



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 30 May 2007.

Mr KEVIN HUMPHRIES (Barwon) [8.18 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have already been threatened with a couple of cattle prods from behind, so keep an eye on the people behind me! It is an honour and a privilege to address this House in my inaugural speech as the member for Barwon in the presence of my wife, Linda, our sons, Nicholas and Alexander, and daughter, Georgina. There is a great deal of joy, pride and humility in the opportunity to share milestones with family, friends and colleagues.

It is without doubt that our three children are our greatest pride and joy. Their adventure today was to get themselves from Brisbane to Sydney for this occasion under the watchful eye and careful coordination of their mother. Nick is the eldest of twin boys and currently attends Queensland University as a firstyear student studying for a Bachelor of Business. He hopes to one day be a valuer. Alexander is also a first It is without doubt that our three children are our greatest pride and joy. Their adventure today was to get themselves from Brisbane to Sydney for this occasion under the watchful eye and careful coordination of their mother. Nick is the eldest of twin boys and currently attends Queensland University as a firstyear student studying for a Bachelor of Business. He hopes to one day be a valuer. Alexander is also a firstyear student studying at Queensland University of Technology. He hopes to be a landscape architect after completing a Bachelor of Urban Design. Both boys are keen sportsmen, good mates, work reasonably hard, enjoy life, are considerate of others and have been relatively kind to their parents during their teenage years.

It was at their birth in Tamworth, after a rather hasty trip from Boggabri some 19 years ago when they decided to arrive early, that I was confronted with two stark realities: firstly, that most men are basically useless when it comes to assisting their wives at the birth of their first children; and, secondly, the admiration, respect and commitment that builds in a relationship with your life partner once the reality hits that you are now responsible for the love, care and upbringing of another human being.

Georgie attends year 11 at Stuartholme College in Brisbane, a school run under the auspices of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She has a great flair for the arts, enjoys her sport and the company of friends. It is great that she follows in the organisational ability of her mother and was able to get her brothers rounded up, tidy and here on time. It was at Georgie's birth 17 years ago in Hobart Royal Hospital that I came to experience a new benchmark in health care. The Royal is located in the centre of Hobart. At that time women after childbirth were not permitted to go home until they were able to complete at least a half day's shopping. We were living in the Huon Valley at the time, an hour south of Hobart. It did take a while for Linda to get home. In the meantime there must have been some extra genetic type transfer, as both Georgie and her mother possess an extraordinary talent for shopping. Nothing gives Linda and I greater pleasure than to spend time with our children.

There is no one particular reason, opportunity or experience that led me down a political path. My life's journey was probably not that different from many of the members here this evening—perhaps different scenery, a different script, but generally I have found in life that people's needs and wants do not differ too greatly. My parents, Eileen and Frank Humphries, were married in Tamworth in 1958. My mother was a city girl, the only daughter of Doris and Jack McHugh. They had moved around New South Wales in pop's position with Postal and Telecommunications and a stint in

Canberra during the war. My grandfather's career ended in Sydney as he and a number of his fellow directors paved the way for the separation of what we know today as Australia Post and Telstra.

To have my mother here today is a great honour and privilege and for us to have our city cousins here this evening gives mum and me great pleasure. My father passed away some years ago. He left school at 14 after the parish priest organised a mechanics apprenticeship for him at the local garage. Dad was the second youngest of nine children. His family relocated to Tamworth from Wee Waa during the Great Depression looking for work. I spent many hours tinkering and playing at the garage in my younger years. My younger sisters, Shanny and Margaret, and brother, John, belonged to a happy, closeknit family that enjoyed many a family picnic, barbecue, outings with family and friends, and the many sporting carnivals that we attended for football and netball with our parents as coaches. I am happy that my sister Shanny and brother, John, are here this evening, and that our sister, Margaret, is also here in spirit.

My parents were able to instil in me the value of hard work, commitment, responsibility to self and others. I am grateful for the opportunities my parents provided for me, for their hard work and the sacrifices they made in providing a safe and happy home. Our family grew up in Tamworth, where I attended St Edward's Primary School, run by the Sisters of St Joseph. Following a secondary education at the Christian Brothers College I gained a scholarship through the Armidale Diocese to train at the Catholic Teachers College operated by the Christian Brothers in Strathfield. I completed my bachelor of education externally through Armidale University and later postgraduate studies in education administration through the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. In 1981, I began what was to become a 20year career in teaching and administration, with my first teaching position at St Patricks Primary School in Walcha.

The SPEAKER: Hear! Hear!

