Donato’s inaugural speech: “The people of Orange rioted” against the status quo

At 1:00pm today, Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party Member for Orange Philip Donato delivered his inaugural speech in the NSW Legislative Assembly.

“It is a great privilege and honour that I stand here in this chamber today to deliver this speech to this house as the newly elected Member for Orange,” Mr Donato said.

“I had never dreamed of being in the position in which I now stand. An unexpected opportunity presented itself and I embraced it, welcoming a new challenge with great enthusiasm and optimism.”

He highlighted the challenges for the Orange electorate that he wishes to pursue in Parliament.

“In Orange, there’s not enough parking at our hospital, and we don’t have a dedicated palliative care ward. The closure of Myer, Electrolux, and a mining downturn has meant that the whole community has suffered job losses.

“Forbes was hit by some of the most devastating floods in history, causing the closure of the Newell Highway for over six weeks: a highway that is yet to be flood-proofed.

“Our education and early childhood indicators are generally below the State average, and we need more funding delivered to these schools to lift these benchmarks.

“If the same were occurring in Sydney there would be riots in the streets – but the people of Orange have rioted: they’ve elected me.”

Mr Donato added that a School of Medicine for Charles Sturt University, roads funding and reducing the rural road toll are key priorities for him.

He concluded with a message to the NSW Government.

“As my Upper House colleagues have demonstrated in the other place, I will obstruct, I will protest, and as you can probably already tell I will not hold any punches back if the people of Orange are getting a raw deal from this Government,” Mr Donato said.

“Last week I walked into this chamber alone as the sole Member of the Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party in the Legislative Assembly.

“In two years time, I plan on having the honour of ushering others along with me.”

The full speech is attached. Check against delivery.
Good afternoon Mr/Madam Speaker, it is a great privilege and honour that I stand here in this chamber today to deliver this speech to this House as the newly elected Member for Orange.

I welcome all Members back from the Christmas break and look forward to a productive, healthy and no-doubt challenging year ahead.

I extend my congratulations to the newly appointed Premier, Deputy Premier and Ministers.

I would also like to acknowledge my predecessor, Mr Andrew Gee MP, for his valuable contribution in this place during his time representing the people of Orange. I wish him well for his future in Federal Parliament.

I extend special congratulations to both Mr Scully and Ms Cotsis on their respective victories as well, and whilst in no-way diminishing the significance of their campaigns, I think they will agree, most of the focus was on Orange the weekend of November the 12th.

In 1995, the Shooters Party, as it was then, elected our first ever Parliamentarian to the Legislative Council, the Honourable John Tingle. Today, I stand here before you as the first representative of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party in the Legislative Assembly.

To be honest, it isn’t a speech I thought I would have the privilege of delivering.

I had never dreamed of being in the position in which I now stand. An unexpected opportunity presented itself and I embraced it, welcoming a new challenge with great enthusiasm and optimism. I embarked upon an old-fashioned boot lace campaign. The campaign was heavily reported upon, inviting significant media commentary.

To quote radio broadcaster, Ray Hadley, from an interview I participated in with him when my campaign was first announced, Mr Hadley stated, regarding my chances of winning the election, “…That it would be a Herculean task to win this by-election…”

It is now well documented that our Party’s victory is historically significant and record breaking. This is the first time since World War 2 that the Country/National Party had not retained the seat of Orange, a period spanning almost seventy (70) years, back to 1947.

A seat that was one of the longest-held and safest National Party seats in this state. Our party obtained unprecedented, history making and record breaking swings. Swings of up to 60 per cent in some booths, especially in and around the Cabonne Local Government Area.

It has been reported that this win was the biggest swing in NSW political history, and has been referred to as “The Donato Swing”!
My story which led me here begins with my grandfather, who like most humble migrants from Italy, came here nearly a century ago in the early 1920’s with nothing but a suitcase of clothing and a dream for a new beginning for his family, in what was then and still is, the best country in the world.

My parents Luciano and Maria, who in a couple of month’s time will celebrate their 52nd wedding anniversary, co-owned a fruit shop, ‘Donato’s Fruit Market’ in partnership with my Uncle Frank and Aunty Grace in Chester Hill for 35 years.

