



Mr Rob Fairs MP

House of Assembly

Date: 21 May 2024

Electorate: Bass

[12.33 p.m.]

Mr FAIRS (Bass) (Inaugural) - Madam Speaker, this is my first opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of the House. Congratulations.

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the traditional and original owners and continuing custodians of this land on which we gather today. I acknowledge elders past and present.

I would also like to thank my parliamentary colleagues from all sides of politics for being here for my first formal contribution to this parliament. I was hoping you might have had something else to do, like lunch. Obviously not. Thank you, sincerely.

To the members of the parliamentary Liberal Party, thank you for welcoming me so warmly to your team. To the Premier, Jeremy Rockliff, thank you for your support and for having confidence in me to be part of your team and your government.

I feel truly humbled to be in this place, doing something I can honestly say I never thought I would. There are so many people I would like to thank for their help and support throughout my election campaign to get me right here.

Firstly, to my wonderful electorate of Bass, thank you for putting your faith in me to represent you in this 51st term of parliament. You have backed me to do a job and I will give you my all.

I would like to say something to all the unsuccessful candidates at the recent election as well. Please, hold your heads up high. To put yourselves out there in the public eye takes incredible, enormous courage and intestinal fortitude. As we know, you only get to step into this chamber after successfully being elected. I was one of the fortunate ones, but I would not be standing here today if it was not for the amazing support I received before, during and after my election campaign.

To name them all, we would be here for a long, long time. However, there are some I would like to single out. To everyone who pounded the pavement doing letterbox drops like my wife Jo, Tim Robertson, Laura Moore, Andrew and Ben Lloyd-Sheekey, Belinda Becker, Kitty and Jason Street, and the young Liberals as well, thank you so much.

To everyone as well, who are so kind to give me some space, considerable space, on their properties for my signs, I sincerely thank you as well.

To my election campaign team, my campaign manager Brian Carlton, who is here today, thank you mate, for everything you did. Hayley Beaumont, David and Leanne Morrison, Derek Taylor and Andrew Palmer, who was like a man possessed when it

came to erecting my signs all over the Bass electorate, words cannot describe his efforts, but thank you so much.

I also thank Jo Palmer and Nick Duigan for their support, despite their very heavy schedules of their own. They called me almost daily to see what help I required and if I was okay.

Thank you also to the Deputy Premier, Michael Ferguson, for checking in almost daily as well, especially when my dad took ill.

Then there is of course, my wife, Jo. She wished she could be here today, but I have it on good authority that she is already celebrating the fact that I will not be home all the time driving her crazy with my apparent snoring, loud eating and breathing. Jokes aside, Jo is my rock and soul mate. Like most of us in life, we have been through highs and lows but her unrivalled love and support and a knack of keeping me grounded is mind-blowing and I love her dearly.

Like many in my electorate, I was, until getting elected, operating a small business. They are the backbone of the economy and keep it pumping. Without generous business people, so many critical services that are not delivered by government suffer greatly. I have always worked hard and love helping people because they need it and just because I can. Mum said many times over the years that I would give away my last dollar if I could. My passion for my community pours through my veins and it makes me happy knowing I am doing my best to make a difference.

I would like to praise the hundreds and hundreds of unselfish volunteers who work tirelessly on behalf of all our local communities, but especially in Bass and especially in the disability, disadvantaged and not-for-profit sector.

For more than three decades, I have heard from ordinary Tasmanians - on and off air - about how politics, and often government, fails; how they feel disconnected and disempowered. Most of us can manage our lives most of the time. However, there are those who cannot and, rightfully, deserve our help in areas like housing, health, employment, security, youth, homeless, victims of crime, elderly, the chronically ill, and the growing number suffering mental illnesses.

