

## GOVERNOR'S SPEECH: ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

**The PRESIDENT:** I ask members to extend the usual courtesies to the Hon. Niall Blair, who is about to make his inaugural speech.

**The Hon. NIALL BLAIR** [12.32 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): May I commence by congratulating you, Mr President, on your appointment and also acknowledging all other members of this place in the Fifty-fifth Parliament. I stand before you today in this place and in front of the many people who have contributed to my being elected to the Fifty-fifth Parliament to outline to the House what I stand for and hope to achieve during my time in Parliament. As a first-generation Australian, I reaffirm my commitment and dedication to this great country and to the people of the New South Wales. In order to outline to the House what I intend to achieve while in this place I must go back and explain the events and environment that have influenced me and impacted upon my life to date. As I mentioned, I am the first of my family to be born in Australia with my parents emigrating in the 1970s from the then troubled Northern Ireland.

My parents came to Australia through a recruitment program arranged by the New South Wales Government to fill a skill shortage of high school teachers from countries all over the world. My father came out first and settled with his best friend from university, the late Angus Payne, and his wife, Dorothy, on the New South Wales Central Coast. When my mother followed some months later my parents were married and, after a number of different postings to high schools throughout New South Wales, they finally settled in Goulburn. My father, John, came from a sailing family based in Larne, a major regional port in Northern Ireland, and my mother, Linda, came from a small village called Glarryford, where my grandfather worked in the agricultural industry. These factors contributed to them feeling comfortable settling in a regional town like Goulburn. I must admit that at times the climate in Goulburn must make them feel as if they are back in Northern Ireland.

So Goulburn was where I was born, along with my two younger brothers, Stuart and Alan. Life in Goulburn was simple: we attended school at Goulburn North public and Mulwaree high schools. During my school years my parents set many good examples for us to follow as they were not just passengers in their community but always keen to get involved and make a difference. My mother was heavily involved with many organisations such as the school parents and citizens, and Neighbourhood Watch, and my father took an active role in coaching sporting teams, particularly soccer—or, as he would always correct me, football. It was during my younger years that my father also taught mathematics to the prisoners at Goulburn jail one night per week as a second job—not a situation for the faint-hearted, but it provided an opportunity for us to plan and save for our next trip back to Northern Ireland.

It can be said that my parents' involvement in the community created a culture and an example for us to follow. That was where my ethic to get involved ultimately started. Growing up in Goulburn and watching my parents get involved definitely shaped my attitude towards empowering communities to best make decisions that directly impact upon them. The other way in which my parents have contributed to my being here today is through their strong belief in the importance and value of education, and in ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to better themselves through learning and vocational training. I will elaborate on that later. I come from a strong family of educators. As mentioned my father was a maths teacher and my mother was a home economics teacher. That is very interesting because although they were great teachers, I am hopeless at maths and my wife, Melinda, will confirm that I am no master chef at home.

My real ambition whilst at school was to follow my parents into teaching and to become a physical education teacher. Unfortunately, I spent more time on the sporting field than studying and fell way short of the required university entrance mark. The upside of this was that I had the honour of representing New South Wales in hockey and was selected in Australian honours squads for indoor soccer and rugby union. To me sport is a valuable aspect of every community and one that should bring together people of all walks of life. It should be beyond politics, class, race and religion.

I am proud to point to two examples that underpin this belief that are both related to my Northern Irish heritage. The first example relates to my late grandpa Jim Blair, who was the first protestant to sign to play football for the Belfast Celtic football club. Unfortunately, a broken leg prevented him from playing. I am told it was not a knee-capping, but it was a brave decision nonetheless. The other example relates to the Irish rugby team. After all the sectarian troubles over the years in Ireland the one thing that all sides can agree upon is to play rugby as one nation and under a neutral anthem. To me these examples underpin the important role that sport can play in any community. In regional areas this importance is magnified. Along with its healthy lifestyle benefits, sport is the social link for many areas and a great diversion for our youth to keep them engaged in their local area. For this reason I will work hard to ensure that everyone in New South Wales and, in particular, regional New South Wales, can have access to the facilities, particularly local showgrounds and community halls, as well as the opportunities to participate in sporting activities.

