



## Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 31 May 2007.

**Mr ROB STOKES** (Pittwater) [11.23 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): It is a joy and a privilege to represent the wonderful district of Pittwater in this place. It is the culmination of a political journey that had a somewhat inauspicious start when, as a 15 yearold student, my entire debating team was banned from debates. It seems the father of a boy on the opposing team had taken strong exception to a particular argument, and called our principal demanding that we all be removed. The principal felt obliged to comply—that father was, after all, Senator Graham Richardson.

We sacked orators sought new venues for our passion for reasoned debate. One became a New York attorney. One is a presenter on the ABC's acclaimed current affairs program *The Chaser*. I now find myself in the New South Wales Parliament as the Liberal member for Pittwater. I thank Senator Graham Richardson for helping us on our journeys and shaping my political consciousness. I will be sure to send Richo a copy of this speech.

In fact, I express my gratitude to the many people who have helped me on my journey here. To Ross Barlow OAM, who gave six months of dedicated service as my campaign director, albeit on the understanding that if elected I would fight for the reintroduction of imperial honours, so Ross could add a welldeserved knighthood to his moniker. Thank you, Sir Ross. To the campaign team—Ray and Sylvia Phelps, Jason Falinski, Brook and Karin Adcock, Ant Gleeson, Adam and Caroline Faulkner and Kai Roland—thank you for all your hard work.

I thank all the Pittwater Liberals, who have endured a very turbulent couple of years, and the hundreds of volunteers who worked so hard over so many months in support of my election campaign, many of whom are here in the gallery today. I also thank John and Margaret Partridge. John was a wonderful, warm and spirited man who loved people and life, and who was called away from this world a little early. I miss him. I also thank the Manly campaign team, who shared many of our highs and lows, and Brad Hazzard, for shocking us into action, sometimes with good cause. One could say he was our political defibrillator.

To my current staff—Jill Dubois, Peter HeatonJones and Julie Heggarty—thank you for keeping everything on track. My parents, Mrs Toni and Professor Gordon Stokes, and my brothers and sisters have given me love in abundance, and a strong determination to reflect this love to my neighbour. I also thank my beloved wife, Sophie, who is my soul mate, my delight, and with whom I share two wonderful children, who have given our lives so much added colour and purpose—and who have also given me a dreadful sore throat.

It is Westminster tradition to acknowledge the contribution of former members, and I am pleased to do so. Pittwater has been represented by Independents Max Smith and Alex McTaggart, Liberal Premier Sir Robert Askin, Liberal Leader John Brogden, Fahey Government Minister Jim Longley, and Liberal Bruce Webster. My immediate predecessor, Alex McTaggart, ensured that Pittwater remained firmly in the political spotlight. I acknowledge his contribution and his deep commitment to Pittwater, its environment and people. Jim Longley and John Brogden are my friends, brothers and mentors. Jim first encouraged me to join the Liberal Party in the early 1990s, and has supported and guided my political journey ever since. Jim and his wife's quiet strength, wisdom, and concern for others continue to be a major source of inspiration.

I first met John Brogden immediately prior to his preselection for Pittwater in 1996. John was an astonishing person to meet, with his charisma, enthusiasm for politics, passion for Pittwater, and deep love for people. My other mentor, Graham Richardson, once said that anyone possessed of a real personality does not join the Liberal Party. Well, Richo has clearly never met Broggers. John and Lucy Brogden have made a great contribution to Pittwater and to New South Wales, and I know they will continue to do so. I acknowledge my deep affection for them both, and thank John for his support, concern and friendship. I acknowledge other candidates with whom I contested the 2007 general election in Pittwater. Pat Boydell, Patricia Giles, Mario Nicotra, Alex McTaggart and Craige McWhirter all conducted positive campaigns and fought hard as worthy opponents.