Mr KEVIN HUMPHRIES: They say I got best prize out of Walcha, and I will tell you what that was in a minute. It was at the end of my time in Walcha that I met my wife, Linda, whilst playing tennis. I remember the occasion vividly, with my attention span having dwindled at the sight of this attractive young girl who had returned home to fill in for tennis. This introduction sparked a romance and we were eventually married in Walcha in 1985. Linda's parents, Jenny and Reeve McCormack, were an extremely generous couple, and I would regard them as friends as well as parentsinlaw. As our family grew there was nothing better than to spend time at the family property "Oak Hill" in Walcha.

Following my time in Walcha Linda and I moved to Tamworth, where I taught secondary school at Rosary College for four years. I went on to take up positions as Principal at Sacred Heart Boggabri, Sacred Heart Geeveston in Tasmania and my final contract at St Philomena's Moree, which commenced in 1995. This period of 15 years as school principal, all in country areas, presented me with a number of privileges, not the least being able to go to work with my children and being a part of their growing up at close range. That has changed now, I can tell you. Sharpening my skills and experience as to what works best within an educational context in terms of teaching and learning, allowing me to learn from experience Following my time in Walcha Linda and I moved to Tamworth, where I taught secondary school at Rosary College for four years. I went on to take up positions as Principal at Sacred Heart Boggabri, Sacred Heart Geeveston in Tasmania and my final contract at St Philomena's Moree, which commenced in 1995. This period of 15 years as school principal, all in country areas, presented me with a number of privileges, not the least being able to go to work with

my children and being a part of their growing up at close range. That has changed now, I can tell you. Sharpening my skills and experience as to what works best within an educational context in terms of teaching and learning, allowing me to learn from experienced educators, and working with excited yet nervous young teachers was an excellent recipe for someone who wanted to make a difference in the community.

Creating, building and on occasions restoring a safe, secure and vibrant learning environment was my focus in the communities in which I worked. Underpinning Catholic education was very much the faith and traditions of the church that I had grown up in, and I believe it still provides a framework that is very much relevant today. I would hope to work with the government of the day in improving our standard of education, encouraging both Federal and State resources to be allocated to ongoing teacher training, particularly in the area of literacy, and acknowledging that the best instruction method that supports a total language approach is a methodology that integrates direct instruction in speaking, spelling, writing, listening and reading comprehension. Taught not caught is the required approach.

It is my belief that no one needs to be or should be left behind in this country. Education is the cornerstone and common thread by which we can move our communities forward. Education underpins productivity, participation and equal opportunity. The delivery of educational services across Barwon will be a major focus of my time in Parliament. The majority of our schools are small, rural and remote. There are few options for choice in education across Barwon, which is why I will be working for innovative and effective delivery of services that reflect community standards and expectations.

Skills are transferable. After 20 years in education I had a career change, setting up a management consultancy company in 2001. I put myself out in the area as a gun for hire. Companies or businesses that were in need of shortterm or parttime management were my target. Moree has a relatively high flow of management throughput in the area. As a large agricultural economy second to none in the country there is a very strong presence in the finance, marketing, input and logistic sector. It is a great place for young people to experience an exciting industry that operates on a local to a global scale. What started as a 12months experiment grew, and over the last five years I have been engaged within the cotton industry, the aged care and retirement sector, training companies, Aboriginal employment and private project management.

I would like to digress and say on a more serious note that at the same time there commenced a recurring natural phenomenon in this country that has grown to take a firm grip on not only the Barwon electorate but also much of inland Australia—drought. Make no mistake about it, most of this State is experiencing a very difficult period of time. I have travelled constantly across our region over the last five years and the current situation is in the realm of a national disaster. Recent rains inland have given some respite to farming communities in providing winter crop opportunity but it is very thin. Water storages are at rock bottom and without large inflows into our storage capacities both country and city areas will face difficulty in meeting our needs that this generation has never faced in its lifetime.

There is a very high probability that our situation will get worse before it gets better. I hope I am wrong. In the meantime with regard to the many farming families and their communities who have been without income over the last six years, I continue to be amazed by their dignity and resilience.

It is time for all governments, both State and Federal, to turn their eyes inwards on this country and focus clearly on the domestic hardship that drought has brought. It is time as a nation that we help ourselves with the savings we have made within our economy and raise the level of support for struggling businesses, many of them in Barwon. We are in new times and we need new and timely strategies to see this drought through.

