



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 6 June 2007.

Mr GEOFF PROVEST (Tweed) [7.30 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I am 100 per cent for the Tweed. I am proud to have been elected as The Nationals member in the New South Wales Parliament, I am proud to be in the Coalition with my Liberal friends, but I am 100 per cent for the Tweed. I am humbled that the citizens of the Tweed entrusted me with a strong mandate to represent them in this place, and I am committed to working very hard to discharge that duty, without fear or favour, over the next four years. I will achieve this by working with the Premier and any other Minister in this Government to deliver better outcomes for the Tweed.

Today I will highlight a number of issues I have been fighting for on behalf of the citizens of the Tweed. I will outline practical and affordable solutions to the problems in the Tweed. I will ask members to imagine a better Tweed with, to quote the Premier, "better services and not cuts". Like many other members of this Parliament, I doorknocked thousands of local homes to get here, I attended countless local community group meetings over the past 12 months, and I listened to the concerns of the citizens of the Tweed. We have had many problems in the Tweed caused by the failure of the Carr and Iemma governments since 1999 to listen, to understand and to act on the concerns of Tweed residents.

Despite this flagrant neglect of regional New South Wales, the Government does not have an explicit policy that states that it should not treat us as second-class citizens; rather, it simply stopped listening to people outside Sydney. The people of the Tweed and Murray-Darling sent a clear message to Labor that they would no longer put up with members of Parliament who just toed the city Labor Party line. The Government is supposed to listen to members of this Parliament but instead it relies on advice from out-of-touch bureaucracies such as the Roads and Traffic Authority and the area health services. I invite the Government to take a fresh approach and to start listening to what Coalition members of Parliament, who represent most residents of the country, are telling it.

The good news for the Government is that fixing problems in the Tweed that it caused itself does not require vast funds from its overstretched budget. Once the Government starts listening to regional members of Parliament it will understand the problems that we face. Further good news for the Government is that we can take practical and affordable action that not only will improve the lives of locals but also will help the Government regain a degree of political credibility. The issues in the Tweed are too numerous to cover in the 20 minutes that are available to me today, but I will mention a number of them that were raised during and since the election campaign.

The Government's proposed B-doubles option B of the Sexton Hill upgrade of the Pacific Highway will be a nightmare for Tweed residents. Community option C, prepared by Rod Bates and his team of experts, is a much better option for local traffic and the environment. The encouraging thing about option C is that the price tag and the time it takes to build are roughly the same as option B. Tweed Hospital is blessed with hard-working and caring medical professionals. Unfortunately, they are let down by financial neglect and inept management from Sydney and its North Coast Area Health Service.

It was revealed earlier this year that patients assessed as requiring surgery at our hospitals are left to wait in the corridors for up to 48 hours, even when surgeons and operating theatres are available. This proves that there are not enough general ward beds for post-operative recovery. This is happening because the Government delayed the implementation of its stage four redevelopment. During a recent campaign the Premier promised 30 new beds for the Tweed. That is nowhere near enough but it is a start. I look forward to the Premier delivering on that promise. The signs are not encouraging; we need proper health facilities now.

I turn next to the Murwillumbah to Casino rail service. Labor closed our rail service three years ago almost to the day. The Premier went into the election campaign stating that there would be no reopening of the line. By contrast, I was armed with a Coalition commitment to introduce six light rail services a day and to start planning the extension from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast. Essentially, this policy was the same as the policy of Trains on our Tracks [TOOT], the local train lobby group. In all the electorates the line goes through—Tweed, Lismore, Ballina and Clarence—the Nationals won increased votes. The difference is that we are listening and the Government shows a lack of understanding of basic transport needs in regional areas of New South Wales.

I advise the House that we do not have enough police in the Tweed. We know this because desperate Tweed police had to threaten strike action before the election to get Labor to listen to their concerns. We need at least 25 additional officers to open the Murwillumbah and Kingscliff stations 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we need five additional highway patrol officers. Our highway patrol officer numbers did not increase for 15 years, while our population and traffic on the highway more than doubled. I cautiously welcome Labor's vague promise of a new police station for the Tweed. I advise that it should be located at Pottsville and that we will need additional officers to operate it. I call on the Government to investigate the Pottsville option.

Labor's abolition of Tweed Neighbourhood Watch and the Tweed Safety House program is another case of failing to understand the different needs of regional and city residents. This was not a cost-saving measure since these programs did not cost the State anything. I am on the committee of Neighbourhood Watch and we are exploring ways of continuing without the cooperation of the State Government. It would be much better all round if the Government reversed this awful policy decision and restored the system that has worked well for the Tweed for many years.

