

INAUGURAL SPEECH OF THE HONOURABLE BEN FRANKLIN

The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN [3.36 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Today I speak in the Address-in-Reply debate to the Governor's Speech formally opening the Fifty-sixth Parliament of New South Wales. I do so noting that we are meeting today on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people. I acknowledge them as custodians and traditional owners of this land and I extend my respect to their elders, past and present. Mr President, in the Governor's address last week he implored us to:

... remember that [we] are here to speak for [our] community and it is their interests that come first.

Although we will be on differing sides of many debates, as long as we diligently seek to honestly reflect the wishes of our communities every one of us will have fulfilled that role. I stand here as a passionate advocate for representative democracy and I believe that the many and varied voices that sit here in this Chamber are an absolute validation of that ideal.

I am particularly delighted to be entering this place with three good friends from three different parties: Scott Farlow, a former work colleague and now great mate who is one of the most decent and honourable people I know; the irrepressible Bronnie Taylor who is clearly The Nationals yin to my yang; and Courtney Houssos, who, along with her husband, George, has been a good friend for many years—although that friendship was not quite strong enough to stop The Nationals smiting Country Labor from the electoral landscape at this election and many more to come. I am also blessed to be sitting alongside a range of outstanding Nationals: Duncan Gay, Niall Blair, Rick Colless, Sarah Mitchell and Trevor Khan. I could not have asked for a better team of compatriots.

I am proud to acknowledge my parents, who are here in the gallery today. We are all the end product of our ancestry, not only in the collection of genes we inherit but, more importantly, in the values and ideals that are sewn into us from an early age. My mother was born in Bellingen, like her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother before her. Their descendants, the Moodys and the Roses, live in the Bellingen valley to this day. Mum has never stopped being a country girl at heart. She is a wonderful mix of a keen intellect, very strong opinions, a strict Methodist upbringing and a capacity for compassion and genuine unconditional love that I have never seen surpassed.

My father was born in West Wyalong and lived with his mother in Wagga Wagga in the house she called home most of her adult life and where I spent too many Christmases to remember. Dad's father was a signalman in the Second World War and was killed on the Sandakan Death March in 1945. It is a loss I have always felt keenly and his tragic and unnecessary death taught me three things: that we must always honour those who fell for us; that we must always support the families of those who do not return; and that as a society we have a moral obligation to provide whatever support is needed to those who have returned from conflict but still carry the mental or physical scars of their service to our nation.

I suspect that dad carries a great deal of his father in him—a very quick wit, a silver tongue and a razor sharp mind. He taught me to think rationally and to consider issues from every

angle. He has always had absolute faith and confidence in the choices I made, although that faith has been sorely tested from time to time. Because their country upbringing was such an integral part of their lives, mum and dad decided they wanted my brother, Jon, and me to have the same experience and when I was a small child they moved the family to a little town on the Murray called Barham where dad was appointed principal of the local high school. We lived first on a farm and then in town and the friendships I struck up in those formative years remain to this day. I won a scholarship to go to Sydney for the final two years of my schooling and did my degree at Sydney university before venturing out into the real world.

My political journey has been a particularly complex one. After a very fleeting membership of the Sydney University Labor Club and over a decade spent in the New South Wales Liberal Party, I did not, as Billy Hughes once remarked, draw a line at becoming a member of The Nationals. Indeed, it was with The Nationals that I found my true political home. Although I had grown up in the country and had known a number of Nationals MPs fairly well, when I was appointed as State Director seven years ago I had no understanding at all of the extraordinary political menagerie that is the New South Wales National Party. There is a broad and diverse range of figures in The Nationals and sometimes it can be hard to reconcile the fact that they all harmoniously exist in the same organisation; but happily coexist they do because, unlike so many others represented in this Chamber, The Nationals is not an ideological party, it is a movement based on geography.

