

GOVERNOR'S SPEECH: ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

The PRESIDENT: As this is the inaugural speech of the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, I request members to extend to the honourable member the normal courtesies.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL [11.00 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): I would like to begin by offering my congratulations to you, Mr President, on your election. I know that you will operate with the utmost integrity and fairness in your deliberations whilst in the Chair. I also acknowledge those seated opposite me, my colleagues, particularly those from The Nationals: the Hon. Duncan Gay, the Hon. Jenny Gardiner, the Hon. Melinda Pavey, the Hon. Rick Colless, the Hon. Trevor Khan and my class of 2011 colleague, the Hon. Niall Blair, all of whom have been of tremendous support to me. I am looking forward to working with all members of this House, regardless of political affiliation, and contributing to the robust debate that I have already witnessed during my first few weeks in this place.

I would also like to use this opportunity to acknowledge the staff of the Parliament, who have been so generous with their time during this initial period, especially to me, given the increased administrative processes I created, having been elected under my maiden name of Sarah Johnston but sworn in under my now married name of Sarah Mitchell. I appreciate the assistance I have been given by a range of staff across many departments and wish to formally record my thanks to you all.

It is with great pride and humility that I deliver my inaugural speech as an elected member of the Legislative Council of the Fifty-fifth Parliament. I have been given a lot of advice as to what this speech should contain, mostly by well-meaning friends and colleagues. The advice has ranged from the very simple, "Don't write anything down, just get up there and wing it", to the very sound, "Leave the emotional stuff until the end in case you cry", not to mention the insomnia inducing, "Make sure you write down every word and read it line for line as this speech will constantly be referred to during your time in office, and beyond. People will use it as a milestone for all your achievements and failures and it will become part of the history of New South Wales forever." Nothing like a reminder of the eternal nature of *Hansard* to take the pressure off. But of all the advice I have been given, there are a couple of sentiments that have constantly been expressed: Be yourself, tell the Parliament and the people of New South Wales who you are, why you are here and what you hope to achieve, and thank the people who matter. So that is the path I have chosen to take.

I was born at Gunnedah District Hospital on 10 May 1982. At that time my father, Steve, was an electrician with his own contracting business, and my mother, Marg, had a fashion boutique called Mags, which became something of an institution in Gunnedah and still exists to this day. When I came into this world my sister, Amber, was three, and my brother, Luke, was to be born a few years later. I had a fantastic childhood growing up in Gunnedah. A true child of the eighties and early nineties, I remember riding bikes in the back gully, roller-skating on our front path, looking forward to cracker night each year and never missing an episode of *A Country Practice*.

An especially vivid memory from my childhood is of my sister, Amber, who, showing early signs of her future career as a schoolteacher, decided to use me as her educational guinea pig. She made me spend many a weekend working on projects and taking tests that she had created, mainly so that she could mark them with a red pen. To this day Amber still takes credit for any of my academic achievements—and I believe I was fundamental in making her the brilliant teacher that she is today. Whether it was due to Amber's influence or not, I did

enjoy school and I did achieve. I especially loved to read and always seemed to have my nose in a book. My grandmother Judy still loves to tell the story of how she came to watch me in one of my first school sports carnivals when, instead of competing in my allocated race, I decided to sit under a tree and read as I thought that was far more interesting.

Growing up I was very fortunate not only to be close to my immediate family but also to have an amazing network of extended family. I had the privilege of growing up with aunts and uncles who were more like extra sets of parents, and with cousins who were as close as siblings. I did not realise how lucky I was until I got older, but to be part of such a tight-knit family unit, which still exists to this day, is something that I truly cherish and I know that nothing is more important than family.

As much as we loved Gunnedah, my parents made the decision to try something new and enter into the hotel industry, so when I was 11 we relocated to Grafton where my parents managed a pub. This was quite a difficult challenge for our family at the time. However, in hindsight I now realise that in doing so my parents instilled in me the courage to leave my safety net and to try new things. Our time in Grafton overall was enjoyable and gave me the opportunity at a young age to meet new people from all walks of life. I learned that the best way to understand what matters most to people is just to listen to them—a skill I know will stand me in good stead in my role as a member of this House.

