



Megan Therese Webb MLC

Legislative Council

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Electorate: Nelson

Ms WEBB (Nelson - Inaugural) - Mr President, before I speak to this bill I take this opportunity to deliver my inaugural speech. I begin by acknowledging the Mouheneener People as the original owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today, nipaluna/Hobart, in lutruwita/Tasmania. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and I pay my respects to any members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community here today.

I acknowledge the continued connection of the palawa, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people to this land for over 40 000 years and the rich and enduring culture that lives in that connection. I acknowledge that after invasion by Europeans this land was never ceded by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Mr President, I stand here with a genuine sense of privilege to be the new member for Nelson. Nelson is an electorate of great beauty and sense of place, from the slopes of Mount Nelson to the shores of Sandy Bay, from the riverside beaches and foreshore stretching from Sandy Bay through Tarooma, Kingston to the bluff at Blackmans Bay, rising in the foothills of kunanyi/Mount Wellington, which provides a beautiful background vista for many of the suburbs that make up this distinctive electorate.

Nelson is a diverse mix of old families and new arrivals, small businesses, public servants, entrepreneurs; it has growing suburbs, young families, thriving schools, and a multitude of community groups and passionate sporting clubs. I know the people of Nelson are well-informed, creative and hardworking; they have strong opinions but are welcoming and engaged.

As I campaigned I heard clearly that this community has high expectations of its elected representatives. I have no doubt many of my constituents will be keeping a close eye on me and my progress in meeting these expectations. Jim Wilkinson, the longstanding member for Nelson who recently retired, has kindly provided me with some very big shoes to fill. During campaigning as I talked to thousands of Jim's constituents throughout Nelson, I found he was regarded with genuine warmth and respect for his service to the community.

Today I add my personal thanks to Jim for his contribution during his time in the Legislative Council, a contribution that benefited not just the people of Nelson but also our whole state. With Jim's retirement an opportunity presented itself for a new representative and, my word, once we had all come out of the woodwork, the people of Nelson were certainly spoilt for choice.

I make particular note here today of the exceptional field of people who offered themselves as candidates for the seat of Nelson in the recent election. The quality of candidates was demonstrated throughout the campaign period; it was seen in the robust discussion of key policy issues in the public domain, in the vision and aspirations

expressed for the community and for our state, and in the thoughtful and committed engagement of the candidates with the people of Nelson.

I express my heartfelt thanks and admiration to the other candidates for their public service in putting themselves forward for office. It is a courageous decision to do so and a significant personal investment on every level from the candidates and their families.

I speak for many Tasmanians when I say that the quality field of candidates in Nelson fills me with optimism and excitement for the future of democracy in our state.

Mr President, as you and other colleagues know well, an election campaign is an immersive experience - not just for the candidate but for their family. I owe an immense debt of gratitude and no small number of apologies to my family for their support and love during my campaign. My family is very important to me. I would not be standing here today as an elected representative without the benefit of their efforts, provided to me so graciously and generously.

I want to acknowledge the members of my family, many of whom are here today. To my sister, Kate, and my brother, Josh, for their help every step of the way and in whatever form was needed - practical, financial, familial, moral and even existential - thank you.

To my eldest daughter, Sophie, who gave daily moral support from afar in Canberra and who came down for a stint of doorknocking and worked her charm on a few Nelson neighbourhoods. She was here at my side on election day and she is here today to share these special moments with me. Sophie, you set me on my path in life and I am so fortunate to have you as an inspiration. Thank you.

To my daughter, Indy, and my son, Atticus, who had their mum practically disappear for many months during campaigning and almost never got cross about it. They were mature and capable enough to keep themselves on track. Throughout the campaign I would tell them that I was setting an example for what it takes to follow your dreams with hard work and passion. That lesson came at a high cost to them and I am very grateful for the loving and supporting kids you are. I cannot promise that I will not be very busy in this job but I can promise you that you will always be the most important thing to me and an inspiration for me to do this job well. Thank you.

To my incomparable dad, Tony Webb, who threw himself into every aspect of my campaign. He was out with me on my first day of doorknocking in February and on the very final campaign day in May, and many, many in between. He also turned his hand to every non-technological aspect of the campaign and supported our whole household in a multitude of ways. For believing in me 100 per cent, thank you, dad.

