

## 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.

**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!

**Mr GURMESH SINGH (Coffs Harbour) (12:04):** I begin by congratulating Madam Deputy Speaker on her election to that role yesterday. I stand here today extremely happy to have been elected by the good people of the electorate of Coffs Harbour. I pay my respect to the Gumbaynggirr people, the custodians and traditional owners of the land covering my electorate. I also extend my respect to their elders past, present and emerging. Before telling my story, I acknowledge my predecessor, Andrew Fraser, who served the electorate of Coffs Harbour for three decades and is in the gallery today.

My path to this Parliament started over 120 years ago with the decision made by my great-grandfather, Bella Singh, to leave Punjab with 13 other men from the surrounding villages to seek opportunity on the other side of the world in Australia. After reaching Sydney he made his way up the coast to the cane fields of Northern New South Wales. I doubt that in his wildest dreams he would ever have imagined that his great-grandson would be standing here today, in the oldest Parliament in Australia, as the newly elected member for Coffs Harbour; the area where his son, my grandfather, Pritam Singh, chose to settle in the late 1940s. Our ancestral home is in Punjab, on the plains about 30 kilometres from the foothills of the Himalayas, and my surname, Singh, is a Sikh name dating back to the late 1600s. Even today our ancestral village is only the size of Hyde Park, so one can only imagine the courage it took over 120 years ago to leave home and cross the seas to an unknown land.

I am proud of my heritage but, as members can clearly hear, I am Australian born and bred. I attended Woolgoolga Public and Woolgoolga High schools and immediately prior to my election in March I was a farmer—I grew macadamias and blueberries in the sandy loam soils of the Corindi range. Between my great-grandfather's arrival in 1895 and India's partition in 1947 my family travelled back and forth between Punjab and Australia. During the war my grandfather fulfilled caretaking duties for interned Italian migrants in Coffs Harbour. Eventually he leased a farm of his own and the family settled permanently at Woolgoolga. Although farming and agriculture has been in my blood going back many generations, I was not exactly in love with the job when I was a boy. I was much more interested in just about anything else and would rather have spent my Saturdays playing cricket or footy. Instead, for me and the other children of banana growers, it was all bananas, bananas, bananas. It was enough to drive anyone bananas! For a very long time Coffs Harbour was famous for its bananas—a very big banana in fact—but in 2019 the area encompassed by the electorate is so much more than the pit-stop to Brisbane it once was.

After completing high school I made the decision, which country kids are often forced to make, to leave home for Sydney. I thought it was the only real option for me and it would be where I would finally discover "real" life. At the time I thought the move from the country to the city, then from university to an office job was a one-way move. It never crossed my mind that one day I would move back to Coffs Harbour, but I grew tired of the high-octane world of advertising, long days and late nights. So in 2009 my wife, Manni, and I decided to return home to Woolgoolga. In the decade I had been away, not to mention the decade since, Coffs Coast had experienced considerable growth. Today it is a diverse and thriving region. We have a booming tourism industry and play host to major events, including a round of the FIA World Rally Championship and the Australian Ladies Classic Bonville. Each year in March we also host the National Touch League championships, which is the perfect drought-breaker—hold the event and the rains will fall.

Our perfect climate means that we have families holidaying all year round and no trip is complete without a family photo in front of the Big Banana. We have a successful and growing agricultural sector, with horticulture, beef, dairy, forestry and fisheries all represented. Recent developments in the innovation and digital space are creating exciting new opportunities. More and more people are moving in to share our beautiful beaches and hinterland, as well as everything else Coffs Harbour has to offer. It is also a great place for amateur cyclists like me—admittedly it has been a while between rides—to enjoy rolling rides through the scenic back roads around Dairyville and Coramba, to suffer the slog up to Ulong or to enjoy a coffee at Sawtell after a cruise down the old highway.