After a few years in Grafton my Dad decided to alter his profession slightly and move from hotel management to club management. We spent a year in Kyogle while Dad managed the local golf club, and in 1998 Dad was offered the role of manager of the Gunnedah Golf Club, so we moved home. It was not long after we had moved back to Gunnedah that it was suggested to me for the first time that perhaps politics should be my career of choice. It was 1999, I was a year 12 student at Gunnedah High School and I was meeting with the careers adviser to discuss my plans for life after the Higher School Certificate.

I remember him saying to me that I should think about politics as I seemed to be a natural leader. I was then School Captain and when I looked back I realised I had always held either a leadership or representative role during my time at school. I was also a fiercely competitive public speaker and debater and had been awarded both Lions Youth of the Year and a Rotary International exchange trip. On paper, I could see how I was seen as a leader but I dismissed the idea completely at the time, saying that I could not think of a worse career choice than going into politics. However, I think the seed may have been sown.

It appeared again when I was studying at the University of New South Wales here in Sydney. When I was picking subjects for my first semester, a friend suggested that I fill the gap in my timetable with an introduction to Australian politics course. She had taken the class the previous year and assured me that as long as I read the newspapers, which I did, I would pass without too much effort being required. So I signed up for the class and from day one became intensely interested in Australian politics and public policy.

My interest in politics continued while I was at university, and by 2004 I was ready to learn more. John Anderson was my local Federal member at the time, and I was fortunate enough to know his office manager, Angela Lyle. Ange has since become a colleague and a great friend, but at that point in time all she did was say yes to my request for work experience. It was a decision that seemed minor at the time but ended up having a huge influence on my future career. I spent two weeks in John's office during the 2004 Federal election campaign. The highlight was spending election day with John, the Deputy Prime Minister of our

country, with the national media in hot pursuit on the infamous wombat trail. From that day I was completely hooked and I took up a full-time position with John in 2005.

There was an incident during my time in John's office that made me focus on the very real need for strong political representation in regional areas. It was during a redistribution of Federal electorates in 2007, where the initial proposal on the table was to abolish the seat of Gwydir, in which I lived, and to make vast changes to the seat of Parkes so that it would encompass almost half of the State of New South Wales. Not surprisingly the proposal was heavily criticised, and the Electoral Commission received thousands of letters from regional people who were angry that their voice in the Parliament was about to be silenced. A public hearing was held in Narrabri at which many people spoke about the importance of ensuring regional people were fairly represented, and I was one of them.

This was another life-changing moment for me because for the first time ever I was given the opportunity to stand up and fight in a public battle on behalf of my community. I am certain to this day that the argument we put forward in Narrabri made a difference to the end result. While we were unable to retain the name "Gwydir" for the seat, we were able to ensure that the boundaries of the newly distributed electorate of Parkes were much more reasonable and allowed communities in the area to have fair representation. I was proud to be able to contribute to that outcome.

I feel very privileged to have worked for John Anderson—a man who made such a valuable contribution to this nation. I remember being slightly in awe of John when I worked for him and, in truth, I am still somewhat in awe of him today. He is an intelligent, honest man who had the moral capacity to make tough decisions while in government for the good of our nation. I believe the policies and programs he created during his tenure are among some of the best this country has ever seen. I am grateful to John, his wife, Julia, and their family for the kind wishes they have given me upon my election to this House.

