



Inaugural Speeches

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

Mr CONSTANCE (Bega) [8.46 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Mr Speaker, fellow members, the people of Bega and New South Wales: It is an honour and privilege to serve in this place at this time. I do not believe that any other people or any other generation has faced the mix of challenges and opportunities with the same energy and hope that we do today. For me to serve as the member for Bega was made possible by the effort of so many who honoured and privileged me with their dedication and faith. In the tradition of this House and regardless of one's faith, the Lord's message of love and tolerance, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, sets for us, in my view, an excellent guiding principle for those of us who aspire to govern for all people.

To the people and my friends in the Bega electorate who—to use that great Australian saying—took a punt on a young bloke and never looked back, I say thanks: Veronica and Robyn Owen, Neville and Joy Hughes, Margaret and Tim Collins, and Maggie and Harry Havu. I also thank Morag Heffernan, Jenny Pike, Margaret Saker, Jim Rogers, the Speechleys, the Bloomfields, the Barmans, the Haslems, and all the campaign volunteers. I owe you much. To my friends and community leaders—Robert and Gayle Hayson, Merv and Robyn Innes, Patricia White, Mary Reeves, Paul Gilligan and Dot Carlton—I will never forget that I am here to represent your interests and the interest of your communities. These are the modest but important interests of diligent, hardworking people who go about their lives with a good heart and a quiet dignity.

I also acknowledge and thank my friends who have supported me: Marise Payne, Patricia Forsythe, Brian and Chris Pezzutti, John Fahey, Garry Nairn, Bruce Baird, Bill Heffernan, Shelley Hancock, Jason Fitts, Georgina Inwood, Jason Falinski, Adam Schofield, Melanie Gibbons, Kate Forsythe and Sam Witheridge. In different ways, at different times, always, you were there. To others who supported me without notice or noise, many of whom I may never meet, I hope to help you many times and in many ways. Those members of my family who some would say have endured the most, I thank you. Your guidance and lessons, your unyielding faith and love, have assisted me throughout my life. To my parents, Jim and Sue, brothers Sam and Ben and sister Eliza, grandparents Patricia and Hugh Marshall, Cec Constance and the late Enid, I say thanks. To Ainslie Thomas, whose support, guidance and love has been so special, I also say thank you. It will never be truly possible for me to repay all the help, faith and work that all of you have done on my behalf. It is a debt I feel keenly and one that I will always work to repay.

My family association with the Bega Valley stems back to the 1860s when my great-great-grandfather, James Constance, in the early days drove a team of bullocks through the valley. His obituary in a local newspaper in 1912 outlined the life of an early pioneer in south-east New South Wales. It is with great honour that I, too, hope to pioneer a new way forward for the provision of better government to the region's communities. I stand here this evening as the sixth member for Bega and the first in my family to hold office in Parliament. Thomas Rawlinson first held the electorate of Bega from July 1894 to July 1895. Since then, each successive member has represented the area with dedication and rigour—a high standard that I will seek to uphold. I note the presence tonight of one of my predecessors, the Hon. Dr Jack Beale, who as the member for South Coast from 1942 to 1973—the year I was born—represented the communities that now form part of the Bega electorate. I am honoured to have Dr Beale here tonight. Some come here to be great orators and others dream of being great leaders. Of me I would like it said when I have left this place that the

electorate of Bega and the New South Wales Parliament is a better place than when I arrived and that I, too, played my part.

This State needs an innovative approach to public policy development so that the regions flourish. It is a time for change. State government needs to be innovative and must harness the true intellectual capital of all the people, not just some of the people. It has been said that the tiny tots of today will work in jobs that have not even been invented yet. In the electorate of Bega and across country New South Wales we need to ensure that innovation policy and technology provide real opportunities for people. The concepts of creating telecommuting corridors from Sydney to Melbourne along our coastline and centres of innovation excellence are a real possibility. Yet the necessary investment in broadband technology and telecommunications will not happen without leadership from government.

The role of State Government to impact change in regional New South Wales through an innovative policy approach cannot be underestimated. Education is but one area that would benefit. Education is the silver bullet. It lowers unemployment, improves economic growth and engenders social change for the better. It improves people's health, reduces poverty and crime and builds the esteem and values of our community. Too many decisions about education in the Bega electorate are made not by parents, teachers or the community in which the school operates. A one-size-fits-all approach from the State is failing our children badly. We need to understand that not all wisdom resides in one person. Good ideas exist everywhere, and should be taken account of when designing education policies.

As do all Liberals, I believe in ensuring that we deliver equality of opportunity when it comes to education, not equality of outcome. Government should not necessarily provide the service, but it should fund it and allow for an ever more creative and flexible approach to public education. In the end all that matters is the quality of education that the children of New South Wales are getting, thereby setting an example for others to follow. Laurence Summers, the chancellor of Harvard, is fond of saying:

... in the known history of the world, no person has ever washed a rented car.

