



Bec Thomas MLC

Legislative Council

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Electorate: Elwick

[11.52 a.m.]

Ms THOMAS (Elwick)(Inaugural) - Mr President, I, too, thank the member for Pembroke for that wonderful gap filler. It was far more than a gap filler. It was a very eloquent contribution. I only hope to be as eloquent as you in delivering my inaugural speech.

I rise today to note the Racing Regulation and Integrity Bill. In order to legitimise this contribution, I appreciate your indulgence, Mr President, and that of the House, in delivering my inaugural speech.

Further to your acknowledgement of Country this morning, I too pay my respects to Tasmania's Aboriginal people as the original and continuing custodians of this island, lutruwita. I commit to working for and with Tasmania's Aboriginal people, to listening to their stories, acknowledging their truth and seeking to ensure the decisions that we make in this place consider, respect and support Aboriginal people and culture.

In preparing to write my inaugural speech, I googled 'inaugural speeches'. Members might be pleased to know that I did not use AI. We have talked about that in this place a bit already. I googled 'inaugural speeches' to be clear about the purpose and to seek some inspiration. If I am to be totally honest with you, Mr President and with myself, perhaps this was also an act of procrastination, for I am a recovering perfectionist and I do really want to get it right.

What I found was the Victorian Parliament website on inaugural speeches said boldly at the top, 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression. That's one reason new MPs work hard on perfecting their inaugural speech'.

The Australian Parliament website referred to the tradition originating in the British House of Commons as 'a significant occasion and an opportunity for a new Member to outline to Parliament what they hope to achieve'. It said that inaugural speeches are diverse and may express political views and goals, thank supporters, speak about personal experiences, and mention specific issues affecting people in the member's electorate.

As you mentioned, Mr President, it is convention that a first speech is heard without interjection or interruption and, according to the Australian Parliament website, in return for this courtesy, the member must follow a few conventions, including keeping their speech succinct and uncontroversial so as not to provoke interjection.

Being generally centrist in my views, I describe myself as being pro-business and development whilst also socially progressive. I like to think I can be fairly

uncontroversial in sharing my political views and goals, but can I be succinct? It is the question you all want to know the answer to. Alison Lai, who for a number of years was my manager and colleague and has since been a great friend and mentor, and who joins us in the Chamber today, once nominated me for the Earbasher Award in the Department of Economic Development end-of-year awards. A fellow elected member at Glenorchy City Council once suggested I would run out of words by the time I was 40.

So, I am pleased to be here with my words today, having celebrated my 40th birthday last Christmas Eve. Members will be pleased to know these not-so-subtle hints have given me cause to reflect and continually work on being succinct. Thank you, Ali, for this and all your encouragement and advice over the last two decades. I will give being succinct my best shot today and in my contribution to debate in this place ongoing.

The Parliament of New South Wales said that first speeches play an important part in the parliamentary life of a member of parliament: 'a moment of achievement, a setting-off point, as they step onto the parliamentary stage for the first time. At times these speeches suggest the career that is to follow ...'. But it also warned not every inaugural speech is a triumph: 'sometimes first speeches may set a false trail, when expectations are not realised, or where a great career is built on the foundations of a shaky or mundane start'. I guess there is hope either way and history will be the judge, but of course I will aim for triumph.

I hold firm the belief that what I do in this place and in this role is not about me. It is about the people of Elwick and Tasmanians more broadly, who I am honoured and privileged to represent in this place and serve in our community. However, in keeping with the important, respected and time-honoured tradition that is inaugural speeches, I appreciate the opportunity to succinctly tell you a bit about me, my views and goals, and my wonderful electorate and its people. I will also use this special occasion to pay tribute to my loyal supporters who helped me to arrive here and continue to inspire and encourage me every day.

