



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 12 May 2015.

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The ASSISTANT-SPEAKER (Mr Andrew Fraser): Order! Before calling the member for Upper Hunter, I welcome his wife, Zenda, and daughter, Lucy; the Mayor of Dungog Shire Council, Harold Johnston, and his wife, Elaine; the Mayor of Gloucester Shire Council, John Rosenbaum, and his wife, Diana; Councillor Bob Keown, from Singleton Shire Council; Councillor Lorna Driscoll, from Upper Hunter Shire Council; Councillor Tessa Capsanis, from Singleton Shire Council; friends, family and, last but not least, the Hon. George Souris, former member for Upper Hunter. I welcome him back to this place. I thought he may have given this place a wide berth. I congratulate the member for Upper Hunter on his election.

Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN (Upper Hunter) [4.28 p.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Like others before me, I truly appreciate the great honour and privilege of being selected by the people of the Upper Hunter to represent them here, in Australia's oldest Parliament. To be given this opportunity is not something one should take for granted. In fact, this weight of responsibility and expectation is welcome from my perspective. For most of my life I have worked in the community. That began when I was very young. My father was a long-term member of the St John Ambulance. That volunteering work provided him with the opportunity to become the first trainer of the Penrith Panthers when they entered the New South Wales rugby league competition. He was to remain with the Panthers for their first 10 years or so. As a child who grew up loving and playing rugby league, and as one who went to just about every home and away game for all those years, I can tell you that there were some very dark days for the Panthers in the 1970s.

My lifelong friend, Michael Durda, unfortunately could not be here today, but I am pleased that his wonderful wife, Margaret, and youngest son, Jason, are in the gallery. Michael has given me a constant reminder of the match when Manly beat the Panthers 70 to seven at Penrith Park. I must be a glutton for punishment because I married a Manly supporter, and Zenda has spent the past 29 years reminding me of that match as well. I remind the Premier that he may well be the member for Manly, but it is time to get over it. The match was played in 1973, and Manly supporters need to get on with life.

During his time at the Panthers my father also volunteered with what was called the Central District Ambulance and is now the Ambulance Service of NSW. He worked with the ambulance driver, thus providing two officers in the vehicle in those days. His time was taken up with volunteering when he was not working as a boilermaker for the Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board, now Sydney Water. Much of the pipeline network around Sydney was built by my father and his mates.

Having grown up in Western Sydney in a typical battler family scenario, many would have thought I should be sitting on the other side of the House. My father was a strong unionist and staunch Labor supporter. But, to be honest, I always felt life in "the burbs" was missing something for me. It was not because of the people or the lifestyle and not for any particular reason that I understood until I became more independent and grew into adulthood. My maternal grandparents were dairy farmers. My memories of spending time with my grandparents on the farm and eventually moving away from home to be with them were just magical.

When I attended Patrician Brothers' College, Blacktown, in secondary school the careers adviser asked, "What sort of job would you like?" I said, "I want to be a dairy farmer." He was stumped. I was the only one of around 1,100 boys who wanted to be a dairy farmer. I told him, "You need do nothing for me. I know exactly where I am headed." Now I understand why I was happier in the country than I was in the city. Rural life was where I was truly at home. It is a lifestyle that many in the city dream of.

There are wide open spaces, gentle undulating hills, lazy times on the riverbank, picnics with cows and horses grazing around you with a gentle curiosity, milk on demand, fresh garden vegetables just waiting to be cut and eaten, perfectly clean eggs lying in a box of freshly cut straw lovingly laid by those quaint little hens. Then there are those pigs—those funny little pigs—just begging to be shared on a Sunday morning with those fresh eggs on a freshly baked loaf of bread that is steaming and soaking up all the butter you can spread, freshly made from that milk on demand. Daisy, the cute jersey cow, just stands in the lush green pastures awaiting your extraction abilities to fill that milk can, so calm and gentle, almost smiling at you with that look of adoration coming out of those gorgeous eyes.

For those who relate to my description, I have news for them: It is nothing but a dream. Rural life is hard work. It is endless days and nights of planting and harvesting. Daisy is not calm and gentle; she wants to kick you and empty herself upon you. The horses are skittish and the pigs, like the horses, will bite you and do everything they possibly can to make your life more difficult and save their own bacon, thanks very much. That is just at home. Your farming activities are literally in your own backyard. It is more than

just a business, it is your lifestyle.

That conundrum between living the life of a farmer and running your enterprise as a business often provides difficulties most people in cities simply do not understand. Whether you live in the city or country, you have needs. Doctors, schools, groceries and clothes shopping—we all have the same needs. Getting to town to fulfil those needs is mostly more challenging and often more costly. You drive to town on a road that rattles your teeth, so you need to see the dentist more often too.

The recent storm and flood events that hit my electorate hard have highlighted the practical challenges of rural life, with the residents of Torryburn only last Friday having access to a pedestrian bridge and no longer being completely isolated. That was 17 days after their bridge was washed away. A local dairy farmer had been milking his cows and simply pouring the milk down the drain, kids had not been able to go to school and normal life had been completely turned upside down. That is part of living in the bush.