In The Nationals the intricacies of what you believe are subservient to your motivation. If your primary incentive is to defend, protect and promote regional New South Wales above all else, then you have a home in our party. We value decency, loyalty and integrity. We look after our mates when they are going through a rough patch, just as we will always assist those in need whom we have never met. We know there is nothing more important than community. There is a heart and soul within the regions that is sometimes difficult to define but that is understood and embraced by everyone who lives there.

The National Party has stood tall over almost a century and I am very proud to have had a hand in its success for the past few years. I am proud to have been campaign director for the party in 2015 when no incumbent Nationals MP lost his or her seat and where for the first time since 1962 no regional Independent was returned. I am proud to have been the campaign director for the party in 2011 where we won our highest proportion of seats in the Legislative Assembly since 1938 and represented over 92 per cent of the land mass of New South Wales.

I am proud to have played some small part in electing extraordinary community leaders, like Kevin Hogan, Michael McCormack, Leslie Williams, Chris Gulaptis and Adam Marshall to the State and Federal parliaments. And I am particularly proud that it was The Nationals who established the first open primary in Australia in June 2010 where we selected our candidate for the State seat of Tamworth by directly asking the community who their preferred representative was. Almost 10 per cent of the electorate turned out on that winter's day to choose a committed and outstanding local advocate in Kevin Anderson, who then went on to win the seat at the general election.

I am a democrat. I firmly believe in the good judgement of the people. I think it is incumbent upon all political parties to throw open their shutters and allow as much participatory democracy in the selection of their candidates as possible. We live in a time of enormous political turbulence. The entrenched loyalties of generations across the political spectrum have been shattered, not just in Australia but all over the world. Communities expect more of their representatives. They are demanding more from us than ever before.

So if the expectations of our electorates have changed and they have become perhaps a little more informed, a little more discerning, even a little more cynical about the entire political process, perhaps it is time for all political parties to allow communities to have a much more substantial say in the choice of their representatives. I acknowledge some parties have already started working in this area but I believe that all of us can do more. I hope that within a decade or two genuine community preselections become the norm for all political parties in their candidate selection.

The Nationals are an extraordinary party—passionate in the defence of our interests but lacking a rigid zealotry that would make us unable to adapt to a changing world. The seats we represent differ so much from each other that it is difficult to see how one political party can represent them all with consistency, but we can and we do, by encouraging each member to do what should be expected of every MP—to stand up and fight for our communities before any other consideration.

Having lived in Sydney for the past few years for work, one of the great joys of my new position is that I am able to move back to a regional community once again. When the opportunity came to move to the seat of Ballina straight after the election I grabbed it with both hands. Ballina was represented for 27 years by Don Page. I cannot think of a finer example of someone absolutely committed to public service than Don and it is a privilege to call him and his wife, Liz, close friends. There is no more heated issue on the North Coast than that of coal seam gas exploration. It is a debate that has mobilised many people who previously had never considered themselves activists or had little or no political involvement. In his valedictory speech last year Don Page stated:

The great majority of people in my electorate, including me, do not see coal seam gas exploration and mining as compatible with the character of the electorate of Ballina.

Last week my friend the Parliamentary Secretary for the North Coast, Chris Gulaptis, stated:

The community wants a gas field-free Northern Rivers. I support my community and I support this proposition.

Today I wish to add my strong support as well but I do that noting the following: our Government has developed the most stringent requirements in the country for CSG exploration. This approach is streets ahead of the one employed by the previous Government where exploration licences were sprayed like confetti across the State. I am certainly not opposed to mining per se and I believe it holds a vital position in supporting numerous regional economies and communities around the State. I note the presence of my friend Stephen Galilee, the Chief Executive Officer [CEO] of the NSW Minerals Council, in the

gallery today. But as an act of bipartisanship I also note the CEO of the NSW Farmers Association, Matt Brand.

