



# Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 26 May 2011.

Mrs LESLIE WILLIAMS (Port Macquarie) [11.25 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Firstly, I take this opportunity, Madam Speaker, to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of the House. It is an historical appointment, you being the first woman ever to be appointed to this position. Already you have proved that you have all the credentials needed to keep this House in order. Congratulations. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land I represent, the Birpai people. I also commend the work of Birpai Elder Uncle Bill O'Brien for his commitment to building stronger relationships, enhancing knowledge and promoting reconciliation among the people of the electorate through his Welcome to Country. I also acknowledge my predecessor, Peter Besseling, and wish both him and his family all the best for the future.

It is interesting when you look back on your past and particularly reflect on your childhood memories and the role they have played in shaping your life; you do not consider them unique. But when you share your life story and watch as others respond with looks of amazement, you tend to reconsider this view—and I know Nathan will concur. I was born on Kangaroo Island in South Australia—I guess I have already considerably narrowed my similarities with most of you.

My father, John, was the local butcher and my grandfather before him, as was my uncle and my cousin. Not surprisingly, knitting sausages, preparing and packing minced beef and dressing a shop window are proudly skills that will always stay with me. Like many country butchers, my dad killed the sheep and beef for the shop at our slaughterhouse not far out of town on my grandparents' farm. I can therefore add to my repertoire of skills details I will not share with the House as it nears the lunch break only to say that I know the importance of having a very sharp knife and salting and folding the hides just so, ready for the tanner. My dad worked long hours and changed careers many times during his life—no wonder I have a problem sticking to one—but I know now that was to meet not his own aspirations but the changing needs of his growing family.

As for my mother, there are no words to describe the pivotal role she has played in so many people's lives. Her nurturing role extended much further than our household—for some 25 years she devoted many hours of service to our isolated community as a volunteer ambulance officer. I grew up with two sisters and one brother, but that is the simple description of our family unit. The door of our home was always open—to friends, family and neighbours. Some stayed for a cuppa, to catch up on news, to get some advice or to garner support; others stayed for years.

They came to live with us so they could have a better start in life, get a better education, or just because they were in need of a place that provided love, care or stability. And while providing so much love to so many people, my parents have also provided 24-hour care for my brother, Phillip, who was born with cerebral palsy. Forty years ago there were no respite houses or group homes, little financial support from the Government, and certainly no support networks for carers—we all grew up as carers and today I am a better person for it. When my first child, Ben, was born in Alice Springs my only wish was that I could be half the parents they were.

I am not the first female to represent the Port Macquarie electorate in this House, but I am probably the only one to have twice come second and then went out a third time before finally nailing that all-important first place. I wear this as a badge of honour. Standing three times meant I had the opportunity to show the community my personal qualities—persistence goes without saying, but combined with my strong connectivity with my local community, being genuine, loyal and with a steely determination, the voters of the Port Macquarie electorate had a clear understanding of the different choices presented to them.

Of course, one of the first questions asked of you when you lose an election is: Will you stand again? For me that was an easy decision. In fact, it was partly the community who made that choice for me—the nurses I worked with, the local butcher, the shoppers at the supermarket, the parents at the bus stop, the volunteers I worked beside, and, of course, the local Nationals membership. They had no doubts I had the qualities that the people of the Port Macquarie electorate were looking for in their local member. With a background in teaching, nursing, small business and administration, and a myriad of volunteer roles, they knew I had the life experiences to be an effective representative aligned with their various issues. I once read that you have two ears and one mouth, and that if you use them in that proportion you are on your way to being a successful politician. As we moved ever closer to the March 26 deadline it became obvious that was one of the key qualities people sought of their local member. Of course they wanted a hardworking local member who was able to deliver real outcomes, but at the top of their list they wanted a local member who would listen.

