



INAUGURAL SPEECHES

The PRESIDENT: Before calling Ms Sue Higginson, I welcome to my gallery her guests, including her partner, Adam Dawson; her daughters, Leilani Wilmott and Hannah Somerville; her grandson, Luca Gava; and her sister, Jo Higginson. I also welcome Senator Mehreen Faruqi and Mr David Shoebridge, former members of this august institution; and Katrina and Kenji Onishi, who are all here this evening for the member's inaugural speech. I also acknowledge and welcome quite a number of people in the public gallery.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON (18:03): I acknowledge that we are on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present. This land, like all land across this State, was never ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Until there is truth, treaty and voice for First Nations people, the work done in this place, like everywhere in this State, is done under the dark cloud of the brutal aspects of continuing colonialism. We must all work together for truth, treaty and voice, not simply because it is the right thing to do—which of course it is. We must do it because it makes things better for everyone, and that is our job in this place.

I am from the Northern Rivers. I live, love, farm and work on the lands of the Gullibul and the Widjabul Wia-bal people of the Bundjalung nation. It is upon those lands that I found my spiritual homelands. I pay my respects to the Elders, past and present, of the people of those lands. I acknowledge First Nations people across the land and the tens of thousands of years of connected, responsible and sustainable land management and custodianship, and recognise that we all benefit from that today. I have worked with and represented First Nations people in courts across New South Wales as we have fought against the destruction of their cultural heritage. The laws that have been posited in this place that claim to be for the protection of cultural heritage are woeful and grossly unfair. They do not protect; they facilitate destruction. It is an indictment that we are the only State that does not yet have standalone cultural heritage laws.

Let's all work together to change that, to enact cultural heritage laws determined and administered by First Nations people and to improve the many other laws that stand in the way of First Nations justice in this State. I stand in this place as a proud Greens representative. I am humbled and excited to join my colleagues and dear friends in this place, Ms Cate Faehrmann and Ms Abigail Boyd, and in the other place Ms Tamara Smith, the member for Ballina; Ms Jenny Leong, the member for Newtown; and Mr Jamie Parker, the member for Balmain. As Greens, we are committed to and held up by four pillars: ecological sustainability, grassroots participatory democracy, social justice, and peace and nonviolence. Those four pillars bring us together as a party that is representative of an innovative, caring, brave, complex and growing movement.

The first Greens party in Australia, which was the first in the world, was initiated in Tasmania from the environmental movement of the early 1970s with Bob. Bob Brown is the embodiment of all the things we The Greens are and represent. The Greens NSW formed in the 1980s, and then in 1992 the Australian Greens formed. We are part of a growing global greens movement that is contributing to parliaments speaking truth to power and practising the politics of justice, love and hope across the world. We have almost 30 years of presence in this place. It commenced in 1995 when, as a movement, we catapulted Ian Cohen into this place from his previous activities at the time—namely, riding the bow of a warship to prevent it from sailing into Sydney Harbour and sitting 30 feet high up a tripod to stop the bulldozers from logging the old-growth forest known as Chaelundi. That is where I met Ian Cohen. It is the kind of people we are.

Following Ian Cohen, a number of great Greens MPs have served diligently and stayed true to the four pillars that they were carried in upon. I acknowledge the formidable work of Lee Rhiannon, Jan Barham, the late John Kaye, Sylvia Hale and Mehreen Faruqi, who continues to serve as one of our awesome Greens senators. Most recently departed from this place, and sorely missed, is David Shoebridge, whose seat I now take—and apparently whose shoes I have to fill. David's tireless contribution to this place has been outstanding in every single way. I have a strong sense that he will continue on his journey at the forefront of Greens politics in the Australian political landscape after this coming Saturday. We certainly need him to do that.

Perhaps inevitable for a party whose origin is in advocating for the voiceless and environmental justice, today The Greens are not only the party for the environment but also the party at the forefront of a wider platform of justice and inclusion—justice for First Nations people, children, people with disability, refugees, women, students, LGBTIQ people, and individuals and families living in poverty. We now have 10 Federal MPs, 23 State MPs and more than 100 Greens councillors, including mayors. It is highly likely that after this Saturday we will have more Greens MPs in the Australian Parliament, making us a substantial and sustained growing force in Australia's political landscape.

That is a significant achievement because, unlike the Coalition and Labor, we have played by different rules. We have refused corporate and dirty donations. We have not acted through fear or favour. We have not formed a compromised coalition. We have not fallen victim to the lust for power. Instead, we have worked upon those four solid pillars and taken positions based on science, evidence and principle, staying true to the practice of grassroots democracy and the politics of justice, love and hope.