How did I become involved in politics? My first real engagement in politics was through water and the Aboriginal community—an unusual combination. In 2002 I was invited to chair the New England and North West Area Consultative Committee, the Federal Regional Partnerships Program. Part of this responsibility was to chair a community adjustment package. The State Government undertook a process whereby groundwater within the Namoi Valley that historically had been overallocated was to be cut back. Despite enormous impacts on both disadvantaged farmers and the communities to be affected there was no real commitment by the State to offer or engage in real or meaningful compensation. Estimated loss of annual production as a result of water cutbacks was in excess of \$40 million net, close to 200 jobs and potentially 70 farmers out of business. This raised the issue of property rights and the push by our local Federal member and then Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, to have water rights recognised as a property right.

In short, if something you owned was to be taken away or historical and legal opportunity denied, then someone has to pay. This is still the case and something all governments must recognise and honour as per their moral and Constitutional obligations. Groundwater recovery within the Namoi and Gwydir valleys, where I live, has been a mess and poorly managed. It amounts to nothing short of theft by an executivestyle government. People's lives and their livelihoods have been seriously jeopardised by this convoluted process that is still going on today. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

Natural resource policy has to be driven by science and fact, not emotion and ideology. Farmers and agricultural communities in the Barwon electorate have a traditional history combined with a depth of expanded knowledge when it comes to managing available resources whilst ensuring that environmental values are maintained, economic benefits are realised and social cohesion is maintained. Rural communities are at the pointy end of impact when it comes to a fundamental change in practice or, in more recent times, extreme weather conditions. It is my belief that the process undertaken in the Namoi was a disaster not only for those affected but also for environmental outcomes in general.

A mistrust is now pervading the relationship between resource management authorities and farming communities. The lack of consistent policy direction, due process and management of water is also reflected in land management. New South Wales has had a period of government that reflects an antifarming mentality, driven by an extreme point of view, a poor understanding of modern farming practice, a populist belief of what constitutes a green credit and a general disconnect from the fact we live largely in a wide brown land. At a recent forum held in Dubbo on invasive native scrub, the Chair of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Don Burke, said,

It is the extreme environmentalists who are the greatest danger to the environment. The best people to look after our land and environment are the people who live there, our farmers.

I hope to work with all governments—I acknowledge the Minister is in the Chamber—to help them develop a closer relationship with our farming community, one based on cooperation and not

convictions. It was during this time that I joined the National Party. I had seen what good and bad policy was delivering and how important it was to have a political voice. I could see who had been traded off in the natural resource debate to preserve our community not just at a local level but also at a regional level. I believed I had to become more politically active. It was clear that if our communities were to have their voice heard then a grassroots party whose priority was committed to taking on board local and country issues was for me.

In 1995 when we first moved to Moree, no Aborigines were employed in the main street of Moree, let alone owned business houses. This was not acceptable for a town of 10,000 people with a third of its population indigenous. It was clear to me and many others that things had to change. Some of the answers have come from within our community, not the external policymakers, departments or wellmeaning social engineers that have pervaded Aboriginal issues for too long. A combination of community engagement, a recognition and acknowledgement of the Kamilaroi nation as the first Australians in the area—the original inhabitants of our land—and a series of capacitybuilding projects have led me to believe we are heading in the right direction.

Employment and business opportunities are growing through proactive locally driven programs such as the Aboriginal Employment Strategy [AES], which has a philosophy of "W" for work not welfare. The strategy forms part of the business and corporate community in socially and economically engaging the community. I became a director of the Aboriginal Employment Strategy six years ago, and I continue to support the business. The Aboriginal Employment Strategy is as much a successful psychological program engaging mentors to partner the new work entrant as it is for the employer ensuring greater outcomes for Aboriginal people and potential employers. The initial office was in Moree, and it now has offices in Tamworth, Dubbo, Glebe and Blacktown. The operation is now an all Aboriginalbased board and staff are committed to getting indigenous people into the workforce and supporting them.

Driven and mentored by Dick Estens out of Moree, the program will continue to expand across the country and be a focal point for practical reconciliation. There will be no social change in our communities without legitimate structured access to economic advantage, work and enterprise. Cultural awareness activities, business sponsorship and mentoring, the arts, schoolbased traineeships and more effective community development employment programs that are challenging the deep resistance to change are slowly turning the tide for some of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters in the Barwon electorate. A joint effort by the Moree community to do up our main street to encourage engagement, ownership, cultural pride and social interaction has been very successful. All the community are proud of our town. There is a long way to go, but we are heading in the right direction.

Not only is Barwon the largest electorate in terms of agricultural production and associated employment, we also have the largest indigenous population. The future of many of our towns will depend on how successful we are as a community in involving young Aborigines in education, training and employment. An approach that encourages enterprise, connectedness and building relationships within the wider community works. There is not room for two classes of Australians within our communities. There is not room for two standards of education or access to health services. There is not room for two classes of Australians meeting community law and order

standards. We are diverse by nature, but we are also one community. Given the resources, together at the local level we can work our way through the many challenges facing Aboriginal communities.

