



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 21 May 2003.

Mr APLIN (Albury) [9.30 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I rise tonight to speak in this historic institution fully conscious of the responsibility entrusted to me by the residents of the Albury electorate. Their history and aspirations are now part of my life, and will be for all the time that I am fortunate enough to be the proud member for this wonderful region in our great State of New South Wales. You will have noted, Mr Speaker, that I refer to a region. It is a region that desires greater recognition. It is a region whose residents are more familiar with Victorian politics and football teams than with those in New South Wales. It is also a region that is yet to be convinced that "NSW" does not stand for Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. Yes, we are far from Sydney but we are the birthplace of Federation, we were the gateway to two Olympic Games, and we are the river crossing on the Hume Highway. This area has been Australia's national growth centre, it is the sporting capital of regional Australia and it is home to some of the best environmentalists in the nation.

It is a dynamic and progressive electorate and, despite the devastating drought and the high cost of feed and water, our farmers and country businesses will pull through, but they need a hand. Our dams are dry. The magnificent Lake Hume was down to only 4 per cent capacity at one stage and pasture and breeding stock have been destroyed. The men and women on the land are doing it tough. I was at a family day at Wymah on Mother's Day. In the past, local producers have donated fat lambs for the barbecue. This year, there are no fat lambs, but those same producers donated the value of a fat lamb to help purchase meat. That is the spirit of country Australia.

My great grandfather, the Hon. William Aplin, was one of the pioneers in North Queensland. He played an important role in the development of Townsville, becoming mayor and being elected to the Legislative Council in 1880. He ran a business and also a station with 15,000 head of cattle. However, drought conditions, low beef prices and tick fever all combined to result eventually in the bank selling off the property. It is a situation all too familiar to many of us in rural Australia. It was said of Mr Aplin that his persistent and influential advocacy in Parliament resulted in many splendid services being established in the north. Well, Mr Speaker, I can do no less than my great grandfather, so I shall aim to emulate him in the south.

I pay tribute to my parents, Russell and Joan, who are both present in the gallery tonight. Thank you for your guidance, support and values. My father was born in Brisbane, but lived most of his life in the countries now known as Zambia and Zimbabwe. He was involved in African agriculture, teaching indigenous tribal people how to move from subsistence farming to the cash economy. As a young boy, I accompanied him to remote areas on bush tracks, slept in thatched huts, heard the sound of tom toms late into the night and found the footprints of hyenas round the hut next morning. There were pests and venomous snakes to contend with, and there still are. No, I do not mean in this place, but I did encounter a couple on the campaign trail.

I observed the basics of farming practices, crop rotation, land care and marketing at first hand. I was exposed to different languages, colours, affiliations and cultures, and I learnt to accept people on merit and to have respect for others. Some of the elements that held true then remain constant for people in rural areas today: identification of resources, the need to add value to primary products, a good transport system, effective marketing, and trustworthy representatives.

We have a thriving mix of cultures and a pride in our Wiradjuri history in our electorate. We celebrate the Ngan Girra Festival annually. We also revel in the International Fair, which provides a colourful showcase for our diverse ethnic communities who contribute so much to our region. We have assimilated recent arrivals along with those who chose to stay in the area after coming to Australia's largest migrant reception center at Bonegilla in Wodonga, which was established after the Second World War. Both of my parents served in the Second World War: my father with the ground staff of the Royal Air Force in various theatres and my mother with the Women's Royal Australian Navy in Sydney. They met and married in Africa and my mother can recall being taken to a new home by crossing the swollen Zambezi River in a dugout canoe with hippopotami and crocodiles paying close attention.

I grew up in Central Africa, won a scholarship and bursary to study at the University of Cape Town—a three-day train journey from home—and after completing a postgraduate degree I was set for a career in foreign affairs. Back then, national service was compulsory, so I was soon doing basic training followed by duties in a paramilitary police force, gaining valuable experience in a wide range of police work, along with bush patrols in operational areas and plain old guard duty. I mention this because of its relevance to 2003: country residents are calling strongly for an increased police presence on the streets and sufficient numbers to cover sick leave and maternity leave. The increase in vandalism and juvenile crime points to problems in society and the failure to accept responsibility. The police need assistance from the Legislature in reacting to these issues.

My career as a diplomat looked assured when I was seconded to Information and posted to Sydney for three years. They were interesting times, and included contact with colourful characters like the member for North Sydney, Bruce Graham, an ex-fighter pilot with a wooden leg, Senators Peter Rae from Tasmania and John Wheeldon from Western Australia, Gordon Bryant from Melbourne and Don Dobie, the Member for Cook. I had to shut down the office in 1980 and return to the new Zimbabwe, where I worked on State visits and development conferences.