My failure to secure a spot to become a teacher turned out to be a blessing. After a short stint as an apprentice electrician in an open-cut mine, I packed up and headed off to study my Bachelor of Applied Science in Horticulture at Hawkesbury Agricultural College in 1995. At Hawkesbury I was introduced to young people from across the State who, like me, had to leave regional New South Wales to further their education. I was automatically attracted to the tradition and culture at Hawkesbury college. Established in 1891 the college offered me a heritage and an old link to Australia that my family could not be offered. The college is steeped in history and has made a huge contribution to many communities across all of regional Australia. For a long time it was under the control of the then Department of Agriculture and was at the forefront of research programs for agriculture and horticulture in this State. Therefore, it is no surprise to anyone to hear that I will be a vocal advocate for the continued commitment towards primary industries in general, particularly research stations across all of regional New South Wales, to ensure we continue to produce the very best food and fibre in Australia.

It was at Hawkesbury where I first ventured into some level of political activity. I was elected as the assistant secretary of the student union. As a union we were always willing to take on the big issues and we spent many hours campaigning against the social ecology students—many of whom were members of The Greens—to stop them from turning the rugby ovals into a permaculture plot. I report that the rugby fields are still there today, testament to our success. Hawkesbury gave me a wide network of pals and alumni across many industry sectors throughout regional New South Wales and my life is much richer for the experience. At this point I would like to acknowledge the Hon. Rick Colless, also an old boy of Hawkesbury Agriculture College and, I am proud to say, a colleague of mine.

**The Hon. Trevor Khan:** But a lot older.

**The Hon. NIALL BLAIR:** A lot older. We go back to 1891. After graduating from Hawkesbury I spent some time pulling beers at the Hornsby Inn and landscaping throughout Sydney before I secured a job with Manly council as a horticulturist and later as its parks technical officer. From Manly council I moved to Marrickville council as a tree management officer, a topic that no doubt will be explored further with members of the crossbench at a later date. Then at the age of 22 I secured a position with Leeton Shire Council as the Manager of Parks and Recreation and moved to the Riverina.

Throughout my time working in local government, I came to appreciate its place in our community as an essential provider of frontline services, particularly in regional communities. Heavily criticised at many times, local councils need to be adequately funded to allow them to efficiently and effectively implement the services that their communities require. They also need to be empowered to make the decisions about their community that impact on their community, particularly planning decisions, and that is why I support restoring planning powers to local government. I am a believer in decentralisation and feel that we need to work with our local councils to ensure they can provide infrastructure to assist with the Coalition's planned decade of decentralisation, another great policy that the Coalition will deliver in government.

For nearly 10 years I worked in local government and learnt from many great people, but Simon Bradley and Brett Lee were two people that contributed most to my career in this field and to them I say thank you. After working for Manly council, which was a Liberal council, Marrickville council, which was a Labor-Greens council, and Leeton Council, which at the time was a Country Labor council, it is no wonder I joined the Nationals.

During my time at Leeton I also spent five years as a retained fire-fighter within NSW Fire Brigades. This position allowed me to service my community in many ways and to get a full appreciation of the importance of our emergency services. In that five-year period I attended numerous emergency incidents, and participated in emergency taskforces and many community events. Through this time I was able to understand the importance of close personal relationships within the emergency services, particularly the need for the extended family members to support the emergency service personnel, who are daily exposed to situations and scenes that no-one wishes to experience.

Although I was paid for my time, I did work alongside members of other agencies who were volunteers. Getting people to volunteer their time to serve their community is becoming increasingly difficult. Without volunteers many things in our community just will not happen and we as a Government need to be creative and innovative to ensure that people keep getting involved. This is another area that I will work hard on while in this place.

The one great lesson I learnt from my time in the brigade was that good leaders are good decision-makers. This was demonstrated to me by retired Chief Superintendent Michael Hurley, who I am very honoured to say is here in the gallery today; Superintendent David Lewis, who is also in the gallery with his wife, Elise; and Station Captain Graham Parkes. I was under the command of all three of these men at various times and each had his own leadership style; however, their common ability to make decisions under pressure—sometimes unpopular decisions—ultimately commanded the respect of all of those who served under them and saved lives in the process. To me, being able to make difficult decisions is an essential attribute for a member of this place, and I thank those three men for their leading example and hope to match their ability in this field.

In 2001 whilst I was working for Leeton Shire Council the new occupational laws took effect in New South Wales. As a departmental manager I ensured that I became familiar with the new legislation and my responsibilities. At this time it was very difficult to get good information about the safety legislation without thinking that the sky was falling and that we as managers would all end up in jail. I personally feel that the Government at the time and WorkCover failed to adequately explain the responsibilities and provision of the Act and the regulation to many industry sectors, but particularly those in regional New South Wales. From here I could not rest: I wanted to know more and wanted to help those who feared the legislation.

