

Legislative Assembly Hansard – 09 May 2019 – Proof

INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The SPEAKER: I pay appropriate respect to the member for Lismore, who is about to give her inaugural speech. It is a pleasure to welcome the member for Lismore, who is no stranger to this Parliament but is a newcomer to this House.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN (Lismore) (11:31): Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to the post of Speaker in Australia's oldest colonial Parliament. I also congratulate the Government on its election win and the Premier for being the first woman to win an election in her own right. I note that she is single and, as she said, has a long name. These things should not be remarkable but they still are. I congratulate the Opposition, led by the Hon. Michael Daley, on a sterling effort in what was a hard campaign.

Mr Speaker, I take you at your word and hope that you can change the culture in this place. I stand ready to help. I commend my extensive and diverse parliamentary experience, which includes Speakers' panels in the other place and in our Federal Parliament. I must say that my first question time yesterday was unedifying. I expected better from the Premier because I know that she is better, and I see no reason to pat myself on the back for taking pointless points of order. We had grown-ups denigrating each other and their parties. We were not sent here by our communities to do that.

I was asked whether I was worried about coming into the bear pit, as it is called. After experiencing one question time I can say that it was more like cats hissing and spitting at each and there was little substance. Yesterday I contemplated sitting through about 44 question times—I think it will be about that many; I am not sure—but because I will do so for the good of my community, so be it; I shall endure. However, as I said, Mr Speaker, I hope that you can change the culture.

I remind the Liberal-Nationals Government that for the 16 years that the Labor Party was in government it achieved 16 triple-A credit ratings and surpluses in 15 of those 16 years. I stand to be corrected, but that is the information I have. The one anomaly was during the global financial crisis, when the Federal Government led by Kevin Rudd ensured that Australia was the only country that did not go into recession. I make that point because I get tired of hearing that Labor cannot manage the economy. I heard it repeatedly during the election campaign and we need to put that absolute nonsense to bed.

I also remind the Liberal-Nationals Government that during its term in government jobs in my region have reduced by at least 17,000 that we know of. The number of public service jobs has also declined, which means lower incomes in our communities. I do not have my family, friends and supporters with me in person today, but they are here in spirit. My senior electorate officer, friend and comrade, Carmel Cook, is here in the gallery. Carmel also ran my office when I was the Federal member for Page. I plan to celebrate at home in my electorate what is the win of many. They will be subjected to watching my speech at the event, a bit like being subjected to your best friend's home video of their holiday—they too will endure. When the Hon. Jenny Gardiner congratulated me, she quipped it was my third first speech—and indeed it is. So it feels a little unusual to talk about my first speech when it is my third but it is the first, and probably the most important, in this most important of Parliaments that you preside over, Mr Speaker.

On Tuesday the Government's agenda and priorities were set out in the speech delivered by the Governor, as is customary. The Government stated unequivocally that it is committed to improving the lives of everyone in New South Wales. I shall take it at its word. As the member for Lismore, my job is to ensure that I do everything I can to improve the lives of all residents across the electorate, which includes Tenterfield, Kyogle, Lismore, Murwillumbah and parts of Tweed Valley. I shall continue my practice of working closely with the local councils and all local MPs to get the best outcomes for the electorate. To do this, I have a duty to work with government but to hold it to account to deliver. As a member of the Opposition, I have a duty to work to better policies and programs that best serve my community and all regional and rural residents of New South Wales.

I am the first Labor member for Lismore in 54 years—a bit of a drought there. The drought has broken; I wish the other drought would do so totally. Lismore was last held by Labor member Keith Compton from 1959 to 1965. His widow met with me in 1991, when I first stood for the seat of Lismore. Some people may have forgotten that or may not have known. You see, I am an optimist who never gives up. I was asked on ABC radio this week whether it was different in this Chamber and I said, yes, there was more civility in the other place. Perhaps instead of mocking it, we could at least emulate that civility.

I am here because I am proudly an activist, not a career politician. I do not say that disparagingly because we all have different paths to this place. We mostly all want to make a difference. I do, I have and I shall do so again. As MPs we get invited into people's lives in the most emotional, intimate ways. Our obligation then is to tread lightly in their lives and take their trust in us to advocate not so lightly for them, and to do so as fearlessly as we can. In my United Nations Development Programme work, I teach new MPs in other Parliaments about the role of an MP and say this: MPs serve and lead. MPs are a voice for all their constituents. MPs are often the first port of call and sometimes the last. MPs are agents of change. MPs do not have a job description—try to look for one, Mr Speaker—so should script their own, along with their plan for their electorate.