It is here I remind everyone, if you have not already voted, to make sure you vote 1 Greens in this Federal election. Do it for our momentum. If you are not into momentum or it is not your thing, do it because this is the climate election. We are the force that can and will escalate climate action, the action we need. Climate change is not coming; it is here. We must do what we need to do to stop the impacts of climate change getting worse than those that are already locked into our future. The warning time is spent. The code red for humanity has been given. I stopped reading the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports and background documents for advice on predictions and models when the Gondwanan ancient rainforests of the north caught fire in 2019. Those forests do not catch fire. I have read well, and desperately, the reports' adaptation pages. However, the words and advice on adaptation that I am looking for now are simply not yet written.

If you do not know what I mean, it is because you are not from Lismore, the Northern Rivers or a bushfire-ravaged community. On 23 February this year I found out I was to become the next Greens member of this Parliament. I was very excited. I was at home in the Northern Rivers. I live 10 minutes out of Lismore, where my children and grandchildren were born. It is our home town. On 28 February everything changed forever. We found ourselves on the frontier of the climate crisis, subjected to a most frightening, extreme climate-induced catastrophic weather event. As soon as daylight hit, my friends, family and community were in tinnies, risking their lives to rescue our friends and their friends who were on their roofs, holding on for their dear lives. Our region was consumed by a cut-off low, otherwise known as a rain bomb.

The Northern Rivers is devastated. Lives are lost, my town of Lismore has been wiped off the map and the upper catchment has been disfigured by landslips never seen before. Watercourses are in places they were not before, farmlands are decimated and our poor, poor river is a scoured, brown, injured scar. My community is displaced, thousands of people are without a home and thousands more are traumatised. The trauma is compounded by the inexperience and lack of preparedness. I curse the Abbott Government for abolishing the Climate Commission in 2013, which at the time was leading the world on adaptation work. Our recovery is long, hard and unknown. This is the human face of climate change. It is not the first time we have seen it in this State. It is harrowing. It is messy, expensive, and it is going to keep happening. I will be asking everyone in this place to help my community on our journey of recovery and adaptation because the lessons we learn—and we will learn them—on this journey will be vital for the next community and the next and the next as we all brace ourselves for a future of more extreme events.

I have been watching this place through an environmental and social-justice lens for about 30 years now. Some of what I have seen has been inspired, hopeful and responsible. Some of it, particularly over the past decade, has been short-sighted, harmful, the product of State capture and at the very heart of what is fuelling the climate, extinction and inequality crises upon us. I cut my political teeth as a frontline forest activist at the beginning of the 1990s. In 1991 I spent months on the front line at Chaelundi State Forest, properly named Jilandi by the Gumbaynggirr people. Jilandi was one of the last remaining wild and remote old-growth forests on public land in the north-east. It has an outstanding abundance of unique native animals that have evolved over millions of years and are severely threatened with extinction.

When I was at Jilandi, I was fortunate to be educated by some of the finest scientists in the country about ecological function, earth systems and the somewhat fragile-balanced nature of our natural environment—how forests sequester carbon, are the home to rare and unique plants and animals, produce rainfall, keep temperatures stable, provide clean water and air, hold landscapes together and contain cultural knowledge. It was easy and long-lasting learning because I was in amongst it. At night, against the full moon in the canopy of the giant old hollow-bearing trees, I saw the silhouettes of greater gliders, yellow bellied gliders, the small bats and the majestic, powerful masked and sooty owls as the precious ground dwellers scurried through the deep, rich mulch layers of the forest floor, all going about their ancient and important business. I heard their magical calls against nothing but the ancient time within which they exist, the relative stability and predictability of the past 12,000 years.

I learnt about the limits to ecology and ecosystem collapse. It was the first time I had heard the term "climate change". It was also where I was first exposed to the raw and brutal force and face of the destruction and exploitation of our living planet. The Liberal-Nationals Coalition Government at the time was dead set on letting multinational corporate Boral let rip with its giant industrial-scale D9 bulldozers in this old carbon-storing, life-giving, vulnerable ecosystem. The community was dead set on protecting Jilandi forest. We camped for months, built blockades, pleaded with politicians for reason, worked to educate and win the hearts and minds of others, and presented the science and, as always, the alternatives.

The Forestry Corporation at the time persisted and came in with hundreds of police officers, who spent days and days breaking through the defences. I note here that at that time, before the frenzy of this current police State, there was a real respect from police. There was a degree of humour and an earnest understanding of the role of peaceful, non-violent but direct—perhaps inconvenient but direct—action. This was important—everyone had a legitimate part to play. This was citizens engaging with their State. It was democracy at work. There were some 230 people who placed themselves in that awful position of being arrested. I know that well because I have represented hundreds of people who have protested across the State and across the country. They were prepared to do this because the stakes were so high.

