



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 22 February 2017.

Mr PHILIP DONATO (Orange) (13:04): It is a great privilege and honour for me to stand in this Chamber today to deliver my speech to this House as the newly elected member for Orange. I welcome back all members from the Christmas break and look forward to a productive, healthy and no doubt challenging year ahead. I extend my congratulations to the newly appointed Premier, the Deputy Premier and Ministers. I also acknowledge my predecessor, Mr Andrew Gee, MP, for his valuable contribution to this place during his time representing the people of Orange. I wish him well for his future in Federal Parliament. I extend special congratulations also to both Mr Scully and Ms Cotsis on their respective victories. Whilst in no way diminishing the significance of their campaigns, I think they will agree that most of the focus was on Orange on the weekend of 12 November.

In 1995 the Shooters Party, as it was then, elected its first-ever parliamentarian, the Hon. John Tingle, to the Legislative Council. Today, I stand in this Chamber as the first representative of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party in the Legislative Assembly. To be honest, this is not a speech I thought I would have the privilege of delivering. I had never dreamed of being in the position in which I now stand. An unexpected opportunity presented itself and I embraced it, welcoming a new challenge with great enthusiasm and optimism. I embarked upon an old-fashioned bootlace campaign. The campaign was heavily reported on, inviting significant media commentary.

To quote radio broadcaster Ray Hadley from an interview in which I participated with him when my campaign was first announced, he stated regarding my chances of winning the by-election, "It would be a herculean task to win this by-election." It is now well-documented that our party's victory is historically significant and record breaking. This is the first time since World War II that the Country-National Party had not retained the seat of Orange, a period spanning almost 70 years, back to 1947—a seat that was one of the longest held National Party seats in this State. Our party obtained unprecedented, history-making and record-breaking swings—swings of up to 60 per cent in some booths, especially in and around the Cabonne local government area. It has been reported that this win was the biggest swing in New South Wales political history, and has been referred to as the "The Donato swing".

My story, which led me here, begins with my grandfather who, like most humble migrants from Italy, came here nearly a century ago in the early 1920s with nothing but a suitcase of clothing and a dream for a new beginning for his family in what was then, and still is, the best country in the world. My parents, Luciano and Maria, who in a couple of months' time will celebrate their fifty-second wedding anniversary, co-owned a fruit shop, Donato's Fruit Market, in partnership with my Uncle Frank and Auntie Grace in Chester Hill for 35 years. My family all worked hard in the fruit shop. It was long and tiring work, but I look back on it with fondness, as it was there that I learnt to appreciate the value and ethic of hard work and family unity.

Following high school I commenced university studies but I quickly realised that university was not the right fit for me. I eventually dropped out of my course and undertook an apprenticeship. Trying to offset the low apprentice wages, I worked behind bars and in restaurants to get me through each week. A fortunate conversation with a close friend a few years later saw me joining the NSW Police Force. This was a career that spanned half my life. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the "cops", which I will turn to later. I met and worked with some great people, some of whom are in the public gallery today, and one who sits in this Chamber, the member for Seven Hills. In fact, it is in the NSW Police Force that I also met my beautiful wife, Nadia.

As many tree-changers do, my wife Nadia and I yearned for a move to rural New South Wales for a better upbringing for our young family, to downsize our mortgage and to pursue a rural community lifestyle. I have been based in Orange for the past 12 years, after successfully obtaining a transfer in early 2005. In this time, my family and I have been actively involved in the local community. I have coached hundreds of kids over the years through our family's involvement in cricket, soccer, AFL and rugby union. Nadia and I have been married for 20 years and together we have five sons: twins Daniel and James, 19; Peter, who will be 18 in two days; Mathew, 16; and Sean, 13. Nadia and I are incredibly proud of all of them. They have grown up into fine young men and I guess one could



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say I wanted to make sure the Donato name lived on. Like all parents we committed ourselves to giving our children the best education and possibilities in life, often involving personal sacrifices. I am proud to be able to share this moment with them here today, to show my children that with hard work, self-belief and loyalty anything is possible.

As I stated before, for half my life I have worked in the NSW Police Force, a great and honourable organisation. My policing career began in the mid-90s working general duties across Liverpool, Macquarie Fields and later Wollongong. In 1997 I was seconded as part of Operation Puccini to Cabramatta which was, at the time, the heroin capital of Australia after the assassination of local MP, Mr John Newman. Alongside many brave police men and women I was tasked with combating the vicious gangs in the area. I observe firsthand the fear these gangs instilled in local businesses and communities through their violent robberies, home invasions, illicit drug supply and extortion.

