



## INAUGURAL SPEECHES

**The PRESIDENT:** I welcome into my gallery this evening the family and friends of Dr Amanda Cohn, including Dr Cohn's partner, Geoffrey Hudson; her sister, Sarah Cohn; brother-in-law, Ben Weber; and nephew, Charlie; her father, Jeffrey Cohn; her aunt, Ann Aitken; elected local government councillors Phil Bradley, Ned Cutcher, Kristyn Glanville and Carol Sparks; and her mother, Susan Cohn, and grandmother, Patricia Philpott, who are watching the livestream.

**Dr AMANDA COHN (18:02):** I acknowledge that I am delivering my inaugural speech on the unceded land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and that I live on magnificent and unceded Wiradjuri land. I pay respect to past, present and fiercely emerging Elders of those and the many nations of New South Wales and extend that respect to all First Nations people here today. New South Wales always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

I am a newly elected member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, a position of enormous privilege and responsibility. I have become a part of this institution as it approaches its bicentenary and as we discuss its history and its place in shaping the ways that we live today. The 200-year history of the New South Wales Parliament is brief in comparison to the tens of thousands of years of governance that existed here before it. To acknowledge the bicentenary with any honesty requires us to reckon with the truth that the New South Wales Parliament has caused very real harm to First Nations peoples and cultures, both historical and ongoing, from the destruction of cultural heritage and language to disrupting kinship and care for country. In recognising this, I reaffirm my commitment to amplify and work alongside First Nations people towards truth, treaty and voice.

I have come to this Parliament from the front lines of multiple, related and compounding crises, in particular the climate crisis and the crisis in our health system. The experiences that I have had as a country GP, as a State Emergency Service volunteer and of steering a regional community through a pandemic as its deputy mayor have prepared me for this role in ways I never expected. Working in public hospitals, emergency departments and community health gave me the most precious insight into people's lives. I have been inspired over and over again by my patients—by their resilience, their dignity and their humility in the face of suffering, or difficult or unexpected news. But the patients that I still think about and who keep me up at night are the people that I could not adequately help, not because of their conditions but because of the avoidable failure of governments.

I remember a young man who refused admission to hospital for necessary surgery because he was a casual labour-hire worker without access to sick leave. I remember the people who came to see me fortnightly for years for support with their mental health while they languished on waitlists for public housing. I remember the elderly couple who spent their final months together traipsing hundreds of kilometres back and forth, away from their children, to a capital city for treatment they should have been able to access closer to home. I remember the victim-survivors of family violence put back into dangerous situations because support services in the bush are not good enough. I remember the four-month-old baby with COVID in respiratory distress for whom I cared for over six hours, waiting for retrieval to Sydney, when I and the two nurses working with me had already been working for 10 hours without a break. I wonder what happened to every other patient in the waiting room that night who was not seen by a doctor.

Over a decade as a State Emergency Service volunteer, I have experienced firsthand the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events due to climate change. I was operating radios in the Lake George Fire Control Centre the night Cobargo burned. I drove a rescue boat on the flooded Hawkesbury last year to evacuate exhausted residents and resupply isolated communities. When I arrived at the Northern Tablelands Fire Control Centre to support and relieve local volunteers just before Christmas in 2019, they had been operating for 108 consecutive days. I cannot continue on the front lines while people in this Parliament make decisions that make things worse.

Climate change is the defining issue of my generation. Our leaders should be discussing how we can keep communities safe in a warming climate and how we can make sure that nobody is left behind by the urgent transition away from fossil fuels that we must make. Instead, new coal and gas projects continue to be approved, and it will be for future generations to judge whether we took the action that we needed to. I am so inspired by the School Strike 4 Climate movement. We should be listening to and platforming the voices of those who have the most at stake, rather than disenfranchising them.