I have spent some 18 years in and around the disadvantaged youth sector. Just over two years ago, I set up my own not-for-profit volunteer charity, the Rob Fairs Foundation, which aims to bring the community together to help our disadvantaged youth. My foundation's aim is to give our youth not only work skills, but life skills and experiences in the hope of sparking something in them and helping them turn their lives around and realise their dreams. I do not care what side of the tracks you are from. In my view, all kids deserve a fair go and the chance to become the best versions of themselves, but we cannot do it alone. That is why we urge and bring the community on the journey with us.

My foundation is not government funded. We rely on the private sector and generous donations from individuals, businesses and other organisations to operate and make a difference, and we are. Connections and partnerships are how Tasmania operates. I have built up many, many over the years. I am so thankful to them all. Many are in this Chamber, Madam Speaker. I could not have set up the foundation

anywhere else but here. You might ask, why? Well, good old community spirit. Tasmania has it in spades, and they rally behind their fellow Tasmanians like no other, but we still need to do more to protect and promote our youth. Bureaucratic and red tape delays are frustratingly long and in a lot of cases, unnecessary.

Why at this stage of my life would I want to get into politics? Great question. I have been talking about it for years, but it never felt right for whatever reason. I have to say, over the last six months, it was really getting to me. I decided to step up and have a go and now thanks to my wonderful electorate of Bass, I will be doing what I have been doing behind the scenes for decades, but on a much larger scale. A big difference, now, is having the opportunity and ability to change what does not work into something that does and delivers for Tasmanians.

Now a bit about me, you lucky devils. I was born on the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia at a place called Minlaton. I was a premature baby; arrived on the scenes more than two months early. My mum always said I was in a hurry then and I have been in a hurry ever since and, you know, she is right. As always. I was so small I could fit on dad's forearm. Later in life, I grew 5 inches in three months. I do not think mum has ever recovered from that, especially with my overnight voice change, going from a high-pitched voice like Mickey Mouse to what you hear today.

My parents, Pauline and Ian, I owe them everything. My father Ian was a bank manager and mum a housewife, and I could never have asked for better parents. They sacrificed so much for us kids. Dad worked his backside off for me and my two younger sisters, Michelle and Adele, not only at the bank but at the local drive-in on weekends as well.

While dad worked, mum looked after us, not an easy thing to do, and when on the rare occasion I got into trouble - all right, maybe quite a bit - she was the one who sent me to my room. She would say, 'Wait until your father gets home, you'll get in trouble'. Dad would come home, open my bedroom door and say something like, 'Let's go kick the footy', much to mum's disgust. Dad was often in more trouble than I was, which I very much appreciated.

Mum's parents lived at Wool Bay, a place well known for its fishing back then - snapper, King George whiting and especially squid. Every school holiday I would be climbing up and down the limestone cliffs to go fishing or spearfishing. My grandfather Len was an amazing fisherman. He had this uncanny knack, seriously, of when no-one else was catching anything, he always would. One thing he did teach me was how to catch squid using a potato. Yep, you heard right, a potato. It never failed. I will show you one day.

Dad also took me fishing and taught me how to use a rod. I remember my first-ever cast did not quite go to plan. It went straight up in the air and came down and cracked dad on the top of his head. The sinker was quite large too, so you can understand how impressed he was with that.

Mum prepared me for the outside world - how to cook, wash, iron, et cetera - to ensure I had the basic skill set for when I went out to the big world on my own, although I reckon my wife Jo might be wondering where those skills have disappeared today.

I went to Para Hills Primary School before going to Eudunda Area School after dad got a transfer to a town in the Barossa Valley. Looking back, this handed me many opportunities to develop life skills and experiences. I spent most weekends at my mate's farm learning that way of life. His parents Ross and Myra Schultz taught me many things, like how important farmers and the agricultural sector is to us all. I also learned to drive on the farm. I remember when I accidentally put my foot on the gas instead of the brake, wiping out a sizeable fence post, which Leon and I then spent the rest of the weekend digging out and replacing and rewiring the fence. We also used to fang around on the good old trusty 8175 motorbikes, jumping dams and ripping up the freshly ploughed paddocks, so we were always in trouble for that.