Development is a tricky issue for the Tweed. I am guided by the principles of democracy. I am 100 per cent for the Tweed and I believe that the interests of existing Tweed residents come first. That is not to say that I am anti development; I am just against bad development. So far as I am concerned bad developments include the Cudgen bug farm, the expanded Chinderah marina, the Terranora quarry and the sell-off of the Jack Evans Boat Harbour. At various stages these proposals were all approved and supported by the State Labor Government or its unelected appointees on Tweed council. This is an area where community groups have had some success, not because the Labor Government has started listening to locals but because the community groups beat it in the courtroom. I testified against the expanded Chinderah mega marina in the Land and Environment Court and we won. Terranora quarry is on hold but we need to remain vigilant. The big fight that is coming up is against Labor's sell-off of the Jack Evans Boat Harbour.

We must put in place a system that gives local people a greater say in the future developments of the Tweed. I have a special interest in public education. My children attend the local State schools

and many of my relatives are public schoolteachers. The State Labor Government's neglect of Tweed schools is shocking. Members should visit the toilet blocks at Kingscliff Public School or Tweed River High School and they will see, or rather smell, the problem there. This is a basic health issue and students have a right to expect the Government to deliver on it. It is a relief that the State Government has promised funding for urgent maintenance at Tweed River High School and establishment funding to take Banora Point High School to years 11 and 12. Pottsville High School has been spoken about and promised, and I call on the Government to start the planning now. However, this is not enough. More worryingly, similar promises have been made before and not kept.

One of the reasons many of us live in the Tweed is the pristine condition of our beaches and rivers. Sadly, our beaches in the northern part of the shire are suffering degradation because of the inept implementation of the Tweed Sand Bypass Project. I am working on this issue with stakeholders such as the Coastal Alliance and other residents groups. If the Government is prepared to listen and understand the problems it is causing, it will be able to take affordable action to fix them before the damage becomes completely irreversible. Our Tweed River has come under threat from an unexpected source in the shape of the Federal Environment Minister's ill-advised proposal to divert part of it to other areas. I am against the current proposal to divert our river. This is not because I am anti-Queensland but because I am 100 per cent for Tweed and I am not satisfied that the project will not cause significant harm to our local ecology and water security. I am pleased that the New South Wales Parliament supported my position last month.

As for Tweed local democracy, I want Tweed Shire Council elections and I want them now. It is pointless arguing about Labor's sacking of the council but, for the record, councillors were never charged with any offence and they were denied natural justice. We need to move on. The administrators should have been there in a caretaker role. Instead, we have seen many major decisions made about the future and a steep rise in general rates and water charges with no apparent benefit to the community. I went to the State election with a plan to hold new council elections this September rather than next September, as per Labor's policy. The local people need a say in their future.

The final issue on my list—last but not least—is the incredibly frustrating cross-border problems that cause such needless headaches for families and small businesses on both sides of the border. The Government picked up on The Nationals policy of creating an independent cross-border commission. However, its response was pathetic. We need to work together as a united body to fix this problem now. I meet regularly with my counterpart from across the border, and we will be happy to advise our respective State governments of affordable solutions to fix some of the ridiculous problems.

The Tweed community had a victory today. Residents in a Banora Point unit block, Yarra Valley Court, were issued with eviction notices and given two months to leave their homes because the New South Wales Department of Housing is buying their units. Most of the people at Yarra Valley Court are seniors—some are aged in their eighties and nineties—and they are terrified about what will happen to them. Many have nowhere else to go. After pressure from the community and the Coalition, the Minister for Housing, Matt Brown, today embarrassingly admitted to Parliament that these elderly people have been treated unfairly. The Department of Housing will now negotiate for the residents to be given much more time to move out and will provide an officer to help them find

alternative accommodation. This is the first victory for Tweed residents. The Tweed electorate has been denied proper representation in the New South Wales Parliament for far too long. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

I obtained a series of affordable election commitments from the Coalition leadership to fix the Tweed problems. I invite the Premier to copy our policies; I will even give him credit for them. I remind the House that I come to this place armed with a very strong popular mandate for change. The swing from Labor to The Nationals in the Tweed was one of the strongest anywhere in the State. I remind the Government that many of the solutions to our problems do not require massive injections of State government funding.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the selfless contribution of some very special Tweed residents who have made my presence here today possible. To my family, three simple words: I love you. To my wife, Aune, you are the rock, the cornerstone of my life. You have taken me on an incredible journey though good and hard times. You are so strong and understanding. Thank you so much. I often refer to Aune as my lightning rod: she has the ability to bring me back to earth when I am charging though the atmosphere.

To my son Brian and his partner, Sharon, and our two grandchildren, Maddison and Shanai: Believe you me, grandkids, Pop will make this a better place for you to live in. To Patrick, my second son, you are always there helping out the family, and I know that you will have a great future in the Royal Australian Navy. Do us proud. To my third son, Jack, thank you for being a great son. Jack is the rugby league and surfing legend of the family. Our daughter, Holly, is a fine young lady aspiring to be an equestrienne champion and, just like her mother, beautiful and opinionated. To my mother, Kath Provest, thank you for putting up with me. I know I caused a number of your grey hairs but, hey mum, we did it. You taught me so much. I pay special tribute to my departed father, Sydney Keith Provest. I know that you would be proud of this moment. You were always there for us and you taught us that, no matter whether you won or lost, as long as you played hard you did fine.

