

INAUGURAL SPEECH

The PRESIDENT: Before I ask the Hon. Wes Fang to commence his speech, I remind all honourable members that the Hon. Wes Fang is about to be make his first speech in this place. I ask members to extend to him the usual courtesies. I also take this opportunity to welcome into my gallery members of the Hon. Wes Fang's family, all of whom are in the House today for the member's first speech. They include his wife, Dr Natalie Snyman; his mother, Mrs Zanette Fang; his mother-in-law, Mrs Elizabeth Snyman; and, of course, his three beautiful children, Caspar, Atticus, and Audrey. I also acknowledge the Deputy Premier and members from the other place. I take this opportunity to acknowledge two of our former members: the Hon. Duncan Gay and the Hon. Jenny Gardiner.

The Hon. WES FANG (17:38): After I was preselected to fill the casual vacancy in this place, the NSW Nationals released a short article about my selection. It was titled "The boy from Uranquinty". It was a rather apt title, as despite all the things I have done throughout my career, I still see myself as a boy from Uranquinty. I often wonder how it came to pass that I stand here, in the Legislative Council, as a representative and proud member of the NSW Nationals. Never in his wildest dreams did that boy from a small village just outside Wagga Wagga ever imagine he would be standing here today.

The story of my journey starts well before I was born. I guess it really begins when a young Zanette Smith, a girl from West Wyalong, arrived in Singapore in the early 1970s after she had enlisted in the Australian Army. She was deployed to Singapore to join a detachment as a signals operator. My mother had a friend, also in the army, who wanted to buy a motorbike to get around the island. They decided to head to the best motorcycle store in Singapore, which happened to be Looi's motors. In the store worked a dashing young mechanic, who also happened to be one of Singapore's champion motorcycle racers and a pretty damn good chef. The store also happened to be owned by this young man's father—and the House will note further on that child employment is a common generational theme in this story.

When mum returned to Australia, dad followed. Dad's immigration was not without problems. He had a kidney issue and could not pass the medical, but, after having numerous knockbacks, dad had a friend hide in the bathroom of the medical centre in Singapore to take his urine test for him. He passed. When securing his visa for Australia proved difficult, it was helpful that my grandmother used to be Al Grassby's secretary. As he was the then immigration Minister, dad was soon on his way. They originally settled in Sydney, but the fast-paced life did not really suit either of them, so they moved to Wagga Wagga. They purchased a bare quarter-acre block in the village of Uranquinty, about 10 minutes from Wagga Wagga. They built a small house and set about making a home.

By the time they sold the house in 1996, they had turned the bare block into an oasis and it was as tropical as Singapore—or at least as much as the harsh Wagga climate would allow. I was born in December 1977. My sister, Kylie, was born not long after. We had an exceptionally happy childhood. I often describe it as a humble upbringing, but always feeling rich. My sister and I never wanted for anything, which was a feat my parents achieved without us realising. If we were out for dinner and I had finished my meal but was still hungry, my dad would say how full he was and give me what he had not finished. It was not until much later on in life that I realised he was not full but he was giving it to me so that I did not have to go without.

We were also privileged by having an exceptional education. We were both products of Uranquinty Public School and Mount Austin High School. While they may not have the reputation of some of the more prestigious schools, what they lacked in facilities they made up for in dedication. To say I was a good student would probably be a gross exaggeration. While I was in high school my parents came back from a parent-teacher interview and said that two comments stood out. The first one was the PE teacher saying "Oh, you're Wes' parents. I pity you". Needless to say, at 125 kilos I was not exactly a superstar at physical education. The second comment was my chemistry teacher saying, "Wes is so lazy he would marry a pregnant woman."

I was not too worried about the comments as I had begun to develop a fairly thick skin while growing up. As I am sure everyone can imagine, as a fat Asian kid in regional New South Wales during the eighties and nineties, I copped a fair amount of ribbing from other children. Kids can be cruel, especially to people who are different—even slightly different. It took a while, but I finally learned to ignore the comments and let them wash over me. In so many ways, I now see this as a strength, especially in this new role and—as my wife sometimes observes—it was perhaps a motivator for me. Those days also taught me the value of real friendships and lifelong friends, some of whom are here today. I have never been one to have hundreds of friends or to surround myself with an entourage. In

fact, I quite often enjoy a little bit of solitude. However, the friendships I formed at school, at university and throughout my career are so valuable. They are undoubtedly part of the reason I am in this place. Those friends know who they are, they know the role they have played, and they know how much I thank them for helping me on my journey.