I attended school, but I was not a great student academically, to be honest. I always preferred and enjoyed working after school and on weekends at the local slaughterhouse as a stock boy and delivering papers for the local newsagency in a clapped-out Datsun 180B. I was an extremely active youngster, riding my Malvern Star bike everywhere, playing footy and later umpiring our great game. I also play cricket, basketball, tennis, golf, got into swimming and also athletics.

After five years in the Barossa, dad got a transfer to Woomera in the remote mid-north of South Australia. There was an American Air Force base there and the township had about 5000 mainly American military personnel and their families.

I did some labouring work for a while for one of dad's mates, but he said to dad once, 'You have a great kid in Rob but he's no labourer', and he was right. I was not then, and I am certainly not now.

As always, mum and dad took little time to settle in. They were famous for their parties, with barbecues going full bore and of course cocktails, strawberry daiquiris and Long Island teas flowing freely and, Madam Speaker, they were potent. It was at one of these that an amazing lady called Ruth McDermott came up to me and said, 'Have you ever thought about doing radio? You have an amazing voice.'

Growing up, I wanted to be an apprentice butcher and a fighter pilot. In fact, dad used to take me to the Edinburgh Air Force base near Adelaide to see the amazing fire-breathing F-111s. I can tell you that apart from being colour blind, afraid of heights, suffering from vertigo and being built like a brick you-know-what, I reckon I could be a damn good fighter.

I also remember very early on - I was probably seven or eight at the time - when I was playing on the beach in Wool Bay and I heard this voice come out of a small portable device known as a transistor radio, and I thought, 'Wow, how cool would that be for my voice to come out of those one day?'. For those younger members here, who do not know what a transistor radio is, it is a portable device about half the size of an iPhone 14. I am happy to show you afterwards. I think I still have some, actually.

Anyway, Ruth took me to the community radio station 5TripleRFM, Rocket Range Radio, it was called, and I started doing some training and very soon, my own show. After a couple of years Ruth returned to the USA and I decided that while this radio stuff was great, I wanted to earn money and I wanted to work and with nothing

really on offer, I decided to join the army. I went in there for a little bit but that did not work out, so then I decided to do everything I could to get into commercial radio.

I attended the Vaughan Harvey Radio School in Adelaide. Vaughan is a South Australian radio legend. His voice was amazing, but his training methods were somewhat out there, like using a cork to train your mouth muscles. I could demonstrate that, but not this time; maybe later after a few bevvies - quite a few.

After graduating, I returned to Woomera, doing numerous community radio shifts. I also took a job as a security guard at the base. Most nights while doing the overnight shift there, I used to ring 5KA radio announcers who later became my radio brothers Paul Barry and the late Mark Pedler, who changed my life forever. They called me one night and said that their boss, another legendary South Australian radio figure, Neil Humphreys, wanted me to start work with the station, so I leapt into my car the very next day, drove all the way to Adelaide and began my commercial radio career at 5KA in 1985.

I stayed there until 1989, when 5KA became KAFM, and I loved it, but we were then taken over and the new owners were cutting staff and I did not want to be one of those, but as it happened, the boss of 7LA, as it was known back then, was over there for meetings and offered me the night's gig in Launnie. I took it. I left Adelaide as a skinny, long-haired 21-year old with a permed mullet and headed to Launnie. I said at the time I would only stay for two years and would never get married, never mind to a Tasmanian, but how do you think that has worked out for me?

Radio in the 1980s and early 90s was awesome. We were rock jocks and we partied hard. As mentioned, I had a long, permed mullet and was as skinny as a rake, which I put down to my diet back then, basically being ample amounts of Scotch and two packets of cigarettes a day. I do not do that now.

On 1 May 1989 I did my first-ever shift on 7LA and the first caller to welcome me was famous northern Tasmanian identity Rodney from Mayfield and I can tell you, he called me every single night I was on air without fail.