My family all worked hard in the fruit shop. It was long and tiring work, but I look back on it with fondness, as it was there I learnt to appreciate the value and ethic of hard work and family unity.

Following high school, I commenced university studies but quickly realised that university wasn’t the right fit for me. I eventually dropped out of my course and undertook an apprenticeship. Trying to offset the low apprentice wages, I worked behind bars and in restaurants to get me through each week.

A fortunate conversation with a close friend a few years later saw me joining the New South Wales Police Force. This is a career which spanned half my life. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the “cops,” which I will turn to later.

I met and worked with some great people. Some of whom are in the public gallery today, and one sits in this chamber, the Member for Seven Hills.

In fact, it’s with the New South Wales Police Force that I also met my beautiful wife, Nadia.

As many tree-changers do, my wife Nadia and I yearned for a move to rural New South Wales for a better upbringing for our young family, to downsize our mortgage and pursue a rural community lifestyle. I have been based in Orange for the past 12 years, after successfully obtaining a transfer in early 2005.

In this time, my family and I have been actively involved in the local community. I’ve coached hundreds of kids over the years through our family’s involvement in cricket, soccer, AFL and rugby union.

Nadia and I have been married for 20 years and together we have five sons – twins Daniel and James 19, Peter who will be 18 in two days, Mathew 16 and Sean 13. Nadia and I are incredibly proud of all of them. They have grown-up into fine young men. And, I guess you could say, I wanted to make sure the Donato name lived on.
Like all parents we have committed ourselves to giving our children the best possible education and possibilities in life, often involving personal sacrifices. I am proud to be able to share this moment with them here today, to show my children that with hard work, self-belief and loyalty – anything is possible!

As I stated before, for half of my life I worked with the New South Wales Police Force. A great and honourable organisation.

My policing career began in the mid 90’s, working general duties across Liverpool, Macquarie Fields, and later, Wollongong. In 1997, I was seconded as part of "Operation Puccini" to Cabramatta, which was at that time, the heroin capital of Australia, post the assassination of local MP, Mr John Newman.

Alongside many brave police men and women, I was tasked with combating the vicious gangs in the area. I observed first-hand the fear these gangs instilled in local businesses and communities through their violent robberies, home invasions, illicit drug supply and extortion.

I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Commissioner’s Citation for my work at Cabramatta during those months.

This concept of community-based policing was embraced by the locals. The assistance provided was invaluable. The whole experience had a profound impact on my life, and it went a great way to making inroads into crushing the illicit drug trade in Cabramatta.

As any experienced street cop will tell you, there are many times of desperation and despair on the front line. On a daily basis responding to traumatic and devastating events, including domestic violence assaults, grieving parents, and fatal motor vehicle accidents.

These were some of the hardest days in the force, and I thank every officer for their duty to this State, because I understand how tough it can get sometimes.

After six years on the front line and with a young family, it was time for a change.

One of the luxuries of the New South Wales Police Force is the flexibility of the role. My interest in law and victim protection led me to join the Police Prosecutions Branch in 2001.

Over the last 16 years, I have prosecuted thousands of criminal cases across metropolitan and regional NSW. The highlight of my prosecuting career was in early 2016 whilst acting as the Senior Prosecutor at Orange, along with Senior Constable Riley, Canobolas Local Area Command achieved the highest local court successful prosecution rate in the state. A testament to Superintendent Cribb and his hardworking staff.

Turning now to the beautiful electorate which I call home.
A city of rich geological history, Orange is a picturesque town nestled in the foothills of Mount Canobolas, a prehistoric volcano, which is what makes our area such fertile agricultural land. It is a vibrant and energetic regional city. It has become a hub for agriculture, education, health, mining, and an ever increasingly popular food and wine industry.

North of Orange lie the community of Molong and surrounding villages that make up the Cabonne Council area. The people of Cabonne, many of whom I met during my campaign, are salt of the earth, loyal, tough, hard-working, fair minded people you would expect from such a proud regional community.

Then there is the town of Parkes. Famous for its Elvis Festival held each January, which celebrated its 25th anniversary this year, which I attended. A great event that brings thousands of tourists and millions of dollars to the local community. There is also the Parkes Observatory and Logistics Hub.