Upon John's resignation I was given the opportunity to work for Mark Coulton, who essentially is John's successor albeit in the electorate of Parkes. I first met Mark when I was working for John and was initially drawn in by his warm personality and somewhat daggy sense of humour. His wife, Robyn, also was never far from his side—an amazing woman whose political astuteness could rival some of the best in the game. I was fortunate to spend just over three years working in Mark's office in Moree, and I loved every minute of it. Mark is extraordinarily capable and I believe that the people of the Parkes electorate could have no better member serving them in Canberra. I have no doubt that, given the opportunity, Mark has the potential to make an even greater contribution to this nation, and I look forward to one day seeing him as a Minister in a Federal Coalition Government.

My relationship with Mark and Robyn is so valuable to me that we asked Mark to be the Master of Ceremonies at our recent wedding, where he referred to me as a surrogate daughter. I can honestly say that I think of Mark and Robyn as my political parents. I have spent many hours with the Coultons over the years and I will miss seeing them on a regular basis. However, I will not miss Mark's somewhat dubious music collection, and will be forever thankful that I will no longer have to listen to Slim Dusty's greatest hits during the many, many long hours it can take to travel across the Parkes electorate. I am so honoured that Mark and Robyn are in the gallery today, and I thank them both for their wonderful support and friendship. To me, they are the epitome of a dedicated partnership and I can think of no better role models for Ant and I to base ourselves on as we begin our journey in marriage and political life. I thank them for being here to share this occasion with me.

I also thank my colleagues from my years as a political staffer. I especially acknowledge Angela Lyle, Kirsty White, Kellie Maslen, Kerry Moyes, Tory Mencshelyi, Felicity Walker, Evelyn Barber, Jeremy Scott, Julia Gunning, Erica Tudor, Erin McAliece, Polly Gibbons and Cate Bailey for making work fun and being great friends to me over the years. It was the encouragement of my work colleagues that led me to join The Nationals in early 2006 when I was 23 years old. I quickly became involved with the Young Nationals, and over the next few years worked at all levels within the organisation before being elected to my current positions as Chairman of the New South Wales Young Nationals and President of the Federal Young Nationals. I love being a Young Nat, and I know that without the opportunities and experiences I have had as a Young National then I would not be here today.

In my time with the party I have learnt to research and formulate policy ideas. I have been able to test my leadership and organisational skills and I have led the political fight on a range of issues affecting young people who are living and working in regional New South Wales. I have been able to sit on the highest levels of executive within The Nationals. I have addressed major conferences. I have travelled overseas on political exchange and I have met some amazing people and formed lifelong friendships. I thank all of my Young Nats friends, both from New South Wales and across the country, with special mentions going to Sara Burnheim, James Howlin, Ben Strang, Jesse Young, Murray Challacombe, Joe Dennis, Erin Adams, Emma Watts, Ruby Cameron, Damian Callachor and Cameron O'Neil. I also acknowledge my fellow Young National in this House, the Hon. Niall Blair. It is such a thrill for our party that two Young Nationals were elected to Parliament on 26 March, and I hope we are joined by more of our colleagues in the years ahead.

In my office at home I have a framed newspaper article from the sixties, featuring a picture of Bobby Kennedy and a quote attributed to him that particularly resonates with me. It states, "The youth of our nation are the clearest mirror of our performance." I believe that the same also could be said about the youth wings of political parties. While I am sad I will be stepping down from my positions within the Young Nationals over the coming weeks, the calibre of those who are ready to take my place is truly remarkable. There are some very bright political minds about to be unleashed. I feel very confident in saying that the future of our party is in very capable hands.

It was with the full support of my Young Nationals colleagues that I decided to put myself forward for a Legislative Council position. It was not a decision that I made lightly, and I respected the significance of the position and the responsibility that would come with it from day one. I will forever be grateful to the members of The Nationals New South Wales Central Council, who not only took me seriously in my bid but also saw enough potential in me to allocate me a position on our ticket. I will never be able to adequately express my thanks to each and every one of them, but I hope that my actions during my time in office will prove to them that they made the right choice.