However, I repeat my earlier point: I am a democrat. It is very clear to me that the Northern Rivers are resolute in their determination that CSG is not appropriate to their area. But, as the former Nationals candidate for Ballina said during the election campaign, we cannot just wave a magic wand and make the exploration licences disappear. If we are to excise CSG from the North Coast we must do it in a sensible, responsible and legal way and I, for one, will be working to that end during my time in this place.

There are a number of other issues that I will support for as long as I have the honour of serving in the Legislative Council. As a National my primary goal will always be to allow regions to develop their potential. Economically I believe that nothing is more important to our regional cities and towns than connectivity, to each other and to Sydney. It is through fast and efficient transport links that our regional centres can genuinely be opened up to people working in Sydney but living hundreds of kilometres away. I am a strong supporter of high-speed rail running from Melbourne to Brisbane. I believe that the boon it would create for towns like Grafton, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Goulburn and Wagga Wagga and their satellite villages would be immense.

I note that the New South Wales Long Term Master Plan released in December 2012 says, "The NSW Government supports the initiative to select a high speed rail corridor between Brisbane and Melbourne", and I hope the Government continues to give this idea the consideration it deserves. However, it is not just about the North Coast. We have just as important a responsibility to support those in the central west of our State and further. I would like to see a network of somewhat faster trains link Sydney to the major centres west of the Divide and I acknowledge the great work of two outstanding Nationals in this space— Paul Toole, who fought for and achieved re-establishment of the daily rail service between Sydney and Bathurst, and former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer, who has been a leader and visionary in this area of rail transport for many years.

I also believe that we need to continue to upgrade the road linkages running west over the mountains from Sydney. The Great Western Highway and Bells Line of Road have been significantly upgraded thanks to the work of the finest roads Minister this State has ever seen. But the Bells Line Expressway remains a deep-seated aspiration for many Nationals throughout the State. Environmentally we have a responsibility to protect the God-given beauty of this country, which is why I support a number of this Government's initiatives, including the push to reduce litter by introducing a container deposit scheme throughout New South Wales. The Nationals have been consistently strong supporters of this proposed legislation and have overwhelmingly passed motions at our annual conference four times over the past eight years seeking its implementation. A cash-for-cans scheme teaches not only environmental responsibility to our young people but also a sense of entrepreneurialism.

I also want to see the regions develop their cultural potential. I am deeply concerned about one aspect of the cultural inequity that exists between city and country. It is the neglect of our

regional museums, historical societies and other arts groups. This is not just about the enduring perception that you have to go to the cities to experience culture, it goes to the very identity of our regional towns. Kylie Winkworth, regional museum curator, who is here in the gallery today, voiced it beautifully when she said:

The reason we must strive for cultural equity in regional New South Wales is because our country towns have incredible stories that aren't being told.

These are stories that build a sense of identity in a region, and ultimately a sense of community. It is no secret that we are losing the youth from our regional towns. Most leave to find better opportunities in the city, some leave for university and their plans to return soon dissipate, and some never experience a deep connection or affection for their hometown and they give in to socio-cultural fluidity.

Of course, we must as a government provide better economic opportunities in regional New South Wales, but that is not enough if there is not also a sense of identity, belonging, or even obligation. Kids from farming families often return to the bush out of a deep sense of tradition and community, but those without an agricultural background do not feel that same magnetism. How can we make our youth feel connected to their region? Likewise, how can we make outsiders fall in love with the history and identity of regional New South Wales such that they could envision a new life there?

It has never been more important to make sure the rich cultural history of regional New South Wales is recognised for its role in providing that pride and identity. It is time we established dedicated museums of State significance honouring specific themes. The New South Wales museum of agriculture could be based in Dubbo, for example, or the State's mining museum could be a wonderful drawcard for Gunnedah. It is time that the stories of our regional towns are not just told but thundered. It is time we provided not just financial support but a synergistic approach to our museums and cultural institutions. Our regional identity is very much at stake. I strongly support the initiative of Arts Minister Troy Grant in developing the State's first ever arts and cultural policy framework and I hope our regional museums will benefit from this focus.

