



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 11 May 2017.

Ms LIESL TESCH (Gosford) (16:52): It is with a great sense of pride, privilege and an even greater sense of responsibility that I address the House for the first time today. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this Parliament sits, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to elders past, present and future. I honour the Darkinjung and Guringai peoples and the beautiful and sacred lands and waterways of the Gosford electorate. I also acknowledge and thank the Aboriginal people who join us here today. Labor has been a champion of reconciliation and recognition of our first peoples. In that spirit and example, I look forward to us working together to continue to strengthen relationships and understanding with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, especially the young Aboriginal people in our community. I also look forward to celebrating with communities across Australia the day when Aboriginal people are finally recognised in the Australian Constitution.

Allow me to paint a picture of an idyllic destination just over an hour north of Sydney and its access to magnificent waterways.

You all know the beautiful Hawkesbury River, flanked by the magnificent Sydney Basin Hawkesbury sandstone, symbolic of the gateway to the beautiful Central Coast. To the east, the Brisbane Water—host of an extensive boat-building industry in its heyday—divides us from the Terrigal electorate. Both these pristine waterways are a playground for boating and recreation, touching on the edges of five magnificent national parks and also dotted with splendid, uncrowded beaches. The Gosford electorate is part of the greater Central Coast, touting a very-important-to-our-economy visitor spending of \$860 million last year. If you have not had a weekend with us, we hope to see you in one of our cafes or hotels next weekend, or maybe on the June long weekend.

I thank the people of Gosford for entrusting me with the opportunity to be their representative in the Parliament. I feel the significance and scale of the responsibility today and every day. And I love it! I particularly thank Kathy Smith for the work she has done before me. I spoke with many people in the lead-up to the by-election and they expressed how grateful they are to Kathy for all her achievements, large and small, in our community.

My gratitude also goes to the people who assisted and supported me in the Gosford by-election. At a glance, I can see many of them here this evening. Sincere and heartfelt thanks go to Senator Deborah O'Neil and Marie Andrews, long-time female leaders and role models on the Central Coast, who inspired me to put up my hand alongside the wonderful candidate for the seat of Robertson, Anne Charlton. To my colleagues here in the Parliament, all of our great Labor team who took time to visit the Gosford community, thank you for your ongoing support and guidance.

Thank you to the tireless and awe-inspiring campaign team led by David Dobson: Emma Murphy, Peter Duggan, Zach Harrison and Brody Willets who lived, ate and breathed the community of Gosford. Thank you to New South Wales Labor, and the irrepressible Kaila Murnain and Pat Garcia. Your support for me, and the campaign, has made all this possible. To our passionate branch members and supporters of the Labor Party who were extraordinarily generous with their time, energy and contribution, thank you. To our brothers and sisters in the union movement, thank you.

Special thanks to Mark Moray and Salim Barber for standing with me throughout the campaign. I thank the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association for fighting to protect the penalty rates of some of our most vulnerable workers on the Coast; the Transport Workers Union for standing up for our local garbos and protecting their take home pay; and the United Services Union for defending local government workers during the amalgamation of our local councils. Amongst it all, Young Labor descended on the electorate energising it with the spirit, fun and enthusiasm of intelligent youth, helping to turn the tide of Gosford towards a great win. I will never take that for granted.

I thank my good friends from school, university, sport, neighbourhood, international development, and life. I thank my brother-in-law, Jarrod. In particular, I thank my colleagues in public education, exemplified here today in the camaraderie of the champagne crafternoon team from Brisbane Water Secondary College. I love a challenge and look forward to the new challenge of realising our goals as the member for Gosford. My priority is to be the catalyst for the positive change that the region is crying out for. I believe my life experiences have given me the skills, resilience and vision to achieve this.

I had a wonderfully privileged childhood. My sister, Trudii, and I grew up in a caravan, built by our father, an architect who spent much of his life designing low-cost, sustainable housing as an ideological solution for a burgeoning society. We lived in a number of locations on the coast of New Zealand's South Island with five cats, three goats, a rabbit and a pig. We went barefoot in summer, wore gumboots in winter, and enjoyed bush tucker as a regular part of our diet. It was not a normal family environment, but it was one of love that allowed us to connect directly with nature from a very young age and to always appreciate and revere the natural world.

