



Inaugural Speeches

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Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS (Clarence) [5.59 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Thank you, I will not let you down. That is my simple message today and it is directed beyond the walls of the bearpit, beyond the city limits and all the way up the coast to the residents of the Clarence and Richmond valleys. To those who placed their trust in me, I will fight for you in this place, in the Clarence electorate and wherever else I need to go to represent you. Thank you, I will not let you down. I say to the New South Wales Nationals: I will stand up for our core values and I will not waver in my support for regional New South Wales—I will not let you down. I say to the New South Wales Government: I will not let you down. I will work tirelessly with the Government to make the State work efficiently for the benefit of all people in New South Wales.

The premier State should be more than just a slogan on a number plate; it should be the measurement of our lifestyle. To the members of this place I also say: I will not let you down. In matters relating to the Clarence electorate and in those matters of public importance you will know clearly where I stand, but I will conduct myself in accordance with the respect due to this place. To my family I say, "Thank you for your support; I will not let you down." I will maintain the principles and values that were taught to me by my parents and by which my own family has been raised. Becoming a member of Australia's first Parliament is the second-greatest privilege in my life. Of course, the first was my marriage to Vicki some 30 years ago.

I am honoured to be in such great company, starting with our Premier, the member for Ku-ring-gai, and our Deputy Premier and leader of my party, the member for Oxley. These are great men and that is why New South Wales now has the best State Government in my lifetime. This place is known for great men and during my time here last week I had time to ponder. I could not help but notice the commemorative plaque in honour of Lieutenant-Colonel George Frederick Braund, member of Parliament, and Sergeant Edward Rennix Larkin, member of Parliament. They set a worthy example for those who follow in this place.

I can tell members that at the time Lieutenant-Colonel Braund was killed both of his sons, aged 17 and 18 years, were fighting in the same war. I am proud to say that the grandson of Lieutenant-Colonel George Braund, member of Parliament, is a constituent of mine. I can say also that his grandfather would be proud of his achievements both in business and in the broader community. It may well be that courage and dedication to public service is genetic. Whilst there is much to admire about the great Liberal member for Armidale, Lieutenant-Colonel George Frederick Braund, his grandson Ian knew where the real power base was in New South Wales—he joined The Nationals a long time ago.

My parents, Dimitrios and Dimitra, had no expectations when they arrived in Perth in 1951 with my brother, George, and sister, Mary. They simply wanted a better life than the one they left in Greece. For the benefit of the member for Upper Hunter, the Hon. George Souris, they came from that part of the north-east corner of Greece known as Macedonia. My parents struggled in a new country with a new language and a young family, but they were hard workers, and this country has always rewarded hardworking families. Becoming a New South Wales member of Parliament did not seem my destiny, especially growing up in Perth in the 1960s or graduating as a surveyor from the Western Australia Institute of Technology with the intention of working in the Western Australian outback. It was during my early years working as a graduate surveyor in the eastern goldfields of Western Australia that I came to love the honesty of the bush—both the people and the landscape. I converted very quickly from a first generation city-bred Australian into a characterisation out of that classic Australian movie *Sunday Too Far Away*.

The most important piece of equipment my first boss gave me after I graduated as a surveyor was not a theodolite but a plumb axe. For the uninitiated, the plumb axe was revered by chainmen because it kept its edge. I loved the simple lifestyle of the bush: you could actually cut down a tree without feeling guilty. Surveyors are prone to travel and in 1980 I moved to the Clarence region in a step closer to this place. It was easy to fall in love with the Clarence: it was like the south-west of Western Australia only warmer with nicer beaches and friendly people. It is a hard place to leave and these days I am mostly considered a local. My work as a small business owner and surveyor showed me that government could operate better. Raising our two sons, Leon and Jarrad, made me want to do something about it.

In 2000 I sold my business and I am very pleased that my former partners, Des Smith and Ed Munday, could join me here today.

They have always been of tremendous support and encouragement to me. I ran for council in 2000 and topped the polls at the election. I was elected Mayor of Maclean Shire Council for the next four years. Maclean shire centred around the town of Maclean, the Scottish town in Australia. Being of Macedonian heritage I always appreciated Australia's inclusiveness for those who are prepared to get up and have a go. I was especially grateful to Maclean, which adopted me so readily when I did not have a "Mac" in front of "Gulaptis".