Finally, to my partner, Peter Horsman, without whom my campaign would not have been possible. Peter, you were involved in and supported every aspect with your skills, your time, your sheer hard work and your thoughtful input. You held our home and families together with patience and humour. Your love and support were unbounded. Thank you does not even come close.

Mr President, I spend time acknowledging my family today because they are essential in my life and have shaped who I am. They have provided me with the values that form my character and that have always been the driving force of my work. They have been instrumental in delivering me to this place.

I believe that our values inform the way we conceptualise the world and our place in it. They are the lodestar of our personal stories.

I would like to share some of my story to shed light on the things in my lodestar. I will begin, if you would indulge me, with a little bit of family history on my mother's side. I want to tell you a little about my great-great-aunt Maud Donnelly. I have learnt of her in recent years and she holds great personal resonance for me.

So, with thanks to my uncle, Rob, for the family history research, Honora Maud Donnelly, known as Maud, was born in 1882. She was the first of an extraordinary generation of the Donnelly family. They were the grandchildren of a former convict and a famine survivor. During the span of their lives, they would see a cluster of colonies become a federated nation and would personally experience the savage consequence of a war in a far-off land.

They were the generation of Donnellys who made the journey from a frontier life of the previous two generations to the modern suburban life that we recognise today. Many in that generation made that transition with a particular concern for justice. It seems to have been in their blood.

In the twentieth century, Donnellys were found in the sawmills and logging camps of the south, calling workers to join union movements and arguing for a fair wage and an eight-hour workday. The eldest of that generation, Maud, became a political activist with a hunger for practical justice and a determination to put the concerns of women on the political table. She held key positions of leadership in the Women's Non-Party League, the Country Women's Association, the Tasmanian Housewives' Association and the women's branch of the Australian Labor Party.

At a time when women were barred from jury service, Maud was appointed a justice of the peace and she presided at the Children's Court as a special magistrate. Maud's activist spirit was likely the product of the circumstances of her childhood and early adult life and the struggle she witnessed in her own mother's life. Her mother, Mary Donnelly, carried and gave birth to 16 children in 19 years; three of those children died in infancy.

Maud's experience growing up in that environment had an obvious impact on the causes she pursued in her adult life. She campaigned and raised funds for the Bush Nursing Association, so people in the bush could receive professional medical care where they lived.

Maud was involved in radio broadcast in Hobart, focused on educating people about health and nutrition. I like to think that if she were here today, she might be doing podcasts. She campaigned for accommodation for country girls so they could stay in Hobart and continue their education. She raised funds and ran a kitchen during the Depression so that children could eat breakfast before going to school. She campaigned

for well-resourced early childhood education. She was also a businesswoman, providing accommodation for tourists and longer term residents over a number of years at various locations around Hobart.

Maud held significant positions in the Women's Non-Party League in the 1920s. They were a group that looked at public policy and resourcing with an emphasis on women's perspectives. The idea of a non-party league reflected their ideal that solidarity among women in making their views heard and in gaining greater opportunities for civic participation should have precedence over any party-political approach or allegiances. The women of the league could be found throughout the 1920s and beyond, lobbying state and federal ministers about a broad range of issues, including issues related to the plight of war widows and their children, the lack of resources for poor families, the poor state of public schools and hospitals, the need for a social welfare safety net and improved access to education, particularly for young girls.

Their aspirations did not end with making their voices heard through lobbying though; they wanted to see women on hospital boards and in the police force, and appointed as justices of the peace and special magistrates. They wanted to see women in positions of power where they could be directly involved in the debates, judgments and legislative processes that had a direct bearing on the nature and direction of the Tasmanian community.

Maud died in 1951, 23 years before I was born. I stand here, an embodiment of her efforts and those of countless other women. My heart sings with admiration for Maud's lifelong commitment to social justice, to her community and to public service.

I cherish the hard-won progress that came from her work for Tasmanian women and families. I am inspired by her vision for equality of participation of Tasmanian women and I take pride in being an expression of her legacy as the first woman to hold the seat of Nelson and in doing so, for the first time in its history, establishing a majority female representation in the Tasmanian Legislative Council and thereby both Houses of our parliament.