My ancestors, William and Elizabeth Bird, came to Australia from England in 1848. William Bird was a blacksmith who ran his own business in Kings Nympton in Devon, southern England. When they arrived in Morpeth they purchased the punt on the Hunter River and ran that business for a number of years. They had three children—all boys—aged 13, 11 and nine when they purchased, sight unseen, land in Wingham just outside my electorate. William and Elizabeth gave their boys a map, horses and some supplies, and sent them from Morpeth to Wingham to clear the land, build a home and begin farming that land.

Three years later William and Elizabeth sold the punt and made their way to Wingham where their boys had done exactly that—cleared the land and built a home and they had begun farming. Today none of us could imagine sending our three children on such a journey, expecting them to be the pioneers they became at such a young age without the love and guidance of their parents. I am sure that having come to Australia from England would only have added to their anxiety, yet helped build their resilience as individuals and strengthened their bond as brothers.

It is this same spirit that drives country people. They have the resilience and stoic determination to forge a life for themselves and their families whilst building a community where members support each other and create a common bond, a sense of belonging, a sense of worth, a sense of purpose—indeed, a lifestyle our city cousins often admire yet simply do not understand. This is what drives me to be here today. I believe in equity of infrastructure, equity in the provision of services and recognition of the contribution of rural and regional New South Wales to the wellbeing of all of us in this great State regardless of where we live and regardless of our chosen lifestyles.

Perhaps it is in my blood. Perhaps it was my upbringing. Perhaps it is simply a sense of fairness. I know it is all these things and more that cause me not to sit on the sideline and watch the game being played. I must be in the middle of the paddock to drive the pack and set up the moves to allow our team to score the winning points, and those points are for regional New South Wales. There is no doubt I am a Nat—a proud New South Wales Nationals member since 1990. I have seen our party become more professional, particularly under the guidance of the now Hon. Ben Franklin, MLC, who was elected to the Legislative Council in March. His predecessors also played a key role in the evolution of the New South Wales Nationals and its standing in regional New South Wales. The New South Wales Nationals have a long and proud history, and I am honoured to be playing my part in our great team—a team that reflects the diversity that is regional New South Wales.

The Upper Hunter electorate is diverse in its geography and demography. It covers more than 27,000 square kilometres with 303 towns, villages or localities. It has 27 different postcodes. When other members of this House say to me they find it hard to get around their electorate that covers maybe 10 or 20 or even a couple of hundred square kilometres, please do not be offended by my lack of empathy. Major towns like Quirindi are the centre for vast agricultural production on the famed Liverpool Plains. Scone is the horse capital of Australia. Muswellbrook and Singleton provide around 68 per cent of the coal extracted in New South Wales and, of course, the vast majority of the mining royalty revenue that pays for many of the services that we all take for granted.

Gloucester, a town that once had booming dairy and timber industries, now is looking to its future in mining and tourism whilst at the same time still having strong and viable dairy and beef industries. Dungog—more recently the town that has been in the news for all the sad reasons—is a haven for agriculture and lifestyle living. On 21 April, the day of the storms and floods, I was meeting with drought-ravaged farmers in Willow Tree. They were struggling to find enough money to feed not only their animals but also themselves. Ironically, putting food on the table for farmers can be difficult at times as well. The very nature of our diversity was highlighted that day. While I was meeting with those farmers, homes were being washed away and people died in Dungog, just a few hours drive away in the very same electorate.

Mother Nature has blessed the Upper Hunter electorate, from the famous Barrington Tops to the beautiful Liverpool Plains. The resource-rich Upper Hunter is well recognised for its ability to sustain not only the local economy but also the New South Wales and, indeed, national economies. We produce our fair share in Upper Hunter and I am determined to return our fair share. Like other electorates, there are issues that need to be dealt with. Recently in the electorate, I had the Premier, Mike Baird, and the

Minister for Planning, Rob Stokes, listening to the mining and equine industries as well as, importantly, the people of the town of Bulga.

Land use conflicts are very real. Scattered around or amongst the coalmines are world-renowned horse studs and vineyards. The mining, agriculture, viticulture, tourism and equine industries are all extremely important to our electorate and, indeed, to the State of New South Wales. It pains me to see community division on the issue of land use conflicts. There is no need for it. We can and do live together, but it also points to a great need for reform in our planning system. We need a planning system that creates certainty and provides opportunity. This is one of my key goals—not just for the economic contributions but also for the social aspects of building the required infrastructure to attract further investment and the jobs that result. The further demand then for services such as hospitals and schools are all critical to our future and point directly to the State and Federal governments.

As a local member, I intend to be a loud voice for the Upper Hunter—to be the champion they expect and deserve. I relish this responsibility and, quite frankly, I am very excited about our future. I mentioned earlier that I have been a community volunteer most of my life. I have been a Nat since 1990. Throughout my life I have had a number of mentors. Politically, my predecessor the Hon. George Souris, who is here this afternoon, has been a constant source of advice—regardless of whether or not I asked for it! George knows what I am talking about. George is very willing to assist and guide me in the electorate with his local experiences and here in Sydney. You do not spend 27 years as a local member, Minister, shadow Minister and party leader without learning a thing or two. I am very fortunate to have access to such experience and wisdom from someone so willing to share.