To my brother Tony—who used to vote Labor but I believe that has changed—and his great wife, Tracy, and their children, Kirsten and Andrew, thank you very much for your support. To my younger brother, John, his wife, Glenn, and their children, Samantha, Scott, Lucinda and Tom, who helped and travelled from Townsville, thank you. Thanks again to Trevor and Kay Sanger, family friends for my entire life, who are here tonight. I would like to mention my mother-in-law, Phyllis Mathie, and her departed husband, Jack. Thank you for your words of wisdom and your help. Thanks to my wife's family, John, Lorraine, Colin, Pam, Sandra and Kate

To my cousin, Geoff Provest—yes, Mr Speaker, there are two of us—thank you for your help, together with your friend Max Duncan. To my campaign committee—Idwall Richards; Alan Blundell; Don Beck, a previous member of this place; Lynn Beck; Derek and Sandi Budd; John and Betty Debham; Graham Nichols and Harry Christopher—thank you. Thanks also to Rod Preston and Cheryl Bending. Special mention and praise goes to Tania Wright from Wright Business Solutions: You were always there, full of enthusiasm. Your knowledge and professional manner were second to none. I appreciate your friendship to Aune and me. Vicki Everingham, who helped in the office on her days off, offered guidance and support with her partner Barney Jenkins. Thanks to Murray Lees, my bohemian mate whose political astuteness and dependability are second to none. He was ably assisted by his friend Gregg.

This would not have been possible without the support of the Young Liberals. Thank you to their President, Mr Luke Barnes, who is effervescent, unstoppable and one of the most committed and dedicated people I know. Thank you to Adam Bedser, who drove the infamous black truck nicknamed "The Phantom"; to Annabel, who coined the witty saying on polling day, "You snooze, you lose"; and to Daniel, who excelled at doorknocking. Thank you to the team in the office—Myrna Hughs, Jan and Jim Wilding, Louie Davids, Bev Scott, Ruth and Susan Phillip and the many others who assisted—and to Sue-Ellen, Jenny, Dave and Maree Burke. Our market helpers were Sue and Darren Bird and Dennis and Faye Busch. Our pre-poll booth workers suffered the heat and rain. All our 300 booth workers worked tirelessly. To Peter Mason: What a great golf day you had. To local National and Liberal Party members on both sides of the border, thank you for your support and help during the campaign. To Alison Penfold, The Nationals State Director, thank you for your support and insight.

Jenny Gardiner was always there. You are a legend. You offered guidance and support. At times I believe I caused you a great deal of frustration but, like a true legend, it never showed. Thank you, Jenny. To Christine Ferguson, thank you for the help you offered Aune and me. My good friend James Power, who is in the gallery tonight, stuck with me through thick and thin. You are a true and close friend. Thanks very much to John and Judy Coleman, Zeta and Marc Grealy, Marc Anderson and Jen Perkins and to my parliamentary colleagues in both The Nationals and the Liberal Party. To Andrew Stoner, Andrew Fraser, Don Page, who helped me to make the big decision, and my friend Chris Hartcher, I really appreciate the help that you have given me. Thanks to all my Federal colleagues and previous members from the area. Thanks to Doug and Larry Anthony. I also thank the new Federal candidate for The Nationals, Dr Sue Page.

Other groups have been instrumental in my journey here. Thank you to Bowls Australia, its President, Brian Marsland, and my other fellow directors. My fellow director and good friend Ian McKnight is here tonight in the gallery. Thank you to former chief executive officer Mark Rendell. Also from the bowls world, I thank John Archer, President of Bowls New South Wales, and Trish Part, President of the New South Wales Women's Bowls Association. Thank you to Clubs New South Wales, the Club Managers Association and my many other club industry colleagues and, in more recent times, the New South Wales branch of the Australian Hotels Association [AHA]. I thank Southern Cross University, one of Australia's leading educational institutions, for its help, especially Paul Clarke, Malcolm Marshall and Karen Van Stacker.

I have worked in business and the local community all my life. I have had 27 years in licensed clubs. I was citizen of the year in Tweed in 2000 and Clean Up Australia chairman for a number of years. I am currently the Salvation Army regional chairman and I was the Tweed and Coolangatta tourism chairman. Finally, to my new fellow parliamentarians in the class of 2007, I look into your eyes and see a passion to achieve things not only for your own electorate but for the people of New South Wales. This is a passion I hope to share as I work with you in this, the Fifty-fourth Parliament.