I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Commissioner's Citation for my work at Cabramatta during those months. This concept of community-based policing was embraced by the locals. The assistance provided was invaluable. The whole experience had a profound impact on my life and it went a great way towards making inroads into crushing the illicit drug trade in Cabramatta. As any experienced street cop will tell you, there are many times of desperation and despair on the front line, on a daily basis responding to traumatic and devastating events, including domestic violence assaults, grieving parents and fatal motor vehicle accidents. These were some of the hardest days in the force and I thank every officer for their duty to the State because I understand how tough it can get sometimes. After six years on the front line and with a young family it was time for a change.

One of the luxuries of the NSW Police Force is the flexibility of the role. My interest in law and victim protection led me to the Police Prosecutions Branch in 2001. Over the past 16 years I have prosecuted thousands of criminal cases across metropolitan and regional New South Wales. The highlight of my prosecuting career was in early 2016 whilst acting as the Senior Prosecutor at Orange, along with Senior Constable Riley—Canobolas Local Area Command achieved the highest Local Court successful prosecution rate in the State, testament to Superintendent Cribb and his hardworking staff.

I turn now to the beautiful electorate which I call home. A city of rich geological history, Orange is a picturesque town nestled in the foothills of Mount Canobolas, a prehistoric volcano, which is what makes our area such fertile agricultural land. It is a vibrant and energetic regional city. It has become a hub for agriculture, education, health, mining and an ever-increasingly popular food and wine industry. North of Orange lies the community of Molong and surrounding villages that make up the Cabonne Council area. The people of Cabonne, many of whom I met during my campaign, are salt of the earth, loyal, tough, hardworking, fair-minded people that one would expect from such a proud regional community.

Then there is the town of Parkes, famous for its Elvis Festival held each January that celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary this year and that I attended. It is a great event that brings thousands of tourists and millions of dollars to the local community. There is also the Parkes Observatory and the logistics hub. To the north of Parkes lies Peak Hill and to the west Bogan Gate, Trundle and Tullamore—all great agricultural towns. To the south of Parkes lies Forbes, a town rich in primary production and bushranger history on the fertile banks of the Lachlan River, and Jemalong irrigation country.

As great as our electorate is, there are many areas where we have fallen behind that I will prosecute in my time in this Chamber. These issues go to the heart of what our electorate expects from government: accessible health care, better education outcomes and protecting and growing jobs whilst improving roads and infrastructure. It should not be forgotten that people do live beyond the Great Dividing Range. In Orange there is not enough parking at our hospital and we do not have a



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dedicated palliative care ward. The closure of Myer and Electrolux and a mining downturn have meant that our whole community has suffered through job losses.

Recently Forbes was hit with some of the most devastating floods in its history, which caused the closure of the Newell Highway for more than six weeks—a highway that is yet to be flood-proofed. The inland rail solution has remained somewhat in limbo and is a project that I would like to see completed before my time is up here. With a renewed focus on major capital works projects and infrastructure building, I am confident this would reduce unemployment in our area. Our education and early childhood indicators are generally below the State average and we need more funding delivered into the schools to lift these benchmarks. I would like to see expansion of the Charles Sturt University School of Medicine, encouraging local medical students to train and remain in the Central West to provide additional professional health care to a growing and ageing population.

The state of some of our roads is embarrassing, something I got to experience during my campaign, touring the 17,000 square kilometre electorate. This will be a key area that I will seek to address. Sadly, 2016 also saw a rise in fatal motor vehicle accidents in our area in what has become a stain on New South Wales statistics. Anyone who has been affected or who has had the misfortune of witnessing such a tragedy will understand the trauma it causes families and loved ones. As such, I will campaign for the introduction of a mandatory driver education program, similar to that of a traffic offenders program, as a component of a person's learner's licence. I have witnessed this program work and its impact on attendees has been significant and long lasting. We should be harnessing the collective wisdom of police, ambulance officers, solicitors, injured persons and even offenders to impart their experiences on those learning how to drive. If this helps to save one life, it has to be a success.

We need to make it as easy as possible to be employed and encourage people to better their own communities. We need to provide the best possible and accessible health care, education and transport. Most importantly, we need to remember that NSW does not just stand for Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. Regional New South Wales needs and demands its fair share. Collectively, we need to develop options to encourage the relocation and decentralisation of people and government agencies. The equation is simple: people will flock to areas with work, transport and entertainment.