The choice for those people was to walk away and know what would be lost forever or do everything humanly possible to stop that from happening. I knew these people. They were mums, dads, grandmas, students, doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, nurses, veterans, artists and soon-to-be members of this place. They were people like the young people who we have recently seen blockading on bridges, roads and ports—the ones who are begging us to take notice and do more about climate change so they can look forward to the future, perhaps even think about having children. They were the people doing what they thought they had to do to effect change to laws, regulations and government decisions. They were supported by and represented hundreds of other people who could not do what they were doing—a bit like we do here. In fact, they were no different to us, trying to effect change to laws, regulations and decisions. Actually, they were different to us: They were not actually getting paid, and they did not have cool offices like we do in a building as fancy and lovely as this one. They were out there on the front line, trusting democracy would work.

The police broke through and the dozers started to destroy that ancient forest and with it all of the important evolutionary work and essential function of that ecosystem. It was devastating. An urgent interlocutory injunction was sought and obtained in the Land and Environment Court of New South Wales, just across the road from here. The court described the forest as "a veritable forest dependent zoo, probably unparalleled in south-eastern Australia". The logging stopped. The laws that stopped that logging were the environment and planning laws that were introduced at the end of the 1970s by the then Wran Government after the legendary late Jack Munday-led green bans movement and in response to an extended period of entrenched corruption and politicised decision-making. The passage of those laws in this place was one of those very inspired moments in time—laws that empower the people to seek and access justice in our courts.

I tell the story of Jilandi here because not only was it formative for me and the movement to which I belong, and perhaps a big part of why I have ended up here, but also it marked a significant line in New South Wales' environmental, social, legal and political history. Jilandi was the catalyst for the New South Wales Government to place 180,000 hectares of old-growth forest into our valuable national park system. It led to the adoption of New South Wales' first threatened species legislation. Jilandi also had enormous political ramifications: The Nationals forests Minister was demoted, a Liberal member turned Independent, the National Party planning Minister was found to have acted illegally, and a Liberal Premier and environment Minister resigned following corruption findings. Many will remember it as the Metherell affair.

While all this was happening in New South Wales, the awakening to the science of the living planet was going off on the international stage. In June 1992—30 years ago next month—world leaders, scientists, First Nations people, community organisations, environmental groups, innovators and hopefuls gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the Earth Summit. From that incredible gathering came the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests and Agenda 21, which led to the establishment of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The Earth Summit had an enormous impact on the development of international environmental law. Domestically, the Australian Government and the public sector embraced the difficult but exciting new understanding of the need to have robust environmental laws, integrating the principles of ecologically sustainable development. It set the national framework. Then in 1995, under the newly elected Carr Labor Government, with an active crossbench in this place, including our first Greens MP, we saw the introduction of world-class threatened species protection laws and the promises to protect our public native forests and end broadscale land clearing on private land.

We saw laws that placed duties, obligations and responsibilities on Ministers to protect the environment, to recover threatened species and to stop the key threatening processes that were threatening their very survival. We introduced the Environment Protection Authority, we started limiting the pollution of water and air, we saw the value of supporting landcare across the State, and we started talking to farmers about stewardship. It was our opportunity to avoid the extinction crisis and to mitigate and protect ourselves from the worst impacts of climate change. That was an inspired, hopeful and responsible time in this place.

Then in 1996 John Howard came to power, bringing with him the neoliberalist economic project: the failing ideology of small government, reduced public service, deregulation, privatisation and environmental commodification. It came with its own made-up economic terms of convenience, like externalities and, by extension, a fictitious profit-and-loss balance sheet that does not account for the real costs to our future generations of what we take from and do to the environment today. Corporate capitalism was given safe haven on our shores and unbridled access to the rich natural resources of this land.

For me this was terrifying. I knew the neoliberalist economic project far too well; I had escaped it. I grew up in the industrial north of England in Thatcher's Britain. I listened and watched as she told us that there is no such thing as a society, that we are all individuals and if we were suffering disadvantage then we all just needed to work a little bit harder. I knew this not to be true—that we are all connected to each other, and we are not separate from the State. The State is us and we are all here to help each other. I knew then the biggest victim of the neoliberalist economic project unrestrained would be nature, the planet itself and, in turn, the vulnerable in our communities and our children's children.

Around this time a friend asked me what I was going to do next. He told me I should study law because the planet was going to need a good lawyer. I did not think I could study law. I had not really had that sort of upbringing—I definitely had not gone to that kind of school—and I was a young single mother. I braved it and I loved it, because somehow beneath it all was the language of justice. After all, it had been the law that saved Jilandi and, ultimately, the last of the old-growth forests of New South Wales. By the time I came to practise, the war against our environmental laws by the Liberal-Nationals Coalition on behalf of the fossil fuel industry, corporate agriculture and the big end of town had well and truly been waged. The red- and then green-tape rhetoric had begun. Amendment by amendment, those hard-fought-for duties, obligations and responsibilities were surrendered to unfettered ministerial discretions that served the neoliberalist economic agenda.

