



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 14 November 2017.

Ms STEPH COOKE (Cootamundra) (16:36): I stand here today very proud to have been elected to this position by the good people of the Cootamundra electorate. I do so noting that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people. I acknowledge them as custodians and traditional owners of this land and I extend my respect to their elders past and present. I further acknowledge the Wiradjuri people, who are the traditional custodians of the land where my electorate is situated and I pay my respect to their people, both past and present.

The Wiradjuri people are originally from the land that is bordered by the Lachlan, Macquarie and Murrumbidgee Rivers. The name Wiradjuri means people of three rivers and traditionally these rivers were the primary food source for the Wiradjuri people. The Cootamundra electorate is bordered by two of those rivers—the Lachlan to the north and the Murrumbidgee to the south, near beautiful Gundagai. It is little wonder that Wiradjuri were so mighty a nation, the largest in New South Wales, because the land in between, from the green undulating hills to the east, floating gently down to the lush fertile plains of the west, cradles a soil that spawns an abundance of produce that would leave this table before me heaving.

A few weeks ago I was a florist; a successful small business owner with three stores in Young, Temora and Cootamundra. Today I stand here in the oldest legislative chamber in Australia and on my shoulders is the expectation and belief of 70,000 people residing in the Cootamundra electorate. There can be no greater honour than to be entrusted to represent your community and no greater responsibility than advocating for their needs. This is my starting block. The step I take today, and from this moment on, is for them. Growing up in Temora, home of sporting champions like Paleface Adios and Mark Kerry, instilled in me the belief that anything was possible. I had this drive to be the top of every chosen endeavour. Aged nine, I taught myself to swim. By 12, I was competing at national championships and in 1992 qualified for the Barcelona Olympic trials.

I can proudly report that I have swum in nearly every pool in the Cootamundra electorate. The long journey that is representative swimming, the thousands of kilometres of training up and down our town pools before dawn and into the night in all types of weather, required focus, fortitude and heart. It also required broad shoulders that do not shirk loads. At 18, the pool gave way to the biggest stage of university and the corporate world. At 21, as the first female and youngest-ever Executive Director of the Baking Association of Australia New South Wales, I found myself before the Industrial Relations Commission fighting to clear the names of honest, decent, hardworking small business owners whom I represented against unfair dismissal claims. I quickly developed the ability to fight for a good cause, no matter what the perceived odds nor the strength of my opponent.

To the people of the Cootamundra electorate I say to you: I am a proven fighter and I will fight the good fight; stand with me and see what we can achieve. To my esteemed colleagues here today I say to you: I may be here in the centre of the city right now but my shoes will always carry the dust of New South Wales. Hear my voice and always know that in this place I am the voice of many. Today I stand proudly with the hardworking members of The Nationals who have their genesis among the rural dwellers of early Australia. Progressive we began and progressive we still are. The Nationals are an eclectic mix. We spring from all walks of life, be that a paddock, a woolshed, a store, a firm, a hospital, a workshop, a kitchen—or indulge me—the back of a florist shop. Individually we may

differ, but we have one thing in common: Nearly 100 years on, what still unites us is the determination to be a strong voice in this place for the extraordinary people who are geographically located outside our major cities.

None of us is going to let you city dwellers forget what our people west of the divide do for you. Right now in my electorate there are farmers working around the clock windrowing their canola. The other day I saw one farmer at Thuddungra turning around the paddock as it bucketed down rain. If you know farming, you know that is bold. One day that canola will reach your table with a touch of vinegar, and perhaps a dash of mustard, offering a delightful gloss to your salad. It will likely be accompanied by a cheese and fruit platter and a good drop of wine—we are known for that too. There is undoubtedly a wool suit or two in this room today that began life as a merino lamb that fortunately survived the bitter winter of the south-west slopes to finally deck the halls of Parliament with great aplomb.

It is not all fine food and flourish though. These communities, large and small, have stood the test of time. Tiny villages whose residents still travel 50 miles to do business, visit the doctor, socialise and shop. I know one or two of them have another 10 kilometres of dirt track and a couple of gates to tackle on the way home. You may have heard this before, but rural people generally take what life throws at them in their stride with little to no complaint. Seasons come and seasons go, and these people spend their lives adapting to and overcoming what life throws at them. Enjoy the fruit of our labours and know that men and women work hard, with hands that bear callouses and scars, to ensure you live a better, more comfortable life.