There is no reason why Sydneysiders, particularly young families, would not move to regional cities and towns if there are good jobs, good transport, affordable housing and a great lifestyle. I think my own family's situation is a classic example. If the same were occurring in Sydney, there would be riots in the streets. But the people of Orange have rioted. They have elected me! My campaign slogan, "Orange deserves better", is as relevant now as it was then. During the course of the campaign Orange did, in fact, get better. More than \$300 million in Federal and State government funding was announced in what I later learnt was colloquially referred to as "pork-barrelling". I will be cynical enough to go on the record and state that if The Nationals did not think they would retain the seat, some of these funding announcements would still be in the trays of the Ministers' printers. Now, as the member for Orange, I will hold this Government to account for every last cent of its promises.

I am not so naïve as to not recognise that my election to this place was largely affected by two key policy decisions of this Government: the greyhound ban and forced council amalgamations. In and of themselves, these decisions are poor, particularly as they hurt regional communities. But it is not just the decisions themselves that are significant; it is what they represent—an arrogant and out of touch Government. They were a reflection on poor government decision-making. To think that the people of New South Wales would just roll over and cop something like that is as ignorant as it is dangerous. Now I, like the majority of members, had no vested interest in greyhound racing when the decision was announced to shut down the industry via Facebook by former Premier Mike Baird. I distinctly remember listening to the *Big Sports Breakfast* program early one morning when the ban was announced and thinking: Why?



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The vast majority of greyhound owners are law-abiding, responsible citizens. I asked myself: Why was the Government punishing the collective majority for the actions of a few? It did not seem just, fair or reasonable. In fact, quite the opposite. It smacked of an inner city decision made by elitist, out-of-touch politicians at the expense of regional communities and jobs. I was then reliably updated on the context of the decision. Instead of intervening to right wrongs and inject some fairness into the inequitable inter-code agreement, including adopting the recommendations of an upper House inquiry chaired by the Hon. Robert Borsak, the Government shut down this significant and established industry. Thankfully, the industry is saved from extinction, for now, and I will work to ensure that the reversal is effected as soon as possible.

The same can be said for council amalgamations. While the Coalition Government was promising regional communities and towns that there would be no forced amalgamations, it was doing the exact opposite in Macquarie Street. For many regional areas, local government is often the largest employer and provider of services. Many councils that were facing the prospect of amalgamation had passed the Government's Fit for the Future test. So we had the position of government setting a benchmark and then refusing to acknowledge that the benchmark had been reached. As with the greyhound decision, I will ensure that the Government's abandonment of this policy is not just hot air. I will fight for the independence of Orange, Cabonne and Blayney shire councils, as well as all those councils that do not want to be amalgamated.

I will continue to represent and advocate for the interests of all shooters, fishers and farmers, as do my upper House colleagues, the Hon. Robert Brown and the Hon. Robert Borsak. It will come as no surprise that I own and use firearms for sport shooting and hunting. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a family that hunted and fished. I learnt from family elders valuable lifelong skills and a deep respect for the environment. Apprehension seems to exist among some members in this Chamber that the election of a Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party representative will usher in a new era of dangerous and lawless weaponry in our State. Nothing could be further from the truth and there is no reason for such apprehension.

Nothing in the party's policy suggests it supports the criminal misuse of firearms. It is a fact that target shooting and hunting remain some of the safest recreational activities in this State. Reasonable firearms policy, based on fact and sound logic rather than vicious propaganda, is a sign of a mature government. Unfortunately, in that respect, this Government has been very immature. As a former prosecutor, I am experienced in dealing with facts and evidence. I know firsthand that the vast majority of firearms crimes are not committed by licensed firearms owners. Logic dictates then that the Government should focus the vast majority of its finite time and resources on curbing the illegal firearms trade and tougher sentencing measures. Instead, successive governments have spent more than a billion dollars on targeting law-abiding firearms owners.

I also thoroughly enjoy fishing, and I support the advancement and sustainability of fishing in New South Wales. Fishers, as with hunters, have become victims of green bureaucracy gone mad. The facts and statistics are ignored with the ever-expanding creation of marine parks and the extension of sanctuary zones without proper scientific study. Best practice fishing management recognises the importance of reciprocal communication between fishers, scientists and governments for managing and detecting declines in vulnerable species and appreciating the economic benefit of fishing. I find this to be the sad state of affairs in government policy. It is indicative of the approach this place has taken to issues that those at the top of power do not like or understand: the response is to ban or restrict it until it becomes someone else's problem. One of my concerns is what happens to farmers and the agricultural industry when this sort of politics is practised on them. Farmers deserve a government that supports them fully in policy and principle. They, too, have felt increasingly misrepresented, unheard and maligned by the Government.