The concepts of ecologically sustainable development and reversing biodiversity loss were disappearing beneath biodiversity offsetting and unlimited economic growth and rationalism. The logging of our public native forests had become subject to its own law, which disallowed operations to be challenged in court. Pollution laws were weakening and the rewriting of the native vegetation laws had commenced. The threatened species lists were growing and New South Wales was being opened up proper to "King Coal". Coal has been the ultimate cash crop for the State with enormous impacts, the costs of which are adding up on the real profit-and-loss balance sheet: our rarest woodlands, threatened species, freshwater streams, cultural heritage, farmland, entire communities lost and, of course, the ultimate fuel of the climate crisis. I went head first and spent many years on the front line of public interest environmental law at the intersection of science and law. I found a profound home with so many good people all across the State working for environmental justice.

Many moons ago I pioneered the first regional office of the Environmental Defenders Office, Australia's leading public interest environmental law institution, which at the time serviced rural and regional New South Wales. Then, with the support of many, I became the principal solicitor and then the CEO. It was my job to help communities protect the environment through law, to assist policymakers to make good laws and to educate the community about our environmental laws. I was responsible for high-profile environmental litigation: the David and Goliath stories of the law. I worked with farmers, activists, traditional owners, small businesses, environmental organisations and community groups at every level of the fight for the protection of our environment and the sustainable use of natural resources. Together we fought against mining and gas giants, proponents of harmful development, and governments when they acted above the law.

We had some great successes, which are now revered by many—places that are now protected and valued with harm avoided—and we had many losses. But for every win playing by the rules—holding governments to account under the rule of law—the full force of vested interest would seek to remove our environmental protection laws that bit more and to marginalise, delegitimise and attack us. Heck, we were even referred to once by the then Attorney General as "vigilante lawyers". When the first law officer of the country puts those two words together because you upheld the rule of law, you know democracy is in a bit of trouble.

We had other successes that were unfairly and undemocratically taken away by this place. Within days of the court handing down a judgement, someone from the Executive in this very Parliament would jump to the floor, pass special legislation or tweak some regulation to interfere with the court's decision, allowing the development and the environmental destruction that we had averted to go ahead. The real offence was to learn that the push for the Executive to jump to the floor comes through the influence of some vested interest that has been lurking in the halls and lobbies of this Parliament, which is the same interest that donates directly to the party of the Executive. I now understand that it goes even deeper than those direct donations, that there is a thing called "State capture". It is real; I have experienced it firsthand. It is happening right here in this building and it is an affliction on our democracy.

I have now entered this place largely through a journey of environmental justice, a small snapshot now shared. Underpinning every step on my path here has been the fight for justice for the planet and the people who do not seek to profit from its exploitation. Every step of the way has been faced with a system that for too long has been stacked against us all—a system that is captured by vested interests and the privileged proponents of neoliberalism. Now that I am here I intend to work day and night to satisfy the insatiable appetite for justice that I hold. Together we will do inspired, hopeful and responsible work. We will face the extinction crisis; protect our forests; recover our threatened species; build our valuable protected area network; repair our catchments; stop approving and relying on coal and gas, which is killing us; build our renewable and circular economy; deliver truth, treaty and voice for First Nations people; restore our many ailing rivers; and support the regenerative agriculture and agroecology movements across the State to work with the land and nature for our food and fibre security.

I am so excited to now join my fellow Greens inside and outside this place in our work for justice together to end the housing crisis; stop the over-policing and incarceration of First Nations people and the overreach of the police State; eliminate all forms of discrimination; include people with disability in everything and with pride; make this State safe for women; provide nurses, paramedics and teachers safe and fair work; support the arts; and build our public sector in partnership with the community. We do this as the neoliberalist economic project unravels—which it is—because it is not the vehicle that can or will safely carry us all on our new journey of adaptation together, where we embrace the best parts of the world we have made whilst dealing with our brutal errors.

As Greens, we fight together for justice not simply because it is the right thing to do, which it is, but because it will make things better for everyone, and that is our job here. Finally, the other thing—and the most important thing—that has underpinned every step of my path here has been my fellow travellers, of whom there are so many. They all know who they are, and I thank and love them all. I especially thank my family who have travelled from the Northern Rivers today to share this moment: my daughters, Lani and Hannah; my darling little grandson, who has fallen asleep—I will not take that too deeply—and my partner in all things, Adam. To all of you I say strap in, because the next part of the journey begins right here. Thank you.

Members and officers stood in their places and applauded.

The PRESIDENT: I will now leave the chair. The House will resume at 8.00 p.m.