After the Clarence councils were dissolved in 2004 I found an opportunity to work as chief operations officer for a company called Atlantis Energy, a start-up company in Maclean developing a new renewable energy technology that generated electricity from river and ocean currents. This company, which was spawned out of the Clarence Valley by Mick Perry in the early 2000s, is now the world leader in tidal current technology. It is developing marine power generation projects all around the world with the primary site being at the inner sound of the Pentland Firth in the north-east of Scotland. Public service has always been my passion and in 2005 I contested the Clarence Valley Council elections and again topped the polls.

In 2007 The Nationals preselected me to run for the Federal electorate of Page, which covers most of the State electorate of Clarence except, ironically, my home town of Maclean. I once again topped the polls, but Labor won the seat thanks to Greens preferences. I was disappointed, not just for myself and my supporters, but for the whole nation, because losing electorates like Page meant losing Australia's most successful Government and our greatest Prime Minister, John Howard. I had not expected to have another opportunity to serve my community in an elected position. The sudden resignation of my predecessor caught everyone by surprise. I was deeply saddened and shocked by his sudden departure.

Steve Cansdell is a friend of mine and was, by any measure, an exceptional local member of Parliament. He was described as the hardest-working member of this place by none other than Paul Gibson, the Labor member of Parliament whose electorate is now held by the current Leader of the Opposition. Indeed all former members of Parliament who represented the Clarence electorate have served with distinction: Ian Causley went on to become Deputy-Speaker of the House of Representatives, Harry Woods was one of the few Carr Labor Ministers to leave politics with dignity, and Don Day's achievements during the Wran Government are well regarded across the electorate. Winning Clarence in these circumstances was a bit like winning a tennis grand slam when your opponent sustains an injury: It is just not the best way to win, but it was out of my control. Nevertheless, win we did, and with a vote surpassed only by Steve Cansdell's extraordinary result last March.

Like all great wins, this was very much a team effort. I was lucky to enjoy enormous support, which I must acknowledge. My number one supporter and my harshest critic is my extraordinary wife of three decades, Vicki—she is not that old. She is well grounded in our community and provides a brutally honest sounding board. She knows when something is right or wrong and that the community wants simple answers, not political ones. Returning to the tennis analogy, Vicki has more energy and fight than Lleyton Hewitt and she looks better than any of the Russian women on the tour. She had no hesitation in backing me all the way, as did my boys, Jarrad and Leon, who even starred in one of my television commercials. Unfortunately, Leon is currently in Los Angeles and Jarrad is having another gap year, this time in Europe.

I must acknowledge the opportunity that my parents afforded me; aside from providing me with a loving home environment they worked hard to ensure their children were educated. Whilst my father passed away in 1984, my mother, at 89 years-of-age, is as sharp as a tack and very capable of taking care of herself. Unfortunately she cannot be with us today. Despite the difficulties he was going through personally Steve Cansdell did everything possible to ensure that Clarence remained in Nationals hands. The candidates who had been unsuccessful in the pre-selection also selflessly threw their support behind the campaign. I particularly want to thank Clarence Valley mayor, Richie Williamson, and Richmond Valley councillor Stuart George.

The reason the Clarence electorate office runs so smoothly is because of the people who have worked there for so long. My senior electorate officer, Deb Newton, is an unbelievably dedicated individual. She is a competent and compassionate young mother who is passionate about helping people and excels at doing just that. Janet Gould is just as good, just as loyal and extremely proficient at the administrative side of things, which I am discovering is so very important in this job. I also acknowledge the excellent work of my part-time electorate officer, Greg Bailey, who joined the office more recently. If I listed alphabetically the local party members, friends and supporters who were part of this win, I would not get past the Bs before the Deputy-Speaker sat me down. However, I do wish to thank in this place the member for Coffs Harbour, Andrew Fraser—door-knocker extraordinaire—and his wife Kerry for their support over a long period of time.

