

Legislative Assembly Hansard – 08 May 2019 – Proof

INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I warmly welcome to Parliament House the friends and family of the member for Dubbo. I particularly welcome his wife, Karen, his mum, Barbara, and his dad, Ian. This is an enormously exciting day for each of you. I hope you enjoy your day in Parliament House today with the member for Dubbo. I also warmly welcome the former member for Dubbo, the Hon. Troy Grant.

Mr DUGALD SAUNDERS (Dubbo) (11:31): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your election to that role. What a humbling and exciting day this is, to be here in one of the most historic buildings in the State, speaking for the first time as a member of the Fifty-Seventh Parliament of New South Wales. I am the first of the new brigade to speak in this Parliament, so let's hope I don't muck it up. I want to start off by saying what an absolute privilege it is to be here representing the people of the Dubbo electorate. It is an incredible part of the State, as anyone who lives anywhere near there knows. It is a very unique feeling to know that for the next four years I will now be the voice for the people right across the region in this Parliament. I have spoken to literally thousands of people from all walks of life during my career as a radio presenter, but I do not think there have been too many times when I have been quite this nervous or quite this excited about actually speaking. Thank you to everyone who has come along to support me today; I appreciate that and I know there are quite a few people watching on the livestream as well, so thank you.

I come to this role at a time when there is quite a bit of expectation about what will be delivered and when. That has a fair bit to do with the fact that the last bloke delivered quite a bit—more on him shortly. I heard a great quote the other day about the fact that although Rome wasn't built in a day, they were laying bricks and pavers just about every hour. That is what I will be doing. You may not see or hear every single thing I do, but I will be there, laying those bricks every hour, as we work towards a very bright future with this Government. I formally acknowledge the former member for the Dubbo electorate, Mr Troy Grant, and wish him and his family all the best for the future.

I stand here now as the fourteenth representative for the State electorate of Dubbo, first proclaimed in 1894 and its second incarnation from 1930. This is an honour, and it is one that is certainly not lost on me. The electorate of Dubbo now is completely different to what it was eight years ago—yes there has been a boundary change, but the prosperity and the belief in the region has changed completely since Troy was elected as part of a new government back in 2011. I will now be working hard to continue that impact and influence as I take the baton forward. I am proud and excited to work with the leadership team of Premier Gladys Berejiklian and the Deputy Premier, John Barilaro. Both have been extremely welcoming and supportive, and I thank them very much for that. I also thank every Minister who has extended that same support, and the members of Parliament who have made this new journey feel a bit more normal, because it feels a bit weird at times, I can tell you.

My fellow new Nationals member, the member for Coffs Harbour, Gurmeh Singh, will deliver his inaugural speech following me and I wish him all the best as we start this journey together. I know we are both proud to have entered this Parliament, respectful of our party's immense history over the past 100 years, but also excited to join with our Nationals colleagues who have been returned to this House, as we look to make significant contributions to the future of The Nationals and to the future of New South Wales. The Nationals is a great party that represents the people of regional New South Wales unashamedly. It also respects the right of members of Parliament to present the views of the people they represent vigorously. It is a party that's not bound by political ideology or philosophy. As our leader, John Barilaro, regularly says, "It's all about geography." It is about giving all the people who live outside our major metro areas a voice, and sticking up for them. Regional New South Wales is becoming far more diverse, and our party is also reflecting that; it is evolving and constantly changing.

My electorate of Dubbo has a very bright future. From the capital of Western New South Wales—Dubbo itself to Trangie and Narromine, Wellington and surrounds, and across to Mudgee and Gulgong—this is a diverse and extraordinary slice of regional New South Wales that I have very firmly at the front of my mind. It has been a nursery for many sporting champions, and I have no doubt it will continue. It is home to innovative health, education and research programs, with so much potential to develop that more. It is also home to Taronga Western Plains Zoo, a world leader in animal conservation, and a hallmark of tourism. There are world-class wineries and eateries at Mudgee, there is goldmining history at Gulgong and Stuart Town, and the Wellington Caves are one of the most significant mammal fossil sites in the world. Add to that the phenomenal output from agriculture and my part of the State is pretty hard to beat. We just need to keep spreading the word and encouraging more people to be part of our remarkable region.

To be honest, it is still a bit surreal thinking of myself actually working here now and being part of decisions that will be made in this Parliament. But one important thing I do recognise is that it is not being here in Parliament that will define me as a member of Parliament, it is the work I do with my community right across the electorate that really counts. I have a lot of people to thank and acknowledge today, and I will be doing that throughout the course, but at the very start I want to thank my three girls—my wife, Karen, and our two daughters, Georgie and Charlie, are here today. It is fantastic to have them with me as I start this new journey. Thanks girls; I love you lots.