Regional people throughout the State know that the tyranny of distance provokes far greater challenges for their lives than those of their city cousins. This is something they happily accept because the upside of living in a country town or on a farm is so great. But in part of our State I believe that regional people are being asked to stomach too much. In the west of New South Wales the physical size of our electorates has become ridiculous.

The seat of Barwon, for example, is larger than all of Victoria and Tasmania combined. Its two largest centres, Narrabri and Broken Hill, are almost a thousand kilometres apart. It represents 44 per cent of the land mass of our State and when you add the seat of Murray into the mix three-fifths of New South Wales is now represented by just two seats. No MP can appropriately represent such an extraordinarily large area—even those as talented as the member for Barwon and the member for Murray, whom I acknowledge in the gallery today. Although the members work incredibly hard and travel enormous distances it is simply

impossible for residents in those seats to have the same access to their representative as those living in almost every other seat in the State.

Therefore, I believe that it is time to reintroduce malapportionment into New South Wales State elections so that those seats over a certain size—100,000 square kilometres, for example—are properly acknowledged for the unique position they are in and are required to have a significantly smaller number of electors enrolled within them than all other seats in New South Wales. I look forward to raising this issue with the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters at the appropriate time.

Six and a half weeks ago the people of New South Wales determined who they wanted to best represent them for the next four years. I was privileged to be at the centre of that campaign. We were fortunate to once again gain the people's trust and now have a responsibility to fulfil the mandate we have been given. This result, based on an innovative and bold agenda, was due to the work of many people. But today I wish to acknowledge the leadership of three.

First, the Leader of the Government, Premier Mike Baird, who I am honoured is here with us today. With Mike Baird what you see is what you get: a man of absolute unwavering integrity. I am proud to serve in his Government and for many years have called him a friend. Second, the Leader of The Nationals, Troy Grant. We do not change leaders very often in the Nats. We want to make sure we get it right the first time so we do not need to worry about it again for a decade at least. On that note, I acknowledge a giant of the party, our former leader George Souris who, with his wife, Vassy, is with us today.

Troy was elected unopposed as Leader of The Nationals after 12 years of dedicated service by Andrew Stoner. For that to happen less than four years after his entering the Parliament shows our level of confidence and trust in him. I know that he will make his mark on both my party and our State for many years to come. Third, my leader in this place, Duncan Gay. Duncan was on the three-person selection panel that chose me to be State director of the party in 2008. So for those of you looking for someone to blame, you can point the finger at him. Duncan is only the second National to lead the Government in the Legislative Council—after the legendary Sir John Fuller. His position is testament to the deep respect in which he is held across the Parliament and the State.

I also pay tribute to the two other members of that selection panel all those years ago, Helen Dickie and Christine Ferguson. These formidable women, along with a number of others like Pauline McAllister, Cathy Cleary, Claire Coulton and Fiona Nash, have cracked the whip and kept me in line for the past seven years, and I expect they will continue to do so for many years into the future. There is one other woman I particularly want to honour today. Jenny Gardiner is a towering figure in the National Party. Without her support, advice and friendship the journey for me to be standing here would have been much more difficult. I know that her legacy to both my party and this Parliament will stand the test of time.

I am very lucky to have served under three party chairmen since I joined The Nationals:

Christine Ferguson, without whose imprimatur I could not have achieved anything in those early days; Niall Blair, with whom I shared some very challenging moments for the party and although we often started from very differing positions and had some quite heated discussions we usually landed at the same place; and Bede Burke who, with his vice-chairmen Grant McMillan and Nick Cleary and treasurer John Cameron, is now charged with setting a new direction for the party.