There have been many political champions I have looked up to and continue to study. The Hon. Tim Fischer was one of the first to congratulate me and send me some tips and traps to ensure my transition into the role of a local member was as effective as it could be. Many past and present political figures have made themselves available to me and I am extremely grateful. Throughout life there are inspirational people who make a difference to one's thoughts and actions. Whether it is a speaker at a conference or a local volunteer who flies under the radar, helping out those less fortunate, or the selfless acts of heroism, or the entrepreneurial abilities of small business people, or the pioneering spirit displayed in extraordinary feats most of us could only imagine, there is always a source of inspiration to draw from. And usually it is right in your own backyard.

Today there are many inspirational people here in the gallery, sharing this experience with me because they believe in me. They have assisted me and they have demonstrated a level of loyalty towards my wellbeing that only true family and friends can do. Within the New South Wales Nationals I have many friends and supporters. Our head office staff have been extremely supportive and helpful. In fact, I congratulate Nathan Quigley for his talent scout abilities when he recommended me as a candidate. Now he has taken the position of the State Director of the New South Wales Nationals after Ben Franklin's election to the Legislative Council. He no doubt knows a good thing when he sees it.

On 2 November 1985, I married my most loyal supporter and best friend, Zenda. We have made a life together and raised two beautiful children, Ben and Lucy. Ben and his partner, Sarah, now have two equally beautiful children, Willow and Ned. Zenda and Lucy are here in the gallery today, as are many of my friends who have shared the best and worst of times over many decades. In my business life as a financial planner—I am one of the good ones, of course!—I have had very loyal friends, staff and clients. Today, the staff and some clients who were able to make it did so: Kirstie Knapton, who was taking a photograph a minute ago, now works in my electorate office; Zoe Donaldson, who now effectively runs the business; and Pauline Perry, who has been paying my bills and keeping the books for over 15 years as well—you had better keep doing a good job, Pauline! All are here to share this occasion. They too have been part of my community activities and their loyalty is unswerving.

As you recognised earlier, Mr Assistant-Speaker, other community leaders are also in the gallery this afternoon. I thank both the Mayor of Dungog, Councillor Harold Johnston, and his wife, Elaine, and the Mayor of Gloucester, Councillor John Rosenbaum, and his wife, Diana, for taking the time out from their busy schedules to attend, along with councillors from the Singleton shire, Councillor Bob Keown and Councillor Tessa Capsanis, and from the Upper Hunter shire, Councillor Lorna Driscoll. I express particular gratitude to Campbell Walker, who is my campaign manager and all-round very decent and capable man. His wife, Emily, and his children, Beatrix, and my godson, Fingal, are extremely patient. I do thank them for that. I must also mention a very close mate, Dave Brown. I coached his son, Chris, in junior league—which is why it is so easy for Dave to coach him in senior league—and we have been mates ever since. We have seen some fantastic highs and lows together and have been there for each other. Dave is here today, sharing this moment with us.

Pamela deBoer, George Souris' electorate officer and that of his predecessor, Col Fisher, is also here today. Pam has been a strong advocate and supporter for many years. Pam worked for the Parliament for 40 years and recently retired. Suzanne Andrews, who is a former staff member for George Souris, has always been of great assistance, as has Jaqui Townsend, who has remained on my staff. There are too many party members and non-party supporters to individually mention; it would have taken up the 20 minutes. To all of our members and supporters who did all the little things that matter in a campaign, thank you. Other family members here today in the gallery are my sister, Sharon Veasey, and my niece, Elizabeth Veasey—who, I might add, volunteered on my campaign for the whole three months leading up to the election day and who I thank very much. There are family members

who could not be here today because they have passed away.

If you look at my political curriculum vitae, you will know I ran for The Nationals in the 1996, 2010 and 2013 Federal elections. I did so because I believe in our region. While many people thought I was wasting my time, as it may have been unwinnable for The Nationals, I did not see it like that; nor did those close to me. My brother was one of those people. Alan died around 8.30 p.m. on the night before the 2010 Federal election. As you would imagine, as a candidate it was a little tough to face the next day, to smile, shake hands and retain the required confidence that a candidate needs to portray; but I did, and I know that Alan and my parents would have been extremely proud of where I stand today—as the first among a huge family tree to gain such office and to be elected to such a position of responsibility that is placed upon a member of Parliament. My maternal grandparents, the dairy farmers, also would have been extremely proud. I have family members here today from my maternal side—my Aunty Peggy and cousins, Lysay and Kelly. Thank you for making the trip to Sydney.

In closing, I add that during my election campaign I had a simple message about who I am and what I stand for. I am someone who demonstrates common sense, integrity and accountability. My passion for the Upper Hunter is stronger than ever. My drive to deliver equity for our communities is in top gear. My message to everyone in my electorate is very simple: Regardless of whether or not you voted for me, work with me. I will not let you down.