So why am I here? Where did I come from and what are my areas of interest? I think everyone who takes this sort of step to represent wants to make a difference, and for me it probably has been building for a while; but it is hard to know how and why you actually take a step forward for this sort of thing. Up until mid-last year I had been in media for 27 years, including the past 10 years hosting breakfast and mornings on ABC local radio in Dubbo. I was lucky enough to speak to a wide range of people from right across the large central west and western regions, from places like Bourke and Walgett through to Mudgee and my old home town of Mendooran. I heard from people about the things that really matter in their lives and their communities. When you are doing that, you get the good, the bad, the sad and the joyful. It has been a really good way of getting the pulse of different towns and parts of the region, and I have been lucky enough to meet some amazing locals in that time.

As part of that I guess I was always looking to connect problems with solutions: Why isn't this happening? What are the possibilities? What is the best solution? Who can help make this happen? When you are able to take part in that sort of process by asking the right questions of the right people, at the right time, in the right way, it does feel like you are actually part of helping to create change—and that is an amazing feeling. From my perspective that is a big part of my role as a member of Parliament, with even more tangible links than I have ever had before. I am really looking forward to that and, from speaking to other members of Parliament, the ability to make a difference in people's lives is something they get incredible joy from.

I did not get involved in this sphere because of a particular burning ideology or ethos. I do have ethics, I do have standards, but I think I would be described by most people I know as quite pragmatic. I know there are probably some other thoughts you are thinking at the moment as well, but we will keep them until later. I like to deal with issues and ideas in a pretty straightforward way, based on practical solutions, rather than lots of theories that may not amount to much. But there is that strong reality that you cannot please everyone all the time and it is a bit hard to accept that. It is true, though, and it is something I have become a bit more aware of in the past seven or eight months. For me, the journey to get here started in earnest back in July 2018 when I first nominated to run for pre-selection for the New South Wales Nationals; the first time I have ever been part of a political party in any way, shape or form. The connection to the Nats and me was pretty easy—a love and desire to focus on rural and regional areas, and a series of very simple beliefs that line up with my way of thinking.

Although politics had been mentioned to me by a few people over the years, it was not seriously in my headspace until right around the time that Troy Grant decided to retire—and boy did that put the cat amongst the pigeons! In a very short space of time I had to decide whether this was actually something I wanted to do, and would be able to do, not just for the electorate, but also for myself and my family. I remember having some very frank discussions over a few days about what the decision could mean. Thanks to some very supportive friends and family, and despite a few sleepless nights and lots of second-guessing, I did put my hand up and I am very glad I did! After a vigorous seven-month election campaign, I am here and I am ready to serve.

I have been extremely lucky to have the absolute and unquestioned support of the retiring member, Troy Grant. He has been a mentor and a friend, and has made a huge difference. He has provided unwavering and honest advice, and true friendship through this journey. So to you, Troy, thanks mate; you are a champion. It is really nice to have you back in this Chamber along with your lovely and supportive wife, Toni. It's a slightly odd feeling, actually, because the last time the three of us were in this Chamber—14 November 2018, Troy was giving his final speech, and I was sitting up in that gallery hoping to be here now. Thanks for coming.

I was also lucky enough to have probably the State's most highly regarded campaign director in my corner, Peter Bartley, who became a bit like a second father. Sorry, Barts, I'm not trying to make you feel old. He's been the other great rock that I relied on through this period and we worked extremely well together. Thanks also to his very supportive wife, Kim. Peter built a great team including a few he's worked with before such as Pauline McAllister, Peter Tremble and Kevin Sinclair. It's great to have Kevvy and his daughter, Helen, here today. They are both outstanding helpers and supporters.

I've also had amazing support from the Nats branches and their chairs in Wellington, thanks to the gorgeous Pip Smith; Narromine via Geoff Smith; a couple of David's—Dugan and Kinsey—who were absolute crackers at Trangie; the continued support of the Dubbo branch through Greg Matthews and Richard Mutton; the Mudgee branch through Sandy Walker, Marg Reid and Lloyd Coleman; and the overarching DEC through chair Mike Blake and his team. All of the branches and the members worked really well together and I'm extremely grateful to everyone who came together to help. Geoff Ballard also deserves a very special mention. He's been like a second right-hand for me over the past few months. He was always there to help no matter what was needed and that did include quite a few weird and wonderful things. Thank you, mate. I owe you big time.