I did that during the election campaign, and it will serve my community well. I listened to what the needs are of the unemployed; the homeless; the parents struggling to make ends meet and to give their kids a good life; the farmers who want to feed us and protect the land and rivers; those who want to save our koalas, our forests and us from extinction; small business people who generally just earn wages but who want not only to survive but also to thrive; nurses and midwives who want to nurse safely and need mandated safe patient to nurse and midwife ratios, and security in hospitals; and our First Nation's People, who want to take their place in society and not have their people, particularly the men, jailed at alarming rates. I think it is more than 30 years since the royal commission and we have gone backwards. They deserve much better.

My constituents need TAFE places and teachers available to teach the courses, and to have schools that are permanent and with air conditioning and renewables. Bexhill Public School comes to mind, with all its demountables. People need shelter and housing. I cannot fathom why we do not have a department of housing and why we do not just build public housing. We build it, we rent it, we upkeep it and it pays for itself. Even at an economic level, it makes sense. I just don't get it. We need to have disability advocacy, action on climate change, more police to be engaged with the community not just arrest people—noting that the views in Nimbin, which is in my electorate, may diverge a little from what I just said. Treating people kindly goes a long way.

My mother always says I am kind, and I have never lost sight of that through all my years in public life. I have faith in politics; the word comes from the Greeks and it meant "affairs of the city". To that I add "country" so it covers rural and regional New South Wales. Its practical meaning is "the art of compromise" and that is what we have to do well in this place. I seek leave to incorporate into *Hansard* a one-page summary of my Lismore electorate plan. I am happy to first give it to members on the other side if they wish to look at it.

The SPEAKER: I note that you seek leave pursuant to Standing Order 271. I would like to view it before I consider granting leave to incorporate it into *Hansard*.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Certainly. I do not think you will find it offensive to the House, but it is your call.

The SPEAKER: Please continue your speech and I will assess it as you speak.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: I was asked what was different between my electorate and other electorates where Independents or the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party won seats from The Nationals. I said the common thread was The Nationals not responding to the needs of the electorate, whether it be action for dairy farmers, fair prices for farmers, fresh food or proper telecommunications, not the goat track of an NBN that has been rolled out—that was former head of NSW Farmers Association Mal Peters, not me. Another example is the failure to spend the promised Restart NSW funds in the regions—only 10 per cent instead of the promised 30 per cent in the years 2015 to 2016, but never on target over five cycles.

Sadly The Nationals have lost their way and are unable to properly represent the changing needs and challenges of our modern society. Maintaining the status quo no longer works. Keep tradition, by all means, but to cling to the relics of coal and just add water to address our problems of extreme weather events, hotter temperatures—climate change, as our scientists call it, including the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology—and water insecurity and scarcity is to fail current and future generations. I want to make things better for my grandson, who is five this year and already a citizen of the world, speaking fluent Portuguese and English, and all our children and grandchildren.

This brings me to say here in this place, where I am very honoured and proud to be, what motivated me to stand. In a nutshell, it was the lack of representation on the challenges the community faces in ensuring our economic and environmental health. It was the inability to tackle issues such as climate change and take action to lower temperatures, transition to renewables, and conserve and fairly allocate water. It was the failure to provide affordable and accessible housing, disability support with advocacy and strong institutions that serve the public—we have lost faith in them. It was the need to tackle drug use, including ice, increase social cohesion in the community—and my community is equally conservative and progressive—and take the community together to a better future.

The inability to tackle these challenges, and we can, was epitomised in the failure of our institutions and MPs—not our wonderful, brilliant volunteers in the State Emergency Services, Rural Fire Service, Red Cross and many more—to adequately respond to the catastrophic flood damage caused to the Lismore and Murwillumbah CBDs and industrial areas by Cyclone Debbie. Yes, Category C assistance was secured for the CBDs and small business. When I was a Federal member I made sure we got that assistance four or five times. Queensland rightfully gets Category D assistance, which is for catastrophic damage, but no-one in my area sought it. I said, "Could you imagine me not going hard for Category D or, in the alternative, a public infrastructure fund to help us rebuild?"

The debate in the electorate often would take the path of economy or environment or defending the status quo as opposed to change. It is not either/or but all of these things. As members we have to walk forward with those challenges and take our community with us. We need to do something about electricity networks, the big three who have the monopoly and push prices down. I have seen everyone promise and I have never seen it delivered yet, so I hope through this Parliament we can do that. We do need to deliver cheaper, cleaner energy and solar power for families and small business. Renewables are not an option but a necessity and—guess what?—they are cheaper than coal-powered electricity. We need to convert to electric vehicles [EVs], and we need EV cars to be cheaper. We need more charging stations in the regions, but I note the rollout by NRMA and others. Government can lead the way on this and must convert our power base to renewables and car fleet to EVs.