While I might have missed out on Saturday morning sports when I was a kid, as an adult I have been able to indulge in pursuits like cycling and footy. I look back with the wisdom of age and the benefit of hindsight and realise that I had a relatively privileged upbringing. While banana farming was not exactly lucrative when I was growing up, it was definitely enough to provide the family with a modest living and, more importantly, an honest living. I learnt the value of an earned dollar and the value of having a strong work ethic.

I grew up surrounded by a large, loving and supportive extended family. We all lived on the same block within 100 metres of each other. There were always people around, willing to pass on life's lessons. I am immensely thankful for their love and attention and I would wish the same for everyone. But, unfortunately, across the electorate and across the State, I know there are pockets where issues of generational unemployment, underemployment and other social issues—issues that are often exacerbated by drug use—are far too common. New South Wales is the premier State, but we all need to acknowledge that some people have missed out—a fact my predecessor Andrew Fraser ensured I understood from the outset.

Immediately following my preselection in November last year Andrew took me under his wing and we spent nearly every day together out in the electorate, talking to people about what matters to them. Andrew knew the importance of representing the entire community, including those, perhaps particularly those, who find themselves in difficult circumstances. Youth unemployment and youth suicide touch too many families in Coffs Harbour and I am looking forward to working with the Minister for Regional Youth to tackle these issues head-on.

As much as I am proud to be here today, I stand here fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead. I thank the electorate for giving me the opportunity to be their State representative, and in particular I pay enormous credit to Andrew for supporting me and for providing great mentorship as I have made this move into public service. Although I have been in the job only a short while, my family is feeling the impact already. For Andrew to hold the job for nearly 30 years was, without a doubt, a result of an amazing team effort, and the whole Fraser family, particularly Kerrie, must also be thanked for their contribution to public life.

Andrew is a man with a tremendous work ethic, which I witnessed firsthand during the election campaign. Together we put up corflutes late into the evenings—and there were some tricky ones, including one that had us high up a billboard in pretty questionable occupational health and safety conditions. Together we walked nearly every street in the electorate, doorknocking and handing out flyers, and meeting with residents, businesses and community groups. Our calorie-laden lunches from a certain fried chicken establishment meant we did not lose too much weight in the heat and humidity of the campaign. I looked after him.

As election day approached we were both at the pre-poll as often as we could be, answering last-minute questions from voters. Andrew, thank you. The electorate embraced our policy vision. Good government is about having a plan to deliver your policies and I look forward to delivering good policy in everything from infrastructure to education. I was lucky, I had a good education and did well at school, and I was fortunate to have options and opportunities. I studied Industrial Design at the University of New South Wales. Fundamentally, that is a degree that teaches you how to examine issues, how to solve problems and how to create workable solutions. And, small world, I lived on campus at the Kensington Colleges at the same time as my Nationals colleague Sarah Mitchell, and Courtney Houssos, from the other place.

I spent nine years in Sydney. I worked odd jobs while at uni—at a newsagency at Bondi Beach and in a late-night pharmacy at Taylor Square in Darlinghurst; genuinely eye-opening times for a kid from the bush. I read a lot. I played footy. I made lifelong friends. I moved on to more professional jobs, steering my career towards marketing, advertising, and design, all the while refining my skills in solving complex problems and building relationships. I brought those skills with me when I moved back to the Coffs coast. After a few years working as a designer in Sawtell I then decided to try my hand at farming full time.

In 2014 I was also appointed chairman of Oz Group Co-Op, a 100 per cent Australian, farmer-owned co-op, which had very humble beginnings in the early 2000s in a small shed in the Woolgoolga industrial estate. Today it is one of the 10 largest agricultural co-ops in the country, and probably the fastest growing. With a turnover of about \$150 million per annum, it is one of Coffs Harbour's largest businesses—a major contributor to the Coffs Harbour economy and comprised entirely of farming families. The members of the co-op recognised the quality and strength of good rules and good governance to further their interests in the long term. They chose to adopt the policies our team created that prioritised long-term benefits over individual short-term gain. The agreement was shaped by fairness and transparency and laid the foundation for our ability to work together and scale the co-op, factors that ultimately led to its success.