A by-election is different from a general election in that I had all the backing and support of the Liberal Party, the National Party and The Nationals head office. Ministers and backbenchers were tireless in their support and I very much appreciate the time they spent with me in the Clarence electorate. In particular I would like to thank the Premier for visiting Australia's oldest floral festival, the Jacaranda Festival in Grafton. It is a very popular festival, and the Premier spent more time talking to constituents of his from Kuring-gai who were at the festival than he spent talking to mine. Similarly I would like to thank the Deputy Premier and Leader of the New South Wales Nationals for his frequent visits to the Clarence electorate, to whom I say, "Come back soon because there is lot more work to be done." [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

New South Wales Nationals State Director, Ben Franklin, and his team have turned the party into an exceptional organisation. Ben has one of the sharpest political minds in the country and I am grateful for the help he gave me throughout the by-election. I also acknowledge and thank my campaign director, Ross Caddell, and Tony Sarks for their counsel, dedication and general support. Our State chair, Christine Ferguson, was an enormous help and inspiration. But successful campaigns must have a local driver and in that regard I thank my campaign chair, Jeremy Challacombe, for his continual commitment to the cause. I must also acknowledge the support that Murray Lees has given me over two campaigns and I am very grateful to him for that and for his friendship.

I turn now to what I want to achieve for the Clarence and Richmond valleys over the next three years and hopefully beyond. The Clarence electorate is a large coastal electorate that spreads across 13,388 square kilometres and includes the Clarence Valley and Richmond Valley local government areas. It has a range of diverse communities—coastal, hinterland and Indigenous. The two main centres are in Grafton in the south and Casino in the north. It is typical of most electorates in regional New South Wales. It is a wonderful place to live, work and play, but has suffered outrageously during 16 years of the former Labor Government's complacency and neglect. Why should we only have one police officer for every 700 residents when there is one officer for every 500 people in Sydney? Why should we have to put up with a killer highway while the previous Government was wasting billions on transport projects in Sydney that never saw the light of day? What gave the former Labor Government the right to administer the Clarence electorate as if it were a Third World colony?

The good news is that we have come a long way since the change of government. More than 10 per cent of the cadets who graduated from the New South Wales Police Academy just before Christmas were allocated to the two local area commands that serve the Clarence electorate. There is more work to be done. We desperately need 24/7 policing in Casino and in the Lower Clarence. This Government's first budget last September saw record funds allocated to the upgrade of the Pacific Highway, and I was pleased to open the completed Glenugie upgrade south of Grafton only two weeks ago. There is more work to be done if we are to meet the 2016 deadline to complete the highway upgrade.

I have put my colleague the Minister for Roads and Ports on notice that we may need to consider night and weekend road works and improve processing times at the Department of Planning and Infrastructure and the Office of Environment and Heritage. The completion of the upgrade of the Pacific Highway becomes more and more difficult with the Federal Government deciding to change the funding arrangements from 80:20 with the previous State Government, to 50:50 with the current Government. This places a further strain of \$2.31 billion on the New South Wales budget and delays the finishing time. It is no wonder ordinary people become so cynical with governments.

The answer is to give power back to the people, and that is exactly our policy. The local accountability and responsibility seized by the Labor Party are now being returned to our local schools, our local health facilities and our local councils. There is more work to be done. We need a health clinic in Yamba and we need to secure the future for our smaller hospitals at Maclean, Casino and Coraki. In 2003 Bob Carr gave a cast iron guarantee that the second Grafton bridge would be built within four years. It took another eight years and a change of government to get the project back on track. We will begin construction of that bridge before the next election. In the ultimate cynical move the former Labor Government axed the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service seven years ago.

It took a Coalition Government to provide the \$2 million to start the process of restoring it and eventually extending the line to the Gold Coast. I see my job as ensuring that the Government builds on the good start it has made in Clarence. But more than that, as the new person in the job I want to hear new ideas from the citizens I am now privileged to represent. As a former surveyor I am passionate not only about better government and a fairer allocation of resources, but also about a smarter government. A smart government is one that wherever possible gives decision making to those who know best.

Almost invariably local decision making is smarter than Sydney decision making. We must always remember that the money we spend in government belongs to the taxpayers of New South Wales. In conclusion, I again thank the locals at home who have given me their trust, and I thank the members here who have made me feel so welcome in this very special place. I also thank my family and friends present in the gallery who have travelled to be with me this evening: Ron and Janette Brown, David and Lee Brown, Alan and Viva Brown, Peter Brown—the Brown family—Graeme and Margaret Dobbin, and Warren and Rosemary Rackham. Thank you. I will not let you down.