recently I purchased an art work for my office by local Aboriginal artist John Robinson, who grew up in the North Coast and now lives in Woodberry. The painting combines Aboriginal and Western European styles. In one work it encapsulates the story of Maitland—the old meeting the new, welcoming each to the other, valuing both our diversity of experience and our unique traditions and culture. It is a beautiful expression of the understanding that can be found when we share and embrace our individual cultures and experiences.

I feel deeply honoured to take my place in this, the oldest Parliament in Australia, to represent everyone in my community. I am pleased to be able to say that I am in fact the second woman member for Maitland, my predecessor Robyn Parker, being the first. I am pleased because when I became foundation President of the Women's Network Hunter NSW in 2005, there were no women members in this place representing the Hunter. For the record, this changed in 2007 with the election of Sonia Hornery in Wallsend and Jodi McKay in Newcastle. The non-party political network I helped to establish has been instrumental in increasing women's participation in decision-making, at all levels of our community.

I pay tribute to the co-founders of our network, Vicki Woods and Bronwyn Ridgway, and other executive members such as the Deputy Mayor of Maitland, Loretta Baker, Jann Gardner, Jennie Wilkinson, Nada Vujat, Sheila Turnbull, Gail Johnson, Glenda Briggs and Race Barstow. I pay tribute to the members of Emily's List, which I joined when it was founded 18 years ago, and organisations such as the Labor Women's Forum, Maitland BPW and Women in Business Connect. These diverse organisations have helped many talented women within our community by providing forums where women can discuss issues of importance to them and develop their skills in representing our community. It is 90 years since Millicent Preston-Stanley, the first woman in this place, made her inaugural speech, and there is still much to do.

I am lucky to have been assisted by those who came before me and those who now join me. I look forward to progressing women's issues right across this Parliament for the benefit of all women and all in our community, particularly those women who will come after us. I thank all of the women and men in the Labor caucus for their support, but particularly the Hon. Courtney Houssos, the Hon. Sophie Cotsis and Jodi McKay who encouraged me to run for the seat of Maitland for many years. I also acknowledge the Hon. Penny Sharpe who is also present and thank her for her long support. Sophie, known by the *Maitland Mercury* as the "the Sydney member for Maitland" in the last Parliament, was a constant support and visitor to our community in the difficult and challenging days after 2011. To the Country Labor and Hunter Women candidates, particularly Kate Washington, Yasmin Catley, Jodie Harrison, Melissa Cleary, Sonia Hornery, Cassandra Coleman, who is here today from Bathurst, and Ursula Stevens, I thank you for your support along the way. It has been great to share the journey with you.

Perhaps the most important woman in my life though has been my mother, Anne O'Connor, who taught me to read at the age of three and sparked my lifelong love affair with words and communication. My mother had been working as a library officer in the Commonwealth public service in Canberra and was one of the first women to receive paid maternity leave when she had me. As the parents of three girls, my mother and my father never subscribed to stereotypes about women so I never felt I was limited to one kind of role in life. My father, Jim, taught me as a teenager how to restore furniture, along with lots of other very hard labour, and I remember many hours discussing philosophy and the world in general in our shed as we stripped back old pieces of furniture.

I was about eight years old when I decided I would follow in my mother's footsteps and commence working at my local library as a volunteer. I spent many hours shelving and repairing books. My father told me only in recent times that I was "let go" when the chief librarian found my letter to Santa in the library post box and decided I was perhaps a little too young for the world of work. I

catalogued all the books in my own book cases at home in rebellion. My activism started in earnest in 1985 during the first International Year of Youth when I was selected to represent my school on an interschool newspaper. But I was too busy to join the world of student politics. I got my first casual job at the age of 15. I remember fondly the owner of the business, Mr Erdman. He was an excellent role model for me years later, when I ran my own business, for his kindness and generosity to both his staff and his clients.

At 21 I joined the Labor Party, 100 years after it was established. Later that year I joined the Commonwealth public service in the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, where I read the sad yet ultimately hopeful stories of the many thousands of people who had unsuccessfully applied to come to Australia as refugees or migrants. I read with a sense of deep shame and embarrassment a question from an overseas school student to the Minister asking if it was really true that Australia had once had a policy that we would only let people with white skin into Australia. I moved to the Social Justice Coordination Section—my dream job — where I drafted the department's Agenda for Women and coordinated consultations around Australia, hearing firsthand the stories of many refugee and migrant women.