My family: It is a little bit difficult to go through my full family scenario. It's complicated, so I'll give you an abridged version today, but it will give you a bit of an insight. I grew up on a few different properties around the Mendooran district after my parents became tree changers back in the mid-1970s. In fact, when I was thinking about this, I think we may have well have been one of the very early tree-changing families. To be honest, I don't think we have ever been properly recognised for that. Trendsetters is what we were. My early life involved milking cows, rounding up sheep, playing with pigs, riding horses, and spending time in the shearing shed, on the tractor and feeding the chooks. After moving back to the area from Sydney, I've been doing pretty much the same thing for the past 13 years, along with radio up until this point at least. For the most part life was good when I was young, apart from the occasional locust plague, drought or family disaster. But, hey, it wasn't meant to be easy, was it?

My parents separated when I was around 11 and that did change everything for me and my brother, Cam, and my sister, Tam. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't all bad but it did change and there were times that I found it very hard. After a period, we ended up having an extended family, which included another brother—Dave's here today and it's great to have him along—and three more sisters, Jodes, Krissy and Dinks. So seven kids; Brady bunch here we come. The memories we now share from those days are all pretty good and it's nice to reminisce. But it was tough and it was hard for everyone. I also have no doubt that my work ethic, and probably the same for my brothers and sisters, actually came out of those time: having to contribute every day as part of a large extended family means you probably do more than you may have otherwise. It is great to have all those brothers and sisters still in my life today.

I went to a few different schools over the years, but I spent my last four years in Sydney at St Andrews Cathedral School. It was great to have a couple of long-lost friends come up to Dubbo and help on election day. Thanks to Tim Kelly, who is recuperating in hospital today but will be watching. Thanks to Geoff Berkley, who is here today—thanks, mate. Funnily enough I also re-connected with a former teacher yesterday. He's now the secretary for the Governor. Michael Miller was my senior English and history teacher, and also sports master. That was great.

Talking of sport, sport has always been a great passion of mine. In my younger days I played just about every sport you could imagine: cricket, swimming, rugby league and union. I also had a long association with fencing—no, nothing to do with pliers. This was foil, epee and sabre. In fact, the whole family took part for a number of years; you can tell some more jokes about that later. The love of sport also led me in that direction during my media career. After a few years working in regional radio I went to 4BC in Brisbane and then 2UE here in Sydney to join the sports departments. In that time I was lucky enough to work with some amazing teams. I was involved in coverage of just about every sport you can image including rugby league, cricket and rugby union. The highlight no doubt were the 2000 Olympic Games here in Sydney, which was an enormous buzz.

But there was always something gnawing away in the back of my mind about being in regional New South Wales. After our first daughter, Georgie, was a couple of years old we started looking seriously at how we could make that happen, make the move back. It's been a really rewarding 13 years back in the region, full of great experiences, friendships and a few tough times, but I don't think we would change a thing. As a family and through my radio work, we've been involved in all sorts of sports and activities from pony club and swimming club to drama and music, and also some innovative and amazing programs such as Moorambilla Voices. The Artistic Director, Michelle Leonard, is here today. She leads a brilliant team that delivers music and movement to children across my region in a way that changes lives and helps inspire, and I want to recognise that today.

I've been lucky enough to know Michelle and report on the difference that the Moorambilla program has made to young people for the past 11 years, including performances here at Parliament House and also down the road at Government House. I'm hoping to see that continue well into the future. Moorambilla also has a great connection with Royal Far West, which is another group that helps improve the lives of people across my electorate and the greater west. These are the types of organisations that are contributing to the health and wellbeing of our regional youth—our future.

I'm really looking forward to working with our first ever New South Wales Minister for Regional Youth to ensure we give our young people every chance to succeed, no matter what direction they are heading in. Of course this all ties in with mental health connections for young people across the region and it is really important. It is amazing how much your perspective on these sorts of things changes when you're involved personally, which I have been. It matters and it needs attention.

I'm also a very passionate believer in the early years, the first 2,000 days of life where so much good work can be done—or not. NSW Health now has a policy to outline the importance of that time, from conception to age five, and what needs to be worked on to ensure that all children have the best possible start in life. This is something I've had a fair bit of awareness of through my mum, Barbara Wellesley. Mum was in charge of baby and community health centres throughout the central west. She also set up and ran a children's charity from Sydney for many years called Good Beginnings. She worked extremely hard many years ago to highlight the need for this type of focus. These days I think there is a general recognition of how important this is and I will be there as a reminder of that need from a rural perspective.