This kick-started my vocational training. I attended TAFE at night and studied through OTEN to gain a number of qualifications that eventually led to my successfully completing my masters in occupational health and safety through the distance learning section of the University of Newcastle. However, my wife Melinda claims half of this qualification because she did a lot of editing of my essays and papers, and she must be acknowledged for that. To me, this highlighted the importance for regional people of being able to access training and education to advance their career prospects. We have a skill shortage in regional areas, and making vocational training available is an essential element for anyone who wants to better themselves or change their career prospects.

I witnessed two great examples of this when I taught at TAFE as a garden design teacher and then managed the apprentice training school for Integral Energy, and that enabled me to oversee the career development and training of 120 apprentices. In both cases I watched people change their lives for the better through vocational training. In my case, my access to vocational training allowed Melinda and me to start up our own safety training and consulting business in Leeton. Before too long I became a WorkCover trainer and assessor as well as a New South Wales trainer for traffic management qualifications.

Over the next seven years our safety company serviced a range of industries throughout Australia. It became a registered training organisation and our operations expanded. We moved into safety systems auditing and consulting and developed a name as an industry leader in agricultural safety systems and a lead training provider for the local government and electricity sectors. I would like to acknowledge some of my clients who are here in the gallery today, particularly Richard Read and Stuart Johnson from the Paraway Pastoral Company. Thank you for your support and confidence over the years.

Although all of our staff over the years have been great, the success of this company must be attributed to the three great women in our business. To my wife, Melinda, Toni Frost and Wendy Cochrane, the three women who ruled my working life, I say thanks. However successful we were in helping companies with the implementation of their safety systems I could not shake the feeling that I was working with a dodgy product, particularly when trying to work with companies that covered more than one jurisdiction and that parts of the Act and regulation needed review. So I started to see how I could work to try to make things better for regional small business owners and workers alike. Around this time I met my local member of Parliament, The Nationals' Adrian Piccoli, member for Murrumbidgee. I liked him and his views, and I started to research The Nationals further. I liked what I saw and joined the party immediately. We go to the same barber as well!

To me, The Nationals were talking to me as a regionally based father, a small business owner, an employer, a homeowner, and a member of a regional community that relied upon essential services. It was clear to me that The Nationals were a geographical party, available

to represent everyone from regional and rural communities regardless of their race, vocation, religion or personal circumstances. You only have to look at The Nationals members in both Houses of the Fifty-fifth Parliament to understand that we represent a large number of demographics within our State. We really are a diverse bunch—look at Trevor! And who would have thought that the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, at 29, and I, at 34, would be the two youngest members of this House and both members of The Nationals. The Nationals have been written off many times as a party, but as Paul Davey titled his book on the history of our party last year, we are *Ninety Not Out*.

As a party The Nationals will never forget where we came from. I take it as a compliment when people refer to us as the old country party, because I see only good things that come out of the country. But we have progressed from those days; now we represent not only the farming community but all of the regional community. In regional New South Wales we produce or have access to the very finest food, fibre, resources, tourism opportunities and environment that Australia can offer. The Nationals is the only party that truly represents regional New South Wales, and I am proud to be a part of its team in this place.

To illustrate how far The Nationals have progressed as a professional political party one need only look at our campaign at the 26 March election. In March The Nationals won 18 out of the 20 seats that we contested, and we broke a few records along the way. Our campaign was kicked off by the brave decision of our party's central council to hold Australia's first ever community preselection in Tamworth. On Saturday 25 June 2010 more than 4,300 people turned out in pouring rain on a freezing day to elect Kevin Anderson as The Nationals candidate for the seat of Tamworth. I worked on a booth in Manilla that day and was proud to be part of political history—but I was even prouder that it was The Nationals who were making it.

During the campaign I had a chance to work with many of our great candidates, namely, John Barilaro in Monaro, Paul Toole in Bathurst, Troy Grant in Dubbo, and Andrew Gee in Orange. The hard work and results that these candidates achieved, along with Leslie Williams in Port Macquarie, Stephen Bromhead in Myall Lakes and Kevin Anderson in Tamworth, contributed to our upper House vote, and for that I am thankful. These results, however, would not have been possible without the work of our duty MLCs and my now colleagues, led by the Hon. Duncan Gay, the Hon. Jenny Gardiner, the Hon. Rick Colless, the Hon. Melinda Pavey and in particular the Hon. Trevor Khan, whose his upper House campaign work made a big difference to our result.