Looking back, this is also where my passion for and dedication to my local community came to fruition. It was not long after I arrived in Launnie that legendary Aussie singer John Farnham announced his Chain Reaction tour that had left Launceston off the dates. That angered me greatly. I will not say what I said at the time, but I called his then manager Glenn Wheatley and said to him, 'What do I need to do to get John to come to Launceston?', and Glenn said, 'If you get me 5000 signatures, he'll come', so I set up a petition, and amassed a stunning 12,000 signatures.

I then flew to Melbourne and headed to the warehouse where John and his band were rehearsing for the tour. I presented him with a huge number of signed papers, got a few photos, we compared mullets - I reckon mine is better than his and he copied me, but anyway - and he said, 'Thanks, Fairsy, I will be there', and true to his word, he came and performed. It was one of the proudest moments of my life being there at that concert in 1991 and seeing, in my opinion, our greatest live performer at the Silverdome.

I stayed at 7LA till 1995 when news editor Paul Murphy, another one of my great mentors, offered me a job at Southern Cross TV, as it was known back then. It did not take too long before I became sports editor and presenter. I remember my job interview with Paul. There were no questions except, 'What do you and Jo want to have to drink?' He had already decided to hire me. I remember, though, being shocked when he asked me to cut my flowing permed mane which I did, reluctantly.

Being sports editor and presenter for the nightly news was an honour and an amazing experience. I got to work with truly amazing people like my now parliamentary colleagues Jo Palmer and Nick Duigan, two of the most genuine and caring people you could ask for. Working with them is up there amongst the greatest moments of my career. They are like family.

One story I would like to share with Jo, seeing she is here, is that she always knew when there was trouble at home, because when I walked into the station, because of my colour blindness, Jo, my wife, would send me into work with a shirt and a tie that did not match - true story - and Jo would say, 'What have you done now?'. She would say, 'That will not do', and she would go to my top filing cabinet drawer where I had a bunch of ties and find one that suited the occasion. Thank you, Jo.

Here is another little story. We used to get KFC every Sunday when we worked on weekends together. She was a bad influence on me. All right, it might have been the other way around.

I left full-time work there in 2006 but remained a sports reader till 2012. The reason I left was to set up my own company, Media, Events, Marketing and Sports Management. I worked full-time for Formula One legend Mark Webber and his multi-sport charity challenges. We travelled with some of the biggest-named celebrities and visited amazing parts of our great state.

One memory I would like to share is that I remember being in a small light plane flying into Melaleuca and the South Coast Track. I was in the front seat next to the pilot. I hardly ate anything for breakfast because I am not a great lover of flying - I do not know if you have figured that out - but in the plane we had the legendary Steve Waugh, Cathy Freeman and her boyfriend at the time, Joel Edgerton. Anyway, if you have ever done that flight, it was not the smoothest. I held out as long as I could, but eventually filled a sick bag. When we landed, the first people to open the door of the plane were paramedics - actually not for me, just they happened to be there opening the door - and Steve Waugh said, 'Well, that's an encouraging sign', but it was a fun time, although not so much for me; it was rather embarrassing, but I have no regrets about being here in Tasmania. Why would I?

My radio and TV work has brought me in regular contact with Tasmanians from all walks of life, from every day hard working families and small businesses to corporate and civic leaders and our much-loved public sector, from our most disadvantaged and, of course, our decision-makers. I have gained invaluable experience and I think that it will serve me well in understanding and doing my utmost to meet the needs and expectations of all Tasmanians, but especially in my Bass electorate.

Tasmania is an amazing place to live, work and raise a family. It boasts a plethora of world-class and iconic tourism destinations almost at our doorstep. When it comes to our produce, as we all know, it is a world-beater.

Madam Speaker, I would like to finish with a plea to the all-new parliament. This is a unique opportunity to do our very best for all Tasmanians. So many futures hang off the decisions made by us in this place. Yes, we will probably disagree a lot, and that is good in a free democracy, but we will have to rise above our sometimes petty differences and work together, compromise if required, to deliver what all Tasmanians deserve, a fair go. Thank you.

Members – Hear, hear.