I had served three governments and experienced dramatic changes, and I made the decision to return to Australia with my young family. That was the start of 20 years in regional television. My wife, Jill, and I raised four children, moving to Wollongong, then Orange, and finally to Albury. Like so many other wives and mothers, Jill has been involved in children's, school, and church activities. She has also participated in wildlife surveys, taught basic English to new migrants, and assisted old people to record and publish their family histories.

I am thrilled that my family is here tonight. I thank them for their love and support, particularly over the gruelling election campaign. Scott is an accomplished musician with a band in Sydney and Richard returned yesterday from deployment with our forces in the Gulf. We are so glad that you and your mates are back safely and we are proud of you all. Douglas is a student at our fine Riverina Institute of TAFE in Albury, and Kathryn is in secondary school.

My work in regional New South Wales will be relevant in this place and in my new role. Regional media can have a profound impact on the life and destiny of their consumers. The various branches can choose to be involved in and stimulate their communities and I have worked with and alongside companies that have adopted this approach. But technology and market forces are resulting in the increased centralisation of all manner of services, and the effects in regional areas are more severe

because the per capita impact is higher when a mill, an abattoir, a bank or, even more drastic, a council is closed down.

My philosophy as a regional manager for television was simple: what was good for the region was good for the station. I learnt this in Wollongong from Allan Hoy during those dark days of the downturn in the steel industry, when diversification became a necessity rather than an option; when I joined the board of the newly formed Leisure Coast Tourist Association and promoted the city; when I was tasked with producing a motivational campaign to encourage business and development by focussing on success stories in the midst of the gloom; and when that crusty and dogged Secretary of the South Coast Trades and Labor Council, Merv Nixon, said to me, "Greg, you're a great humanitarian." My time in Orange introduced me to agricultural and machinery field days on a large scale, and I have memories of advertising agency executives returning home to Sydney on the small planes with souvenir cattle prodders to presumably perform disciplinary acts in the office or boardroom! Whatever, the lesson is that familiarisation is essential; that the city-country divide will not disappear, and that both sides need to make the effort to understand what is necessary to guarantee the viability of farming, industry, commerce, education, services and so on in country areas.

Let me pick up on one point: air travel. We have been through turbulent times in recent years. The pilots dispute, the withdrawal of regional operators and the Ansett fallout have all had a massive effect on business and tourism in the regions. Air connections are vital. I applaud the initiatives of Regional Express in servicing my electorate of Albury. I wish the operators of Brindabella Airlines success in their new venture linking Albury to Canberra. I commend Qantas Link for its service which maintained the link to Sydney through the Ansett crisis when our local Kendell Airlines service disappeared. But governments at all levels need to look at the situation. Eighteen regional centres in New South Wales have lost their regular air services. Airport taxes are a major burden on travellers; on some sectors they account for almost 50 per cent of the lowest fare. Any further reductions in traffic may well jeopardise the viability of the services and therefore impact heavily on regional economies. If Queensland can sustain country air links without the imposition of head taxes at small airports, so should we—if we value the connection. I call on the Government to consider this opportunity for action.

In 1988 I moved to Albury to take up the role of station manager of the commercial television station AMV4, and I needed to adjust to a Victorian football code, Safeway instead of Woolies, Victorian beer labels and even product packaging that was different. Many of those differences are no longer evident; they have adapted with the times and we will one day see the Swans win the AFL Grand Final. But while sporting and commercial operators have forged ahead, governments have been slower in recognising the need to address border anomalies. They are not just anomalies that affect our electorate—they present opportunities for the advancement of the whole State. Parents complain of the high preschool fees compared to the situation across the river. Do we not recognise the measurable benefits of preschool education? Why is there not a greater financial commitment to this sector? This is an opportunity to make a real difference to the next generation of New South Wales adults, and to value the experience and dedication of our preschool teachers.

Where anomalies disadvantage us in attracting or retaining business and investment it is only logical that our Government should react. I call on the Government to activate a cross-border commission

and to stimulate industry investment. The potential is evident, the policies are required policies which actively encourage industry outside the axis of Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong—policies of affirmative action for decentralisation such as payroll tax rebates. We read of a planned city of 300,000 on the outskirts of Sydney, yet there are opportunities and better lifestyle prospects in regional electorates and we are well placed to attract a portion of this development.

