

Legislative Assembly Hansard – 08 May 2019 – Proof

INAUGURAL SPEECH

The SPEAKER: I welcome all those here today to hear the inaugural speech of Helen Dalton, the incoming member for Murray.

Mrs HELEN DALTON (Murray) (12:29): Mr Speaker, congratulations on your election. I thank you and your colleagues for your warm welcome. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of this land, past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge service men and women for their contribution and sacrifice, which has enabled us to enjoy our Australian way of life. I believe this way of life, however, is under threat. Many here in Sydney have failed to notice an astonishing divide occurring within our State and within our nation. A new Third World country is emerging within our wealthy, privileged borders.

Twenty years ago people in the Murray electorate lived longer than those in Sydney. Today we die, on average, five years earlier. We live to 80 on average while Sydneysiders live until 85, according to NSW Health data. And there is no doubt our health is suffering. Peter Dutton once told the world that health facilities on Nauru were better than they are in some parts of regional Australia. He is right! But it was not always like this. When I was growing up, small country hospitals serviced all our needs. They set broken bones, removed infected tonsils and appendixes, stitched wounds and did other basic, everyday procedures. Now almost none of the above is done in hospitals across my electorate. Indeed, if a child breaks a finger they need to travel up to four hours to get it treated.

I could tell you many other horror stories, ranging from matters as diverse as stagnant household income, poor educational outcomes, dysfunctional local government, abhorrent water quality, poor access to the internet and insufficient mobile coverage—and you will find rural New South Wales drifting further behind Sydney at an alarming rate. The scary thing is that none of this is accidental. And we are not just losing our facilities and infrastructure but also losing our livelihood. Back in 2012 the journalist Julian Cribb wrote, "If Australia's security agencies got wind of a terrorist plot to destroy infrastructure and jobs, waste billions of dollars and undermine our health, our governments would mobilise our defence forces to prevent it." He went on, "The trouble is the perpetrators in this scenario are Australian governments themselves: Federal and State, from both sides of politics."

Our governments and their bureaucracies are dismantling one of Australia's most productive industries, the irrigation sector. This sector supplies us with most of our daily needs that are essential to a healthy diet and living standard. Water is our lifeblood in the bush. If we have it, we thrive; if we do not, we die. Irrigators who have fed Australians for a century are being sent broke. Water prices are soaring. Food industries are shrinking, local food companies are being sold offshore or shut down, regional towns are dying and many farmers are quitting agriculture for good. It is these forgotten Australians who have put me in Parliament today.

Today is a special day not just for me but also for all my supporters, volunteers, donors, family and friends. It is truly a shared victory, and I am honoured that they have entrusted their votes to me. For those who made the extraordinary effort with pre-poll, I thank you. To the scrutineers, mentors, my kitchen cabinets and confidants, I am indebted to you and I will not let you down. To all of you, I am truly grateful. I wish to thank the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party for providing me with the opportunity to make a difference. The party backed me, a former schoolteacher, country girl and farmer with no experience in politics.

Along with my husband, Nayce, and son, Campbell, we own and operate our own family farm business, which includes both irrigation and dryland enterprises. We produce many of the products you enjoy, such as rice, cotton, corn, winter cereals, beef cattle, wool and fat lambs. Farming is in my blood. I was brought up on a wheat-sheep property north of Rankins Springs in the Melbergen district. My grandparents were pioneers and settled in the area after the First World War. My family still farm there today. My grandfather Geordie was a Scottish migrant from the Orkney Islands and in 1914 enlisted with the Australian forces and served in Belgium and France. My grandmother's people, also from the Orkney Islands, arrived in Australia in 1864 and settled in Lake Rowan. They opened a blacksmith shop and are credited with repairing and modifying the plough blades that were used for Ned Kelly's armour. Ned Kelly's gang called in many times to have their horses shod. On one occasion a ball was held in Lake Rowan to celebrate the opening of the Australasian Bank. Steve Hart and Dan Kelly came dressed as women while police with fixed bayonets were guarding the place.

My mother's people were early settlers. The infamous "flogging parson", Reverend Samuel Marsden, married my grandparents, who were convicts, in Parramatta. Geordie and Elsie, my grandparents, taught me many things, including perseverance and resilience. As a child I was bush happy, with few restrictions. Dust and dry conditions were part and parcel of my environment. Many times in the morning my mother bathed my eyes open with warm, salty water as conjunctivitis or sandy blight seemed ever present. Water was always scarce and highly valued and we were continually reminded that we were not on the Burrinjuck!