To the north of Parkes lies Peak Hill, and to the west Bogan Gate, Trundle and Tullamore, all great agricultural towns.

To the south of Parkes lies Forbes, a town rich in primary production and bushranger history on the fertile banks of the Lachlan River and Jemalong Irrigation Country.

As great as our electorate is, there are many areas we have fallen behind in; which I will prosecute in my time here.

These issues go to the heart of what our electorate expects from Government: accessible healthcare; better education outcomes; protecting and growing jobs; whilst improving roads and infrastructure.

It should not be forgotten that people do live beyond The Great Dividing Range.

In Orange, there’s not enough parking at our hospital, and we don’t have a dedicated palliative care ward.

The closure of Myer, Electrolux and a mining down turn, has meant that our whole community has suffered through job losses.

Recently, Forbes was hit with some of the most devastating floods in its history, which caused the closure of the Newell Highway for over six (6) weeks, and a highway that is yet to be flood-proofed.

The inland rail solution has remained somewhat in limbo, which is a project I would like to see completed before my time is up here.
With a renewed focus on major capital works projects and infrastructure building, I am confident this would reduce the unemployment in our area.

Our education and early childhood indicators are generally below the state average, and we need more funding delivered into the schools to lift these benchmarks.

I would like to see the expansion of the Charles Sturt University School of Medicine, encouraging local medical students to train and remain in the Central West to provide additional professional health care to a growing and ageing population.

The state of some of our roads is embarrassing, something that I got to experience during my campaign, touring the 17,000 square kilometre electorate. This will be a key area that I will seek to address.

Sadly, 2016 also saw a rise of fatal motor vehicle accidents in our area, in what has become a stain on rural New South Wales statistics.

Anyone who has been affected or had the misfortune of witnessing such a tragedy, will understand the trauma it causes families and loved one’s.

As such, I will campaign for the introduction of a mandatory driver education program, similar to that of traffic offenders program, as a component of a person’s learners license.

I have witnessed this program work and its impact on attendees has been significant and long lasting.

We should be harnessing the collective wisdom of police, ambulance officers, solicitors, injured persons, and even offenders to impart their experiences on those learning how to drive. If this helps to save one life it has to be a success.

We need to make it as easy as possible to be employed and encourage people to better their own communities.

We need to provide the best possible and accessible healthcare, education and transport.

Most importantly, we need to remember that New South Wales doesn’t just stand for Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong. Regional New South Wales needs and demands its fair share!

Collectively, we need to develop options to encourage the relocation and decentralisation of people and government agencies. The equation is simple! People will flock to areas with work, transport and entertainment.
There is no reason why Sydney-siders, particularly young families, wouldn't move to regional cities and towns if there are good jobs, good transport, affordable housing and a great lifestyle. I think my own family’s situation is a classic example.

If the same were occurring in Sydney, there would be riots in streets. But the people of Orange have, in-effect, rioted. They've elected me!

My campaign slogan, “Orange deserves better”, is as now as it was then. Well, during the course of the campaign, Orange got better. Over $300 million dollars in Federal and State Government funding was announced, in what I later learnt was colloquially referred to, as “pork-barrelling”.

I will be cynical enough to go on the record and state, that if perhaps the Nationals didn’t think they would retain the seat, some of these funding announcements would still be in the trays of the Ministers’ printers.

Now, as the member of Orange, I will hold this Government to account on every last cent of its promises.

I am not so naïve to not recognise that my election to this place was largely affected by two key policy decisions of this Government: the greyhounds ban and forced council amalgamations.

In and of themselves, these decisions are very poor, particularly as they hurt regional communities. But it is not just the decisions themselves that are significant. It is what they represented: an arrogant and out of touch government. They were a reflection on poor government decision making.

To think that people of New South Wales would just roll over and cop something like that is as ignorant as it is dangerous.

Now I, like the majority of you, had no vested interest in greyhound racing when the decision was announced to shut down the industry via Facebook by former Premier Baird.

I distinctly remember listening to the Big Sports Breakfast program early one morning when the ban was announced, and thinking, why?