I was probably considered an average student because I spent most of my time outside of school with dad, working in restaurants. It would be no surprise to anyone who understands our culture to hear that the eldest son of an Asian chef would be working alongside him in the kitchen. I look back now and realise two things. The first is that I learned the value of hard work. Both my mother and father had an incredible work ethic and it was this that saw them succeed later in life. The second is how valuable that time with dad was. I can tell the House something else: Just when you think you have reached the bottom of the bag and peeled the last potato, there is always another bag.

Despite not being the best student, I had the help of many wonderful teachers. There are too many to name individually, but, again, they know who they are and I thank every one of them. Without them, I would not be here today. I was fortunate never to be pressured by my parents but for one simple rule: "You will go to university". I was the first member of my family to go to university, and while these days we do not always advocate for everyone to seek a tertiary education, I have no doubt of the enormous influence this edict has on my life. After school I started a science degree at the University of Sydney. I soon decided that life in a white lab coat was not for me, so I transferred to the University of New South Wales and completed a degree in aviation and also gained a fixed-wing commercial pilot licence.

While most of my compatriots went on to successful careers in the airlines or corporate aviation, I decided to follow a different path. I wanted a career helping people, so I joined the Australian Army as a pilot. If I have to choose a pivotal moment in my life, it would have to be this. It was in the army that I learned to grow up and accept personal responsibility. While I understood friendship, I learned the value of esprit de corps and the meaning of mateship. I was a specialist service officer, which meant we did an abridged course at Duntroon. While we did not have the in-depth knowledge of a regular army officer, as one of my instructors said, "With the uniform on, you cannot tell the difference, so you have to conduct yourself the same way".

I completed Duntroon, then went on to Tamworth to complete the fixed-wing tri-service course. It was brutal and we lost more than half of our course mates by the time we had finished. It was then off to Oakey in Queensland to commence helicopter school at the School of Army Aviation. I completed the helicopter conversion course and then the helicopter tactics course on the Kiowa. I graduated, along with my five other course mates, and, in what I would count as one of my proudest achievements in life, we earned our "wings". I was selected to transition to the Blackhawk.

I completed the Blackhawk conversion course, and then it was on to the final tactics course before becoming fully operational. However, during the regimental officers basic course we soon discovered that I could not fly the Blackhawk using night vision goggles, particularly formation flying. It is fair to say it is a somewhat important skill for a Blackhawk pilot, but despite numerous attempts and incredible support from the army, it is something I just could not do. To say I was devastated is an understatement, but I made the decision that I wanted to continue flying and making a difference in people's lives. When I am asked to speak at an event, I will often use this example to highlight the acceptance of setbacks or disappointment, and not letting it stop you achieving your goals.

With the help of my commanding officer at the time, I transitioned my military qualifications to a civilian licence. I landed at Child Flight, flying its rescue helicopters. This was possibly the best job I will ever have. Not only did I have the opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young children and their families by bringing critical care to remote and regional areas of New South Wales, but also it gifted me one of the most important things in my life—my wife. Nat was a doctor in the back of the helicopter, and because each other's story of how we first met differs, I will not recount it now for the record. I did so on our wedding day and she has never forgiven me. It was not until more than a year after we first met that we started dating. She is a slow learner and I am a patient man. It has become a handy skill in our relationship. But I digress.

We moved back to Wagga Wagga in 2008. Nat had the opportunity to become a consultant paediatrician and I relished the chance to be closer to Mum and Dad and to try my hand at small business while still working at Child Flight. I became involved in politics after we moved back to Wagga and just after our first son was born. Being responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of another generation really focuses the mind and it is what drove me to become involved. I chose The Nats for one simple reason: Unlike most other political parties, we are a party based on geography, not philosophy. I am someone who grew up and again resides in a regional community, with family living in

rural and regional areas across New South Wales. I believe the party, whose sole purpose is ensuring those communities are represented in Parliament and receive their fair share, is the one that is best placed to represent us.