Back then I did not really understand the significance of what they were saying, until I married my husband, Nayce, an irrigation farmer from the small town of Yenda. We produced four fine Australians in quick succession, and they are here today. Campbell manages our farming business, Jessica is a vet in the Kempsey district, Elizabeth is a doctor in Wagga Wagga and Alexandra lives in Dubbo and works in the cotton industry. I became involved in the Ricegrowers' Association and helped develop the world-first five-tier environmental program. One fantastic legacy is the Bitterns in Rice Project, which continues today. The Ricegrowers' Association of Australia provided many other opportunities for me, which included the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation.

As you have probably gathered, I have deep roots in agriculture, particularly in the Murray electorate, and its future. The Murray electorate encompasses more than 107,000 square kilometres including the Griffith, Leeton, Murrumbidgee, Berrigan, Balranald, Hay and Wentworth shires, and the Murray River and Edward River councils. The area is predominantly flat. I have it on good authority that Conargo is one of the flattest places on earth—so flat that you can see the back of your own head! It encompasses parts of the Murray, Murrumbidgee, Lachlan and Lower Darling rivers. The electorate is the home of 14 nations whose people are the traditional owners of the land, a truly remarkable and unique part of New South Wales. Conservatively, irrigated agriculture from the Murray electorate is worth \$7 billion to \$10 billion at the farm gate and maybe five times that from the flow-on effect. Along the food chain, it helps keep half a million Australians in work.

We are populated by smart, productive, multigenerational, multicultural and innovative people. Together, we have developed world-class production and value-add industries. Sadly, these industries are now under serious threat. There is a very good reason I am here: All is not well in the bush. The March election was history in the making for the Murray electorate—the agricultural heartland of New South Wales—rusting off from traditional voting patterns. As agriculture declines, jobs disappear and our young people move to the big cities. Governments then use declining populations as an excuse to further strip away our services—health, education, water and infrastructure.

Our rural and regional health system is in crisis. We have a serious doctor shortage, low levels of bulk-billing and poor access to mental health specialists. Mental health workers are in high demand but positions are not filled, resulting in sufferers not receiving the treatment they need. Under the current drought conditions, suicide statistics are becoming alarming. Many country hospitals have become glorified bandaid depots. Their roles have been downgraded and centralised to bigger regional centres like Wagga. A culture of bullying and gagging is further demoralising hardworking medical staff.

Regional hospitals need to have their own local boards. Hospitals need to be defined as either district or base and a charter of health requirements established. We need good corporate governance, fiscal responsibility, an adequate budget and staffing for the provision of community health needs. Concerned and informed people are desperately trying to hold together a system that is falling apart. They are amazing, dedicated people and they need to be heard. The tyranny of distance and small population numbers are not good reasons for substandard health services in the Murray electorate. We keep paying our taxes but getting so little in return.

Education is a huge concern. Schools across the bush are closing down or being forced to merge. They are struggling to attract teachers. Existing staff are being stretched and required to do more paperwork than teaching. The forced merger of the only two public high schools in Griffith was both underfunded and poorly planned. The Government is saving money, but the teachers, students and their families are suffering as a result. This situation would never occur in Sydney. We seem to be the neglected class, and our communities feel that they are being used as social experiments.

I am also concerned about our natural resources. The New South Wales Government owns more than 850 national parks and reserves, which equates to seven million hectares. The 2015 staff redundancy round has left the national parks and wildlife organisation gutted, resulting in the failure of conservation and land management. Like many other New South Wales government departments, the revolving door of staff, inability to consult, leadership vacuums, bullying and unmanageable workloads are commonplace. The lack of sensible management impacts on our ability to access our national parks and educate our children about our wildlife and threatened species.

With the merging of many of our river red gum forests into national parks and the closure of sustainable logging, rural and regional communities again feel sidelined, with little consideration for our environment and our communities. The rhetoric that our future economic development will be maintained by accessing our natural resources in balance with conservation is meaningless bureaucratic gobbledegook. An explosion of feral pests is causing irreparable damage to our lands. South-western communities are again bearing the brunt of poorly thought-out policies. The lock-up-and-leave ideology is clearly failing to deliver.