When John Howard came to Government I soon joined the staff of the Opposition as chief of staff for the member for Fraser, Steve Dargavel. With Steve I helped coordinate a meeting in Canberra of church and community leaders to affirm their commitment to multiculturalism. I was moved by meeting Sir Ronald Wilson, co-author of the *"Bringing Them Home"* report on the Stolen Generations. I am glad that we have apologised as a nation to our Indigenous people and later to those who were abused in institutions. I reject racism, discrimination and abuse in all their forms. In 1997 I met my husband, Robert, and later moved to Walcha, a small town in the New England Tableland. The town had 1,800 people and three-quarters of a million sheep. It is a wonderful community. In Walcha I joined and started to manage the family business, Northern Highland Travel, as part of a motel. In the year 2000 we moved to Maitland with our six-week-old son Joshua.

I take this opportunity to thank Elaine and Bruce Aitchison, my parents-in-law. They taught me so much about business and about regional and rural Australia. They have treated me as their daughter and have been wonderful friends, mentors and supporters through some of the best and some of the hardest times in business and in life. In the 17 years the business has grown incredibly. From the spare room of our house, the business has grown to employing around 25 staff across three distinct businesses with seven coaches, a café and conference centre and a travel agency. In all, I suppose one could say I am a Labor member in plain clothes. I have spent 24 years working in the private sector, 17 of which have been running my own business. I have also participated on a large number of local, State and Federal government and industry advisory boards.

I have won a number of personal and business awards, including the Lower Hunter Business Woman of the Year and the Bus NSW Young Achiever Award and I was a finalist in the Telstra Business Awards. My company is in the Tourism NSW Hall of Fame and we were national finalists three times in the Australian Tourism Awards. I thank my business and industry associates for their support and friendship over the years, including Darryl Mellish, Frank D'Apuzzo and Matt Threlkeld at BusNSW; Michael Apps at the Bus Industry Confederation; Craig McGregor from the Maitland Business Chamber; Kerry Hallett and Rod Doherty from the Lower Hunter Business Enterprise Centre, BNI Harvest; Bob Kerr and my fellow chief executive officers at The Executive Connection; Elizabeth Gaines, Nicola Nanninga and Lisa Gair from Helloworld Limited; and the staff of the Australian Tourism Export Council [ATEC], Tourism Australia, Destination NSW and Destination Hunter.

In my business I have been lucky to travel to many parts of the world. I have been privileged to enjoy the culture, geography, flora, fauna, art and history of cities as diverse as Vienna, Kota Kinabalu, Paris, Barrow in the Arctic Circle, Luxor, Madrid, Soweto and Angkor Wat. These places and the people in them changed my life and my perspective. Perhaps one of the most powerful lessons I have learnt during this time was about the impact of social media. The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was born out of the new freedoms available due to social media. As we saw so recently in the storms in my community, people are more likely to trust their own networks for information. Government must attend to this significant change and ensure that we are still able to communicate effectively with the growing number of people who do not use traditional media. Like any media, we must be careful to ensure that the true voices of our community are the ones that are heard.

Through my business I have contributed to the economic development of small and remote communities such as Walgett, Broken Hill, White Cliffs, Ouyen, Deniliquin and Lightning Ridge. I enjoy listening to the inaugural speeches and private members' statements of members from places to which I have travelled. I ran for Country Labor in order to assist communities in regional New South Wales, drawing on my experiences both here and overseas, to ensure that families in these communities have the same opportunities that people in cities take for granted.

I would like to tell you more about the beautiful city of Maitland. Forgive me if I start to sound a little like a tourist guide—it is understandable, given my background. Maitland was once the principal centre of the Hunter Valley and much of our early colonial heritage remains largely preserved. Much of our long history has been recorded in the *Maitland Mercury*, established in 1843 and one of Australia's longest surviving newspapers. Historically Maitland was made up of three townships. In the early days, West Maitland was known as the "people's town" and over time became our commercial centre. It was popular because of the rich alluvial

river flats which, as we know from the last few weeks, are subject to flooding, but they provided an important source of water, and land for cropping and grazing and transport.

East Maitland was the "government town", the centre of administration—where many of our most historic buildings remain. Caroline Chisholm established a home for female immigrants there, and it is home to the Lands and Water Building, the Old George and Dragon inn, the East Maitland District Courthouse opposite the infamous Maitland Gaol, and the beautiful Anglican church of St Peter's. Morpeth was a private town, started by Lieutenant Edward John Close in 1821. Queens Wharf accommodated the steamships of the Hunter River. Many iconic Australian family businesses such as Arnott's, Brambles and Soul Pattinson started in Morpeth. Morpeth today is a major tourism drawcard, with Trevor Richards and Lisa Simmons Webb having been major advocates for tourism there for many years.