This experience has created a lasting interest in the importance of human stewardship of the environment and the preservation of green space within the community. My family returned to Australia when I was seven years old, initially living in a boatshed and moving at least 10 times in 10 years before Mum, aged 50, purchased our first family home on Labor's low-interest HomeFund loan scheme. Dad moved onto the homemade houseboat—once again, for us, affordable housing.

Change is not always by choice, but I have learned to embrace it. It has helped me to be flexible and pragmatic when necessary and to adapt quickly and positively to new circumstances. As an active young person who crashed my bicycle and broke my back when I was 19, I had no idea of the very important role that sport would play in my life. As a new wheelchair user, wheeling into the Wheelchair Sports NSW stadium at Mount Druitt and seeing people with disabilities going fast and having fun—people who had lives, boyfriends, cars and jobs—instilled in me a whole new world of possibility. I immediately fell in love with the game of wheelchair basketball.

I used my \$2 pensioner ticket to travel from Blackalls Park in Lake Macquarie near Newcastle to Mount Druitt every Thursday evening for training and was selected in the Australian women's team. After playing in the national men's league with a group of women for a number of years, we established the Women's National Wheelchair Basketball League, which I enjoyed competing in again last weekend. Go the Sydney Flames—top of the league! After placing seventh in Barcelona in 1992 and fourth in Atlanta in 1996, it was an honour to be a part of a team of athletes who worked with the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Organising Committee to educate Sydneysiders and beyond about what a Paralympics was going to deliver to our city.

Sydney 2000 left a legacy not only of improved physical access, but also we saw a vast shift in the attitude towards people with disabilities in Australia. For the first time in Paralympic history, we competed in front of packed houses. Stadiums were filled with school students. No longer did children ask their parents or teachers "What is wrong with that person?" but rather "What sport does that person play?" Thank you so much, Sydney and your volunteers. Everyone involved in that era speaks of the games with heartfelt joy. Our first silver medal, in front of the home crowd, led to an offer to play in Europe and a career as the first woman in the world to play professionally in the men's league in Spain, then in Italy and in France. In all three nations I was motivated to develop sufficient language proficiency to collect the phone numbers of the female spectators and work to establish women's teams.

I was living in a tiny apartment in Paris, travelling around France on weekends and being paid to do what I love, when an email arrived from the Department of Education with a job offer at Brisbane Water Secondary College in Woy Woy. As a good geography teacher, I immediately googled the peninsula. It has water on three sides, a ferry to friends in Saratoga and another to the Northern Beaches, easy access to trains, and an expressway travelling both north and south. And so I moved from Paris to Woy Woy. I had barely had time to settle into life in Woy Woy when the opportunity to try out for a spot in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race with Sailors with disABILITIES arrived. Our vision-impaired skipper was by far the best sailor at night—thanks, Kirk—and the two double-leg-above-knee amputees working on the front of the boat had no legs to be swept out from underneath them as the waves of Bass Strait crashed over the foredeck. Our navigator, Bill, was adept at his job as the boat rolled, ably holding all technology steady with his 4½ elbows and 7¼ fingers. Give us a wave, Bill.

In addition, I met my wonderful partner, Mark, an able-bodied volunteer, on my first Sydney to Hobart race. After years of sailing together and his travelling around the world chasing this Paralympian, Mark is perfect—the supportive partner of a member of Parliament who lives most evenings amongst the community and nights away in Parliament. Thank you to all our families and thank you so much, hubby. Experiencing the Sydney to Hobart with Sailors with disABILITIES is a celebration of diversity and a lesson in creative solutions for all of us.

The documentary of this race was the catalyst for Paralympic sailor Daniel Fitzgibbon to chase this wheelchair basketballer as future crew. After our first trial sailing together, Dan invited me to compete in Miami the following week. We won our first three regattas. On returning to Australia, I sadly retired from the Aussie Gliders. After five Paralympic Games playing wheelchair basketball, we had won two silvers and a bronze. For the following six years, Dan and I spent almost every weekend and school holidays on the water training to beat the best Paralympic sailors in the world. We backed up the gold medal we won at the London games with another gold in Rio last year.