I was the first born to Kathleen and Ricky Dance, named Rebecca Jane Dance on Christmas Eve of 1983. Mum and Dad hailed from Cygnet and had 17 siblings between them. My late Nan and Pop, Joan and Donald Dance, were very connected to the local community, owning the local service station. They worked hard and long hours to make ends meet for 11 kids. My mum's father, Bernhard Haugland, was a Norwegian sailor who met my nan, Dorothy, in Hobart during a port stop and went AWOL, never returning to the ship, as the story goes. As you know, Mr President, we hosted the Norwegian Ambassador where we joined you for lunch. It was wonderful to meet the Norwegian Ambassador. After creating a family of eight children, sadly he died from a brain aneurysm aged just 39. My nan, Dot, worked in an apple orchard and had a hard time raising six boys and two girls on her own. I am wearing her necklace today.

Mum and Dad moved up to town from Cygnet for work when they left school and bought their first house in Lutana for around \$30,000 in 1980 - if only. I have fond memories of growing up in this little house. It was situated in a cul-de-sac at the end of the overpass across the highway and served as an after-school pickup point. My friends from Bowen Road Primary School and I would walk across after school and often find

any number of mums crammed into the little kitchen. Mum had created a welcoming little community hub.

With dad being a carpenter and mum doing part-time admin work, we never went without, but we did not do it easy either. From a young age my brother Adam and I were always taught to look out for others and to always do your best. My mum and dad are wonderful people. They are selfless, kind, generous and welcoming. The member for Prosser managed not to cry during his speech and I was determined to do the same. Oh dear. They showed us, and continue to show us, how to make people feel cared for and included.

Mr Vincent - Drink some water.

Ms THOMAS - Thanks for the tip.

We were also taught that 'sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can never hurt you'. And whilst I am not sure that is entirely true, it certainly is a mantra that has served me well in the sometimes-harsh domain of public life so far. As Adam and I hit our teenage years, we moved to a bigger house in West Moonah and I went on to Ogilvie High School. I enjoyed school and loved playing netball and basketball. Looking back, I can see that I often took on leadership roles within my friendship circles at school, through sport and in my family - just ask them. My assertive tendencies at home may have come back to bite me at school, though, when in grade 6 I ran for house captain and lost by just one vote to my cousin, Miranda. I still recall my brother Adam telling me he voted for Miranda. And so I learned the important lesson early on that you can never take any vote for granted. It is probably due payback for trying to boss him around too much at home.

Mum's well kept school journals show that growing up I wanted to play netball or basketball for Australia and that I was always hungry. When I reached my peak height of 155 centimetres in grade 6, I was forced to rethink my career ambitions and I shifted focus towards being a lawyer or maybe a psychologist, and maybe I found somewhere in between.

When, as mayor of Glenorchy, I attended the grade 6 Bowen Road Primary School graduation last year, each student identified what job they aspired to do on completing their education. Basketballer, doctor, teacher, scientist, vet, they said. No-one said mayor. No-one said politician. As I presented an award and had the opportunity to congratulate the school leavers, I told them that all roads can lead to a role representing your community and that it is an honour and privilege to serve others. I encouraged them to take the chance if ever they have the opportunity.

I believe each of us who are privileged to serve in this place have a role in involving, inspiring, encouraging and supporting those around us, and particularly future generations, to put their hand up to serve their community. I am a firm believer that you cannot be what you cannot see. We have a responsibility to conduct ourselves in a way that makes smart people with decent values want to run for parliament or local government, or to serve the community in other ways. I am committed to doing this during my time here in this place.

I never would have dreamed I would be standing here today, not coming from a family or friendship circles that had any involvement with or any particular interest in politics. Boy, how that has changed.

I am so grateful and proud to have so many of my family and friends here today in the Chamber and joining by watching online. I see what I do in here as a team effort in which each and every one of my family and friends plays an important role in making Tasmania a better place through their interest in and support for what I do, for which I am so very grateful.

A particular thank you to Auntie Mary, who is here today on her 79th birthday. Happy birthday, Auntie Mary.

Of course, a special thanks to my wonderful husband, Ross, who is not a fan of the limelight, so I will keep this bit brief. Thank you, Ross, for your honesty, guidance, love and support and everything you do with, and for, me. Hopefully, you do know how much I appreciate you.