The vast majority of greyhound’s owners are law-abiding responsible citizens. I asked myself why was the Government punishing the collective majority for the actions of a few. It didn’t seem just, fair or reasonable. In fact, quite the opposite. It smacked of an inner city decision, made by elitist out of touch politicians, at the expense of regional communities and jobs.
I was then reliably updated on the context of the decision. Instead of intervening to right wrongs and inject some fairness into the inequitable inter-code agreement, including adopting the recommendations an Upper House Inquiry chaired by the Honourable Robert Borsak, the Government shut-down this significant and established industry.

Thankfully, the industry is saved from extinction, for now, and I will work to ensure that the reversal is effected as soon as possible.

The same can be said for council amalgamations. While the Coalition Government were promising regional communities and towns that there would be no forced amalgamations, they were doing the exact opposite in Macquarie Street.

For many regional areas, local government is often the largest employer and provider of services.

Many councils that were facing the prospect of amalgamation had passed the Government’s fit for the future test. So we had the position of Government setting a benchmark, then refusing to even acknowledge that the benchmark had been satisfied.

As with the greyhound’s decision, I will ensure that the Government’s abandonment of this policy is not just hot air. I will fight for the independence of Orange, Cabonne and Blayney shire councils, as well as all Councils that do not want to be amalgamated.

I will continue to represent and advocate for the interests of all shooters, fishers and farmers, as do my Upper House colleagues, The Honourable Robert Brown and The Honourable Robert Borsak.

It will come as no surprise that I own and use firearms for sport shooting and hunting. I was fortunate enough to be brought-up in a family who hunted and fished. I learnt from family elders valuable lifelong skills and a deep respect for the environment.

Apprehension seems to exist among some Members in this chamber that the election of a Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party representative will usher in a new era of dangerous and lawless weaponry in our state. Nothing could be further from the truth, and there is no reason for such apprehension.

Nothing in our policy suggests we support criminal misuse of firearms. This is also in spite of the fact that target shooting and hunting remain some of the safest recreational activities in this state.

Reasonable firearms policy, based on fact and sound logic rather than vicious propaganda, is a sign of a mature government. Unfortunately, in this respect, this government has been very immature.
As a former prosecutor, I am experienced in dealing with facts and evidence. I know first-hand that the vast majority of firearms crimes are not committed by licensed firearms owners. Logic dictates then that the Government should focus the vast majority of our finite time and resources on curbing the illegal firearms trade and tougher sentencing measures. Instead, successive governments have spent over a billion dollars on targeting law abiding firearms owners.

I also thoroughly enjoy fishing, and I support the advancement and sustainability of fishing in NSW. But, fishers, like hunters, have become victims of increasing green bureaucracy gone mad, while true facts and statistics are ignored. The ever-expanding creation of marine parks and the extension of sanctuary zones without proper scientific study are examples.

Best practice fishing management recognizes the importance of reciprocal communication between fishers, scientists and governments for managing and detecting declines in vulnerable species and appreciating the economic benefit of fishing.

This I find to be the sad state of affairs in government policy. It is indicative of the approach this place has taken to something those at the top of power don’t like or understand, just ban or restrict it until it becomes someone else’s problem.

One of my biggest concerns is what happens to farmers and the agricultural industry when this sort of politics is practiced on them.

Farmers deserve a Government that supports them fully in policy and principle. They too, have felt increasingly misrepresented, unheard and maligned by our Government.

My electorate of Orange is considered a food basket both nationally and internationally. We grow and export food, vegetables, raw material and meat, through world’s best practice agriculture and primary production.

Farmers already have enough to deal with during their day, so it is critical we recognise the issues they face early and address them as a matter of priority.

Farming has been at the forefront of this nation’s economic and cultural development, and it should be at the forefront of this Government’s agenda for regional New South Wales.

We must look at current policies that hurts farmers and redress them. Also, we need to develop ways to help farmers manage their properties to ensure they can get on with the job they do best, for many generations to come. We must protect them from unreasonable and impracticable Government decision making, including limiting green and red tape.
We have the rise of extreme green groups and animal liberationists threatening the very future of farming as we know it, and no consistent response from government. We cannot dismiss these groups. We need a protective framework, both in practice and principle, against this vocal minority.