I would say, and am saying, sorry—sorry for what we have not achieved for Aboriginal people in this country. It is 40 years since the recognition of Aboriginal citizenship and I can honestly say we have a very long way to go in closing the gaps that exist between the lives of indigenous and nonindigenous people. I am committed to growing and supporting leadership within our Aboriginal communities, growing community capacity and encouraging all people to take advantage of what mainstream Australia has to offer. There is no better place to be driving these issues than out of Moree and the Barwon electorate, a recognised place that can, and does, bring about change.

With an electorate of 225,000 square kilometres—approximately 30 per cent of the State—taking in most of northwest and central west inland New South Wales, access to health services and provision of infrastructure are always on the agenda. Distances and time delays in accessing specialist and semispecialist services from country areas is not acceptable. It is not acceptable that half the maternity units across inland New South Wales have been closed in the last 10 years—10 of them in Barwon. It is not acceptable that young families have to travel more than three or, in some cases, five hours to have their babies delivered. It is stressful and costly, and it seriously compromises young families who want to make their home in a country area.

To keep young people in, and attract them to, our rural communities, access to appropriately trained medical staff and facilities is a necessity. In this day and age no one should be disadvantaged by living in a country area. There is much to do in this area, and I will work on focusing all governments on gaining better outcomes for rural and remote health. An enormous proportion of Barwon's income is generated from primary industry. Agriculture across the region and the emerging mining industry in the CobarNyngan area are producing copper, gold and silver, and coal in the Narrabri region. At this stage I will give a plug to Lightning Ridge, home of the Black Opal, and the many tourist operators around the region who promote the diversity of our region—home of the Outback. [*Further extension of time agreed to.*]

The challenge both now and in the future reflects the changing global economy. Each of these industries produces billions of dollars in income, which underpins our local, State and national economies. With the global resources boom and an ability to responsibly grow our regional mining industry, it is vital that infrastructure keeps pace with demand. New South Wales has fallen behind our competitors and we need to fast track road and particularly rail infrastructure that will enable reliable and timely delivery to ports and world markets. I look forward to an announcement by the Federal Government committing to the Brisbane to Melbourne inland rail link, which will run through the electorate of Barwon. Barwon's future economic and growth corridors are aligned north-south, giving us the ability to move large quantities of primary produce and commodities to port, which is essential for the next level of productivity gains for this country.

The electorate has the minerals, the rich soils to produce grains, and pastures for meat and fibre production. The economic reality of growing valueadding businesses such as renewable fuel and energy in rural areas will result in improved infrastructure and reduce the cost of doing business. This will require political will from all levels of government and a level of intergovernmental cooperation that currently is challenged at best.

With the advent of faxes, the Internet and modern communications it has been all too easy to centralise government at all levels and the decisionmaking process. Too many of our communities are managed from outside with local decisionmaking compromised. Local government has been forced to compete in a handout, do as you're told mentality with various State and Federal government departments. This, in effect, is killing off many of our smaller communities. There needs to be a fairer, more consistent way of supporting local government through recurrent funding and providing a framework whereby communities can and will take more responsibility for their wellbeing and future. Both my National colleagues and I believe in less government, not more; decentralisation of decisionmaking as opposed to centralised; and the local community being responsible for setting their own standards.

There is much discussion about water management not only across the State but nationally. The BarwonUpper Darling Basin takes up the Barwon electorate and includes all the major inland rivers and the crossborder rivers as well. How water is allocated and for what purpose is very complicated. It is necessary for the Federal Government to take on water management within the MurrayDarling Basin. It is necessary for all governments, catchment management groups, local stakeholders, industry and conservationists to cooperate in delivering fair and reasonable outcomes. If whisky is for drinking and water for fighting over, we should not be afraid of having the fight if it means we can arrive at a point whereby our communities are able to maintain their viability without compromising environmental outcomes.

There are a large number of people that I would like to mention, none the least my local branch member and former local member, Ian SlackSmith, who is here tonight. I thank him for his generosity and time spent introducing me to the electorate. To Robyn Barrett, who was my campaign director, Alan Hunter, Peter Taylor, branch chairman, who is here tonight, Hugh Livingston, and all those who helped me along the way, and the 300plus electorate volunteers who manned the 70 booths, Linda and I are very grateful. I am an ordinary person with the privilege of representing an extraordinary part of the world. Barwon is a big electorate with a big heart. It will rain and hopefully plenty of it. In the meantime I will represent and serve my electorate without fear or favour. I thank the members and friends in the gallery who have given their time to share a little of the tobecontinued Barwon story.