As only former Prime Minister Paul Keating can, he characterised coal's place in its historical context of being what was needed for industrialisation, but now it is renewables. He took the Prime Minister to task for taking a lump of coal into the Federal Parliament, a place where I have seen a few silly stunts, but that one was up there with all of them. We need to repair and restore our social, physical and economic environments. We need to work with stakeholders to revitalise our CBDs to create jobs. We need a clean environment. We need jobs—regional jobs plan with targets for local jobs, local skills, local industry. We need regional integrated transport plans and timetables for action. This brings me to customer service. I say to the Minister for Customer Service, "Oh, Minister, I have a long list and I think you may have a rod for your back."

The Hon. Lynda Voltz: I have mine.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: I am sure members on all sides have a long list. I wish him well but I wish the title was "Minister for Public Service". Maybe I am bit old fashioned in that I want service not a commercial engagement with my public services. When I go to renew my licence, I do not consider I am a customer but a member of the public accessing a service, albeit a mandatory one for which I pay a fee, generally, if I want to drive on public roads. I expect a service, not a commercial exchange as I do when I am getting fuel for the car, getting my hair done or shopping for clothes and groceries—that is when I am a customer.

How does the notion of public service fit into customer service? It galls me when I get called a customer or client when accessing health services. I am not shopping for an opinion, a diagnosis, a cure, medicine or treatment; I am seeking a service. I am a patient and I hope to get some good medical help by way of investigation or treatment. I say "me" to reflect the concerns of my community expressed to me regarding these issues and to state that I share their sentiments. There is also a gutting of public services. We cannot have customer service or public service if public services are gutted as they have been, with the loss of extension for farmers and the loss of public service jobs—there are about five people in Forestry to oversee the regulation from Newcastle to the border. The two have to go hand in hand. I have a long list—I will not share it today, but I will over the next four years. I have plenty of time to do that.

This brings me to the challenge of ice use in my local community. Members would have seen Lismore in the news about ice—everybody would have. The member for Ballina certainly would have because it is an issue in communities right across the north of the State—many other communities; it is not just us. We have a serious problem with ice in Lismore and some surrounding areas. It is destroying families and the lives of addicts. It is highly addictive, takes people down a path of self-destruction and affects the lives of all around them. We already have a body of work and some evidence about the extent and nature of the problem and some approaches to respond.

There was a Legislative Council committee inquiry into the provision of drug rehabilitation services in regional, rural and remote New South Wales. That committee came up with some really well researched evidence and recommendations, so do not tell me that those committees do not do some good work! The Government response to that committee report was issued by the Hon. Brad Hazzard. Many people in Lismore and Tenterfield, in my electorate, tendered submissions to that inquiry. There has also been a report by the Lismore City Council's committee on social justice and crime prevention. That report has not yet been made public. There is a large body of work which speaks to this issue. There has been a Commonwealth Government inquiry into crystal methamphetamine, or ice, and I hope meet with members of that committee quite soon; I am trying to arrange it now.

As those in the know say, we cannot arrest our way out of this problem. Yet we try. It is a bit like playing a broken record. We fight the war on drugs, yet it boils down to a fight with addicts, young users and people like those in my electorate who are taking cannabis for medical reasons. A cannabis user cannot drive, either, as the presence of it in their system is the element of the crime—unlike drink driving, where the crime is linked to a measurable amount of alcohol which indicates impairment. We need to take these issues seriously as we sip our shiraz and chardonnay—the drugs of choice for us older ones. I find taking drugs pointless, but society has been at it since pre-literate times and I cannot see abstinence being taken up any time soon.

We also have a problem with young people being criminalised for taking their drug of choice, cannabis. I know that no-one is up to the challenge on this, but these challenges, left unchecked, will intensify. I know that it was the Opposition's plan to convene a drug summit in this place, but good ideas should not be discarded. I seek leave to have the "Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan: New Priorities, New Energy, and the Right Priorities: 2019" incorporated in *Hansard*

The SPEAKER: I indicate that under Standing Order 271 you can incorporate the document you sought leave to incorporate.

Leave granted.

Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan: New Priorities, New Energy, and the Right Priorities: 2019

I have a local plan and Labor has a state-wide plan.

My Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan will bring new energy and new Priorities to our communities, to ensure they are economically and environmentally sustainable to maintain and enhance our quality of life.

My Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan will deliver better frontline services and opportunities to our health and hospitals, schools, universities, rebuild TAFE, create jobs, and revitalise our CBDs, so our young people can see and have a future.

My Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan will see the rollout of renewables, the repair of our rivers, secure our water and take real action on Climate Change.

My Lismore Electorate Renewal Plan incorporates Labor's stated priorities about a fairer NSW including jobs for the region, health and education services, attacking the cost of living rises, action on affordable housing and homelessness, re-regulating and capping electricity prices, accelerating the transition to renewables, and stopping the sale of NSW under the Liberals and Nationals.

If I am elected as our Member for the Lismore Electorate, my Lismore Renewal Electorate Plan will deliver on the right priorities. The Nationals have not and will not deliver or lead change that is needed. The Greens have some worthy visions but cannot deliver them. Labor in Government can and will deliver on the right priorities. It is a party of progress and renewal; the party that leads change to ensure the community is included in the new ways needed of working and living. And always about jobs.

My advocacy for our communities will be fearless, gutsy and informed by my extensive successful experience of getting things done, even the hard things. Think Water Trigger Legislation that I was instrumental in delivering at Federal level, to protect our water from Coal Seam Gas and Coal mining. Given that it is primarily a State issue it required skilful advocacy to get Federal action. I secured that well aided by overwhelming community advocacy imploring me to do something at Federal level.

My advocacy will bring local action on renewables, protection for koalas, clean water, water security, decent roads for our electric cars and of course better health and hospitals and education including TAFE places, courses and teachers. It will mean a Sustainable Food Plan that will strengthen our region's growing food and fibre reputation.

My plan and Labor's plan will build on our historical agricultural base, that now includes a service base - health, education and construction and a lively and growing arts culture. We need to wrap a strong economic plan around this base. We need jobs and sustainable jobs. Our Snowy Hydro's Chifley's three principles can enable this. To give this vision some teeth I shall work to realise a range of actions and roll out of policies, that I have already articulated.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Thank you for your indulgence. I was at the Drug Summit in 1999 in this place. It worked. It brought a whole community together. The Parliament worked at its best when it came together to tackle hard issues—and they are hard issues for many members. Politics was at play and the art of compromise was the order of the day. I want the Government, and indeed the Parliament, to consider this.

We once held a Homelessness Summit in the New South Wales Parliament. The summit was held by former Speaker Kevin Rozzoli—a wonderful man—Ian Cohen, MLC, and me. The Governor graced us and opened it. We did make some advances and we can do this again. Were our parties happy at the outset? Not entirely. Three members of Parliament, acting as parliamentarians, held the summit, but everybody came on board, including the members of the minor parties. It is often said that there is a difference between the major parties and the minor parties. Some of my friends in The Greens talk about the two major parties being the tired, old parties, as though The Greens members can rightfully claim to have a perfect party. Please, that is not true. We should not denigrate each other's parties. Denigrate policies, not parties. All of us come from strong traditions and we should show respect to every member in every party.

The Coalition generally defends the status quo while Labor advances change. That is not 100 per cent true in either case, but the difference is clearly seen during elections. I come from a tradition of progressive politics, and that has delivered pensions, child endowment, publicly funded schools, public hospitals, Medicare, Landcare, home care and disability care. I shall digress here to opine on the axing of Disability Services in New South Wales with the advent of the NDIS, a potentially great program that just needs funding properly. To improve peoples' lives here in New South Wales—including in my electorate of Lismore—the Government needs to provide, at the very least, disability advocacy.

I cannot hope to say all that needs to be said today, but I treat this speech as the start of a conversation about improving the lives of the people of the Lismore electorate and making a difference. We need to have more conversations in this place on issues we all care about. We need to come together as a community of MPs as we represent our respective constituencies. We need to make the committee system work and we need to properly resource the alternative government, the Opposition and some minor parties. I say this not for some self-serving purpose, but for the larger purpose of maintaining a healthy democracy. People struggle and fight wars to get freedom that can come through a democratic state. We need to protect and preserve our freedoms and that means proper scrutiny of our legislation and regulations in this place. We can do it; are we up to the challenge?

That brings me to my work at the international level through practising being a good neighbour. As Reverend Tim Costello has said, "Charity begins at home, but does not have to stop there." Indeed! I helped form the New South Wales Parliament's Asia Pacific Friendship Group, which I see is still going strong. I hope that we can establish a Friends of the United Nations Association of Australia [UNAA] as well. I will work with the Speaker to advance this and the NSW UNAA branch.