Maitland still has many rural communities—from Lochinvar to Duckenfield, Berry Park, Millers Forest, Phoenix Park and even parts of Woodberry. Tocal College agricultural school is located in the area and we have our own wineries. My home has a resident mob of kangaroos, possums and native birds. It is much easier to leave when it is not necessary to leave animals in a pet motel. From a population of around 53,000 when I moved to Maitland, the current population is now closer to 75,000. Approximately five people move to Maitland every day to start a new life. Our population growth has added a suburban flavour to the outskirts of the city.

Maitland is a town of diversity—a natural stepping point into a larger community for those from the bush and a tree change for those from the city. City dwellers have come to live in Maitland from all parts of the world. People bring to Maitland many different experiences and expectations of life. The 2322 postcode in which I live is covered by three Federal electorates, three State electorates and two local government areas, which sometimes creates difficulty in coordinating economic development but it does ensure a wide range of interest in our community from politicians across the spectrum. Indeed, the headquarters of the Hunter Regional Organisation of Councils operates from offices in Thornton. As members will see, Maitland started as, and has retained its role as, the heart of the Hunter.

The people of Maitland are resilient. We have just suffered one of the most devastating natural disasters in living memory. We lost a member of our community and three more in the nearby town of Dungog. Many people were without power for over a week. Houses have been damaged by water, sewage and trees, and in Hunter Close, Lochinvar, they were swept off their foundations. The whole community of Gillieston Heights was turned into an island for six days and has only this week regained full road access. Businesses have also suffered greatly. Throughout this disaster, the people of our community have worked together to help each other and those in the flood-affected towns around us.

From one community so many heroes emerged: people such as Sonia Gannon and Patricia Ling from Gillieston who led the volunteers to distribute food and water from the community centre operated by Mark and Amanda Venz; doctors Shahid Sarki and Saira Chandio who, with nurse Mick Sager, set up a voluntary medical clinic; the many who operated the ferry at Testers Hollow; Brad and Michelle Adams who kept the Facebook page updated; and Sandy Paul who ensured that her community got to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Anzac Day in a moving ceremony. There are so many heroes I am unable to name them all.

We must remember that the State Emergency Service started from the devastating Maitland floods in 1955 in which 11 people lost their lives. I thank the local State Emergency Service and Rural Fire Service volunteers and all the government and charity agencies. They put their community's needs ahead of their own needs and those of their families. I think specifically of the Thornton Rural Fire Brigade members who came home after a 3.00 a.m. response call to find their own cars completely submerged but then went out again.

The State Emergency Service, together with all those in the community, found that there were new challenges to be faced in this latest disaster. The community faced storms and floods and a lack of power and telecommunications that were unprecedented. I will be working with our community to ensure that we learn from this event, particularly regarding our roads. There has been too much congestion and too many floods at Testers Hollow for us to ignore it any longer.

I pay tribute to the community groups I have worked with and will continue to work with in the future, particularly Maitland Senior Citizens; Hunter Valley National Seniors; Maitland Sunrise Rotary; U3A; View Club; Volunteers for Palliative Care; the Maitland Tenambit; BMX Club; Save our Rail; Marcellin Park and Maitland Rugby Club; Maitland Women's Cancer Support Group; Berry Park Residents Action Group and the Tocal Road and Bolwarra Residents Action Group, together with many others.

I thank the former members for Maitland and councillors who have helped me along the way, particularly John Price and Tony Keating who are here today. I thank our councillors, Deputy Mayor Loretta Baker, Henry Meskauskas, Ben Whiting and Robert Aitchison and our Federal members, the Hon. Joel Fitzgibbon, MP, and the Hon. Sharon Claydon, MP, as well as Labor State members Tim Crakanthorp and Clayton Barr. I thank Labor leader Luke Foley for being a regular visitor to Maitland and before him John Robertson. Thank you to all the shadow ministers who have visited Maitland so many times, particularly the Hon. Walt Secord.

I thank our ALP branch members, particularly Mike Voorbij and Ian Hunt for their constant presence at the Maitland Markets, come rain, hail or shine, and our secretary, Vicki McLaughlin. I especially thank Kevin Martin, who was the very first person to encourage me to run as the member for Maitland, and to Max Ray, Ruth Stanley and Kim Pagan, who were always ready with a hug or a kind word when I was feeling discouraged, as were Patsy and John Carpenter. Even our newer members, such as Kay Wonderley, Graeme Dark, Brent Nolan and John Leao, have all contributed greatly. For dedication, I must mention Julieanne Bright, who volunteered and even came from Abu Dhabi to be here today.