It is not only elite sporting competition that has shaped the direction of my life. My mum, who was a magical woman, instilled in my sister, Trudii, and me a deep passion for life and for people. In her efforts to support our family, Mum's talents as a potter created wonderful artistic and community adventures. She developed in us an enduring enjoyment of the arts and a strong belief in the importance of the arts and culture for celebrating, humanising and enriching society. Having worked in aged care for much of her life, Mum taught us about taking time to listen to the stories of life and the needs and achievements of individuals and communities. Mum spent time as a palliative care

volunteer, giving much to those in need. It is not just for my Mum, whom we lost to breast cancer, or for Kathy Smith, who is currently battling cancer, but for all of us that I commit to expanding the resources dedicated to people who need palliative care across New South Wales and the Central Coast.

Our electorate has a world-class facility in Gosford Hospital. To the north lies Wyong Public Hospital, initially built using instalments of miners' wages to construct the first stages of the hospital. Plans to privatise this hospital and the consequential impact on job security and mental wellbeing for health workers are affecting, and will continue to affect, people across the whole of the Central Coast. No health professional imagined their role would include having to wage a political campaign to save their workplace and their job security. Nor should access to quality health care be bound by what people can afford. I commit to working hard to ensure that the health service provided to the people of New South Wales supports good health now and in the future. Money invested proactively in prevention is a more effective long-term measure, both financially and for the health of our community.

Whilst my sister, Trudii, studied nursing and paid the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, I was lucky enough to commence university in the post-Whitlam era, without the social or financial barriers to tertiary education that are emerging today. It is a top priority for me to make education and training financially accessible for the next generation to reduce their risk of being left behind. I will always champion the value of quality education and continue to fight to reinstate the jobs and training spaces that have been taken from young people in TAFE courses across New South Wales. We must increase the number of apprenticeships and support employers to adopt training policies that not only employ youth but also equip them with training for future innovation in Australia and the world.

At this point, I send a shout-out to the tradies from the coast. Almost 10 per cent of our population are employed in the construction industry. Most of them relied on TAFE for their qualifications, many gained their skills within the framework of apprenticeships and many travel to Sydney every day for work. I pay my respects to the nearly one-quarter of Gosford locals who travel outside the electorate every day for work. The average commute is more than three hours per day—valuable time that takes my constituents away from their families and communities. This has a crippling impact on their quality of life. It is hard to exercise, to help their children with their homework or to contribute to a community group when they are stuck on the M1 or the train.

I have a vision to transform Gosford into a thriving, energised business and social community, the capital city of the Central Coast with a beating heart, a waterside community that people are proud to call home. Growth in the Gosford electorate coincides with Labor's commitment to an increase, not a decrease, in government engagement to generate jobs on the coast.

We will ensure the development of infrastructure, the safety of our waterways, and quality, accessible health care. I know that Labor will deliver equitable access to tertiary education and understands the issue of the increasing need for affordable housing. The people of the Gosford electorate are not "Greater Sydney", and as such the area needs development particular to our needs and identity, expanding on all that we already have to offer. We must be recognised and resourced as a region. On this note, the importance of inspiring, extending and supporting education

and employment opportunities for young people cannot be underestimated in society, especially on the Central Coast.

In one of my last lessons as a geography teacher, we discussed as a class the youth unemployment rate of the Gosford electorate—which currently stands at almost 17 per cent. Eden, a year 10 student, came to me at the end of the class remarking that, when taking those statistics into account, five of the 30 children in that class would not get a job. Not to mention, as a young Aboriginal man, Eden's outlook for employment may be even statistically worse. These are sobering statistics and a reality that I hope to change. I have been a teacher for 25 years and more than 20 of those have been in public education on the beautiful Central Coast—and I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, in asking for an extension of time, I think that the class that you have to deal with in this Chamber is possibly worse than any class I have ever taught. *[Extension of time]*

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Please continue. This is your life.

