



Inaugural Speeches

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Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: The Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party, Jillian Skinner, has long been a role model, and Gladys Berejiklian, whose guidance and friendship I appreciate, are at the helm of this Government. As part of the O'Farrell Government, they are not only part of the change: they are leaders of it. In no small part the women of this party have set the agenda for a new, fresh and positive Government. I am here in part because of what they have done, and they have my deepest and sincerest thanks. Women's voices may now be heard as a matter of course, but that movement came about because there were many who were able to stand united and raise their voices when they were expected to stay quiet.

While that is one positive change in society, I am particularly concerned about another area that needs reform. How Government and society deal with people with disabilities needs to change. There must be a focus on how we manage and deliver our help and support for people with disabilities and for their carers. I will judge my time as a parliamentary representative, and the performance of this Government, by how successful we are in supporting those living with disabilities. The benchmark must be by how much we have improved their lives and delivered greater independence. Through my career while working as the development manager at Technical Aid to the Disabled, through my family and time spent as chair of the council's aged and access committees, my eyes have been opened to the unfairness and difficulties that the elderly and many people with disabilities face on a daily basis.

We should strive to ease this burden wherever we can. It is our responsibility to help those who need it. With this in mind, we need to drive our accessibility building codes and standards. We need to reduce the occurrences of broken lifts at train stations and, most importantly, we need to know that our actions and decisions can impact others and hold them back, or give them their own independence. But most important of all we need to realise that those with disabilities need to be listened to. They know the issues, and often they can also provide the solutions. We must engage more than ever before in a meaningful dialogue with those with disabilities, the non-government sector and the service providers to ensure their needs are being met.

I have spent the most rewarding 3½ years working at Technical Aid to the Disabled, or TAD, and I am thrilled that many of my former colleagues are here tonight. Technical Aid to the Disabled is a not-for-profit organisation that makes and creates innovative devices for people with disabilities to help them be more independent. I was always so impressed by the hundreds of volunteers that give up their time and effort to help people they have never met. The Technical Aid to the Disabled volunteers saw a need and they worked together to find a solution. They highlight that this Government's plan to let people have more control over their own lives will work.

Technical Aid to the Disabled is successful at modifying bicycles so that kids with disabilities can ride with their friends and family. One of the most heart-warming parts of the job was watching children who were unable to walk be helped out of their wheelchair, have their feet placed on the pedals, and then be able to ride a bike for the first time. It is a rite of passage we all go through, but which these children would otherwise have missed out on. Watching a child ride for the first time—they are the smiles that stay with you for life.

My grandfather had the same idea some 60 years ago for his son, my uncle and my inspiration, Bourke Gibbons, OAM. In those days my grandfather was told that putting my uncle, who has cerebral palsy, on a bike would hurt him and that he should stop—now we know it can strengthen muscles and balance. We have come a long way from the way we used to treat people with disabilities, and our attitudes towards their treatment and care have changed. Again it has shown me that those closest to the issue almost always know the solutions. But there is still a long way to go and, while women were able to bond together to speak up, many people with disabilities rely on advocates to speak for them. It is a responsibility that I hold dear and that I will be a champion for.

I will work towards better health care, and more support for our doctors and nurses. And better health care also includes mental health. I know that people do get turned away from being admitted to hospital and getting the care they need because mental health care beds are full or because they are assessed to not be at a high enough risk. I have seen the stress that places on both the person and their loved ones—and, unfortunately, the consequences. They say, "Life was not meant to be easy" but during my time in Parliament I would like to make life just a little easier for people—to help them to feel that someone is there to stand up for them, someone is there to listen, and someone is there to make a difference.

I am proud to live in Menai, and I am even prouder to now be its representative in this place. The electorate of Menai is a young electorate, and we are lucky to have a high rate of employment. But many in our community are on fixed incomes, and they are concerned about the rising cost of living. The Menai electorate is bounded by Heathcote Road and the Georges River and is split right down the middle by the Holsworthy Army land. It is half in Liverpool council and half in Sutherland, giving it two distinct sides—both as important as each other but with different newspapers, different train lines, and more than a 20 minute drive in between.