Thank you also to the extended Thomas family in Victoria and Toowoomba: Lindy, Bruce, Emily, Josh, Cate, Karl, Eleanor, Tom, Billy, Finn, Hamish, Angus, Arthur, Hazel and Patrick. Thank you for your support from afar, and for generously and graciously accepting me into your family when Ross and I met 20 years ago, even though I took him so far away from you. I still claim that I saved a mainlander.

Thank you also to my brother, Adam, sister-in-law, Siane and nieces, Eva and Mila for your love and interest in what I do. Thank you, Adam and Siane, for being here today. It really means a lot.

I especially thank my Mum and Dad for their lifelong encouragement and support for everything I do. I know that not everyone is fortunate enough to have parents in their lives, so I am very grateful not just that I do, but they are such selfless, loving, kind and supportive parents. I love and appreciate them more than words can say.

My parents instilled a sound work ethic in Adam and me and taught us the value of working hard. I got my first job at Purity Glenorchy Central, now Woolworths, at 14 years of age. At 18, I got a second job at Cooley's Hotel in Moonah, where I worked throughout my uni degree until I got my first full-time job, aged 23. For a while, I worked the two casual jobs whilst also studying. I would knock off at Purity at 9.15 on a Friday night and start at Cooley's at 9.30, where I would work through until around 1.30 a.m., then be back at Purity the next morning for the 7 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. shift. I hated working on the checkouts. You never knew what type of customer was next. I guess it was good practice for door-knocking.

I wanted to quit but Mum encouraged me to keep going and I got more confident and made some new friends. In fact, I met one of my best friends, Greg Taylor, through this job. He looked after me and sometimes argued with me then, like a big brother, and still does today. I am so grateful for his support and perspective.

I also met many great people at Cooley's Hotel. After a shaky start learning to pour beer, I really enjoyed bar work for the conversations it enabled me to have with

people. I have kept in touch with publican, Stephen Salter, who remains a good friend to my family and me today. Thanks, Steve, for believing in me and for being prepared to give away a few flat six and seven ounces when I could not master the art of pouring a beer. I know Steve loves telling the story of what it took for me to finally get it right. I will leave that one out of *Hansard*, and for Steve to tell over a beer at the Paddy Wagon if you are interested.

I have continued to perform multiple jobs throughout most of my working life through roles secondary to my main job, including as a group fitness instructor, Intimo consultant, council alderman and mental health first aid instructor. The common theme throughout my work history is helping people. Be it at the supermarket, the pub, in the public service or on council, I have always enjoyed serving my local community.

I left Rosny College in 2001 with a tertiary entrance score of 96.4. I went on to UTAS where I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Psychology and Sociology and got first class honours in Sociology in 2006, before then embarking on a public service career in 2007.

I started as a graduate at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, before moving into the Tasmanian Public Service in 2008 as a project officer at Sport and Recreation Tasmania within the then Department of Economic Development. I had almost 10 years at Sport and Rec, where I performed various roles including as a client manager managing funding agreements between the government and state sporting organisations and providing advice on good governance. A shout out to Craig Martin, who was Executive Director of Sport and Rec for pretty much my entire time there and always believed in and encouraged me and continues to today. Craig is here with us today.

Craig and I, together with Ali, who I mentioned earlier, worked on the regulation of boxing and combat sports at a time when mixed martial arts competitions were increasing in popularity in Tasmania. There was community concern about this. MMA lacked social licence as a sport where people were, 'snappin' necks and cashin' cheques', to quote a successful participant. We worked with the minister's office and established the Standards for Boxing and Combat Sport Contests under section 49B(1) of the *Police Offences Act 1935*. That was a really helpful experience that I carry into this place today. I also managed the Sport Club Development team for a while, the Premier's Physical Activity Council and, for a short time, the Athletes Scholarship Program and the dedicated coaches at the Tasmanian Institute of Sport.

It was during my time at Sport and Rec that I became a member of Glenorchy City Council's Sport and Recreation Advisory Committee, first as a state government agency representative and then as a community representative. For two years I chaired this committee and through this role I became aware of and increasingly frustrated by the dysfunction occurring at Glenorchy City Council in and around 2016. With my interest in local government piqued and looking to broaden my scope of knowledge and experience, I took a secondment to the Local Government Division in the Department of Premier and Cabinet to work on the targeted review of the *Local Government Act* in 2016.