We women in this Chamber are an embodiment of the committed advocacy of our foremothers. From the suffragettes of the 1800s through to women like Maud in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, we stand testament to the tenacity of their vision and dreams. But even as we stand here as beneficiaries, the work begun by these women is not done. We have not yet fully realised their dreams. In my campaign I made a commitment to bringing a particular focus to my role in this place - to explicitly examining the impact of public policy and legislation on women in our community. I look forward to delivering on that commitment, collaborating with my colleagues in this place and within the community to bring it to fruition.

Mr President, those who know me well will have noted the personal connection I share with many of the themes from Maud's life of advocacy and service. Perhaps we can take it as confirmation that in some cases at least blood will out. I share her passion for social justice and addressing disadvantage. Like Maud, I have seen firsthand the impact of poverty and inequality on others in our community.

I come here after working in the community sector for close to 20 years. I began my time in that sector working in community aged care for the Salvation Army, providing hands-on care for some of the most disadvantaged older people in our state. Through the intervening years, I moved through many roles and arrived at my most recent role, managing the Social Action and Research Centre for Anglicare Tasmania. Across the breadth of that work in the community sector; I have seen the toll taken by the exhausting daily struggle of many fellow Tasmanians to meet their basic needs and those of their families.

Beyond that, and even more cruelly, I have seen the discrimination and judgment all too readily poured on those who are struggling in this way - judgment that then becomes yet another barrier to overcome. Insidiously I have seen in this daily sentence of poverty and disadvantage that the ultimate casualty is hope - hope for the future. For far too many, this hopelessness is a prison from which there is little prospect of release.

Like Maud, I have a deep abhorrence for the inequity that exists in our community and feel called to practical action advocacy to address it. Inequity is not an inevitable condition; it is in most part created and sustained by structural factors, by the choices we make in our public policy. Among us we have the resources to ensure all members of our community have a good life, a home, enough to eat, a well-educated and developed skill set to their full capacity, support to participate and be part of the social fabric we weave together, and care and support to maintain health and wellbeing. These are things that we who live in this most fortunate of places should have as a birth right - that so many of us do not is an indictment on the governance and policy choices we have made. An exhortation to do better - I take this exhortation to heart and it will sit at the very centre of my approach to this role.

I come to this place as a committed independent. I share Maud's belief that to achieve real outcomes for our communities in fundamental areas such as health, education and the elimination of poverty, we must rise above the adversarial approach of party politics. To make genuine progress on our state's biggest challenges, we need long-term collaborative policymaking and investment.

I want to work with colleagues in this place to deliver that. Dismay at party-political argy-bargy was the sentiment I heard echoed most commonly as I doorknocked in Nelson. People spoke to me of their frustration at what they described as the squabbling, bullying and petty pointscoreing they saw taking up the time and energy of their political representatives. They expressed disillusionment as to whether their communities' best interests really sat at the heart of this party-political approach.

As a true independent, the people of Nelson will never have reason to question whose interests I am putting first. I will not be in a position to have to balance their interests against parties' interests. I am free to undertake my role in the Legislative Council without being directed to a party position. I will never have to agree or disagree on any particular policy simply on the basis of who has proposed it, but genuinely on the basis of whether it is good public policy. I am heartily glad of that.

It is powerful that our Legislative Council has never been party-dominated. In thousands of conversations during campaigning I heard very clearly that our community values the independence of our upper House. They recognise that its functions of

review and scrutiny are best delivered through a Chamber made up of independent representatives. I adamantly share this view. With the greatest respect and absolutely no personal reflection on other members, I would not wish to see further encroachment of any party representation in this place - the function of this Chamber is to be neither a rubber stamp nor an entrenched obstruction, and party dominance inevitably would lead us to being one or the other. Our upper House is a check and a balance, an additional element of community representation in a chain of robust governance. The more independents sitting here, the better.

About 10 years ago I had the opportunity to shift from frontline roles in the community sector to roles focused on social policy and research and advocacy. To me this was a natural extension of what has always been at the heart of my work: a drive to make a positive difference in people's lives. It is the same drive that has seen me arrive here 10 years later. I come to this place with an enduring passion for good evidence-based public policy. Through my work I have had the opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of policy across many of the foundational issues affecting the lives of Tasmanian people. Indeed, the focus of my policy and advocacy career has encompassed that range of issues we might well describe as the bread-and-butter issues of Tasmanian families - health, housing, aged care, disability support, education, transport, social services and the economy. The people of Nelson can be assured that this background will stand me in good stead as a fierce and well-informed advocate for good public policy and accountable governance across these and many other areas.