There is no escaping a strong belief amongst many in the electorates that we are the party for farmers and rural communities—and we are. But we are so much more than that. In so many ways, the face of modern rural and regional Australia is changing. More young professionals are calling the regions home, and so too are increasing numbers of families from different ethnic backgrounds. Regional Australia is becoming increasingly broad and diverse. In so many ways my family and I represent this change—two professionals, one born overseas and the other with a mixed heritage, who choose to raise their family in regional New South Wales, away from the city.

I am the first to admit that I am far from the stereotypical National Party representative, but in diversity lies political resilience. I am proud of the fact that I am the first person of Asian-Chinese heritage to represent the NSW Nationals in this place. I may be the first, but I am certain I will not be the last, and in the same way our regional communities are changing, so too does our party reflect that. I am proud of this increasing diversity within the NSW Nationals and I am pleased to be a part of that change. I am also grateful for the fact that, despite this, our core values and principles have not changed. Our party was built on these tenets and I have no doubt they will hold us in good stead for the future.

I have to thank the people who helped me along my political journey. I must thank all the members of the Wagga Wagga branch of the NSW Nationals, along with the Wagga Wagga State Electoral Council and the Riverina Federal Electoral Council, of which I have had the privilege of being chairman for the past six years. I will not name all the members individually, as I will inevitably forget somebody and it is a rather extensive list. I do, however, want to thank three people in particular: Gretchen Sleeman, Margaret Hill and Barney Hyams, who are the secretary, treasurer and chairman of Wagga Wagga State Electoral Council respectively. They have kept the whole show running in the Riverina for as long as I have been involved and I could not have done it without them.

I also have to thank the NSW Nationals' Central Council, including the past and present members. Members like Ruth Strang, the kind of grassroots supporter our party was founded on, and Andrew Fraser, the wise parliamentary head, are always willing to guide new Central Council members when they start. Thanks must also go to the State directors I have worked with, Ben Franklin and now Nathan Quigley, who was actually my first contact with the party and encouraged me to join, along with the head office staff and volunteers who have provided me guidance throughout my roles within the NSW Nationals. I must also thank Will Coates for agreeing to come and work with me. I am looking forward to all the fantastic things we are going to do together for our community.

I am fortunate to have had a number of political mentors. Michael McCormack suggested I put my hand up for the Riverina chairmanship after he became the member for Riverina. We have always had a fantastic working relationship and we know we can be frank with each other and disagree at times, without it affecting our friendship. His wise counsel is always welcomed. The three chairmen I have served under during my time on the Central Council—Christine Ferguson, Niall Blair and Bede Burke—along with their vice chairs, in particular Grant McMillan and Dom Hopkinson, have always been there to guide and advise me. Jenny Gardiner has always given me wise counsel when I have asked for it or, more often than not, when I have needed it.

I was lucky enough to have been included on a Nationals' leadership program in 2011. I sat next to an amazing young lady on the bus, heading to one of the events in Canberra and we instantly bonded. We formed a friendship that lasts to this day. Her name is Bronnie Taylor and I know that I would not be here without her. I must also thank the Deputy Premier, John Barilaro, as well as his predecessors Troy Grant and Andrew Stoner, along with Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce and Warren Truss, who I have also had the pleasure of knowing. As a Senate candidate last year, Senators Fiona Nash and Wacka Williams dedicated a huge amount of time to supporting me through that process and it was always much appreciated.

I cannot go without mentioning the person whose vacancy I filled. Duncan Gay was a giant of this place and we have developed a friendship and mutual respect over the years. We have not always agreed, but we have always had a respectful debate and he has always been so generous with his time to help me. I know I have to honour his legacy in this place, as well as forging one of my own.

My greatest thanks of all, however, goes to the finest person I have known in politics. She is somebody who has supported me throughout my involvement; not always telling me what I wanted to hear, but what I needed to hear and not being afraid to tell me when I am wrong. It was when she announced her retirement from politics that my involvement started. Our first meeting was the day

before the preselection and I remember it vividly. You have never met somebody who loves their community more, who would fight tooth and nail to ensure they did not miss out and was never afraid to do what is right. I lost that pre-selection convincingly, but Kay Hull and I formed a friendship that is as strong now as ever. She has helped in so many ways, and if I can be half as good at this as she is I think I will do okay. I would not be here without her.