Pittwater is an ancient place. As you walk out on one of the tracks leading off West Head Road, in a few metres almost 220 years of European settlement seems very distant indeed. Just off that road, you are in the land of the Garigal and Cannalgal people. Their millennia of ownership makes modern constructs of real property and Torrens title seem hollow and faintly ridiculous. The same deep love of country of the Garigal and Cannalgal people is echoed in the way Pittwater people demonstrate an active and enduring commitment to our home; the way Mona Vale Hospital auxiliaries have worked solidly for decades, raising hundreds of thousands to support our community hospital; the way lifesavers at Pittwater's 12 surf clubs freely contribute countless hours of patrols to keep visitors safe on our beaches. It is also echoed in the work of the local Rural Fire Service, which protects our bushland and the families who live near it, and in the work of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol and the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, which provides safety to those who use our waterways. It is also seen in the unsung actions of many individuals every single day—like former Mayor Robert Dunn, whom I saw recently, a lone figure on Newport beach, quietly stooping to pick up rubbish as he walked.

The care that Pittwater people demonstrate for their land explains why we react strongly when external decisions are imposed upon us, without a proper or personal understanding of local realities. That is why we fought the health department's plans to close our excellent local hospital at Mona Vale. That is why we fight the apparatus of overdevelopment, such as the Seniors Living policy, which continues to allow residential unit blocks in sensitive areas, instantly destroying the local character established by residents over many years. And that is why the Avalon community is deeply unhappy with this Government's decision to close its police station.

The same sense of ownership is why the Pittwater community shares a deep affection for Currawong Beach. Currawong encapsulates all that is precious about Pittwater—public access, ancient bushland, and the memories of generations of visitors. And this is why my community feels so betrayed by a Government that speaks of environmental action but refuses to save the environmental jewel of Currawong from desecration. I have a challenge for the Government: if it is serious about our heritage it will act now to secure the future of Currawong in public ownership as part of Kuringgai Chase National Park. We need to encourage the type of community "ownership" evident in the relationship between Pittwater's people and the environment. And we need to use that idea of ownership to create an environmental ethic replacing the frontierism and exploitation that have long characterised our relationship with our surroundings.

The ideas and words we use to describe approaches to the environment are inadequate. The current Government is enamoured of the word "sustainable", but, stripped out of its context within the phrase "ecologically sustainable development", it is virtually devoid of meaning. And words like "ecofriendly" and "eco" are, in my experience, used by some developers as code for replacing ecology with concrete. The words and ideas we really need to create a comfortable and enduring relationship with our environment are "consciousness" and "justice". We need to be conscious of our condition, and how we got here. For example, I am very aware that my forebears were some of the people who dispossessed and decimated the traditional owners of Pittwater. They did not mean to, of course, but they did not much care either. It is just that the settlers chose to be unconscious to the fate of the locals. I am sorry for their limited vision, and I acknowledge that so much of the rich experience of life I have enjoyed has been built on a great historical injustice.

Indeed, consciousness is a precondition to justice. We cannot create a just environment without first recognising our culpability in creating the present ecological crisis. We cannot achieve environmental justice until we acknowledge the personal benefit we have derived from the damage we have caused. Without this consciousness we are phoney, and all our words are just empty posturing, and spin. As John of Salisbury put it, "Who is more contemptible than he who scorns knowledge of himself?"

I was born in 1974, and I am part of the first generation born after the energy shock. My consciousness was formed in the knowledge that our growth, wealth and society depend on limited and dwindling resources. Yet, in my time on this earth humanity has failed to wake up to this reality. Our desires have increased. Our houses have bloated, our cars have bloated, our government has bloated, and our children have bloated. Our challenge now is to slim down. We use too much energy, too much water. And what are we doing? Building more coal-fired power stations so our kids can play computer games and building a desalination plant so we can wash our sport utility vehicles [SUVs]. As families are getting smaller, we are building bigger houses but on smaller blocks of land, so that kids are kept inside the "media room", where they can remain part of an unconscious civilisation.

A sober, conscious evaluation of New South Wales planning policies cannot but scream their failure. Twenty-five years of urban consolidation has not delivered an urban nirvana where people sip mugaccinos at sidewalk cafes and share home decor tips. Instead, its legacy has been the loss of built and natural heritage, diminishing neighbourhood character and identity, habitat loss, no slow down of outward growth, and the total overload of existing infrastructure. Urban consolidation policy has resulted in more power failures, more sewage overflows, and more concentrated air pollution.