Between 2017 and 2019, I worked as a policy and project manager in the Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug Directorate in the Department of Health, working on the

Rethink Mental Health plan. During this time, my dismay at the findings of the 2017 Board of Inquiry into Glenorchy City Council, together with a strong yearning to be more connected to and make a difference in my community, inspired me to run for alderman at the 2018 extraordinary Glenorchy City Council election. I have no doubt that you and some other members here recall passing the *Glenorchy City Council (Dismissal of Councillors) Act 2017*, which was critical in returning stability to the Glenorchy community.

I was proudly elected as a Glenorchy City Council alderman in January 2018, in what was my first attempt at election for public office. This went some way towards healing the wounds of the grade 6 house captain defeat. I am truly grateful to those who encouraged and supported me to run for public office in 2018, especially former mayor of Glenorchy and our independent member for Clark, Kristie Johnston.

Between 2019 and 2021, I worked as an adviser to then Speaker of the House of Assembly and member for Clark, Sue Hickey. I am grateful for all that I learned from this opportunity. I was not a member of a party then and never have been. I went into this role to help the member to help people. I was based in the electorate office in Glenorchy, which had become a pseudo-welfare office, swamped with community members in need of help with mental health, alcohol and drug, housing, justice and family violence issues. It was hard and, at times, very sad but very rewarding work. I learned a lot about the complexity of issues affecting people and reflected on the opportunity for government policy, systems and services to be improved to prevent and better address some of the wicked problems affecting Tasmanian people and communities.

As is commonly the case, our electorate office was a place of last resort for people desperate for help; often people who had survived significant trauma and were trying to navigate a world and our service systems in which there is still relatively little recognition of trauma and its long-term impacts, let alone services to support their healing.

We must start asking, 'What happened to you?', rather than, 'What is wrong with you?', if we are to support people not just to survive, but to thrive. Mental health and addiction services will continue to be revolving door band-aid fixes unless they become not just trauma-informed but trauma-centred. This is something I am really passionate about.

In the electorate office, I worked alongside Duncan Warburton, and we made a great team. I am so grateful to Duncan for his support then, and I am absolutely thrilled he is coming to work with me again. It is his first week, and he joins us in the Chamber today. Thank you, Duncan, and apologies again to the independent member for Clark, who is now recruiting.

In 2020, I was fortunate to be elected as deputy mayor by my fellow alderman following a vacancy. I still remember my shock and awe at being encouraged to run for deputy mayor. I doubt I ever would have had the faith and confidence in myself to nominate if not for this encouragement. I am forever grateful to those who encouraged and supported me to do so. This taught me the importance of telling people when you truly believe they are capable of something. We should never assume that people know

they are capable. I certainly did not. I now make a conscious effort to genuinely encourage others when I see the opportunity. This is something my Mum and Dad have always been great at, and I really admire that in them.

When the former mayor of Glenorchy and now independent member for Clark was elected to parliament in 2021, I took leave without pay from the State Service to perform the role of acting mayor and campaign for election as mayor. Despite the State Service offering better salary and conditions than mayor, i.e., superannuation benefits, something that we need to address in this place, I ran for mayor because I love our community and I care about its people.

I was elected as mayor of Glenorchy in July 2021 and subsequently returned at the ordinary local government elections in October 2022. I sincerely thank the people of Glenorchy for their faith and trust in electing me to represent and serve them in 2018, 2021 and 2022. During my six years at council, we worked hard to demonstrate best practice governance and were proudly referred to as the turnaround council as we made our way out of the dysfunction that debilitated the organisation to set Glenorchy up to thrive.

I am so grateful for the support of my fellow elected members, general manager Tony McMullen, the executive leadership team, and all the wonderful staff who work so hard to make Glenorchy a better place every day. Thank you to everyone who made my time at council so rewarding and who helped achieve some great things for the people of Glenorchy. Together, we improved community engagement through regular community yarns and pop-up chats at Northgate, Claremont Village and the Moonah Arts Centre, an expansion of the Let's Talk, Glenorchy online platform.

