



# Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 26 September 2018.

**Dr JOE McGIRR (Wagga Wagga) (12:01):** I am honoured to have been elected to serve as the member for Wagga Wagga. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which the Parliament stands, and also the traditional owners of the land on which the electorate of Wagga Wagga is located—the Wiradjuri nation—and I pay tribute to elders past, present and emerging. The electorate of Wagga Wagga is located in south-west New South Wales and in addition to Wagga Wagga incorporates the towns of Tumut, Batlow, Adelong, Lockhart, Uranquinty, The Rock, Yerong Creek, Collingullie, Currawarna, Ladysmith, Mangoplah, Pleasant Hills, Talbingo, Tarcutta and surrounding communities.

Located on rich agricultural land, the electorate encompasses vibrant health, education and retail sectors, and has developed into a hub for innovative industry. In addition, the defence forces continue to make a significant contribution to the community. First established in 1894 the electorate of Wagga Wagga has been in continuous existence since 1927. I am the sixth member to represent the electorate in the past 91 years. The electorate has been served by a number of outstanding members from both sides of the Parliament, and I acknowledge and pay tribute to them.

As is customary in an inaugural speech, I wish to outline the personal journey that has led me to joining these members in service to the community. In doing so I will describe the critical issues facing my electorate as a key and influential part of rural New South Wales. I was born and grew up in North Sydney. I did not know my grandfather, Greg McGirr, from Parkes, who served as a Labor Minister in this Parliament in the 1920s and had a fierce rivalry with Jack Lang. Nor did I know his brother, James, who was Labor Premier from 1947 to 1952. But I felt their influence growing up in a devoutly Catholic household where discussion centred on religion, politics and the Democratic Labor Party.

I vividly remember listening to Bob Santamaria on a Sunday afternoon, after watching *World Championship Wrestling*, and before *The Footy Show*. Later, I followed the career of my aunt Trixie Gardner, also born in Parkes, who became a Conservative life peeress in the House of Lords. My father graduated from Hawkesbury Agricultural College in the 1940s and subsequently worked in farming in the Harden, Murrumburrah area. Although he returned to the city after some years, he clearly had a strong love of the country and nearly all our holidays were spent travelling in rural areas. He met my mother, Maureen Baxter, a pharmacist, in Sydney and they married in 1959.

My parents dealt with many challenges, including my father's long illness with kidney failure. However, they were devoted to their children and loved us. My mother was the strong foundation of our family, and I remember particularly how she managed juggling the demands of our family, a job and my father's long and frequent visits to Sydney Hospital. I was fortunate to receive a marvellous Jesuit education at St Aloysius' College, where the fight against communism was mixed with a strong focus on social justice. After studying medicine at the University of Sydney, where I admit I was active in university politics, I commenced my residency training at St Vincent's Hospital.

While at St Vincent's I rotated to Wagga Wagga as a junior doctor, and it was there that I fell in love with my wife, Kerin Fielding, and also with the Riverina. Kerin and I returned to Wagga Wagga many

times as part of our training and eventually settled there in 1991. We have been blessed with four wonderful children, who were born and have grown up in Wagga Wagga, and of whom we are extremely proud. Kerin is an inspiration and a wonderful partner who has served our region as an orthopaedic and trauma surgeon, and as a teacher. Without her, I would not be standing in this Chamber today. Interestingly, her mother's family hails from Parkes too, and she had many rural experiences in her upbringing in Australia.

My first position was as Director of the Emergency Department at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital where, among other duties, I undertook ambulance retrieval work, bringing patients from Tumut, Batlow, Lockhart and other towns. I remember the dedicated and professional nursing, allied health and ambulance personal with whom I worked, but above all I remember the patients and their families who trusted us and who often bore terrible tragedy with great courage. I then worked in administration in a variety of roles across southern New South Wales. I was fortunate to visit many rural towns. The discussions I had with health professionals and community members were often robust.

This was the time when so-called rural decline seemed to dominate the thinking of the Government bureaucracy. The belief was that rural towns would soon wither, people would move to cities and major centres, and investment in rural areas was misplaced. The thinking was that the banks were leaving town, so other services would follow. How could rural services survive in an efficient, free market? Needless to say, the communities had other ideas and fought to maintain and increase health services and other critical structures, and worked effectively with their local politicians to achieve this. At one stage I was the director of clinical operations and medical services in an area health service the size of two-thirds of Victoria.

Communities reacted strongly to the distance between themselves and where decisions were being made about them, and that distance could be great, physically, mentally and emotionally. In 2011 I stood as an Independent for the electorate of Wagga Wagga. I obtained more than 30 per cent of the primary vote and it was clear that I had an impact, particularly with regard to the delivery of the new Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. At the time community members of the towns such as Tumut, Batlow, Adelong and Lockhart and surrounding areas were telling me that this was a major priority. My concern at the time was that after a decade of planning and consultation through the normal government processes, the decision on the new hospital seemed to depend on the politically marginal nature—or otherwise—of the electorate.

I then worked for the University of Notre Dame Australia, training medical students in rural locations to help meet the shortfall in doctors in rural areas and improve the health of rural communities. Only 20 years ago there was a belief that you could not train doctors outside large universities in major cities or, if you did, they would be somehow not as good as city-trained doctors. This has taken many years to prove wrong, but wrong it is: Training, education and services in many areas can be every bit as good in rural locations as in the city. Then came the unfortunate circumstances that led to the resignation of the former member. I was prompted to stand again because I believed there was a need to change the way our communities are represented. I genuinely believe I can improve the link between the community and government, industry and infrastructure throughout the area.