Water is the lifeblood of the Murray electorate and it was the most important issue during this last election campaign. Our region is the agricultural mecca for New South Wales. All wealth—whether you like it or not—comes from the earth. I was taught in economics that land, labour, capital and enterprise were the inputs of production. Back then, water was a given—but not anymore. It is now a tradeable commodity. All your city jobs, although seemingly removed, come back to the earth. The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is a disaster for regional communities. From the very beginning, government attitude was to tame us, blame us, blame each other, lock us out of the conversation and not listen.

Now, after billions of tax dollars and millions of fish dying, governments still refuse to accept responsibility. The political scramble for water has left the Murray electorate in a desperate State, with dairy herds disbanded and rice priced out of production. Our agricultural diversity has always been our strength but, with water flowing to the highest or most desperate bidders, it leaves communities, contractors, process and transport companies hung out to dry. Several towns across rural New South Wales have run out of drinking water. Farmers are going bankrupt on zero per cent water allocation. But at the same time wealthy corporations are making tens of millions of dollars by trading ghost water.

We know that there is corruption and gross mismanagement. But why is there not action? Why are those responsible for this disaster not going to jail? Some irrigators are facing court over water theft, but what about the bureaucrats and politicians who created this mess? They are supposed to look after our more precious natural resource. Why have they escaped with no consequences at all? Why are they allowed to continue destroying our rivers? How many more taxpayer dollars will be wasted? The Federal and State governments are creating man-made floods with their policy of "just add water", with a cool \$13 billion in their back pocket. They, personally, have nothing to lose with their just-flush-it mentality. The irony of the plan is that it will leave some areas continuously flooded and other areas decommissioned.

I invite every single member to come out and see for yourself the wastage, loss and damage that is occurring in my electorate. While New South Wales crumbles, a smaller State to our west prospers at our expense. South Australia has seized a 100 per cent allocation and has an overabundance of environmental water to keep artificial lakes full. There has been little accountability for its behaviour while everyone upstream is in trouble. Catastrophic fish kills in the Lower Darling were horrendous. Those who live and work there feel violated. This environmental damage in New South Wales has finally caused the bush to revolt in fury. The locals know that if you rapidly drain an essential resource in this land of drought and flooding rains there will be dire consequences.

The Barmah-Millewa Forest has been inundated for months as the river operators try to push more water across the South Australian border. The overbank flows are ruining habitat both in the river and in the forest. This water is netted off against New South Wales irrigators' allocations, causing hardship for farmers and their communities. Where else in the world during a drought would huge amounts of fresh water be allowed to escape to the sea and then be brought back to be desalinated at a huge cost? We know that poor water management is responsible for blue-green algae blooms. Poor-quality water is dangerous to everyone's health. There are very strong links between blue-green algae blooms and motor neurone disease clusters. There are clusters in towns and regions in the seat of Murray, with rates in Griffith seven times the national average. Yet the Government is refusing to fund a study that will definitely prove the cause of these shocking rates.

Despite this bleak picture, our people are defined by their optimism. We are resilient and eternally confident that we can make a go of things, produce food and fibre, raise our families and support our communities, regardless of the many difficulties we might face. Unfortunately, that resilience has been taken for granted for too long. Burdensome red tape is strangling small communities where resources are stretched to the max. We are always being asked to keep doing more with less. The irony of this is that when governments want to see projects delivered then red tape is cut and cast aside without due process.

While country communities have waited decades for new hospitals, the New South Wales Government built a 270-kilometre, \$500 million pipeline from Wentworth to Broken Hill that nobody wanted in just two years. The business case was kept secret. An environmental impact statement was not needed. Today I commit myself to the Murray electorate. I intend to continue to build partnerships with all communities, including New Australians and the First Australians. We need to adequately recognise the economic and environmental contribution we make and support our industries and people with sensible policies.

I refuse to let us be the ignored or forgotten people, or the people who continually receive second best. I intend to put "local" into "localism", and encourage and guide the current Government. We need visionary planning that is nation building and provides for the future. Water infrastructure needs to be high on the list. There are sensible, practical, triple bottom line solutions, and I look forward to discussing those with the water Minister, the environment Minister and their various departments. Rural and regional communities have too often borne the brunt of poor government policy and we have always gone along—sometimes reluctantly—with inappropriate policy. But not anymore. I intend to put Murray on the map. I leave you with a quote from Ray Goforth:

There are two types of people who will tell you that you cannot make a difference in this world: those who are afraid to try and those who are afraid you will succeed.

Members stood in their places and applauded.

The SPEAKER: I add my personal congratulations to the member for Murray.