We have heard a number of inaugural speeches over the past few weeks and listened to the claims made by members that their electorate was without argument the number one place in which to live in New South Wales—whether that is for its pristine beauty, its colourful culture, or its vibrant communities. It is with some reservation that I have to inform the House that whilst I am sure it will

not be reflective of their future speeches, these members have quite simply got it wrong. Clearly they need to venture north to the Port Macquarie electorate to find what is colloquially known as "God's Country". Without doubt the Hastings and the northern part of the Manning Valley and surroundings are the most picturesque locations—not just in New South Wales but across this nation.

Our area enjoys the best climate in Australia, with the average temperature ranging from 7 degrees to a balmy 27 degrees. It has the best surfing spots—do not worry Andrew; I have been sworn to secrecy about exact locations—and, without a doubt, the best people. The majority of my electorate is centred on Port Macquarie. It was first settled in 1821 and is one of the oldest penal settlements in Australia. It is a haven for the historian, with heritage buildings and remnants of our past sprinkled amongst the cosmopolitan and vibrant central business district, with its outdoor eateries overlooking the beautiful Hastings River and the stunning architecture of the internationally acclaimed Glasshouse Arts and Conference Centre. Travelling a little further south you find the beautiful and fast-growing areas of Bonny Hills and Lake Cathie. Just beyond that is Camden Haven, with the magnificent backdrop of North Brother Mountain with the Camden Haven River at its feet.

The most southern part of the electorate is bordered by the mighty Manning River, with the small but wonderful communities of Harrington and Crowdy Head. And of course there are the many villages sprinkled in between including Hannam Vale, Lansdowne, Coopernook, Moorland and Johns River, to name just a few. And then about 600 kilometres east of Port Macquarie is the World Heritage-listed Lord Howe Island, where we have a community whose issues are so unique and so broad that the Premier has responded appropriately and on being elected transferred responsibility for it to his own office. Our white sandy beaches and rocky headlands are shouldered by a hinterland of picturesque hills accommodating delectable local produce in eateries and galleries along winding country roads.

The people of the Port Macquarie electorate continue to surprise me with their enthusiasm for their local fare, and the dedication and inspiration they capitalise on to showcase it to the world. The list of award-winning local cuisine is endless—Ricardo's famous relish, The Other Chef's onion jam and Cassegrain's verdelho all hold regular spots on my pantry shelf. Last Sunday I, along with some 14,000 others, attended the Slice of Haven—a food and wine festival in the stunning Camden Haven that has now well and truly secured its position on our local events calendar. This is just one example of the vigour and foresight of our local communities that have banded together against the odds of the competitive coast and the global financial crisis to continually punch above their weight. Similarly, the Camden Haven Music Festival, Oysters in the Vines and the very popular local markets at Johns River, Laurieton and Port Macquarie provide a showcase of what our community has to offer.

Whilst the picture I paint is one that is undoubtedly luring you ever closer to the electorate that tops the list in New South Wales, it is not without its challenges. Like many communities, particularly those across regional New South Wales, our idyllic lifestyle has been eroded and threatened—and it has nothing to do with climate change! It is the result of 16 years of a Labor Government that has left those of us living in rural and coastal regions now paying the price for its neglect and arrogance. But now is not the time to look back. Now is the time to garner our strengths and to work together to ensure everybody gets a fair go no matter what their postcode.

As a new local member I will play my part by giving the following assurances to my electorate, on which I should be judged at the end of my first term as a member of the O'Farrell-Stoner Government. I will deliver on each of the commitments I made prior to the election. The expansion of the Port Macquarie Base Hospital will be the largest infrastructure project being undertaken in the electorate, and undoubtedly one of the most crucial. Terms such as "access block" are not lost on me, and I do understand the dilemma facing mid North Coast families when they are told they will have to travel to Sydney for a diagnostic cardiac catheter. The challenge for the Liberal-Nationals Government is to ensure this critical project delivers maximum benefit for patients, on time and within budget. Similarly, the replacement of the Stingray Creek Bridge has been a long-term agenda item, and I will work closely with our Port Macquarie-Hastings Council to ensure it soon becomes a reality. Important major road projects are currently underway, including the Herons Creek to Stills Road upgrade on the Pacific Highway and the Oxley Highway upgrade to Wrights Road. I will continue to work closely with all stakeholders to ensure these projects are completed in a timely manner.