Far from generating better public transport, urban consolidation has simply put more cars on the same roads. A student taking public transport from Avalon to get to the nearest university at Macquarie Park, where I used to work, would have to leave by 6.30 a.m. to get to a 9.00 a.m. lecture. The same trip by private motor vehicle would save that student 1½ hours of travelling time. Express buses do not stop at the parkandride at Warriewood, and commuters catching a bus from Narrabeen to the city generally have to stand all the way on the hourlong trip. More flats have simply made the problem worse. It is little wonder that more people use public transport to get to work from the Central Coast than from Pittwater. Yet, despite the known consequences of too much urban infill, the present Government wants up to 5,000 more homes on bushland at Ingleside, in

Pittwater, an area with more biological diversity than the United Kingdom, without any guarantees about upgrading the existing infrastructure. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

This is not justice. Before any substantial subdivision is undertaken, we must identify and protect significant bushland, we must rebuild the local police station at Mona Vale, we must secure the future of Mona Vale Hospital, and we must upgrade Mona Vale Road and provide public transport along it. I love Pittwater. It is where I learnt to sail and surf. It is where I first became intoxicated by the smell of the Australian bush. It is where I met, courted and married my beloved wife, Sophie. It was from Pittwater that my mates and I set out on our surfing trips along the beautiful New South Wales coast. We did not have to go far before finding a quiet, unspoiled beach. We would spend an afternoon on the waves, and then light a campfire as night fell—blissful!

But for the kids of tomorrow, that is going to be an increasingly rare experience. Ribbon development means you have to go further and further out of Sydney to find those unspoiled stretches of coastline that have burned such a clear picture in my memory. We used to be able to travel a relatively short distance and find ourselves in the middle of nowhere. There is not much "nowhere" left any more. As with a page of writing, where the margins and spaces are just as important as the words, so we need to preserve our coastal grasslands and littoral rainforests to give meaning to the places in between.

And it is not just those ritesofpassage experiences that I fear are being lost to today's young Aussies. The way we are going, my kids will not get the opportunities I enjoyed. I do not agree with the Premier that we are heading in the right direction. No. We are contributing to a worldwide decline, where the systems we rely upon to give us life are being suffocated. Government is running out of time to address the consequences of environmental injustice. I am not just talking about the impact on the natural environment; there are huge social consequences too. People stuck in front of their plasma screens in the artificial comfort of air conditioning are more likely to suffer the health consequences of inactivity. Young people dislocated from their surrounds are bored and frustrated. In running kids camps I learned that children respond to their environment. In the bush they socialise better, learn more, and become more selfreliant. If we sacrifice our bush and the unique character of each area of the State, we remove the incentive for them to care about their community.

To create a new environmental ethic based on the justice to future generations and to the earth itself, we must encourage our community to be conscious of our consumption. Every home and business relying on nonrenewable energy supplies should be smart metered so that people are always conscious of how much energy they are using. And we should plan for a future where every home has a water tank, reducing demand for State water supplied through expensive and energy intensive infrastructure. We should make it easy for people to be conscious participants in civil society. On a shelf in my office, I have 11 reasonably small, beautifully bound books. This is one of them. This book and its 10 brothers and sisters contain the entire body of New South Wales legislation as it existed in 1937—everything in a set of books smaller than some modern computer manuals. Yet today we have laws and regulations so dense that they are simply inaccessible to the ordinary citizen.

We have a land valuation system so archaic and complex that the taxpayer is left unable to understand the basis upon which land tax and property rates are calculated. And our planning system is so overloaded with regulation that councils simply cannot enforce the conditions placed on development to ensure the local environment is protected. It is so easy for government to transact business as usual. It requires more to transform our society into one that is conscious of its natural surroundings. We have long battled over our environment: we have sought to explore it, to subdue it, to conquer it and, all too recently, to save it. Now the battle is about our collective consciousness and sense of justice for our environment. Such a transformation is not simply change for the sake of it; we need to change direction. Parliament is a forum for leading this change, and I am proud to be part of it for the people of Pittwater.