



Inaugural Speeches

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Mr GREG PIPER (Lake Macquarie) [11.21 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Mr Deputy-Speaker and members of the House, it is an honour and a privilege to be here in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly today delivering my inaugural speech as the representative of the people of Lake Macquarie. I take this opportunity to thank all those who worked for me on the election campaign and those who supported and voted for me. It is not easy to contest and win a seat held by either major party. In this case, the Labor Party had held the seat since its creation in 1950, and the former member, Jeff Hunter, had held the seat since 1991. With that came a strongly contested election, resulting in its being the second most marginal seat in New South Wales. I tip my hat to the member for Port Stephens, who has the most marginal seat.

The margin of 106 votes is a clear message that every vote is important and that without dedicated helpers before and on polling day it could easily have been a very different result. At least as important was the work of my scrutineers, who spent many hours over 10 days ensuring that the value of each vote was properly recognised. While I have a great many people to thank, particular thanks on all of the above must go to my friend Ken Winning.

My decision to run against Mr Hunter was not due to any personal animosity. To the contrary, Jeff worked closely with me and the community on many important issues over the years. I would like to note and thank Mr Hunter for his graciousness in how he accepted the election outcome and wish him all the best in the future.

I have run a different race from many of the members of this House in arriving here today. As an Independent member I have been propelled here not only by what I believe to be the Lake Macquarie electorate's dissatisfaction with the government of the day, but also by the electorate's unpreparedness to accept what either major party offered. My decision to offer myself for election was made after strong representation from people who shared the common perception that the New South Wales Government had failed to remove the threat of open-cut mining in the Lake Macquarie electorate and that that failure was at odds with not only the area's existing residential and rural amenity, but also the Government's own development and conservation strategies. Whilst this was a key factor in my decision to run for this office, it came on top of many concerns that I and others held about how Lake Macquarie had been treated for some years by successive governments.

The inadequacy of infrastructure and services across the State is widely acknowledged. Lake Macquarie contributes more to the State's economy than many areas, yet it is lagging in government provision. This is not the occasion to specifically outline all of my aspirations for the electorate of Lake Macquarie, but I foreshadow that I will pursue the upgrading of Main Road 217 from Teralba through Toronto, building on the excellent work recently completed by the State Government on the Five Islands to address the increasing traffic congestion and unreasonable and dangerous conditions, particularly in the growing peak periods within Toronto.

I will also work to ensure that a health facility is established in the Morisset area to overcome the glaring void in health services, particularly casualty and outpatient services, between Wyong and Newcastle. I will pursue the provision of more police officers in the electorate and in the Lake Macquarie Local Area Command, where police numbers are less than half the State average for a population rapidly approaching 200,000 people. I will work towards the construction of the Glendale

transport interchange and associated Pennant Street Bridge. Clearly I need to work with my colleague the member for Wallsend and other local state members to achieve this regionally important infrastructure. I will work to protect our unique environment, including not only the lake and coast but also the hinterland of Lake Macquarie and Wyong, where threats from coal extraction have been and continue to be a real concern. I will also seek greater accountability in the use of part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act.

The state seat of Lake Macquarie represents a substantial part of the City of Lake Macquarie—a seat and a city with many natural assets located in close proximity to Sydney. It is a growing area and is set to take the major proportion of population growth in the Lower Hunter under the Government's adopted Lower Hunter Strategy. People rightly want important issues of infrastructure provision and environmental protection addressed prior to this growth occurring. That covers some of the reasons I am here, but I also want the members of this House to get to know me— obviously over a long period of time—and to know what I want to achieve.

I have served many of the residents of Lake Macquarie electorate as a councillor on Lake Macquarie City Council, by population the fourth-largest local government area in New South Wales, for over 16 years, including more than three years as popularly elected mayor. It has been, and still is, an honour for me to be able to serve the residents of the City of Lake Macquarie as their mayor. It is an exceptionally well run council and is a tribute to past and current councillors and employees. During my time on council I have done my best to ensure that there has been a balance between the necessary accommodation of growth and the protection of the environment. One of my most fulfilling roles has been with Lake Macquarie improvement project, which has set high standards and achieved impressive results in the remediation of an estuarine system that had been highly impacted by development since white settlement. It had been simultaneously loved and neglected, nearing the point of becoming a dead lake.