Let me assure my constituents that each part of the electorate matters as much as the other. I want to particularly mention Hammondville and Holsworthy though. Holsworthy is a special place. The army base gives it a transient nature but also an amazing community feel. I recently attended the fiftieth anniversary of Holsworthy Public School. I met a lady who taught there during the Vietnam war. At that stage the school was mostly made up of children whose fathers were serving our country in Vietnam. She spoke to me of how news of injuries and deaths rippled through the community, and about the effect it had on the children she was teaching.

This was echoed when I met with the principals of Holsworthy public and high schools and the principals of Hammondville and Wattle Grove primary schools. I found it interesting to talk to them about the unique pressures they still face by having so many of their students with parents in the army. One of the things they spoke about was how they feel when they hear the news on the radio or television of someone being hurt or killed while serving overseas. They spoke of how, when they arrive at the school gate, they can tell if it involves someone from their own school population just by the feel and interaction between the parents. They spoke of how they all band together to help the child and the family. They spoke of how they support the children if their mum or dad is deployed overseas and, interestingly and importantly, about the challenges and needs for further assistance that arise when they return.

It is a special community and a special school that combine to help each other. I know the community is banding together once again after the terrible news of the death last week of Sergeant

Brett Wood, who served with the 2nd Commando Division at Holsworthy. I, too, wish to pay my respects to this man and my condolences to his family for such a tragic loss of life. Members would be aware that today we also heard the news of a further two deaths in Afghanistan. This should remind us all of the debt we owe our members of the armed forces, their families and the communities that support them.

I recently met with the General Manager of Hammondcare, Keith Morgan. Hammondcare is located within walking distance of my electorate office in Hammondville. The centre offers a high standard of aged and dementia care. Whilst there I was told an inspiring story of a Minister, Robert Hammond. Minister Hammond, in the days of the Great Depression, noticed how many men were out of work once the Sydney Harbour Bridge was completed. He purchased substantial landholdings and divided them into parcels, selling them to men on the condition that they were unemployed, married, and had at least three children. They also had to be homeless. The need was so great that the demand outweighed the supply. However, Minister Hammond was able to assist many families. What an amazing contribution to make and a legacy to leave.

I grew up in the Menai electorate on the Woronora River. It was a fabulous childhood of playing in the bush and kayaking. I still think it is one of the most beautiful places, and when I can I like to buy a coffee from the fish and chip shop and just sit by the river and relax. When I first went to school I used to walk over the one-way bridge that went across the river. Investment in infrastructure and the growing Menai population soon saw the one-lane bridge replaced with a two-lane bridge. Then, in 2001, the opening of the new Woronora Bridge meant that cars no longer had to drive down "the bendies". Population expansion saw the creation of the townships of Bangor, Menai and Barden Ridge.

We still have a natural beauty in Menai, all the way from Sutherland down the Woronora and Georges Rivers to the Chipping Norton Lakes. Menai has a great deal of wildlife and bird life. It is a beautiful place to live. My family has not come from "easy street". I am so proud of my parents. My dad, Scott, grew up in a Housing Commission house and along with my mum, Rhonda, opened his own business and became Australia's number one real estate agent. To say I am proud of him is an understatement. I do not think there is a house in the Menai district that he has not sold, or at least been inside. It came in handy when I was doorknocking.

My dad was not the stereotypical real estate agent but someone who really created a relationship with his clients. Most days I am stopped by people wanting to ask me how he is and what he is up to now. People have always asked me if I am "Scott's daughter". Well, now he is finally getting, "Are you Melanie's dad?" Sorry dad. My mum is the most caring, giving and beautiful person I know. When I was young she worked so hard to help make the family business a success—and I can say that I never noticed the juggling act she must have been performing to ensure that everything ran smoothly for us. She has really made me who I am, and yet I can only hope and strive to be more like her.