I have so far spoken about three aspects of an anti-rural mindset that has plagued rural communities: the view that rural is in decline, that the best training and services can only be

provided in or from the city and that decisions for communities are best made by people far away from those communities. Over the past two decades this mindset has been accompanied by increasing centralisation of services. I want to make clear that I am not negative about technology and the economic benefits that can arise from centralising services. But when it comes in the context of the anti-rural mindset, then I believe it leads to growing frustration and disenchantment. Perhaps this has been reflected in the rural by-elections of recent years.

The anger that followed in the wake of the council amalgamations or the decisions affecting the greyhound industry was the anger of people who had things done to them, not with them. It was a disenchantment I encountered while campaigning for the recent by-election: a sense of real distance between politicians and the concerns of the community. People talked to me of job insecurity, stagnant wage growth and a higher cost of living, especially because of electricity prices. They want certainty on renewable energy and they are concerned about climate change. They want access to affordable child care and public transport options. They want health and community services in their towns. Those living in regional areas also want to feel safe. Along with support for our law enforcement services, people spoke of a need to improve mental health and drug treatment services, including rehabilitation facilities—especially for the current ice issue affecting many communities in New South Wales.

People also spoke to me of the need to ensure there are educational pathways that interact with business and industry that lead to local job opportunities for our children and grandchildren, along with access to meaningful activity for young people. Families want modern, up-to-date, well maintained schools. They want modern, well staffed health services. They want well maintained roads so that local lives are not lost on our rural roads. They want to see support and respect for our farmers, especially in this time of drought. These are the 3.00 a.m. issues—the ones that wake people with worry.

People also spoke to me of the desire to grow their communities, particularly by attracting small to medium businesses, supporting tourism and developing infrastructure. There was a positive response to my proposal to abolish payroll tax for rural and regional businesses with turnovers of up to \$4 million. This would encourage a decentralisation approach by industries. After all, there is a growing realisation we cannot all live in Sydney. These were the concerns and desires of the people of our electorate, and these were the concerns and desires that were not being acknowledged by politicians. The residents in the electorate of Wagga Wagga who spoke to me during the recent by-election do not see the political leadership they want.

In my view, we rely on our political institutions and, indeed, our political parties to protect us, and our rights and interests. This applies as much to the threats of centralised bureaucracies and the free market as it does to external threats. What then happens when the parties themselves are bureaucracies, centrally run—professional and efficient, no doubt—but perhaps more concerned with power than service? Is this what ails rural Australia? Has this led to the rise of the so-called "country Independent"? For rural and regional people, the rise of bureaucracy and technology has meant the centralisation of control. The key issue is one of control. Do we have the ability to make the decisions that affect our communities, or are those decisions made elsewhere? And if so, what are our political institutions doing to protect our right to contribute to the decisions that affect us?

One of the great strengths of our country and our State has been the political process that protects and acts on the concerns of people and communities. We must ensure that the political processes continue to support rural communities and their members to reach their full potential. During my career I have formed a strong belief that communication is the key to the ultimate success of any venture. I believe the role of the local member is to communicate with constituents, and harness the local knowledge and skills for the benefit of the community. It is my intention that everyone in the electorate of Wagga Wagga feels that they are connected to the decision-making process through the local member's office.

I wish to note that the Government made a number of commitments during the by-election, including funding for Tumut Hospital, stage 3, a car park for Wagga Wagga Base Hospital, the Riverina Intermodal Freight and Logistics Hub, the Multisport Cycling Complex, and work on Marshall's bridge and the Gobbagombalin bridge turning lanes among other commitments. I acknowledge the Government's commitments and the benefit they will have for the electorate of Wagga Wagga. I also note that the candidate for the Liberal Party gave an undertaking on ABC Radio that all the commitments would be delivered regardless of who was elected, and I look forward to working with the Government to deliver the promises it has made during the campaign. The people of the Wagga Wagga electorate were dismayed that the election promises were espoused as a gift; in fact, they see them as essential services that they are entitled to as a matter of equity. I will relentlessly pursue the delivery of these promises on behalf of the people.

I wish to close by making a number of acknowledgements. I would like to thank those who have supported me professionally to make a rapid start to my work as a member of Parliament, including the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly and her team, and the staff of Parliamentary Services. To my fellow Independents, my thanks to you for the ways you have provided me with support and advice over the past weeks. To the many who handed out and put up posters, were active on social media and in other ways supported the campaign, thank you. Your local people power was tremendous. I wish to thank the people of the electorate of Wagga Wagga for entrusting me with the honour of serving as their local member, and I assure them of my commitment to serving to the best of my ability.

I would like to make special mention of two particular people who have given me and Kerin and our family many years of unqualified support in our time in Wagga Wagga, who were the backbone of the campaign in 2011 and who were the heart and soul of the campaign this year. I am speaking of Rob and Margaret Brain, who are in the Chamber today. Thank you. Finally, I wish to thank my family: my children Lara, Natasha, Dylan and Anna and above all my wife, Kerin, for their wonderful love and support.