Many people will be aware that there has been controversy over the building of a highway through Albury. A decision was made by the Federal Government last December and the recent budget provided funding. The Roads and Traffic Authority has carriage of construction, and I will work to ensure that we get a state-of-the-art road which provides the infrastructure and safety we desperately need. I will also work to see that upgrades on our regional roads are forthcoming. It was good to meet the Minister for Regional Development in Albury last week. He knows about the plans for industrial estates in the Hume shire and the city of Albury: he learnt of the initial commitment to Albury's Regional Museum and library and he will hear more of our desire for Government commitment to a vibrant cultural precinct, to the development of a port of Albury and the establishment of the Murray Recreational Trail. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

The history of the region has been intrinsically linked to the mighty Murray River. This is our State's southern border, although it could well have been otherwise. Back in 1851, when separation was achieved between northern and southern New South Wales, the border was proposed as the Murrumbidgee River. Due to a clerical error the boundary was fixed at the Murray River and Albury became a frontier border town. Let us make no mistake: The Albury electorate is a vital gateway to New South Wales and it is well and truly open for business—the business of attracting investment, developing infrastructure, expanding education and research facilities, creating innovative ecotourism attractions, tackling salinity and restoring healthy river systems. I am fortunate to represent this electorate on the edge of the Australian alps and the Riverina plains, where the mountains meet the Murray. It is home to 62,000 people in the city of Albury and the shires of Corowa, Culcairn and Hume, an area of 5,779 square kilometres. Our major employment categories are professional occupations followed by trades and labour, manufacturing, and then health and community services.

In relation to health, we are working towards a cross-border health area to link Albury Base Hospital and Wodonga Hospital so that we never again have to experience the closure of the Intensive Care Unit in Albury as we did for a month last year. Nor, I trust, will we hear of specialists being asked to cut their surgery lists, as is the case at present. A reduction of waiting lists should be the aim, as should the attraction of doctors and specialists to our regional and rural areas. In Culcairn shire there is no ambulance service, despite the promise of a first-response ambulance unit to be located at the Culcairn Multipurpose Health Service. This results in an unacceptable delay of up to 45 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Is this to be tolerated in places such as Culcairn and Henty, on a major road such as the Olympic Way?

The solution is to establish a first-response unit based at the multipurpose health service, crewed through multiskilling of staff within the service. Just as hospitals have become multipurpose services in some country towns, so we should consider adapting other services to take account of our needs. And if this is unpalatable to some unions, consider the case of an 84-year-old lady I met in Henty who had a serious fall late at night and had to wait more than half an hour for an ambulance to

arrive from Holbrook, take her to Culcairn for initial treatment to a fracture and lacerations, and then wait for another ambulance to collect her to take her to Albury. Country people deserve better.

We have in the Albury region a concentration of medical activities that is unique in regional Australia. This provides an excellent platform for the delivery of rural health programs. Post secondary education must be expanded to meet the educational aspirations of our young people; it must provide the skills, knowledge, infrastructure and creativity to stimulate local industry and new business ventures which sustain the local population. We need a critical mass of researchers contributing scientific knowledge relevant to our region. There is no State funding to build upon local expertise and infrastructure—it should be part of the vision, creating synergies between education and local industry. It is worth noting that two in every three regional students who study at Charles Sturt University choose to work in regional Australia. The tertiary institutions make a significant contribution to reducing the drift of population from rural and regional Australia to the metropolitan cities.

I have touched on some of the issues which concern us, and I will build on the foundations laid by our strong representatives, such as Gordon Mackie, Harold Mair, and my immediate predecessor, Mr Ian Glachan, who is so well respected in this place and throughout the Albury electorate. Ian was strongly supported by his wife, Helen, in his commitment to our region over the past 15 years, and I am grateful for their advice and guidance. To my campaign team and the local branches throughout the Albury electorate, I say thank you for all your hard work and inspiration. I also extend thanks to my campaign manager, Howard Hinde, who is here tonight with his wife, Deborah, John Knobel, Bruce Holmes, Karin Wilcox, Moira Stewart, Bert Eastoe, Eric Turner, Derek Beveridge, Sheena McLeod, Daryl West and so many others who made this possible.

To John Brogden and all the shadow Ministers who visited during the campaign, to Philip Ruddock who opened my campaign office way back in February, and to all of you who supported and advised, thank you. But, most of all, thank you to the people of the Albury electorate. People like the shift worker in Mulwala who did not appreciate his lunchtime being interrupted by this doorknocking candidate, who said there was a cat chasing an angry brown snake in the garden. He rang me that night to say the cat was alive, the snake was dead and he was going to vote for me. Well, mate, I am here for you.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I extend my personal congratulations to the honourable member for Albury. I wish him well in his future parliamentary career. I recognise the presence in the gallery of a substantial contingent of family, friends and constituents of the honourable member for Albury.