My parents, who very quickly became known as "campaign mum and dad", taught me the value of service; they taught me to help others, and to speak up. They are both very involved in fundraising for charities. They give so much of their time and effort to helping others, and they remain my inspiration. I have not seen enough of my parents throughout the long campaign, or of my aunties

and uncles, and cousins—I come from a close family. I want to thank them for their understanding throughout the campaign. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

They have given me so much support, they worked on polling day, and they are here tonight. Also here tonight are my godparents, Graham and Colleen Jackson, and my godson, Will Thatcher—he is peeking over the top there—and his big sister, Annelie. I have loved watching them grow and become talented, funny and good people. There are four friends in particular that have given me the understanding and love to follow this dream: Lauren Benikos, Brett Everett, and Halley and Simon Chan. Thank you. I look forward to being a better "Aunty Mel" to Lachlan and little Lucinda Chan, and I cannot wait to see what their passion is in life.

My parents, unbeknownst to them, instilled a passion for politics in me. I can still picture my father with Nick Greiner on the back of a truck in the 1988 campaign, standing up to campaign for the betterment of the Menai area. My parents took me to political fundraisers, one of which was for the former member for Sutherland Lorna Stone, who is in the gallery tonight, and they spoke to me about politics and current affairs around the dinner table. As an only child, it all felt very grown up. I was reminded recently of how the dinner table conversation must have rubbed off on me. While talking to my best friend from kindergarten recently she mentioned to me that her mum always thought that I was destined for politics. Apparently at all of seven or eight years old I was talking to her about Barrie Unsworth and the fact that I liked her "Bye Bye Barrie" car bumper sticker. I also think some of my interest in politics came from the education I received.

I was lucky enough to attend public, private and Catholic schools. I have experienced different education systems and I think I have a pretty good idea of the pros and cons of them all. A lovely congratulations card told me that I am Danebank's first old girl to be elected to Parliament: it is an honour. I believe I may be the third member of Parliament to come from De La Salle Cronulla—but the first of my political persuasion. It was at De La Salle Cronulla that I really learnt to put across my point of view. I studied three-unit modern history and we focused on Australian political history. Of the eight students, I was the only one writing my essays with a differing point of view. I have Mr Adrian Brown to thank for encouraging me to make my argument and to think differently.

I have mentioned him once already in this speech but once is never enough when speaking of inspirational people. My Uncle Bourke Gibbons is a member of the Order of Australia, a dual Paralympian and an amazing fundraiser. I believe he is one of the reasons I am who I am. Working for a charity assisting people with disabilities was a natural area for me to work in: I felt I could make a difference. On election night my Uncle Bourke told me that I was helping to fulfil a dream of his and doing what he always wanted to do. Life has not been easy for Bourke, as he has written in his book: he needs to rely on the Government and his elected representatives. Our decisions affect his life and his wellbeing.

I saw the impacts of decision making while working for the Hon. Dr Brian Pezzutti some 10 years ago in the other place. During that time Dr Pezzutti chaired the parliamentary inquiry into mental health. One aspect of that inquiry addressed housing options for people with mental health issues and disabilities. My eyes were opened to how important it is to understand the impact of government decisions on those whom governments are meant to protect. Governments can do great good, but they can also do great harm. I thank Dr Pezzutti and his wife, Christine, for giving me my start

working in politics, and for igniting the spark that helping people could be a career and an option for me. I am privileged that Dr Pezzutti is here tonight from Lismore.

It was at this time that I joined Andrew Constance, now the member for Bega, on his Young Liberals executive and met many of the people who also were elected at the last election—Mark Coure, the member for Oatley; Gareth Ward, the member for Kiama; Natasha Maclaren-Jones in the other place; and Matt Kean, the member for Hornsby. It has been a treat to share this exciting time with so many old friends. Many people have more recently helped this opportunity and spark to become a reality. As Leader of the Opposition, Barry O'Farrell came to Menai many times to see the different parts of the community. I think the whole parliamentary team came to Menai during the long campaign, but I particularly thank the frequent visitors: Chris Hartcher, Mike Gallacher, Mike Baird, Katrina Hodgkinson, Catherine Cusack, Gladys Berejiklian and Pru Goward.

Jillian Skinner is by my side tonight, as she has been for so long. She has encouraged me since I first came to work in this building. She looked after me during the campaign and all the years in between. Thank you also to my guardian angels from her North Sydney conference: my good friends, Marilyn Cameron, Neville Mitchell, Simon Moore, Felicity Wilson and the energetic and tireless Bob Eustace. I thank from the Liberal Party and the leader's office State Director Mark Neeham, Chris Stone, Richard Shields, Lisa Maree Schell, Jeremy Vine and Penny George, Matt Cross and Jaymes Boland Rudder for their guidance and words of advice. Thank you to Chris Hall, a hard worker who coordinated many campaigns, including Menai, and yet somehow remained my friend. I thank the members of the State Executive and, in particular, the former member for Ryde Michael Photios and Kelly Knowles.