Although I am now resolutely a National, I also want to acknowledge a number of Liberals from whom I have learnt a great deal and to whom I remain indebted for their friendship and support: Rob Stokes, Pru Goward, Jillian Skinner, Gladys Berejiklian, John Ajaka, Scott Morrison, Alex Hawke—who I am delighted has escaped the clutches of Canberra to be in the gallery today—my first boss in this place Greg Pearce and my great friend Matt Kean. Of course, I do not forget my new boss, the Government Whip Peter Phelps, and your good self, Mr President, from whom I have learnt a great deal over many years of friendship.

A number of people have recently said some very kind things about the work I have done in the National Party organisation since 2008. But let me say this, one person cannot achieve anything substantial alone. Any significant achievement requires the presence of a dedicated team working resolutely for a common cause. It has been the privilege of my life to work in the head office of the National Party alongside an incredible group of men and women who I believe run the best campaign operation in the country.

I cannot begin to name all those to whom I owe an enormous debt of thanks but I would like to acknowledge a number of people without any of whom the New South Wales National Party would not be in the shape it is today: Anna O'Brien, Felicity Walker, Douglas Martin, Simon Moore, Remi Luxford, Julian Luke, Young Nats State chairman Dom Hopkinson, Alex Bruce—a man for whom I have enormous respect but never want to see at a 5:30 a.m. strategy meeting again—the indefatigable and ridiculously talented Ross Cadell, the amazing Tony Sarks—whom I am delighted that I have managed to convince to come and work with me—and the new leadership team of State director Nathan Quigley and deputy director Tom Aubert. Nathan and Tom are two of the brightest political minds I know and under their leadership the party is in very good hands. I particularly want to pay credit to my great friend and deputy for the past seven years, Greg Dezman. Greg, we have been through a great deal together. You have kept the party out of trouble, you have an extraordinary future ahead of you, and I would not be standing here today without you.

Lastly, I acknowledge those friends who have been with me through the twists and turns of a sometimes tumultuous political journey. If I were to name you all we would be here until tomorrow. However, I will never forget the loyalty and support you have shown me and I appreciate so many of you being present in the gallery today. Part of that support has come from the farthest flung reaches of the country. I pay particular tribute to my friend Jay Grant, who has come from Melbourne for this speech, and the incredible Western Australian Nationals, who I believe are watching this in their party room today. I thank in particular Marty Aldridge, Colin Holt, Mia Davies, Jacqui Boydell, the dynamo Brendon Grylls, and

rising stars Darcey Duncan, Heather York and Joe Lundy. Thanks guys. You are genuinely an inspiration to us all.

I also must acknowledge three couples here today: Ben Saul and Jane McAdam, who have taught me to stand up for what I believe is right whether or not it is popular; and Chris and Anna Minns, who with their son Joe and my godson Nicholas have reinforced to me that there are extraordinary, decent and talented people on all sides of politics. Chris you will go a long, long way in this place and I am delighted that we were able to enter Parliament at the same time. I also acknowledge my counsellor and friend Tony Chappel and his wife, Alex, who are having their first child later this year. Every one of us should be thinking of that child and the rest of his or her generation when we legislate in this place.

Finally, I pay particular tribute to my parents, Terry and Karlene Franklin. They spent their entire working lives dedicated to the public education system—mum in primary schools and dad in secondary schools. There is nothing we do that is more important than the protection and support of our public schools. I will be a passionate advocate for them for as long as I have the honour to sit in this Chamber. The impact that my parents had on the lives of thousands of children was immense. They taught them to be reasonable, thoughtful and considered and every day imbued in them the values of honesty, integrity and equity. If in the time I spend in this place I have one-tenth of the impact on New South Wales that these extraordinary public servants have had throughout their lives, I will leave a happy and fulfilled man.

I believe that regional New South Wales has an incredibly bright future. With the demand for our exports potentially about to skyrocket due to an exploding middle class in China and South East Asia, the opportunities for regional New South Wales over the next two decades are immense. I will spend every day of the next eight years working for those communities and attempting to repay the incredible trust and confidence that has been placed in me by so many. Mr President, I thank you for your indulgence.