You have to empower people and give them a sense of ownership for them to care about what they are doing. If all the direction and all the ideas on health and education come from the top down— from those who cannot even get maintenance of buildings right—how are we enthusing the people of New South Wales and the Bega electorate to play a role in improving the quality of their own education and health?

From Ulladulla to Bega high schools and from Pambula to Batemans Bay hospitals we need to provide better buildings and equipment. We live in a time when anything is possible. In the history of New South Wales no government has raised more money through taxes than this one. How can we make more for our people when our infrastructure is run down yet the money to fix it all has never been more plentiful? We should not have to talk about the state of buildings, roads and the like. It should be a given that our children are taught in state-of-the-art classrooms, that patients are cared for in world-class facilities and that our roads are properly upgraded and kept. It should not even be on the table for discussion; that is the easy part. And yet we cannot even get past it.

On roads, I am committed to making sure that the State Government provides in the next four years upgrades to the Princes Highway south of Ulladulla. For example, the Pambula Bridge, a rickety 110-year-old rotting wooden bridge—a highway version of the Menangle rail bridge—stops our school kids from attending class during floods, halts our businesses and is a black mark on the State's road system. If the people of Bega have one flaw it is that they are willing to endure so much without too much complaint. Their claims for better roads, hospitals and schools are legitimate and will be heard in this place.

I wrote this speech while sitting on the back porch of a farmhouse on a property known as the Oaks, some 500 kilometres from here near the townships of Candelo and Wolumla. This magnificent place, owned by Tim and Margaret Collins, provides a view of the rolling green hills in the Bega Valley. From it you can admire the magnificent Angus beef and dairy cattle that graze these hills. This spectacular farming country set along the far South Coast provides some of the best produce in the nation. The skills base that the electorate of Bega enjoys has produced powerful, laudable industries. Indeed, our agricultural produce is the stuff of legend. The Bega Cheese Factory is a textbook case of good produce combining with good craft to deliver a fine product. There is not an Australian who is unaware of it. We have good fisheries industries that feed a growing market for inbound tourism, from the co-operatives in Bermagui and Ulladulla to the Boatshed in Batemans Bay. My constituents take our natural gifts and turn them into some of the best consumable products in the country. One needs only to visit the country shows during the months of January and February to see this first hand.

The Bega electorate is not simply growing produce, it is growing smarter. We have a growing history of innovation. Our industry is diverse, inventive and hard working—it has had to be in order to survive. We have one of the highest unemployment rates in New South Wales at 11.3 per cent. The industries of the south-east, particularly forestry, have been greatly impacted by microeconomic and structural reform. Only 1,422 people now work in agriculture, fishing or timber industries compared with 1,600 only 5 years ago. Over-regulation by government suspicious of these industries and their ability to maintain and sustain the environment upon which they rely is rendering our local industries uncompetitive and no longer a viable option for people to enter into. It is a sad fact of life that the farm gate has imposed upon it 56 Acts and regulations of Parliament, making our primary producers' lives difficult—not that they are not already difficult given the drought and international market pressures. And on that front: Just because it has flooded in Sydney it does not mean the drought is over.

Everybody is concerned about the environment and the best approach to managing it. The Bega electorate has amongst the world's most pristine areas. We have the world's greatest national parks, including Mount Gulaga, the Deua and Murramarang. It must be remembered that 41 per cent of the electorate is national park. What concerns me though is that the State Government does not comprehend the need for better environmental management and practices. Environmental protection is not about closing off large sections of bushland by locking it up and throwing away the key. That to me is environmental vandalism. The proof in this is how we continue to manage our bushland to minimise the impact of fire. We have too many inaccessible fire trails and frustrated Rural Fire Service volunteers, who too often must deal with these problems in times of crisis.

Our beaches and waterways are the best in the world and we all must work hard to balance coastal development whilst protecting these areas. This will be the greatest challenge facing State and local governments in the next decade as we continue to see massive growth in the Bega electorate, particularly in Batemans Bay and Merimbula. We all deserve a different approach to the problems facing our environment. Too often public debate is forced inside the constraining paradigm of: development bad, protection good. These are incredibly complex issues that deserve more than simplistic, knee-jerk responses. Some people lack the attention span to care or understand them. It is sad that so many of our leaders come to this debate interested in it only if there are votes attached.

The degradation of our environment, the diminution of biodiversity, the salination of our land and the abuse of underpriced and precious resources are a disgrace. Poor planning in relation to water supply has led to constant restrictions for residents. We must bite the bullet and start to harness the water flow of our short coastal rivers in a more efficient and environmentally friendly way. We need two additional off-river water storage facilities immediately to meet the demand of our communities now and in the future. That said, we must continue to look closely at ways in which we can recycle water and utilise stormwater run-off and the like.