The electorate of Cootamundra spans 34,711 square kilometres, making it the fourth-largest electorate in this State. Crisscrossing that patchwork of farming communities and towns are 1,356 kilometres of State roads and 984 kilometres of regional roads. There are 385 bridges and bridge-size culverts on these State roads. Me and my little white van—the Bobby Dazzler—are very familiar with many of those roads, bridges and crossings. So too are my constituents. These roads are the lifeblood of our region. They connect our communities and our families, businesses and corporations. They connect producers to ports. For our regions to flourish, for this State to work to its strengths, our focus must remain on roads and rail.

The amount of freight movement to and from and also interstate through the electorate of Cootamundra is astonishing. I will advocate passionately to see a comprehensive freight plan implemented that fuses seamlessly with the neighbouring electorates of Barwon, Murray, Albury, Wagga Wagga, Orange, Bathurst and Goulburn. I look forward to contributing to the Draft Future Transport Strategy 2056. Special attention must shine on the now infamous Bells Line of Road and improving the Lachlan Valley Way—to name but two of our critical routes. The Coalition Government has spent more than \$500 million on roads in the electorate of Cootamundra since 2011 and the Minister for Roads, Maritime and Freight, the Hon. Melinda Pavey, has seen a lot of the electorate this year. The future is exciting and I look forward to the journey with you, Minister.

My husband, Keith, is a maths teacher and the principal of Young High School—and one of the most passionate advocates of public education I know. My favourite teachers from St Anne's Central School in Temora, Mr Barry Flakelar and Mrs Jan Sutton, are in the gallery today—and I thank you both for helping me and hundreds of other students reach their full potential in life. I am proud of the investment that the Coalition Government has made in public education in the electorate of

Cootamundra through Gonski schools funding, the recently completed investment in the Young TAFE campus and, looking forward, to connected learning centres in Grenfell and Narrandera, and linkages and pathways to rural-based universities. Minister Adam Marshall and I have lots of work ahead of us.

However, for the thousands of educators in rural and regional New South Wales, the mental health and wellbeing of our students is as important as physical learning spaces and quality curriculum. Too often we hear of our young people—our future—engaging in self-harm and even taking their own lives. For those of us who had the most simple and delightful upbringing in our idyllic towns, these tragedies are as distressingly perplexing as they are heartbreaking. Just recently the Hon. Bronnie Taylor, MLC, announced a State-first School Health Pilot Program designed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of primary and high school students in Young through the engagement of a nurse in school. That commencement date cannot come soon enough. Minister Hazzard, you must really subscribe to Winston Churchill's fine words:

Healthy citizens are the greatest asset any country can have.

I owe a debt of thanks to you for your agile response to the needs of the Temora community and the resulting \$2 million operating theatre upgrade at our district hospital, which is due for completion in 2018. I look forward to your return to the region to discuss the prospect of a redeveloped hospital for the people of Cowra. My drive to Sydney yesterday involved a tour of the marvellous new ambulance station in Harden-Murrumburrah. With similar stations in Ardlethan, Coolamon and Grenfell, we are thankful to my predecessor, the Hon. Katrina Hodgkinson, who put in the hard yards for the people of our communities on this and innumerable other issues. What greater gift to be bestowed with than the blessing and legacy of Katrina Hodgkinson, who served the electorates of both Cootamundra and Burrinjuck so well over 18½ years. So much was achieved on her watch thanks to her tireless agitating.

I would not be standing here today if not for the unwavering support of the Leader of The Nationals and Deputy Premier, the Hon. John Barilaro. He was a stalwart during the campaign from start to finish, visiting the electorate on countless occasions—including a whistlestop tour of many township booths on election day to meet locals and thank our members, supporters and volunteers. John Barilaro is a fellow tradie—a chippie—who has also spent thousands of hours building and growing a small business. We both understand that small business is the heart and friendly face of regional economies. Small businesses are the backbone of small communities like Aria Park, Ardlethan, Jugiong and Ganmain and, of course, our larger towns. As roads are the lifeblood to connecting people physically, small businesses are the key to economic growth, viability and liveability in our region. Their long-term sustainability is vital.

There are many small businesses operating from farms and settlements. For instance, the Quandialla Candle Company relies on good telecommunications and freight services. Over and again, I hear that poor telecommunications are standing in the way of progress. The additional \$50 million announced through the Connecting Country Communities Fund will go some way to filling the blackspots, and I applaud that. Having toiled through the 10,000-hour mark in owning and operating a small business, I will always be a strong and passionate advocate for the needs of this critical sector across my electorate. Small businesses provide goods and services, drive innovation, creativity, industry and

growth, contribute to local charities and causes, and employ people. We all know that jobs change lives.