I have felt it has been my life's work for the past few years, and while it has been a huge team effort it is an accomplishment of which I am personally incredibly proud. It represents the type of success that I want to help others achieve. Agricultural co-ops seem to have lost favour in recent times, but our example has proved that it can be done. Governance in an agricultural co-op is hard; farmers make for a tough constituency. In a room of 10 farmers you might hear more than 10 different opinions. But fairness, transparency and good governance will win them over. It is this experience that I will bring to my parliamentary career. While I never thought I would be a member of Parliament, I have always been politically curious. I take an interest in new ideas and make sure I do not develop tunnel vision. When I have felt strongly about something I have rarely been one to take a back seat, but I am surprised that it was farming that ultimately prompted me to seriously consider politics and consider what I could bring to the Parliament and to the people.

Working in agriculture introduced me to one of the most nuanced and fractured relationships in Australia's diverse landscape: the often apathetic and antagonistic relationship between the urban and the rural. So much could be overcome by bridging the basic lack of understanding in the urban areas towards people living and working in regional and rural Australia. Unfortunately, activists can tend to focus on the worst while ignoring and negating appreciation for the crucial food, fibre, raw materials and energy that are produced by hardworking families living in the regions. Members of our modern society, especially those in the urban centres, are wholly reliant on these industries for their survival and the quality of their lives. The call for uninformed regulation, red tape and broad, sweeping shutdowns ignores how lucky we are to take access to food, clothing and materials for granted, and ignores how recent our secure access to these commodities is and how precarious it could be.

I was thrust into the political realm when I saw poor policy being proposed at a local level. Good policy offers a hand up, not just more indiscriminate red tape. Governments should work with people to determine and embrace best practice based on evidence and science so we can ensure a sustainable future for all. I look forward to working with my colleagues from across the State to attract the kind of development, growth and innovation that is going to bring prosperity to the region and to my constituents. I am ready to juggle all the aspects of the job, from facilitating access to services to fighting for the funding a growing electorate like Coffs Harbour deserves. I am ready to examine and contribute to policies that will create a better-functioning society. I am also ready to open the events and attend the functions that are a testament to the vitality and spirit of our community.

Today I join parliamentarians like Gladys Berejiklian and John Barilaro who, like me, despite or possibly even because of their immigrant backgrounds, have gone out and got what they want. It has not always been easy. There were times during the campaign when things got personal. But that is not the kind of politics I find useful, it is not the kind of politics of which I want to play a part and, clearly, it is not the kind that prevails. Politics is changing.

When I first worked in digital marketing over a decade ago, social media was largely a way to keep in touch with family and old school friends. The promise of social media was that it would open our minds to new ideas, but the opposite has occurred. New words have entered our lexicon—words like fake news and echo chamber. Social media is often not a true reflection of society; not every issue has its own hashtag. The only true way to know the community is to be an active member of the community. Debate is being pushed further to the extremes of the political spectrum, alienating people who want to remain open and optimistic and who aspire to a pleasant, peaceful life for themselves and their children.

I love the diversity of the Coffs Harbour electorate, but I still maintain there is far more that unites us than divides us. I know getting involved in politics may mean I expose myself to extra scrutiny, bullies and unfair criticism, but I can only go into this confident of my own good intentions. Luckily, I have a strong and supportive network of friends who will not only boost me when I am down but also help keep my feet on the ground. Some of the best friends I will ever have are friends I made in Sydney. I met my closest circle through sport—the smart ones made it here today! Now, as a group of men in our mid-30s to mid-40s, we have realised the importance of keeping those relationships from our late teens and early 20s strong. Too many of us lose touch with our inner circle of close friends as we get older. We now make an extra effort to catch up more regularly, even though we only ever get a quorum at the Christmas catch-up.