Ms LIESL TESCH: I have seen the fantastic work that our teachers and principals do, educating our youth and helping them become active members of our community. There is much we can learn from leading world-class education systems, such as those with decentralised school structures, without the overinvestment in one-off, standardised tests that artificially categorise both students and teachers. My initial visit to this place was so exciting. As an active wheelchair user and incomplete paraplegic, I popped a wheelie to jump the single step into the Chamber—cool! There is a long ramp that allows me to enter beside the big stairs from Macquarie Street—tick. One of the first things that drew my attention was the wheelchair accessible bathroom and shower on the same level as my office—tick. Since my arrival we now have new bendy microphones on our side of the House—tick.

My Labor colleagues have been out and about with me in Gosford and have a pretty good understanding of what I can and cannot do in my chair. They are still learning, and continue to ask lots of questions. It is so good to feel so welcome. However, on my first morning of Parliament, I chose not to use the gym or the pool before work—four steps, no handrail, and I could not even fit in the door of the shower. Couldn't I go upstairs to the accessible shower? You do not want to see me wheeling through the corridors of Parliament House in a dripping bikini, I can assure you.

I would love to join my colleagues for lunch in the gorgeous Domain out the back, but as they quickly saunter up the steps back to their offices, I have to detour through the hospital next door to get to the front gate on Macquarie Street. And when I leave Parliament in the evening after hours, I push the button and wait for the police to let me out as my colleagues wave, "Have a good time at dinner". You might notice I have a lower lectern, and one day I hope we can work to enable future wheelchair users, with less balance agility than I have due to the nature of their diverse disabilities, to sit properly under this table.

In addition, after my first day in Parliament, I arrived at the accommodation I had booked as "an active wheelchair user", only to be welcomed by a flight of stairs. Nice one! The booking agency organised a second night down near Central station—it was pretty cool pushing up with my backpack and it is not what I had in mind—and then for the final night they informed me, "We can't find any wheelchair accessible accommodation in Sydney". I say this not to seek pity—ask any one of my sporting teammates or opponents how they fared when pitted against me—I speak about the

reality of everyday life for people with disabilities in our community. I know this old building is history and with it comes some physical limitations, and there will be more budget to spend on changes next year.

We are a progressive Parliament, and people and change make history. People with disabilities do not want to be fighting for access. We want to be able to live our lives well and, in my case, roll in on day one to be an active and effective member of Australia's workforce.

We must remind ourselves that the bottom line of the whole National Disability Insurance Scheme agreement was about people with disabilities doing just that.

In conclusion, I say to the people of the Gosford electorate: Thank you. I am so excited to be working with and for a community of people who know what I stand for, know what I believe in, and know that I will fight for justice, fairness, equity and inclusion in our community. Now, come and visit. Let me know about your visions for the future of our community. Bring the school students of the Central Coast in to check out your Gosford office here in Parliament House. Mum's pottery is on the bookshelf, and on the wall is a fantastic painting by Audrey Hennessey—who is up there in the gallery—a young Wakka Wakka and Yaegl woman who moved in with my partner, Mark, and me when she outgrew her foster home. Audrey's year 12 major work depicts her home life in Baryulgil, and the magnificent colours and textures of the bush tucker that was her childhood. In the centre of the painting are the symbolically represented mission's nine dwellings, dusted with white of the nearby asbestos mine.

James Hardy and the New South Wales Government both knew the implications at the time, but kept the mine open due to the success of high levels of Aboriginal employment. This reminds me every day of the importance of the integrity of government decisions, and that we must not compromise profit and key performance indicators at the expense and wellbeing of Australian workers and communities. In closing, I would like you all to shut your eyes and listen to the sound of the Rio Gold Medal—as that is how some people in our community see the world. It is one thing to put on the green and gold and wheel out onto the court or sail out onto the bay to represent our great nation. It is another thing to be elected to work with and for the people of the Gosford electorate to make our community the best place in the world to live.

Members stood in their places and applauded.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: On behalf of every member in this House and the wonderful crowd that you have here this afternoon, we extend our congratulations to you and wish you every success in your career.