Our Nationals members of Parliament in the other place, led by our leader Andrew Stoner and Adrian Piccoli, have worked hard for many years in opposition to lay the platform for all of our candidates to work on, and to them I am forever grateful. I am also pleased to acknowledge my State and Federal chairman of the Young Nationals, Sarah Mitchell, as now a colleague in this place. I still am a Young National; I may not look like it but I have one year to go. Congratulations, Sarah. I am glad that I can experience all of these new things with you literally right next door. The Nationals campaign and the organisation as a whole in New South Wales are directed by a professional and committed team. The recent success of our party is a tribute to our central council and executive, which has improved and evolved over time under the inspirational leadership of our State Chairman Christine Ferguson, whom I am glad to acknowledge is in the gallery today.

Our team at head office during the campaign of Greg Dezman, Nathan Quigley, Felicity Walker, Douglas Martin and Laura Clarke made great personal sacrifices to help us get elected, and to them I am grateful. I make special mention of our State Director, Ben Franklin, who is also here today. Ben has been the architect of our party's recent resurgence and our campaign result. He has broken down many barriers within our party and has always had the courage to fight for what he knows is in our best interests, no matter how difficult that may be. Ben, you now have your own place in the history of our party, and to you I say thank you. I also appreciate the efforts of our campaign managers, central councillors, members and election volunteers. I am a proud member of our party and will work hard to uphold our beliefs and serve our members to the best of my ability.

I would like to finish by personally thanking some people. To my parents, John and Linda, I say thank you for all of the opportunities and support throughout my life, but not for the hereditary baldness. You can pick which person in the gallery is my dad! To my brother Stuart and his wife, Sally, my brother Alan and his fiancée, Katrina, and to Melinda's siblings, in particular Fiona and Mark, thank you for your support and for putting up with my political talk at family functions. To my mother-in-law, Grace, thanks for all of your help. It is comforting to know that you are there when needed, especially when I am away.

To my research assistant Katrina Carlon, thank you for assisting me to find my way here at Parliament. I am sure we will achieve many great things together in this place. To the many mates out there and central councillors: there are too many to name but you know who you are and I appreciate your full support.

Finally I must take time to thank my wife, Melinda, and son, Lachlan. Firstly, to my wee man, Lachlan. I might be biased but I think he is the best son in the world, and an intelligent one at that. Recently after explaining to Lachie that part of dad's new job is to look at laws for New South Wales, he was quick off the mark to ask:

Dad, can you make a law that allows all chocolate for kids in New South Wales to be free?

Keep an eye out for a motion along those lines in private members' business next week. I have travelled away with work since Lachie was an infant, and it never gets any easier being away from him. Lachie, your understanding and support means the world to me. I hope that you keep on developing into the fantastic young man that we know you will be. Your mother and I are proud of you and love you very much. In my new position I now have the title "honourable" before my name. It is a privilege that I accept, but it does not come close to the title that I am more commonly referred to by the students in year 1 at St Pauls Primary School, Moss Vale and which means the most to me, and that is "Lachie's Dad".

To my wife, Melinda: I would not be standing here today if not for your support. My good friend Mitch Williams was right when he pointed out that I had overachieved when I convinced you to marry me. Melinda allows me to be myself and keeps me grounded. She is the reason I am here. Today illustrates that. Melinda is not here today as there were some issues that came up at home that needed to be addressed. To enable me to be here today, Melinda sacrificed coming here today and is watching now. That sums up the support I get. She makes sure that everything is happening at home while I can be here concentrating on the job at hand.

Melinda is what I refer to as a dream enhancer. Whenever I come up with a harebrained idea, she does not point out the hurdles and risks; she encourages me to go ahead and realise my dreams, even when that often entails her working out the details and finishing the job while I have moved on to the next great idea. Melinda has achieved many things in her life. She was a park ranger at Kosciusko National Park; she was the youngest and first-ever female horse-mounted ranger to work in Centennial Park; she has worked as a jockey in New South Wales and in the United States; she has held many professional positions within the health industry; she has worked as a subeditor; and she has worked most recently as the business manager of our safety training and consulting company. Melinda is full of energy, hard to keep up with, and punches well above her weight. Melinda, I love you very much and owe much of my happiness to you.

In closing, I am here to represent the members of the New South Wales Nationals and to stand up for regional New South Wales. My performance and attitude while in this place can be summed up stating three sayings that originate from my time at Hawkesbury:

Use well the present moments as they fly.

When one great scorer comes to write against your name, they write not whether you won or lost but how you played the game.

Wazzee Wazzee Ya, fight on, fight on, victory will come!

Mr President and fellow members, thank you.