One topic prominent in my work in recent years, and for which I am known to be an active and vocal advocate, is poker machine reform. I will not prosecute the argument for reform at this time but I mention it now because it illustrates the kind of public policymaking in this state that is the polar opposite of what I want to contribute to and be associated with in my time as a parliamentarian.

Each iteration of the policy, legislative and regulatory approach taken on poker machines in this state has been, and continues to be, an example of bad public policy: policy made against all credible evidence, to the detriment of tens of thousands of Tasmanian families and solely in the interest of currying favour with an influential, financially powerful industry. It has lacked, and it continues to lack, economic, social and moral credibility. It lacks even the bare minimum in transparency and accountability in governance.

Over decades we have witnessed our state governments of both stripes flagrantly mislead the Tasmanian people on this issue; they have tied themselves in knots to justify the policy and regulatory capture they have allowed to prosper in relation to this industry. Time and again, they have failed to demonstrate the common decency required to put the lives of Tasmanian people before the profits of a small number of well-connected donors. In fact, this area of public policy stands as an exemplar of our worst fears when it comes to the operation of power and influence in our political processes.

In recent years, I believe, the bedrock of our democracy has cracked on this issue. In the context of electoral donation and funding laws that are far too opaque - the most lax of any state, in 2018, we saw a single industry make a financial incursion into our political process. This should give all of us pause, including those who may be seen to

have benefited from it in the immediate sense. Having happened once, our democracy remains perpetually overshadowed by the threat that it may happen again. This threat in itself acts to warp our political functioning, and that cannot be ignored.

As a member of the Tasmanian community and as an elected independent representative in the Tasmanian Parliament, I never again want to see the overwhelming financial support and raw political influence of a particular industry install any party as the government of this state or cause any opposition party to be cowed to the point of inaction. Therein lies the death of our democratic foundation.

No party or political actor should balk at the prospect of contesting a fair, transparent and accountable election. To fail to deliver a robust legislative framework that guarantees this for the Tasmanian people well before we face another state election would be a clear message that political self-interest trumps public interest in this state. Instead of the worst of any state, here in Tasmania we should have the best election donation transparency and accountability laws in the country. I stand ready to participate in delivering that highest standard to the Tasmanian people and I call on my parliamentary colleagues to do the same.

Transparency and accountability matter. Not only do they stave off corrupt behaviour, but even more importantly, they build trust. Trust is a precious and fragile commodity between our community and their political representatives. We are entrusted by the community to act and make decisions on their behalf, decisions that will chart the course of their lives, no less. In the interests of openness, let me state that I am daunted by that responsibility - daunted and humbled. In a certain place in my heart, I am scared by it. I am scared of not living up to expectations; of letting people down who have placed their trust in me; of not making the best of this incredibly fortunate opportunity. I am scared because I know that inevitably I will do each of those things. In my time here, I will experience many other failures besides because life is complex and none of us is perfect.

While I find this fear uncomfortable, I know the presence of these feelings is healthy. If a day comes that I no longer feel at some place in my heart those feelings of being daunted and scared by the magnitude of what has been entrusted to me in this role, I believe that will be the day I no longer warrant that trust.

Mr President, there is a strong general perception - it has been communicated to me frequently since the election - that involvement in politics changes and likely harms those who enter into it. I thank those who have expressed concern for me on that front. Let me say this in response: travelling through life inevitably brings change. I will certainly be changed by my time here but let me mention three changes that I plan on guarding against.

First, I will guard against the loss of idealism in the face of pedestrian pragmatism. Second, I will guard against a battle-scarred hardness of heart in the place of compassion. Third, I will guard against a presumptive sense of entitlement to the many privileges afforded to us in this place.

While eschewing these things might not make me a more successful politician, I hope it will help me continually strive to be a better representative for my community.

Inaugural Speech – Megan Therese Webb MLC

Thank you, Mr President, for time today; thank you to the members and the staff of the Legislative Council for their warm welcome and their generous support and patience. I conclude by stating my support for the Biosecurity Bill and thank those who have worked to achieve it. Thank you.

Members - Hear. Hear.