My campaign team has truly run a marathon. I thank Jay Suvaal, who was instrumental in getting the campaign up and running; Gena Parker, who has been there every day, and as my daughter Jessica said recently, "Everyone needs a Gena in their life." I told her, "She's mine. Don't take her."; Ned Barsi; Giacomo Arnott for always being ready to take photos; Jordan Fallon, who trusted that I was worth it; and Andrew Hewitt, who always believed we could win back Maitland. I must make special mention of Josephine Hillard, who was there at the beginning and coordinated everything over the last five months. She knows when to push and pull and when to leave me alone. She has been a great support. I thank Jamie Clements and Kaila Murnain for their support, as well as the Young Labor team. Ian McNamara, who is here today, and Darren Rodrigo were strong supporters of Maitland through and through. We still remember their magnificent efforts as Young Laborites in 2007, which spurred us on to greater efforts each time.

I thank Mary Yaager and Mark Lennon. As someone in business, I am a friend of the unions. The Maitland Community Union Alliance has been a strong advocate for our community and I thank the hundreds of people who went doorknocking, particularly Matt Graves, Graham Kelly, Matt Byrne, John McFarland, Rob Long, Josh Howarth, Gaye MacAuley, Albert Fazon, Mick Forbes, the Electrical Trades Union, the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, the Health Services Union, the NSW Teachers Federation, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Rail Bus and Tram Union and the Transport Workers Union. I am sure I have missed one, but I thank you all.

I thank my friends who have been with me through this difficult path to middle age, particularly Luce Andrews, David Woodcock, Paula Campbell, Eva Cawthorne and David Haydon, Rachel Applebee and Sean Kennedy. Friends such as you have been worth gold. Most importantly, I thank the people in Maitland who have put their trust in me; some of them voted for Labor for the first time at this election. I will honour that trust in all that I do in this place.

Finally I wish to thank my family: my parents Anne and Jim, my sisters Trish and Annie and their families, and little Kendra, who is here today, and of course Robert, Joshua and Jessica. You have shown me an incredible love and support that humbles me to my core. You have always believed in me and have generously helped me in so many ways. I thank you for accepting the excuse "After the election" for so many months, but most of all for being active participants in this journey. There are no words that could adequately express my thanks and love for you all.

Robert, through the good times and the hard times, you have always been there, with your optimism, persistence and resilience. You have supported me no matter what. I am grateful for every day I have you in my life. In their own right our children have made me immensely proud as a parent. Joshua, you are already an inspiring young man, with an understanding beyond your years, demonstrated most recently on the Kokoda Track with your father and grandfather, which honoured the sacrifices of your paternal and maternal great-grandfathers, Jack Aitchison and Hugh McCall. Jessica, you are an impressive young woman. You are clever, kind and incredibly compassionate. On your own initiative you gracefully and confidently helped many of my constituents during the recent floods.

You have both shown a wisdom and courage in your own ways that is far beyond your years and have accepted the costs of your father's and my ambitions to make a difference in our community. I am sorry for the times I have not been there for you. I promise I will make every moment I am here count, because there are too many reasons to be home and too many precious moments to be shared with you to just put aside unless I am achieving good things for our community.

Labor has a proud tradition of delivering for Maitland. Just in our last term in office more than \$300 million was delivered, including the third river crossing and the Hunter Expressway, which were both crucial in the recent floods. We built social housing; moved government departments to create jobs in Maitland; redeveloped the Maitland Hospital emergency department and increased beds, creating another 300 jobs; invested in schools and TAFE and SES and New South Wales rural fire brigades. It is a proud record and I am so proud of our former members.

The Liberals promised \$80 million at the last election and delivered less than half that amount. Projects such as the railway roundabout have been stalled; promises to retain the rail line have been flipped over and promises of 24/7 staffing at Beresfield police station, retaining the East Maitland courthouse and the existing Maitland Hospital have all been broken. It is a shame. Unemployment has doubled. Essential services such as community counselling, TAFE and fire services have been cut and all we have to show for the new Lower Hunter Hospital is a \$6 million sign at Metford.

At the 28 March election the Baird Government made more empty promises, but this time the community was not fooled. Our community rejects the Baird Government's privatisation agenda and has demanded public schools, public hospitals and the retention

of our rail line into Newcastle and Sydney. We need this infrastructure to cope with our growing population.

I am committed to getting Maitland working again and to ensuring that we get the essential services and infrastructure we need to ensure that our community is able to fully participate in work and education with high quality health and transport. I am proud of Labor's vision and our values of social justice and integrity. I will be working towards implementing those visions and our values in this Parliament as well as holding the Baird Liberal Government to account. I look forward to working with you, Madam Speaker, and the other members in this place to achieve great things for my community and our State.