I acknowledge the work of the current Minister for Primary Industries for the inroads he has made in these areas thus far.

After all, it is farmers that feed us and put clothes on our back.

I would like to finish by thanking the people that helped get me here today in what was an amazing team effort.

Firstly, to The Honourable Robert Brown and The Honourable Robert Borsak, who provided and continue to provide me with an immense level of support to an otherwise inexperienced politician. You mentored me, providing expert advice and guidance throughout this journey. For this, I am so very grateful.

To Filip Despotoski, State Director of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers, who unfortunately can’t be here today. For your guidance, knowledge, support and expertise far greater than your age would suggest, thank you.

To the Party Executive, for your level of support and trust you have placed in me. Thank you, and I will not let you down.

To John Townsend, thank you for your invaluable media and information technology advice and support.

To Robert Despotoski, Stephen and Christine Bowler, Stephen Larsson, Senada Bjelic, Peter Chambers, Carl Smith, Emma Bradford, and John Preston for their support and assistance. I thank you all.

Thank you to Brett Cooke for his unwavering friendship, support and loyalty, along with Philippa Walker, Tina Skrtic, Don Mahoney and Rebecca Hawkins for their assistance.

To Ray Hawkins and Matt Shearim of Bullets and Bits gun shop in Orange, thanks for your encouragement.

To the greyhound owners and industry representatives who travelled far and wide to come and help-out manning pre-poll and polling booths on election day. For this, I am so grateful and appreciative.

To Jon Russell and his fellow members of the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association, I extend my sincere appreciation for your invaluable contributions.
To Will Tuck, Phil Jenkyn and the many other passionate supporters from Save our Councils (SOC), thank you.

I would like to thank and make special mention of Jessica and Andrew Coombs, Mick Madden, Graeme Kelly and Stephen Hughes from the USU, Mark Buttegieg from the ETU, Brock Skelton from the AWU, Mark Morey and Salim Barber from Unions New South Wales, Kaila Murnain, Rose Jackson, Jay Suvaal, Oliver Plunkett and everyone else who assisted with scrutineering every single ballot paper eight (8) times, to ensure that every vote counted!

Special mention must be made to Mr Ray Hadley and Mr Alan Jones for the public support they showed, not only myself, but the regions of New South Wales in giving a voice to those who otherwise would not be heard, or, that the government refused to hear. I am truly grateful and appreciative.

To the Party members across the country who donated their time and money to helping me get elected; You are the backbone of our great party, without you, we would be nothing.

To my lifelong friends Damien Benson, Michael Coorey and Arturo Alibrandi who have been great friends for over three decades. I thank you for your support, loyalty, encouragement, humour and advice over these years.

To my parents Maria and Lou for their steadfast support and unconditional love all my life. I don’t think they ever imagined witnessing me delivering this speech to you all now in this place.

Thank you to my sister Josie and brother-in- law Gary Sanders for their love, support and sage advice.

To the people of the Orange electorate who placed their trust in me, I am truly humbled and thankful. Rest assured I will do my best each and every day to represent, fight and advocate for you all.

To my sons, Peter, Mathew and Sean thank you for your patience and understanding during the recent periods of lengthy absence. To Daniel and James, who answered the call to help out your old man, manning booths at Yeoval, and bringing up with you your team mates from Easts Rugby Club. Thank you.

Lastly to my beautiful wife Nadia. You have been by my side for the past 20 years. The love, support, and encouragement you have given me is more than I could ever have asked for. For this, I am truly grateful.

I would like to finish on the following note.
The Government of the day has the mandate to run this State, I will not obstruct them in exercising this mandate. However, as my Upper House colleagues have demonstrated in the other place, I will obstruct, I will protest, and as you can probably already tell I will not hold any punches back if the people of Orange are getting a raw deal from this Government.

Despite the sentiment that may exist opposite, we are a mature party, with goals and policies equal in maturity. I will learn the ropes pretty quickly, and the newness of the job will not deter me in my commitment to put the interests of my constituents above all else.

Last week I walked into this chamber alone as the sole member of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers in the Legislative Assembly. In two year’s time, I plan on having the honor of ushering others in with me.

Thank you!