Some members will know that I have worked in Timor-Leste or East Timor, as we know it affectionately. I supported their long and costly struggle for freedom, in which more than one-third of the population perished. I supported them in their long struggle to rightfully get title to their resources in the Timor Sea. We were not good neighbours at government level on both scores—all of us. I am pleased to say that I was there for the advent of their freedom and the advent of their massive win in securing a median line boundary in the Timor Sea. It still needs to go through the Australian Parliament and I hope that, as my close friend and colleague Nobel Peace Prize laureate José Ramos-Horta says, Australia shall be generous and give the money they are still reaping during this delay of ratification. I can see the member for Liverpool nodding; we have some commonality on that issue.

I became expert in freedom struggles, the United Nations, international affairs and the law of the sea. The technical expertise of itself may not seem transferable to my role as a local MP, but it is. I know how to fight to win—and that is a plus—and I know a thing or two about what works in government and what peoples' needs are. I am on the United Nations Development Programme express roster as a parliamentary affairs and governance expert, having done some solid work in Myanmar's Union Parliament. I am gradually working in their State and Region Parliaments, of which there are 14. I intend to continue some of this engagement, albeit on a modest scale. I can do more than one thing at a time, do it well and not neglect my home duties. For those of you interested, please discuss it with me. I still stand with my other close friend and colleague Aung San Suu Kyi, whose task is massive and probably mostly incomprehensible to those who have not lived under military dictatorship. It is akin to trying to turn around a jumbo jet midstream in a few seconds.

In conclusion, before I turn to my thankyou's, I can recount that MPs have three key roles: They are constituency, parliamentary and party, in that order or, for Independent MPs, frequently a strong community support group. To be a good MP, one needs the passion of an activist—and it should not be dulled by this place; it should be enhanced—the skill of an advocate and the disposition of a diplomat. Fortunately, I have all three, have used them to great effect and will use them to great effect through this place to make a difference in the lives of people in the Lismore electorate. I have a few thankyou's and I will go fast. Kevin Rudd came to Murwillumbah to support me and will be here with me in the next sitting week—thank you, Kevin. Tanya Plibersek opened my campaign. Isn't she wonderful? We love Tanya and Penny Wong—intelligent at every level, informed, strategic, caring and much more.

Carmel Cook and Ronny Susanto were my campaign manager and campaign director, which sounds fancy but they did the hard slog, day in and day out. Carmel was with me every step of the way, including early mornings, and is still here with me as senior electorate officer [SEO]. When we came here some people commented on our ages. I did not say it then; I am 64—younger than some members in this place. Carmel is soon to be 71, so she might be the oldest SEO. She can wear that title. I thank my husband, Jim Gallagher, who turned up every day in the campaign office. I thank Ian Cook; door knockers extraordinaire Shaen Springall, Michelle Bobbin, Gil Wilson, Zoey Bull, Harry Gregg, Aurora Ihalainen, Eli McLean, Dylan Varis, Jack Budgeon and team; Jenny Dowell, Naomi Worrall, Darlene Cook, Glenys Ritchie, Cassie Barnes, Owen Kirk and family, Kylie Rose, Inge Stainlay, Joe McErlean; branch members and supporters; the local branch of the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, Health Services Union, Electrical Trades Union and the United Services Union.

I thank also Joel Fitzgibbon; Mark Butler; Penny Sharpe and Adam Searle, who are in the gallery today; Walt Secord; Lynda Voltz, who made her inaugural speech in this Chamber yesterday; Mick Veitch; Michael Daley, who rang and apologised for not being here today; Jenny Aitchison; John Graham; Troy Swan; John Gunston; Ian and Marianne MacRitchie; Nathan and Sandie Willis; Oan Gasorn; John Redmayne; and many others who helped with my campaign. I was looking around the Chamber for which shadow Ministers visited: I thank Jodi McKay for her good work on roads and bridges. I thank Marg Barden, Charmaine Murphy, Heather Ryan, Katrina Johnson, Emily Green, Jade Hanlon and Jaxson Wilson.

Mr Speaker, I have more people to thank but I shall have other opportunities to do so. I again thank the Speaker for his indulgence in allowing me to incorporate my plan into my first speech and for granting me the extra time. I thank all members in the Chamber for their courtesy in listening to my inaugural speech. I look forward to working with all my colleagues to improve the lives of every citizen in New South Wales.

Members stood in their places and applauded.

The SPEAKER: I join the House in congratulating the member for Lismore on her inaugural speech in this Chamber.