We invested in community safety, introducing a PCYC program to support and mentor young people, and security guards on council lawns so people were and felt safer. We hassled the Premier and relevant ministers for more resources for greater investment in early intervention programs for youth and for more resources for Glenorchy Police to enable more proactive police patrols. I will continue to hassle the Premier for these things.

In partnership with other levels of government and organisations, we came good on our promise of significant capital projects: the Tolosa Park Dam re-integration, a new cell at Jackson Street landfill, a new Eady Street sports amenities building, the replacement of the KGV turf and amenities building, Giblin Reserve and Benjafield Park play spaces, a new Montrose skatepark, Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park upgrades, and 10 local playground renewals. These are all projects I am proud to have been involved in. Importantly, we committed to fully funding the renewal of assets: playing catch-up on asset renewal and leading a return to surplus and financial sustainability.

We made some hard decisions too. Selling the Derwent Entertainment Centre and Wilkinsons Point, the disposal of underutilised land, relocating the BMX track - thanks to the member for Prosser for taking it on as mayor at the time - requiring our general manager to make savings through redundancies. Dare I mention that we closed the Glenorchy pool. I am so grateful that the election saw tripartisan commitment to \$5 million in funding to repair and reopen the pool in the short term, while a longer-term solution is explored.

Tasmanian councils are struggling with the increasing demand to deliver more and better infrastructure, assets, and services, as are all 537 councils across Australia. Councils are constantly being asked to do more by their communities and by other levels of government, but they are not adequately funded to deliver on these responsibilities. Local governments are responsible for maintaining 37 per cent of community assets, but receive just 3 per cent of federal taxation revenue; a shout-out to everyone who works in local government - be assured I will continue to be a strong advocate for the sector. Local government must get a fairer share of taxation revenue to be able to deliver the infrastructure and services communities need. Changing lines on maps alone will not deliver sustainability in local government. The funding model for local community infrastructure and services must be reformed if we are to achieve greater equity across municipal areas and sustainability in local government.

I am also a strong supporter of the community services sector. Over the past three years I helped raise over \$70,000 as chair of the Salvation Army Glenorchy Red Shield Appeal. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to Duncan Warburton and Andrea 'Andy' Watson for their dedicated efforts in helping this cause, and to Captains Jeff and Jacqui Milkins for believing that we could. It is critical that community service organisations are appropriately supported by government.

I am also passionate about upskilling people to recognise the signs of mental ill health and to speak up about this when they see them. I have been accredited by Mental Health First Aid Australia to provide people with the skills and confidence to have safe conversations about mental health and suicide since 2018. Over the past six years I have delivered around 60 courses in workplaces and the community.

Life experiences shape who we are and often what we do, and my own episode of depression in 2017 motivated me to learn more about, and teach others more about, mental health and mental illness. Although it was a tough time, my recovery journey taught me a lot about what is important to me and how to look after myself and others. That, I am really grateful for, and I am open about this experience.

Through this life experience, I learned that activism - standing up for what I believe in - is one of my core values; so are authenticity, attention to detail, courage, connection to community and determination. Being clear on this helped lead me to where I am here today. These are the values I will bring into this place as I serve and represent the good people of Elwick, as I independently scrutinise legislation and work collaboratively with all members of parliament to get the best outcomes for the people of Elwick and Tasmania.

I have for a long time been a passionate advocate for the electorate of Elwick and the people within it. Friends and colleagues will attest that I have been standing up for my patch for years, long before I was ever in public life. They will tell you that if you ever wanted to fire me up, just try criticising Glenorchy or its people. I always knew that Glenorchy was the cool cousin of Hobart, not the poor cousin, and I am pleased more people are now saying that this is true.

The electorate of Elwick is rich with cultural diversity, some amazing restaurants, world-renowned shipbuilders, innovative social enterprises and not-for-profits, and talented artists. It is a sporting hub as the home of Premier League football at KGV, the

home of the Southern Tasmanian Netball Association in Creek Road and, of course, the home of the 2024 NBL Championship team, the mighty Tasmania JackJumpers.