As I said during the election campaign, there is a lot of work to do. Whether it is getting the long-awaited primary school at Lake Cathie, guaranteeing Westport Park is dedicated as public open space, upgrading the playground at Crowdy Head, dredging at Harrington, upgrading Pilot Beach Reserve at Dunbogan, improving Ocean Drive at Port Macquarie, or supporting \$50,000 for a local youth space. These are just some of the projects that have my name written right across them and that is the guarantee that they will get done. I will not only keep the electorate informed about these and many more issues of importance; I will always be listening to our community. Whether it is through meetings and phone calls, chatting in the street or at the local supermarket, or on what will be our regular electorate tours, this is my commitment to each and every member of the Port Macquarie electorate.  
[*Extension of time agreed to.*]

There are many organisations and volunteers in our community who make tangible efforts to assist those who need resources and advice to improve their lives—often when their lives are in crisis. I refer to the Anglican and Catholic-run soup kitchens, local church groups that connect with the homeless and needy, Lifeline, the Hastings Men's Shed and Suicide Prevention Network, the palliative care volunteers, the local Salvation Army—for which I will again proudly be a volunteer collector on Sunday—the Pink Ladies and

the Marine Rescue volunteers, to name just a few. These community groups bear such a burden in trying to help others and they do it with limited resources. I will make it my responsibility to assist them in their humanitarian efforts so they can reach out further to assist others.

I remind you again of my mum and dad who instilled in me a sense of helping others. I will build on that tradition by continuing to focus my energy on improving the life and the opportunities of those who face challenges far greater than ours. Those with disabilities and mental illness and their carers, and the homeless and young people at risk can be assured that their needs are at the top of my list. I am heartened by our future at a local level largely because I continue to see evidence of communities across the electorate collaborating to achieve better outcomes. As a local member I am privileged to be able to work alongside dynamic and passionate groups of people who, like me, are prepared to contribute their energy and time to ensure a better future for our children and for their children. Locals who have banded together through progress associations, chambers of commerce, tourism boards and volunteer organisations to achieve better outcomes for those who reside across the Hastings and the Manning valleys. As Mother Theresa said:

We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.

My election campaign was the sum total of the work of more than 300 volunteers; people with honour, good people, who accepted the challenge and seized the opportunity to make a difference for others in their community. They may think their contribution was lesser when compared with others but when fused with the other contributions we created—as my opponent referred to—the perfect storm. The sum total of the contribution of each volunteer meant we left no stone unturned, no market unattended and no community unvisited.

Dollars are imperative to a campaign—there is no argument about that—and often those in political parties are criticised for overspending. In reality your bank balance might just as well be zero unless you have someone like Bill Yates to position the corflutes in every corner of the electorate, or Rodger Alden to organise the hundreds of supporters and volunteers for polling booths. Just as importantly, without those enthusiastic individuals to answer the telephones, knock on the doors, attend the markets, update the databases and cook the barbeques you would not have a winning campaign. Each and every one of those hundreds of volunteers deserves a mention here today but that would be impossible. Please know that I am indebted to each and every one of you for your generosity and your time. I thank those on the strategy team and the many who took on leadership roles throughout the campaign.

I make mention, however, of those who led the charge. Campaign director, Theo Hazelgrove, unfortunately cannot be here today. His meticulous planning from the outset meant all bases were covered. My question to the other new members of the House is: How many of you came home to a prepared casserole, the dry cleaning collected, the ironing hanging neatly inside the door, the car washed and the kitchen tidied so there was nothing else to do in those dark hours but to turn on the microwave and check the answering machine? Assistant Directors Paul Rowlandson and Cameron Kirton were instrumental in ensuring that the team remained cohesive and on track. It was not all smooth sailing, but who would expect it to be when a campaign spans not months but years. It was because of your wisdom, adaptability and foresight that we were able to achieve our goal. I am confident that it will be the community who will be thanking you in the months and years ahead as they realise the real benefits of electing a member who is a part of the O'Farrell-Stoner Government.