The position I was awarded put me in the No. 11 spot on the Coalition ticket. This position was far from certain: in fact, no political party in the history of New South Wales had ever had 11 Legislative Council members elected. For me to take a place in this House, history would need to be made. Well, history was made. I am fiercely proud that I will forever be recorded as the first member of this House to be elected from the No. 11 spot. However, I will always remember that I am here only because of the thousands of people across this State who changed their vote for the first time ever and supported the Coalition. I also am aware that the only reason these people changed their vote was due to the tireless work of our many Coalition candidates, campaign managers, and volunteers—and I am grateful to them all.

I particularly thank the Leader of The Nationals, Andrew Stoner, my parliamentary colleagues and all of our candidates and campaign teams who, along with working on their own seats, made it an extra mission to help get me elected. Leading the charge in all of this was our State Chairman, Christine Ferguson, who was confident from the very start. I have lost count of how many times Christine said to me throughout the campaign, "I think we're going to be able to get you up!", and I thank her for constantly reminding me that there could be a light at the end of the tunnel. Equally supportive was our State Director, Ben Franklin, without whom, I am utterly convinced, I would not have been elected. Ben, you were always honest with me, even when the news was not good, and you allowed me to obsess over numbers and odds for the better part of the past 12 months. Thank you for sending me the best text message of my life, for being a wonderful friend and for creating a magnificent team to offer me even more support.

I believe that the New South Wales Nationals head office is the best political office in this country. While time does not permit me to thank the small army of staff that we now have on board, I make special mention of Greg Dezman, Nathan Quigley, Douglas Martin and Laura Clarke for their guidance and friendship. You are all amazing. I also thank my newly appointed staff member, Will Coates, who has done a wonderful job in helping me navigate through my first few weeks as an MLC. I am very lucky to have him on my team. I also acknowledge and sincerely thank the many supporters I have had in the party over the years. Again, there are too many to name in full, but I could not let this occasion go by without mentioning just a few: the Federal President of The Nationals, John Tanner; Federal Director, Brad Henderson; Tom Lyle from Gunnedah, who has supported and encouraged my political career for over a decade; Ruth Strang from Tambar Springs, who was the only person possibly more excited than I was when I was declared elected; Peter Taylor and the Moree branch for including me during my time in their town; and finally Warwick Knight, Max Zell, Peter Bartley and the rest of the Parkes electorate crew, who have always given me their unwavering support.

It has been my experience that at times there seems to be a somewhat jaded view of The Nationals in our society. We are seen as the old country party with our membership mainly consisting of male farmers. This is simply not the case. The reality is that we are a party that exists to support everyone from regional New South Wales, whether they live on the coast, in a major regional centre or in a small one-pub village. As a reflection of this, our party membership consists of people from all walks of life—not just farmers, but doctors, lawyers, small business owners, teachers, students and tradesmen. Our diversity also is evident when we consider the varying backgrounds of our members in this House.

I believe my election to this House is further proof of how progressive and relevant we really are. I like the fact that I may be the only Nationals Party member in history to be able to make the true claim that I have never owned a pair of R. M. Williams boots—although my male colleagues assure me that if I knew how comfortable they were, I would swap my heels for a pair of RMs in an instant. My age, my gender and my background have never impeded me along my political journey in our party: in fact, I have received nothing but respect and encouragement from our membership. To write us off as just a farmers' party is simply untrue and ignores the fact that we received over half a million primary votes at the 26 March election. Clearly, the people of regional New South Wales know how important it is to have us as their voice in Parliament. I am fiercely proud of where I come from. I love my community and the people within it. I will fight until my dying days to ensure that regional communities like my home town of Gunnedah get the representation, recognition, infrastructure and services they deserve.

As a proud member of The Nationals I do not enter this House with a narrow policy agenda but rather a broader promise to do all I can to improve the lives of those living in regional New South Wales. It is particularly pleasing for me to be a member of a Government that will put regional issues back on the agenda. Our promise to deliver a decade of decentralisation will ensure more opportunities for our regional towns to grow and prosper. I believe that we must also ensure diversification of industry in regional New South Wales and support small business in every way we can. I hope that we will be able to pay particular attention to young people who want to buy or start their own small business as I believe that we have a responsibility to encourage entrepreneurs who want to contribute to our regional economies.