Positively, we are seeing participation in sport grow and we must urgently plan and deliver new and renewed regional sport and recreation infrastructure in my electorate. The provision of aquatic facilities, indoor courts, ovals and pitches is critical to cater for our growing population and growing participation. I will continue to call on the government to invest adequately in community facilities.

My electorate is home to the Elwick Racecourse, where the 150th annual Hobart Cup has this year been run. There are award-winning microbreweries popping up, providing opportunities for independent brewers and community connection in a new setting. It is home to the Tasmanian Transport Museum and the Hobart Showgrounds. It is home to the Multicultural Council of Tasmania, and to Karadi Aboriginal Corporation. I thought about trying to claim Mona and Cadbury, Mr President, just over my boundary, but I thought you might have something to say about that.

Mr PRESIDENT - The previous member for Elwick is still hurting about that.

Ms THOMAS - Most importantly, though, it is home to great people. The people of Elwick are on the whole, genuine, down-to-earth people. We do not ask for much, we appreciate what we have and we look out for each other. I am so grateful for their support in electing me to this place and I promise to listen to, represent and serve them to the very best of my ability - those who voted for me and those who did not too.

I will do all I can to ensure people are and feel safe and supported in our community. I will advocate for community infrastructure to be planned, developed and maintained to meet community needs. I will seek to work constructively with all of my parliamentary colleagues to address some of the wicked problems that trouble us all: health, housing, education and youth justice, with a focus on prevention and early intervention in breaking the cycle of disadvantage of crime.

Health, or ill health, is a massive challenge for governments across the country. We rarely, if ever, hear stories of a government being praised for getting it right, but that is not to say we should not try - and try our hard-working Tasmanian healthcare staff do, providing outstanding service within a stretched healthcare system. Whilst we need better access to health care for those who are unwell right now, ultimately, to reduce the strain and stretch on our health system, we must reduce the reliance. We must do more to try to stop people from getting sick. We need greater investment in prevention and early intervention.

Our community deserves fast action on housing and transport solutions for greater Hobart too. We must change the way we do housing and incentivise the construction and purchase of more medium-density dwellings if we are to meet the growing demand.

We need action on and investment in the long-talked-about activation of the northern suburbs transit corridor. People of the northern suburbs have for too long been left behind when it comes to significant investment in these sorts of projects that benefit the everyday battler. I will stand up for them.

We must work hard to break cycles of crime and disadvantage, and support our hardworking Tasmania Police with programs that prioritise early intervention to help stop crime before it starts. We must also address the immediate issues at the same time so that everyone feels safe in our community right now.

We must support our business community to be able to open their doors without counting the cost of vandalism and anti-social behaviour. We must do all that we can to provide future generations with equal life chances. Identifying kids at risk at primary school age and providing appropriate place-based supports to them and their families is critical if we are to ensure our next generation has every opportunity and every possible chance to break the cycle of disadvantage and thrive.

We must use the collective intelligence and passion we have in this and the other place, analyse innovative approaches from across the world, invest in future generations, and do some things differently if we are to achieve positive and enduring change.

We must be courageous enough to make decisions that may not reap rewards within election cycles but will serve Tasmania well into the future. We must govern not just for now, but govern for future generations. These are my hopes for my time in this place, my hopes for the people of Elwick and for Tasmania. I am committed to demonstrating a level-headed collegiate approach and dedication to the people I represent as I proudly serve them here in this place.

I am so very grateful to be here and for the warm welcome that I have received. Thank you. I look forward to working with you all. I note the bill.

Members - Hear, hear.

Mr PRESIDENT - Honourable members, I congratulate the member for Elwick for that very thoughtful, heartfelt, informative and entertaining first contribution.

You will make a tremendous addition to this place. I thank the very proud, and rightly so, family and friends of the member for attending today. It is such an important occasion. It is so good to see such a good turnout and our friends from the other place who have had time to come up in between their division bells. I am sure all members will join me in congratulating you on such a fine first contribution.

Members - Hear, hear.