The Orange electorate is considered a food basket both nationally and internationally. It grows and exports food, vegetables, raw material and meat through world's best practice agriculture and primary production. Farmers already have enough to deal with during their day, so it is critical that we



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recognise the issues they face early and address them as a matter of priority. Farming has been at the forefront of this nation's economic and cultural development, and it should be at the forefront of this Government's agenda for regional New South Wales. This Parliament must redress policies that hurt farmers.

Government must develop processes to help farmers manage their properties that will ensure they can get on with the job they do best for many generations to come. Farmers must be protected from unreasonable and impracticable government decision-making, including limiting green and red tape. The rise of extreme green groups and animal liberationists threatens the future of farming as we know it. There has been no consistent response from government. These groups cannot be dismissed. A protective framework must be developed in practice and in principle against this vocal minority. I acknowledge the work of the current Minister for Primary Industries and the inroads he has made in these areas thus far. After all, farmers feed us and put clothes on our back.

I conclude by thanking the people that helped get me here today in an amazing team effort. First, the Hon. Robert Brown and the Hon. Robert Borsak provided and continue to provide support to an otherwise inexperienced politician. You mentored me, providing expert advice and guidance throughout this journey. For this, I am so very grateful. To Filip Despotoski, State Director of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, who unfortunately cannot be here today, I thank you for the guidance, knowledge, support and expertise you have exhibited—far greater than your age would suggest. I thank the party executive for the level of support and trust placed in me. I will not let you down. To John Townsend, thank you for your invaluable media and information technology advice and support. I thank Robert Despotoski, Stephen and Christine Bowler, Stephen Larsson, Senada Bjelic, Peter Chambers, Carl Smith, Emma Bradford, and John Preston for their support and assistance.

I thank Brett Cooke for his unwavering friendship, support and loyalty and Philippa Walker, Tina Skrtic, Don Mahoney and Rebecca Hawkins for their assistance. I thank Ray Hawkins and Matt Shearim of Bullets and Bits gun shop in Orange for their encouragement. I am grateful to the greyhound owners and industry representatives who travelled from far and wide to help man pre-poll and polling booths on election day. To Jon Russell and his fellow members of the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association, I extend my sincere appreciation for your invaluable contribution.

I thank Will Tuck, Phil Jenkyn and the many other passionate supporters from Save Our Councils. I thank and make special mention of Jessica and Andrew Coombs, Mick Madden, Graeme Kelly and Stephen Hughes from the United Services Union, Mark Buttegieg from the Electrical Trades Union, Brock Skelton from the Australian Workers' Union, Mark Morey and Salim Barber from Unions NSW, Kaila Murnain, Rose Jackson, Jay Suvaal, Oliver Plunkett and everyone else who assisted with scrutineering every ballot paper eight times.

Special mention must be made of Mr Ray Hadley and Mr Alan Jones for the public support they showed, not only to me but also to the regions of New South Wales in giving a voice to those who otherwise would not be heard, or that the Government refused to hear. I am truly grateful and appreciative. To the party members across the country who donated their time and money to help me win the election: You are the backbone of our great party and without you it would be nothing.

To my lifelong friends of over three decades—Damien Benson, Michael Coorey and Arturo Alibrandi—I thank you for your support, loyalty, encouragement, humour and advice over these years. I thank my parents, Maria and Lou, for their steadfast support and unconditional love all my life. I do not think they ever imagined I would one day deliver this speech in this place. Thank you to my sister, Josie, and brother-in-law, Gary Sanders, for their love, support and sage advice.

To the people of the Orange electorate who placed their trust in me, I am truly humbled and thankful. Rest assured I will do my best each and every day to represent, fight and advocate for you all. To my sons, Peter, Mathew and Sean, thank you for your patience and understanding during the



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recent periods of lengthy absence. I thank Daniel and James, who answered the call to help out their old man by manning booths at Yeoval, and for bringing their teammates from Easts Rugby Club with them. Thank you.

Lastly, to my beautiful wife, Nadia: You have been by my side for the past 20 years. The love, support, and encouragement you have given me is more than I could ever have asked for. For this, I am truly grateful. I finish on the following note. The Government of the day has the mandate to run this State. I will not obstruct it in exercising this mandate. However, as my upper House colleagues have demonstrated in the other place, I will obstruct, I will protest and, as members can probably already tell, I will not hold back any punches if the people of Orange are getting a raw deal from this Government.

Despite the sentiment that may exist opposite, it is a mature party, with goals and policies equal in maturity. I will learn the ropes pretty quickly, and the newness of the job will not deter me in my commitment to put the interests of my constituents above all else. Last week I walked into this Chamber alone as the sole member of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party in the Legislative Assembly. In two years time, I plan on having the honour of ushering others in with me. Thank you.