Burnout is not just about having to put in long and unsustainable hours. When you take skilled and compassionate people and put them in an environment where they cannot do the work that they were trained to do and expose them to suffering every day that they are unable to ease, it causes a moral injury. I have heard the same stories from nurses, midwives, paramedics, teachers and countless other essential workers. While our health system has failed to support its existing staff with safe working conditions, locum doctors and temporary agency staff are offered more and more money. Through my work in both health care and emergency services I have learned that the health and safety of our communities depends on strong, well-resourced and well-supported public services—and, importantly, that one must never, under any circumstances, piss off the nurses.

For me, as well as finding healing through time in nature and time with animals, I found energy in having the opportunity to be an advocate for my peers and my patients and a part of driving change. In 2016 I was the first Green and the youngest woman ever elected to Albury City Council. I had the incredible responsibility and challenge of leading my community through the COVID pandemic as deputy mayor while continuing to work on the front line as a doctor. COVID brought out the best in our communities. In response to unexpected challenge and hardship, at a local level we saw compassion and care for each other, making sure our neighbours had food and medicines while we tried to connect, sing and play together using technology.

But the same unexpected challenge and hardship brought out the worst in government. The New South Wales Government supported a police-led, punitive response, with fines disproportionately targeted at already disadvantaged communities—decisions that further marginalised people with disability and, particularly, immunocompromised people—and State border closures that ripped through the middle of cross-border communities like Albury-Wodonga.

The one optimistic lesson that I took from the Government response to COVID was seeing that things can turn on a dime, given political will—from the Federal Government providing free child care to suddenly having to present documents to cross a policed border between Albury and Wodonga. Imagine if we applied that sense of urgency to action on climate change or addressing the housing crisis. We can, and must, and I will hold on to that hope that so many individuals and communities have shown me.

Serving my community for five years as deputy mayor taught me the value of the platform of an elected representative. I learnt that speaking up to change the conversation has value in and of itself, even if you do not win in the short term. I have also unfortunately learnt how women in public life are treated when they take a stand. The worst messages that I have received, being persistent threats of sexual violence, are too explicit to read into *Hansard*. What helped me to get through the biggest challenges in local government is the same knowledge that will serve me well in Parliament: knowing that I was not elected as an individual but as a representative of a movement of people with shared values.

Many Greens before me have demonstrated how to be an elected politician who empowers and platforms others. The Greens recognise that social and political change is driven outside of Parliament by social and protest movements, and by people and storytelling. With that knowledge, I navigated a conservative majority in the council chamber and had big wins on climate, protecting native vegetation, trans rights, accessibility for people with a disability, and recognition of First Nations heritage.

Critically, The Greens understand that social justice and environmental justice are inextricably linked. Both people and our environment have been ruthlessly exploited by corporations and facilitated by politicians. As a crossbencher, and particularly as a Green, it is my proud responsibility to hold the government of the day to account and to amplify the voices that most need to be heard. I am inspired by Greens who have come before me in the Legislative Council. I am particularly personally grateful to three former members—Lee Rhiannon, Mehreen Faruqi and David Shoebridge—who have each shared with me their time, energy, knowledge and skills.

From my academic work, including completing master's degrees in epidemiology and international public health, I have been left with a love of seeking a deep understanding of an issue and not shying away from nuance or complexity, and an appreciation of the important scientific approach of changing one's views when presented with sufficient evidence. That said, academic peer review may be the only process I have experienced that is as slow as the process of government.

After starting my study of medicine at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, I moved to Albury for my clinical placement years of medical school, which also took me to Deniliquin, Broken Hill and Wilcannia. Studying medicine gave me a fascination for people and understanding how we work and what makes us tick. I quickly fell in love with both the landscapes and communities of regional New South Wales. I am delighted to have the opportunity to travel and connect with the communities I now represent as an upper House MP.