The broader policy questions about the environment mean surely it is time to dare our Government and citizens to consider every option—alternative energy, recycling of water, charging market price for the resources we use, and many other ideas. We do not face a crisis today, but we are creating one for tomorrow. All of us here will be judged harshly if our children look back at this moment and say: they understood well enough, and yet failed to act. Life is good on the far South Coast. The people in the Bega electorate communities are amongst the most proud in this State. It is not simply in the commercial field that the conscientious people of the Bega electorate come together to deliver results. When my constituents encounter a problem they work together. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

Whether it is a fundraiser for a local school, a fight against inappropriately located development or a local hospital auxiliary fete, these community events demonstrate an unusual gift in my constituency—the gift of grace in the face of neglect. Even though the State Government refuses to recognise my electorate's profound public education and hospital problems, the people will still bond together to do the best they can. They are highly energetic and co-operative. In co-operation Bega presents another role model to the State—Bega's strong sense of community. Our volunteer organisations are flourishing and are to be celebrated. From the RSL clubs to Rotary, from the Country Women's Association to Quota and from Lions to Red Cross, from hospital auxiliaries to various church groups and to our business chambers, our communities are strong. I must also single out an outstanding chamber—Bega, under the leadership of Robert Hayson, Chris Murphy and Anna Glover.

I also acknowledge the strength of our volunteer rescue associations. We have the bravest and most determined. Our Rural Fire Service volunteers, surf life savers, State Emergency Services, the Volunteer Rescue Association, and coastal patrol personnel risk their lives every day to protect property and people from the onslaught of the harsh elements that nature can throw at us. They are everyday people achieving extraordinary feats. Government is not best placed to provide these services, as these organisations are built on the back of great Australian volunteerism and spirit. That

said, government has a duty to provide the necessary resources and funding to enable Australians to fulfil their important duties as safely as possible. I would like to see the State Government provide more support and resources to each of these organisations. Our surf lifesaving club houses, such as those in Pambula and Bermagui need building. More safety measures are required at Narooma Bar and we can never provide enough funding for our volunteer bush fire brigades.

I stand before this Parliament as a Country Liberal—as someone who reflects the values and ideals of the communities right across the Bega electorate. I am committed to ensuring that I am a member of integrity and I will always put the people of the Bega electorate first when deliberating in this place. We stand here at a moment in history when there is so much to hope for. Without the hope, optimism and energy of this State's youth the barriers to change are not lowered, the system fails to have dynamism, and we do not move forward with pace. Therefore, the youth wings of the political parties are critical to making the system better.

As a 29-year-old, and the youngest member of this Parliament, I was a member of the Young Liberal movement, and was elected to its State presidency. In doing so I join a less than exclusive club in this Parliament. I join other presidents, John Brogden, Catherine Cusack, Don Harwin and Gladys Berejiklian, and from New South Wales in Federal Parliament there is John Howard, Philip Ruddock, Joe Hockey and Marise Payne. If the Young Liberal movement has shown us anything it is that the journey is its own reward. I have learnt much from my political upbringing in the Liberal Party and I will always be a number one supporter of the people in this organisation who make it strong.

The people of Batemans Bay and Broken Hill, of Pambula and Penrith, deserve to have an equal chance in this life. No matter where you begin in this State, your opportunities should be just as great as any other person's. I come to this place believing that the role of any good Government is to empower the individual to make choices, and once empowered, those choices are best left to the individual. The political process touches the lives of everybody, every day. Arrogance and elitism should never characterise government. Politicians should never see themselves as above and beyond the people; rather, they must stand alongside and work with the communities they represent. Government departments should be partnering with the community and industry, not, as we are seeing, creating conflict. There is too much division in our society. Too many leaders in Parliament have taken an opportunity to divide in order to win support, rather than unite to build a stronger community.

Being singularly beholden to the media cycle can detract from good policy outcomes for the community. While the media must play an important role in the process of open and accountable government, we must always remember that as parliamentarians we are held accountable by the people, not the daily tabloid, broadsheet or talk-back debate. Political leaders should not be held captive to the press—the spin should never be prioritised above the substantive debate that is required to deliver good government in this State. I am often struck by the antipathy between those people living in the city versus those in the country. It is difficult to understand the perspective of another when you have so many of your own concerns to worry about. All problems are urgent, and all need solving. It strikes me that our community can achieve so much more working together, as opposed to working against each other. Difficult politics are involved here, but the leadership required to achieve it is not beyond us.

Max Weber said that politics is the slow boring through hard boards, that any good policy or idea takes time to work through the bureaucracy of government. This might be true, but there is only one way to find out, and that is by doing good things. I came here to serve the people of Bega, and that is what I am going to do. I feel proud and honoured to speak for the Bega electorate and to be a chapter in its story. I shall strive to meet this privilege.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I express my personal congratulations to the honourable member for Bega, and I acknowledge the presence in the gallery of a very large contingent of family, friends and constituents. I also note the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Bruce Baird, the honourable member for Cook and former Minister of this Chamber, as well as the presence of the honourable Senator Marise Payne.