Although we met through a mutual love of sport there is far more that connects us as we get older. Throughout the action-packed last 12 months they were a constant source of support and guidance. Excluding the normal seasonal pressures of farm life, there were some big changes at the co-op. In mid-August, a few weeks before the preselection cut-off, our second child was born. And a week later my grandmother, Rattan Kaur—the matriarch of our family—passed away at home at age 96. I had a difficult decision to make about whether this was the right time for me to essentially drop everything and focus on getting elected. As I have often done in life I chose the unpredictable path—and here we are.

I could not have succeeded without the incredible support and hard work of the campaign committee: Andrew Fraser, our State electoral conference chairman, John F. Sercombe, George Cecato, Brett Sprague, Peter and Chris Lubans, Brett Marshall, Kerry Hines, Neil Manson, Paul Shoker, and of course the incredible Joe Lundy, who was the lynchpin of the campaign. I wish him every success in his new role. I thank the hundreds of volunteers who took the time to hand out election material on polling day and at pre-poll, the Young Nationals who helped doorknock, the people who put our signs in front of their homes and businesses and those people who manned the campaign office. It is due to their hard work and support that Coffs Harbour remains a Nationals electorate.

I also thank the Nationals State chairman, Bede Burke, the State director, Ross Caddell, and the entire team in the NSW Nationals head office for their support, hard work and enthusiasm. I acknowledge the many Nationals party Ministers and Liberal Party Ministers and colleagues whom I met along the way. I single out John Barilaro for his support and guidance during the campaign, it was very much appreciated. It was Niall Blair in the other place who first piqued my interest in State politics and he was a sounding board during the rigours of the campaign. Led by Premier Gladys Berejiklian, our leadership team fills me with confidence. We are ready and dedicated to making the regions and New South Wales as a whole a better place.

The last few weeks of the campaign I ran purely on adrenaline and caffeine. I will admit to a few sleepless nights. But on the night before polling day I had the best sleep I had had for months because—to use some football slang—I had left it all on the park. I knew that night that, whatever the result, we had done everything possible to win. I woke up on polling day feeling refreshed and relaxed. I started the day as I have started nearly every day for the last few years: I went down to my local cafe and sat at our regular table 25 and had a coffee with my mates. Although we normally discuss diverse topics such as vegan ethics and mountain biking, on polling day it was all about the election. It is important for me to point out that this group, probably more than any other, encouraged me to take the step of running for pre-selection. I thank them.

So, like every other day, I left Bluebottles that morning with a spring in my step. Andrew and I started the day at separate ends of the electorate. He was at Lowanna and I was at Red Rock with his son Angus, who was with me the whole day. We made it to every booth in the electorate and spent the last hour of the day at my former primary school. That night we celebrated the end of the campaign with friends, family and the campaign volunteers. I thank Diane Leahy, Katie Hunter, and Craig McTear for making the transition in the electorate office so smooth. I look forward to the good work we will do together. I thank Amy Rudder and the other friends I have spoken to over the last few weeks for their wise counsel over the years and for helping me collect my thoughts for this speech.

I thank the members of my extended family, many of whom are in the gallery today, for putting up signs, dressing the booths and visiting friends and networking in the community. It was truly a team effort. I acknowledge that for my mum, Joginder, dad, Gurminder, my brother, Manvir, and his wife, Amanpreet, and especially my wife, Manni, the past few months have been difficult to say the least. I know you have all shouldered an extra burden. Thank you for allowing all this to happen. It could not have been done without your support and blessing.

I will conclude with a final message: The politics I represent is not about left or right, it is about the people of the Coffs Harbour electorate having access to the same services and the same opportunities as someone living elsewhere in the State. I represent opportunity and growth. I represent rewarding those who work hard. I represent helping those in need of extra support. I represent lower taxes, less red tape and fiscal responsibility. I represent affordable, reliable and clean energy. I represent regional New South Wales. I thank the people of Coffs Harbour for trusting me to represent them.

*Members stood in their places and applauded.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** I extend my personal congratulations to the member for Coffs Harbour. I welcome him to the Fifty-Seventh Parliament as a representative of his community. I know he will do a fantastic job. It is great to have him join the team.