For those wondering about my slight accent, I was born in Sydney and my family moved to Montreal, Canada, when I was three years old for my dad's work as a scientist. Growing up in Canada has left me with a predictable and lifelong love for cold weather and maple syrup, as well as an open mind to radically different ways of thinking and organising our urban spaces. The motto of the school I attended in Montreal has shaped much of my work: "Non Nobis Sed Urbi et Orbi", meaning "Not for ourselves alone, but for the city and the world".

Before I studied medicine, I completed a degree in Spanish and Latin American studies, which led me to live and study in Chile and travel throughout Central and South America. With the Pinochet dictatorship in recent memory, my fellow students took their democratic rights and responsibilities seriously. I learnt my activism as part of the Chilean student movement for public education, to which the Government responded with military police. They taught me that putting lemon juice in a bandana would take the edge off the tear gas, but it turns out that does not work very well. At the time, I was grateful that in Australia we understood the critical importance of the right to protest in a healthy democracy, but now we are faced with draconian anti-protest laws that have seen courageous environmental activists given jail time for something as benign as blocking a road. Under the current laws, I am not sure we would have ever seen the successful civil rights movements of previous generations.

At times, watching debate in Parliament and especially question time, one might forget that the decisions made by the New South Wales Parliament have serious and lasting consequences for the communities that we represent. Living on the Victorian border, I have seen the tangible difference that State Government decisions make. Just across the "Milawa Bila" Murray River, my patients have better access to domestic violence services, gig and casual workers have access to sick leave, and nurses have better pay and safe staffing ratios.

In 2019 I watched over the live stream, hanging on to every word, this Parliament debate whether to decriminalise abortion. I will not forget that many of my now colleagues voted that I should be a criminal for my work as a medical abortion prescriber. I am proud of my work as a provider of both abortion and antenatal care, enabling my patients' reproductive health choices to be carried out safely. Abortion is health care. Reproductive health care is health care. It should be free, safe and accessible to every person in New South Wales.

In March this year, I walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge along with 10,000 members of my community and our allies in celebration of WorldPride. It was a glorious sunny morning for LGBTQIA+ communities to come together and reclaim public space. But what has stayed with me is the contrast between vibrant and inclusive events like WorldPride and Mardi Gras and the daily lived experiences of queer people, particularly in rural and regional areas. I remember a patient, whose physical and mental health I had been supporting for some months, who came out as a trans man. He was kicked out of home and fired from his job on the same day. Because his workplace refused to provide him with a separation certificate, he was not able to access income support. He came to see me in a state of crisis, unable to afford to fill his scripts for his regular medications. He did not feel safe approaching local charities for support because of their religious association.

Though I am proud and able to speak openly about my sexuality, I myself am not exempt from the pressures of homophobia. When I was elected to local government, after many years of living and publicly identifying as bisexual, I chose to no longer disclose my sexuality because it felt safer not to do so. Like so many bisexual people in long-term relationships with someone of the opposite sex, I have been complicit in my own erasure. This personal experience is a very recent memory, and it motivates me to fight for queer visibility and representation, especially for bisexual and trans and gender diverse people, and to improve safety, access and inclusion for all LGBTQIA+ people in every corner of our State.

Reflecting on the history of this place in preparing to speak tonight gave me cause to also reflect on my own history. I am one of the 48 per cent of Australians who have at least one parent born overseas. My maternal grandparents, Robert and Patricia Philpott, migrated to Australia from England in 1970. Through my British heritage I know that a cup of tea cannot solve all problems but will certainly always put you in a better state of mind to tackle them.

My paternal grandparents, Herbert and Gerte Cohn, my Opa and Oma, were forced to flee the Holocaust as German Jewish teenagers. They met at Gross-Breesen, an agricultural youth community established to shelter Jewish teenagers from Nazi persecution and to prepare them for life abroad. Their stories are well documented in my Opa's memoir, including his forbidden visit to the Berlin Olympics on the day that Jesse Owens won the 100 metres sprint, which he tells they managed only because of the large influx of foreign visitors at the time.