I strongly believe that there is no better tool in life than a good education. As I mentioned earlier, I was an avid reader as a child and to this day I am certain that developing strong literacy skills at an early age made learning easier for me. As a Government we have a responsibility to ensure that all students studying at schools across New South Wales are given the support and guidance required to develop both strong literacy and numeracy skills. If these fundamental building blocks are not properly mastered from the beginning, further education can be a real struggle. I am pleased that my colleague the Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, has made literacy and numeracy a government priority from the start as I know that the stronger our programs are the more future opportunities for our children.

As a young woman from a regional area I feel that I have a responsibility to make sure that I am a voice for all regional women in this Parliament and that I must keep the issues that matter most to them at the top of the agenda. One particular issue that I am very passionate about is the need for regional hospitals to have adequate maternity and paediatric services. Access to health services is a huge issue across the State and many areas of our health system need to be reformed, but in the past not enough importance has been placed on maternity services. I feel very strongly that women and their families from right across this State should have access to adequate maternity services, along with all the necessary prenatal and postnatal care, no matter where they live.

I have been fortunate to be involved with a local charity organisation in Gunnedah called PRAMS, which stands for Paediatric and Maternity Support. This group was started by a handful of young mums in Gunnedah who were fed up with the conditions of the labour ward at our local hospital and decided to do something about it. Since its inception, the members have worked incredibly hard and garnered significant community support. They have managed to raise thousands of dollars and the money has been used not only to completely overhaul the maternity and paediatric wings at the hospital to make them a nicer environment for the mums and kids, but also to purchase medical equipment, including a vital signs machine and a new labour bed.

These achievements have been fantastic, and I have been pleased to be able to work with and support them along the way. But while aesthetic improvements to the wards are nice for a community group to do, I do not believe that it is the responsibility of small community groups to raise money for vital medical equipment. I will certainly use my voice to fight for more support for maternity and paediatric wards across this State and I hope that our Government will give these vital services the attention they deserve. My main goal while I am an elected member will be to make sure our regional communities not only survive, but also grow. To be able to do this we must keep young couples and families in our towns, and we must encourage more young couples and families to come and discover the great life outside of the cities. We need to have jobs on offer, good schools with the right learning

programs and solid health services. If I am able to contribute to making this a reality, I will consider my time in public life to have been worthwhile.

It is now time for me to try to hold myself together as I thank my family. I will not look over to the gallery as I will not be able to maintain my composure. As I mentioned earlier, I have an incredibly close family. So close, that despite the fact that most of us already live in Gunnedah and see each other daily, we even holiday together at Christmas time and have done so for over three decades. The most amazing thing is that we actually enjoy each other's company. I am sure that the Hon. Jan Barham will be pleased to know that our annual pilgrimage to the beach, an event in our family since 1979, finds us staying at Byron Bay every year and injecting considerable funds into the local economy for a solid three-week period.

For the past few years, four generations of our family have been together in Byron and we have loved every minute of it. Therefore, it would come as no surprise that an event like today could not pass without some of my family being here. So I say thank you to my grandmother Meg, Auntie Pam, Auntie Jan and my cousin Isaac for coming today, and to all those watching online at home including Howard, Simon, Megan, Charlie, Nick, Rach, Pete, Alex and Ed. Thank you for not only being my biggest supporters but also for helping me to keep it real. Inflated egos do not last long in our family and I know that you will all keep me grounded along this journey.