Some six years on from my first introduction to The Nationals, I have never lost sight of the one person who was the catalyst for my entry into politics; a person who seized the opportunity to bolster the team with yet another grassroots community advocate, synonymous with so many other members of the Stoner team. Despite two election losses she remained determined, resolute and optimistic. When I stepped forward for round three, she stepped forward alongside me without faltering. It was then that I sensed victory was on the horizon. Melinda Pavey, I thank you for your unwavering support, dedication and friendship.

Under the leadership of Ben Franklin, the staff members of our head office are the true unsung heroes. I knew that a win in the Port Macquarie electorate would be the jewel in the crown and for those who had been there from day one to 26 March this had become a personal mission. I am sure a round-three candidate provided some interesting challenges: a "no" to my request would need to be accompanied with either a lengthy and well-researched explanation or "if we do not say yes, she will be back again!"

In round three it was clear that a bona fide Coalition effort was intrinsic to secure the seat of Port Macquarie, and clearly both Barry and Andrew recognised this. There was a constant stream of Shadow Ministers to the electorate from both the Federal and State camps—for many the road to Port Macquarie is well worn. Jillian Skinner, Catherine Cusack, Brad Hazzard, Andrew Constance, Duncan Gay and Pru Goward, to name a few, were instrumental in providing assurance to the electorate that we were listening and we were about action, not words. I was honoured to have Julie Bishop visit the electorate. In the final month before the election Joe Hockey visited twice. His appearance on the day immediately prior to the election confirmed this was an all-out Coalition effort. I

thank my fellow Nationals colleagues for their advice, guidance and ongoing support.

There were also those on the periphery who, whilst they were not a part of the campaign proper, played an important role in keeping me both grounded and sane. Those friendships outside of politics provided me with the most honest advice through the hectic and rigorous months leading up to election day. I am still relying on you Anne, Nyomie and Julie—and no lesser on Kim who is taking charge of the mental health ward—to ensure I remain focused and real. To my Rotary fellows, I thank you for your ongoing enthusiasm for my ambitious goal and for your understanding and patience as my hours of service gradually dwindled. My commitment to our shared goals certainly has not, and I will always wear my Rotary pin proudly.

An enormous thankyou to two beautiful people of this world: Ben and Meredie. It is one thing to hold yourself up for public scrutiny as a candidate but to ask your two teenage children to stand beside you as you endeavour to become a household name is another. But I should not have ever doubted for a minute their commitment to my dream. For a 19-year-old young man to give up a week's holiday to scrutineer at nursing homes and to head off to the pub on a Friday night with a bright yellow T-shirt emblazoned with the words, "Vote 1 for my mum" is simply selfless. Meredie took on whatever task was thrown at her through the campaign with such calmness and ease. She remained entirely focused on our one goal with enthusiasm and pragmatism beyond her years.

To my husband, Don—I know this may surprise many here but I just do not have the words. Many times I felt a fraud when people would pass comment about my untiring efforts and my apparent seamless ability to be involved in every aspect of the campaign. This election win happened because of a partnership that was indestructible and beyond criticism. Don's curriculum vitae now reads like a book, and his skill set has expanded considerably to include taking charge of the 300-plus volunteers for polling day, keeping the house that I have paid little attention to for years, attending to our two cavaliers who bark because they think I am a stranger, and ensuring that we actually have a bank balance.

When it got to the point in the final weeks of the campaign that I needed to be in two places at once, I was! Without hesitation Don filled in as my representative. So it is no surprise that I stand so proudly next to him. All the people I have mentioned today and those that time does not permit me to mention have one thing in common: my word. You have my word that I will continue to work hard, fighting for the best possible outcomes for the people in my electorate, who have given me the honour and the privilege to serve each and every one of them as the Member for Port Macquarie.