My Oma survived the "Kristallnacht" with her father by riding the train that circled Berlin around and around, with the family savings stuffed in her socks. My Opa was brought to Australia by a Jewish charitable organisation and put to work as a farmhand near Forster. After a brief stint in the Australian Army, always creative and entrepreneurial, he established a small market garden where he grew and sold vegetables and slept at night in a disused chicken shed, saving up money for my Oma's fare to Australia.

After the war, with the assistance of the Red Cross, he found my Oma in England, who had survived the war working as a cook. She told me proudly of the occasion that she cooked for visiting royalty at Perth in Scotland. They were married, despite having no family and few friends at the time, with a complete Jewish wedding at a synagogue in Bondi Junction and a reception attended by the large extended families of their friends—an extraordinary gesture of compassion and community.

As romantic as my Oma's and Opa's story is—I have often mused that it would make an amazing movie—the other side of this story is that my Opa's mother, his brother Alfred and Alfred's wife and child died at Auschwitz. My Oma's father, Julius Jacoby, died at Theresienstadt concentration camp and her mother, Edith Jacoby, at Auschwitz. I honour their memory today. By making the impossible decision to send their children away, I am here to tell their story.

What my family's story has taught me is the danger of an "us versus them" mentality and the importance of standing up for all persecuted people. The first time I voted for The Greens was in support of their principled, courageous and unwavering calls for compassionate treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. We have a long way to go for this institution to be as inclusive and representative as it should be. I wonder how my grandparents would feel to know that their granddaughter is expected to stand, every morning, in this notionally secular public institution while those around her recite the Lord's Prayer in unison.

This year we saw neo-Nazis openly parading in Australia, with the protection of the police. This chills me to my core. Threats to any marginalised group of people make us all less safe. It is our collective responsibility to respond firmly and unwaveringly to the far right and the threat that they pose not only to Jewish people but to all targets of white supremacy, including people with a disability, people of colour and queer people. Those who may oppose me should know that I am determined and persistent. Last year I completed an ironman-distance triathlon after years of training and preparation. I may slow down. I may ask for help when I need to. But I will not stop—not during an endurance race that took me 14 hours and not in the fight for the change that we need in this State.

Of course, I did not arrive at this position without the support of countless people, some of whom I will take the opportunity to thank. Thank you to my patients for sharing with me your brightest and your darkest moments and your hardest decisions. Know that I am still and will always be caring for you in a different way. Thank you to the thousands of Greens volunteers who poured their time and energy into this election campaign and many before it. My seat in this Parliament does not belong to me as an individual but belongs to all of us. Thank you especially to members of the Albury Greens—my second family—for your unwavering support and for putting your confidence in young people. Thank you to my new colleagues Ms Abigail Boyd, Ms Cate Faehrmann, Ms Sue Higginson, Jenny Leong, Kobi Shetty and Tamara Smith for your mentorship, guidance and camaraderie. I am proud to be part of a team of such outstanding, skilled and committed women.

Thank you to my partner, Geoff, for nearly 10 years of walking beside me or standing behind me and never in front. You have shown me the truth in the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who said, "Aimer, ce n'est pas se regarder l'un l'autre, c'est regarder ensemble dans la même direction", which means love does not consist of gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction. Thank you to family, friends and like-minded people who are here today. Seeing your faces in the gallery is a beautiful memory that will give me strength on my most difficult days.

Finally, to the people of New South Wales, who I am here to represent, please never let me lose sight of why I am here. Just as it is my role to hold the New South Wales Government to account, it is yours to hold me to account and to keep me connected with the communities I am here for. I look forward to your letters, emails and phone calls and to many collaborative conversations, meetings, public events and campaigns. I am ready to work together towards a better future for all of us.

*Members and officers of the House stood and applauded.*

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

**The PRESIDENT:** According to the resolution of the House, it being 8.00 p.m. proceedings are now interrupted to enable the Hon. Jacqui Munro to make her first speech without any question before the Chair.