I also acknowledge our dear family friend, Kate Smeaton, who is in the gallery. Thank you Kate for being such a big part of our lives, especially when we lived Grafton, and for being here to celebrate this occasion with us. I am also proud to have my new family represented here today. To my mother-in-law, the wonderful Roie Mitchell, who is in the gallery, I say thank you for being the complete opposite to every existing mother-in-law stereotype and for welcoming me into your family with such warmth and love. Thanks also to the rest of the Mitchell and Powell clan for their support and well wishes. I also acknowledge my late father-in-law, Andrew, who we sadly lost last year and who always had time to talk politics with me. At our celebratory lunch today we will toast to absent family and friends in the knowledge that he would have been pleased to see me here.

Unfortunately, my brother, Luke, could not be here today. I am a bit disappointed about that, as he has a keen interest in politics and I know he would have loved it. But he does have a very good reason. Luke worked hard to qualify himself as both a refrigeration mechanic and an electrician by the time he was 25. His hard work has paid off and last week he started his own business in Gunnedah. I understand his desire not to disappoint his clients by taking today off, and can only say to him: I am immensely proud of you, Luke, and know that your business will be a roaring success. I am very grateful to you, and your gorgeous partner, Kate, for your love and support.

My sister, Amber, and her husband, Tom, are here in the gallery, and I thank them both for being such a big part of my life. Tom, you inspire me with your drive to always provide the best for your family and I believe my sister could not have married a better man. Amber, I have always looked up to you and you make me realise that with a positive attitude to life you can achieve great things. I especially appreciate the time spent on your couch, often on a Friday night after a difficult working week, when life's problems are solved over a glass or two of wine. I also thank you both for producing the most amazing children on this planet, the gorgeous Oscar and the beautiful Scarlett. My niece and nephew have brought such joy to our family, and even at their young age they already remind me of qualities that may come in

handy during my time as a politician. Scarlett, who at almost 11 months has mastered crawling but not yet walking, reminds me that if you fall on your face, you just need to get back up again, and that the only way you can achieve your goals is with patience, tenacity and ambition. Oscar, who is four and going through an extremely inquisitive phase, reminds me that you should never be afraid to ask why.

To my parents, Marg and Steve, who are also here today, thank you for everything you have ever done for me. Dad, you are the smartest and hardest working man I know and if I can become even half the person you are, then I will be very lucky indeed. Mum, you are my best friend and your support during this entire process has been overwhelming. Your confidence in me, stemming from the morning of my preselection when you assured me that I would have no trouble winning them over given that I had not lost an argument since I was about three, and your emotional support during the campaign was invaluable. The constant encouragement and unconditional love I have received from both of you has made me the person I am today and I would not be here without you. I promise to make you proud and to always heed your advice, Dad, which was to remain humble and never forget what an honour it is to be here.

Finally to my husband, Anthony, more commonly known as Ant. They say that three of the most challenging times you can go through as a couple are when you get married, when you start a new job and when you move house. Well, as we are a couple who never does anything by halves, we managed to do all three of these things last month. Not only did we survive, we came through it all stronger than ever. Ant, I am so lucky to have you and find it hard to put into words what you mean to me. I am very aware that I am loud, I am opinionated and I am argumentative—all qualities that might be good in a politician but that are terrible in a wife! Thank you for putting up with me. Thank you for letting me pursue my political dreams. I know that my election means we will face some logistical challenges in our personal life over the next few years as we hope to start our family and grow in our marriage, but I also know that you were my biggest supporter in all of this from day one and that, no matter what the future holds, we are on this journey together. You are the most wonderful person I have ever known, I love you with all of my heart and I am so proud to be your wife.

I am proud to stand here today at 29 years of age as an elected representative of the people of New South Wales and the youngest member of this Parliament. During my term in office I will always remember the journey and the people who got me here, and will use their example to guide me in my role. I will continue to read widely to educate myself so that every decision I make in this place will be informed. I will have the courage to leave my safety net and to try new things. I will always listen to people so that I can understand what matters most to them. I will not be afraid to make tough decisions for the greater good. I will respect the significance of this position and the responsibility that comes with it. And I will always fight to ensure that regional communities across New South Wales get the representation, recognition, infrastructure and services that they deserve. Thank you.