Being here today, representing the people of the Cootamundra electorate, would not be possible without the help and support of so many around me. I acknowledge and thank The Nationals State Chairman, Mr Bede Burke; State Director, Nathan Quigley; Deputy State Director, Tom Aubert; and The Nationals head office team and the campaign team on the ground: Gill Burke, Mitch Coveney, Josie Coles, Alexandra Hall, Isabelle Gillespie and Jack Piggott. Many of them are in the gallery today. I make special mention of Cootamundra State Electorate Council Chair Mo Simpson, John Hetherington and Peter Toole for being there every step of the way, and the members of the Young branch, of which I have had the pleasure of being president these past few years.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Pam Halliburton, Margaret Hill, Beth Firman, and all the workers, supporters, volunteers and branch members who helped during the Cootamundra campaign. Determined to see the seat retained by The Nationals, they braved all types of weather over the two weeks of pre-polling. On polling day they arrived as one united army, decked out in those fabulous canary yellow T-shirts. I assure them that I will work as hard for them. I thank my campaign manager, Ross Cadell, whom I have known for more than two decades. He kept my perfectionism at bay. Thank goodness for that, or we would still be arguing largely inconsequential semantics ahead of my very first local media interviews.

I cannot forget to mention the Hon. Ben Franklin, who introduced me into this world of politics some 20-plus years ago. I also thank Niall Blair, Adam Marshall, the Hon. Wes Fang, Paul Toole, Rick Colless, Kevin Anderson, Ray Williams, David Elliott and all my colleagues from The Nationals and the Liberal Party who made the huge effort to travel to the electorate many times to support me. Niall, the people of Narrandera are tremendously thankful for your visit and announcement of \$1.1 million in funding for the fisheries research centre. It is a vital investment in that region's future. I thank also the effervescent Bronnie Taylor, who all but lived in the electorate for almost two months, going above and beyond to ensure that the constituents were not adversely impacted during the by-election campaign. She did a magnificent job. I acknowledge also Federal members Michael McCormack and Craig Laundy, and friend and Mayor of Temora Rick Firman, OAM, for his sound advice and support before, during and since the by-election. I thank also Fiona Nash for her unwavering belief in me while she was facing great difficulty.

The Coalition is an incredibly strong team, committed to delivering for the people of this great State. Joining it at this time is very humbling indeed. I have many long-time friends in the House today, and am very blessed to have been so warmly welcomed and supported as I navigate this new territory. I acknowledge my very dear friends Premier Gladys Berejiklian and her remarkable chief of staff, Sarah Cruickshank, to whom I owe—or blame—my decision to stand for preselection. I have known them both for so long and to see the strong women they have become has been inspiring. Being here together today is due in no small part to them both.

To the people of Temora, who I wish could all be here, I am so proud to have grown up in this town and among people whom I love and cherish. I thank my team—my friends—at Native Botanical. Together we have created one of the most beautiful, successful, award-winning businesses in New South Wales. They are the reason am able to step out of customer service and into public community service without hesitation. My very good friends Natalie Bains, Sharon Richens, Tiffany

Olssen, Holly Bradford and Nicole Sanderson have travelled vast distances to be here today. I could not have made it through the rigours of those weeks, and in particular election day, if it were not for their support. My husband, Keith, is in the gallery today. He stood outside the Young polling booth for days on end. I am not sure that when we married he knew he was signing up for all of this. But thank you, sweetie, for your love and support throughout.

I acknowledge and give my heartfelt thanks to my parents, Stephen and Marie Cooke, who are also in the gallery. We are, after all, a product of our parents. Mine, hailing from Tallimba and West Wyalong, instilled the traditional values of honesty and decency, and that nothing comes without hard work. My brother, Andrew Cooke, who is also in the gallery, and I are testament to that. However, the most important lesson they imparted is that service is the most important thing a person can offer in life: service to those in need, service to your family, to your friends and to your community. They have proudly displayed and lived by this virtue. As a result, I, too, serve my community and give back to the town and region that has given me such an amazing life. It offers the riches of country life and all that it entails to future generations and ensures that we remain a viable alternative to a city-centric existence.

Finally, I acknowledge the people of the Cootamundra electorate. Our electorate is my home, and it has been the home of my family for generations. I made a vow on election night—one that is incredibly important to me and one that I intend to keep. I am here to fight for you and alongside you. While we might not always win everything we want, everyone will know that we fought until there was no fight left. I will earn your trust, I will earn your belief, and I will be your voice. I have never been more humbled nor more determined in my life. Thank you and God bless.

Members stood in their places and applauded.