From a general perspective, I think people across the electorate want to feel like they're being listened to and being represented by someone who cares and has their back. That's exactly what I'll be doing. As I said, I've had a fantastic chance to connect with people across the region through radio over the past decade, but I'm now looking forward to providing a tangible link between problems and solutions, and providing help in a whole new way. I reckon I'm a pretty normal sort of bloke, whatever that means. It's funny how many times I heard people saying through the election campaign, that that's what they want. They want normal people. So how do you keep being normal? I think it's about staying connected with the many friends I have across the regions, but also continuing to talk to as many people as I can about their lives and their communities, and what matters to them.

I've had good times and plenty of tough times. I'm not a career politician; I'm a realist and it is, of course, impossible to help everybody all the time just as I mentioned earlier that it's impossible to please everybody all the time. But if I can get pretty close, I'll be pretty happy. I've also been thinking about the top needs and expectations of the communities across my electorate over the past few weeks. The main thing that each and every person wants to know is that we are not missing out by choosing to live in a regional area, and nor should we. It's something I'll be working on with the entire Nationals team—not just ensuring that we aren't missing out but also trying to make sure that everyone in my region knows that they aren't missing out and they know how to access what they want and what they need. It's important and we need to do a better job of that.

Drought will continue to ruin lives and there will be lots of tough decisions made in coming months by families and businesses. There has been a stack of money set aside to help in certain circumstances, but there's also the need to re-connect with the many people who have been affected and regain the confidences that we once had. I'm sure we can do that and I know there will be some positive outcomes for the future in that direction. I also ran some community surveys over the past six months, which clearly indicate that the other top issues across the electorate are access to health and health services, better roads and connectivity. A fantastic redevelopment happening at the Dubbo Base Hospital is already making a difference. It will include a cancer centre in the next stage. A new hospital is also being built at Mudgee. But there does need to be more and there will be more—not just buildings, but also a focus on support services.

A part of that will involve the new nurses and health workers for the region, which have been announced. I am keen to see more focus on establishing a health and wellbeing precinct to bring together all the aspects of our region's biggest employer—Health. Investment in roads and rail is at an all-time high, which is great. I'll be pushing to make sure that regional roads and rail lines, which carry locals, freight and tourists between our regional towns, are at the forefront as planning for the future occurs. We'll be maintaining a whole new fleet of regional trains at the Dubbo rail facility in coming years, with better timetables for travellers and a skilled workforce at the centre of it. There really are some very exciting opportunities on the way.

There's also now a huge focus on better data connectivity and less mobile black spots. It is the emerging focus for many businesses, professionals and families looking to live in or move to our regional centres. Big money is set aside from the State Government for exactly this and it could be a game changer for our region. The difference that reliable internet can make to businesses, including agricultural businesses in parts of the region like around Narromine, is immense. It is a big part of our future. The good news is that the Dubbo electorate is recognised as a growth region with lots of potential for the future. We just need to drive that potential, interest and investment to make the most of what is possible.

We need to see new businesses start up and current businesses scale up. With growth we need a skilled workforce. We need to train and retain skilled people locally, and, of course, attract new skilled workers to the region. But if we've learnt anything in the past few years, it is that the times they are a-changin'. There is no guarantee that an industry will remain viable forever, and all regions need to think outside the box and look for potential opportunities. There is no doubt that more opportunities are on the way, but one of our greatest challenges is to encourage our children and grandchildren to live and work and raise their families in regional areas like mine. It is all a part of future-proofing our regions.

As I mentioned, there are so many people to thank and recognise. I have mentioned a few of them already and many of them are in the public gallery, which is fantastic. My family will continue to be the most important aspect of my life. My wife, Karen, is a big part of how I have managed to get here and how I will continue to be able to work successfully as an MP. Our life has been a bit of a roller-coaster, but her passion and support will be so important over the next four years. Thanks, darling, I love you. My daughters—Georgie, who is 17, and Charlie, who is 13—have started to get a little understanding of what this role might actually be, but the reality is it's really hard to know until you're in the middle of it. It is starting to happen now. Georgie Girl, you are one of the most talented people I know. You have a light that shines and attracts people, and you will be a leader of some sort. I love you very much. Charlie Pops, your laugh is the most infectious I have heard. You have so much to give and I know you can do whatever you want to do. I am very proud of you and I love you.