There are many people to thank locally for putting me in these responsible shoes. These people dedicated hours and hours and deserve to be thanked publically. My State conference president and friend Matthew Minehan; Chris Downy the former member for Sutherland, who gave me reassurance; Louise DeDomenico, who kept me eating good food; and Justin DeDomenico, who was my go-to guy; the interstate team of Ian Zakon, Felicity Stevenson, Mitchell Clout, Angela Samuels and Megan Purcell; and the dynamic Young Liberals who were the core of the campaign from start to finish—Kate Schouten, John Riad, Amy Cook, Dan Nicholls, Danial McGilgorm, Olga Stouchlina, Rob Leigo, Michelle Minehan and Libby Ryan

My thanks also go to long-term supporters who continue to provide that support: Matt Daniel, Hussan Awada, Elizabeth Hughes, Peter Tilley and David "Stretch" Maher. Dave Maher gave us the best quality A-frames in the State election. I thank also the treasurer and level-headed Simon Newport and his treasury colleague Russell Vickers. My deepest thanks also go to Leasa Newport, Alison McNerney and her parents, Alison McNicol, Troy Loveday, Scott Williams, Susan Kelly and Brett Thomas, Frank Zumbo, and the Federal member for Hughes, Craig Kelly. The campaign truck came in handy again. I also thank Kenny and Matthew Johns—Kenny especially for lending us his ute "Wedges", even though it did break down twice.

My deep thanks go to the Hon. John Ajaka, MLC, who was a constant campaigner in the south. It is good to see that his hard work has been rewarded with so many new members. I thank also the Hon. Don Harwin, MLC, for his sage words of advice. Thank you to Marc Landrigan who gave up so much of his time and energy—week days and weekends. Your sacrifice ensured our success. My council colleagues have given me a great deal of support—Councillor Craig McCallum and Bruce

Walton; and Councillor Kevin Schreiber, who gave me the opportunity of chairing council's community services committee, the honour of being his deputy mayor and always offered his support. I thank also Councillor Steve Simpson, who has been a gentleman and freely gave his assistance and advice.

Liverpool City Council is just as ably served by some passionate local councillors: Ned Mannoun, Tony Hachiti, Mazhar Hadid and Garry Lucas. These men were my guides in the Liverpool council area. My new Menai team comprises Jeff Page, who has many years experience in this place, and Natalie Peterson, my colleague at TAD, a woman who shares my passion for disability services, and who I am proud to say is helping me deliver on my commitments. My final thank you goes to my campaign director and my mate Councillor Kent Johns. As much as I try, I will never be able to thank you enough for your guidance and patience—even though I know I tested it an awful lot. Your campaigning skills are legendary and I was so lucky that someone I have trusted for many years agreed to direct this campaign.

The Liberal Party had never before won Menai, but under Kent's guidance we manned every booth—in fact, we won every booth. Kent, your legacy of never losing an election remains, on both sides of politics. We had so much support on election day that we managed to be the first seat called on the night, and I am proud to say we achieved a swing of 27.4 per cent. That is a lot of trust from people who have never voted Liberal. I thank the people of Menai for voting for me, and everyone who helped to make this dream a reality. I will work hard to make sure that you feel that your time and effort, and particularly your trust, was all worthwhile. It is an honour and a humbling responsibility.

Politics is an interesting occupation choice: it is a hard job to get but an easy one to lose. It is only through doing everything you can do, putting in all the time and effort, that a member of Parliament can feel that he or she has achieved all that they set out to do—no matter how long we each are here to represent our constituents. I have been given an opportunity and a responsibility that comes to few people. I will never take it for granted.

I started my speech acknowledging some strong women who have guided my life. I get misty very easily but I want to chance it to mention one other woman, my grandma, Freda Johnson—a woman who gave me so much love. I know she is here with us tonight. Thank you.