This situation has been greatly turned around through a partnership between council, the State Government and the community. I acknowledge and thank the State Government for its contribution, which was agreed under the Carr Government. While the project is continuing, it is disappointing that the terms of the arrangement were altered unilaterally by the previous Government. These changes have greatly complicated an otherwise extremely efficient, cost effective and award-winning project. The changes have added nothing to the already high level of governance being applied and have in my view reduced the ability to achieve the best environmental outcomes for each dollar spent.

The latest redistribution of electoral boundaries has created some anomalies in addressing communities of interest in our region. I am well aware that many people in the electorate of Lake Macquarie who reside in the Wyong Council local government area are particularly upset that they have been removed from what they see as their natural and logical community of interest. I wish to assure those residents of the Lake Macquarie electorate residing in Wyong that they will not be ignored by me as their representative. Whilst not in my state electorate but within my city, many people in areas such as West Wallsend, Barnsley, Holmesville and Cameron Park have difficulty accepting that they have been placed in the state electorate of Cessnock. They feel once again that they have little common community of interest with Cessnock and are clearly geographically separated from that community. I have no doubt that the member for Cessnock, Mr Hickey, will

ensure that these residents are well represented. However, these people's concerns should be on the record and, while I understand the competing interests and difficulties in setting electoral boundaries, I believe that protecting communities of interest should be of such importance that amendments to the relevant legislation should be examined.

Reflecting on my previous career as a psychiatric nurse working in mental health and developmental disability at Morisset Hospital for some 24 years, I am also greatly concerned with the provision of appropriate resources and policy to those who are all too frequently in a situation that is injurious to themselves, their families and loved ones, and to the community. I hope to be able to participate in dialogue to improve services in this sector.

While I have spoken of what I see as needing to be fixed or is lacking, I am mindful that we have many good things in our community and the tendency to focus on negatives can lead to us overlooking these. Having a real belief in the importance of local government, it is my hope that state and local government can work together to improve their working relationship for the overall benefit of the community. I will try to be positive in my efforts to address the needs of Lake Macquarie in this regard. I look forward to working with other local state members and parliamentarians with good ideas for the overall benefit of the region and the State regardless of political affiliations. It has never been my way to pursue politics in an adversarial manner, and I am heartened that the Premier has supported an Independent in the role of Speaker of the House. I believe that this bodes well for the House during this term.

Having had the opportunity to listen last night to the inaugural speech of the Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water, I was heartened to hear his understanding of and concern for the challenge before us. As a major producer of greenhouse gas through consumption and coal export, New South Wales has a grave responsibility to take a leading role in both moral and actual terms to reduce our society's global warming impact. I agree with the Minister that a strong economy and a healthy environment are not mutually exclusive; they are, in fact, interdependent. I wish the Minister and the Government well in addressing this most significant issue.

In closing I wish to specifically acknowledge the support I have had from my family over my years in public life. My wife, Lyn, my mother, Hazel, along with two of my three sons—Danny and Chris—and other family members and friends are here today. It makes me very proud that they are able to be here. A great regret is that my father, Keith, cannot be with them. My father, of whom I am immensely proud and love dearly, passed away one week ago today. He was gifted with many skills and great intellect, and was always using these gifts to help others. He was always a great help to me in my election campaigns, but, more importantly, he was always there to help me and my family in any way required. I would like to thank all the people, including friends, council staff, electorate staff, constituents and members of this House, who have shown me and my family such kindness over the last year and the emotional time of the past week.

I opened this inaugural speech with a reference to the race that I ran to get here. The destination inferred in that analogy is not an end, but a beginning. I will use my time and direct my endeavours during the term of this Parliament to work cooperatively for the good of the people of New South Wales and I will happily be accountable to the people of Lake Macquarie electorate for my performance. I wish to thank members for the honour and courtesy they have shown me in the

delivery of this inaugural speech and to close by wishing the Government and the Parliament all the best in this term of office and I particularly our Speaker.