It would be remiss of me to not thank the Clerks and staff in this place who have helped me immensely, as well as my new colleagues whom I have not already mentioned. I include not only The Nats in the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly but also our Liberal partners in Coalition, as well as all other members in this Chamber. I believe, no matter what side of politics we are on, we all put ourselves forward to do this because we are genuinely here to serve our communities. I thank those members from all parties who have welcomed me and I look forward to working with them for however long I serve in this place.

It is often said family is everything. I am lucky to have the most amazingly supportive family to be able to do this. I have no doubt this life is harder for rural and regional members due to the time away from our families. We are so fortunate to have the best supportive network in Wagga Wagga. My mother-in-law, along with my mother, lives three kilometres away from us in the same village. Without her constant help, it would be impossible for my wife and me to hold professional careers. We cannot thank Heila enough for everything she does. The entire Snyman family is here today, and I appreciate the effort they have made and how welcoming they have been to me since I became part of their family.

My grandparents, Daisy and Looi Im Heok in Singapore and Mavis and the late Bill in West Wyalong, provided me the best of both worlds. I was lucky enough to experience both the Australian and Asian cultures when I was growing up, and this has helped to shape me into the person I am today. My aunts and uncles have always been there for me when needed, but in particular I have to thank my dear Aunty Shirley, who had me moving in and out of her house on and off during my university years. She was a very patient lady. My sister, Kylie, is a very special person. In so many ways we could not be more different, yet in many other ways we are the same. She is smart, funny, studious, applied, dedicated and loyal. I will let you choose where we are the same and where we are different, but I am fortunate to have such a wonderful sister.

As I touched on earlier, I was lucky to meet one of the most amazing and special people I have ever known while at Child Flight and I convinced her to marry me. I must say she looked damn cute in her flight suit. How she manages to hold a professional career as a paediatrician while raising our three children, with me being away as often as I am, is still an amazement to me. She is the ying to my yang, often balancing out my crazy ideas with a healthy dose of reality but never discouraging me and always backing me 100 per cent. Nat is as amazing as she is talented and I know how lucky I am to have her in my life.

Our three children, Caspar, Atticus and Audrey—otherwise known as Waspy, Patty and Butter—are the most important things in our lives and each has their own special place in our hearts. They are wonderful kids, who have to deal with a very busy mummy and a daddy who is away quite a bit. They are amazing, resilient and each of them has their own unique and special personality. Most important of all, they know how much we love them. I cannot wait to see the fantastic people they will become when they grow up; I just hope it does not happen too quickly.

There are two more people I want to mention before I finish. One is here, the other is here in spirit. There is no doubt I inherited my mother's sense of activism and interest in politics. Growing up, I was so lucky to have somebody who always put my needs first. That is not a figure of speech. My sister and I always had whatever we needed, whenever we needed it, even if it meant my mother went without to provide it. When I was young, I took it for granted. Now I am an adult, I look back, and realise what it meant and how fortunate I was to have somebody as dedicated as my mother. It was not just monetary items either; my mother left her career to dedicate time to my sister and I in the same way she now dedicates time to her grandchildren so Nat and I can continue our careers. I would not be where I am without her, and I can never thank her enough.

Miss Audrey FANG: Is daddy finished yet?

The Hon. WES FANG: Almost. The one person who would have loved to be here more than any other is the one person who cannot be—my dad. When I was growing up I had friends, but my best friend was my dad. As I became an adult, friends came and went, but the one thing that never changed was my best friend. Dad was your typical proud parent, the one who was always talking about the achievements of their children and, like Mum, he would sacrifice anything for us. Dad was there when I started my political journey. He always told me he thought I would make it when I was not sure I would. He would have given anything to be here today, as I would give anything for him to be able to see his

son—the son of a migrant who arrived with a few dollars and a couple of changes of clothes to his name—stand in the Legislative Council making his inaugural speech. Unfortunately, Dad passed away at the end of 2013 after a long and brave battle with cancer. He is not here today, and I am not a spiritual person, but wherever you are, Dad, thank you for everything.

I make no promise of the things I will achieve while in this place, other than to say I will always fight for what I believe in and I will do my best to deliver for the people of rural and regional New South Wales. I believe we should all try to leave a place a little better than we find it and I hope that, in the future, I am able to say that I played my part in shaping our communities for the better. Our rural and regional areas of New South Wales are the most amazing places and it is a privilege to come to this place and represent them. Mr President and fellow members, thank you.

Members stood in their places and applauded.