One thing's for sure: Our life as a family has changed completely, from how the girls get to and from school, who cooks what, who does what and when, who does the chores and, most importantly, how much ironing I now seem to have! I am not a big fan. Mum and Dad—Barbara and Ian—and their respective partners, John and Lorraine, are here today, which is great. Thank you. They were also here yesterday as I was sworn in as an MP, which was lovely. I appreciate all of your support. It has been incredible the whole way through, including pre-polling and election day. The encouragement and understanding have been great. Thank you all so much.

My sister, Tamara, and brother, Campbell, have been awesome. They were a big part of the Mudgee crew during the crunch time and, in fact, they were sending me very loving messages every day during pre-polling. They were enjoying it so much. Thank you. I thank Cam's partner, Rhonda, for coming along. My nephew Jackson is also here along with my brother-in-law, Col, and my stepbrother Dave. Thank you, guys, for coming. They also were involved during election day. It is also great to see all the Gottings here. Thank you for coming along today; it is great to have your support.

Obviously, I do not have time to thank every single person who has helped me get here. To all of those who made the effort—there are a lot of people, as there are for everyone—I say, "Thank you very much." When I started down this path, I was lucky enough to have some really good friends, who have also been with me for the entire journey, sometimes in the background but always there and generous to a fault. Thanks to Jen and Steve Cowley and also Mark Horton, who have always had my back and have always been with me. Thank you for coming today. I thank my great friends Craig and Cate Whiteley. Craig was one of the first people I talked to about this decision, and Cate was an incredible bundle of energy during the election campaign. I also thank Cate's dad, Peter Turner, who is renowned as the door-knocking guru and was always around to help, as was Shibli Chowdhury, who is a great helper and mate.

The Gulgong gang, headed up by Marg Reid and former MLC Lloyd Coleman, who is here today, was so generous and supportive. I owe you lots—literally. Thank you very much. I thank Sandy Walker at Mudgee, who was there bright and early every day during pre-poll, just like Kevvy was in Dubbo. These are the sorts of people you cannot do this without. They are unbelievable helpers. Thanks also to the Simmos—Ian and Cate—who are absolute legends. Gus Diffey was tireless and awesome as the corflute warrior during the campaign—thanks, mate. Ryan Hunter went over and above. Mike Blake as Chair of the DEC was involved as much as possible and has always been supportive—a big thanks to you and Melva. To Georgie and Charlie's godparents, Geoff and Bridget Mann, who are here today and have been such loving and caring supporters of us as a family over the years, thank you so much—and happy anniversary! Can you believe they are here on their anniversary? Congratulations! It is great to have you here as part of my special day on your special day.

I'm very lucky to have dedicated and talented staff in the electorate office who bring a range of skills and abilities. A couple of them are here today. To Jane Diffey, who has now stepped up as my senior electorate officer—basically, the boss; a whole new level—thank you for what you have done and for what you are going to do. To Ben Walker, who is still quite new in his role and, I am sure, has many more goals to kick—thanks, mate. I know we're going to work really well together. Thanks for being here today. Our newest member, Jennifer Hoar, starts only next week, but I know she will be a great asset to the team.

I feel like the State as a whole, and the Dubbo electorate in particular, is on the crest of a wave—a wave of prosperity. I am really excited about the possibilities and I am honoured to be the voice for my region. You know, it's funny, I've been told quite a few times in the past few weeks that now the real work starts. I suppose that's true, but it's also worth recognising that a huge amount of work by a huge amount of people has gone into getting this far. And from somebody who's never done anything like this before, you have no idea what's required financially, mentally and physically. It does take a big toll. I will mention a few mates who did all that, and I was hoping they would be here with me in this Fifty-Seventh Parliament, but, unfortunately, they are not. A shout-out to Austin Curtin, Mackenna Powell and my good mate, Andrew Schier—I am thinking of you today.

The way I see it now is that this is the start of making the real difference. Earlier I talked about the decision to put my hand up for this role. It was not an easy decision but it was an important one. It is one that I feel privileged to have been able to make. I finish with a quote from George Eliot, which, I feel, pretty well sums things up for me, "It is never too late to be what you might have been." Thank you.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the member. I know that he will play an extremely important role in this House. I wish him all the best. I warmly welcome to the gallery the friends and family of the member for Coffs Harbour. In particular, I welcome his wife, Manni, his mum, Joginder, and his dad, Gurminder. This is a very proud day for all of you. I hope that you all enjoy your time at Parliament House today. I also warmly welcome the former member for Coffs Harbour, Andrew Fraser. I know it will be difficult for him to refrain from interjecting but it would be appreciated if he did not!