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On the steps of her old school, new police chief makes history



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Karen Webb made history in more ways than one when she was sworn in as the state's first female police commissioner on Tuesday as she brought the ceremony, usually performed at Government House, to the local school in her home town of Boorowa.

Taking to the microphone in front of the red brick buildings of Boorowa Central School, she joked that the display of dignitaries, police horses, dogs and helicopters might make up for any lacklustre show-and-tell displays from her 13 years there as a student.



Karen Webb is sworn in as NSW's first female Commissioner of Police at the school she attended in Boorowa. TARYN BRUCE

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Karen Webb sworn in as the first female commissioner in NSW Police Force

Growing up in the small town had bestowed her with a powerful sense of belonging, Commissioner Webb told her audience, who included dozens of schoolchildren sitting cross-legged on the grass.

Her decision to join the NSW Police Force was inspired by a local officer and “true community leader” she met when she received her driver’s licence on Australia Day in 1982.

“I am immensely proud to be appointed the 23rd NSW Police Commissioner and the first female to hold the position in almost 160 years,” she said.

Commissioner Webb said the force has had to adapt over the decades to changes in how crimes are committed – and pointed to cyber crime as a new challenge that needed to be met with technology-enabled police work.



Commissioner Webb with NSW Governor Margaret Beazley. TARYN BRUCE

But she said community engagement would remain at the forefront of her attention.

“My focus has always been on driving a professional and positive culture across our teams and individuals ... to engage our community with dignity and respect,” she said.

“At the centre of all crime are people: victims, witnesses, criminals and the community. The NSW Police Force is about people. Our workforce of 22,000 officers and staff are our strength.”

Police Minister and Deputy Premier Paul Toole said it was the first time in more than 170 years a commissioner was sworn in outside the capital.

He said Commissioner Webb’s choice to stage the ceremony in the town of just 1650 in the state’s Hilltops region, 340 kilometres south-west of Sydney, “speaks volumes” about her values,

and she had “already inspired many young people”.

Premier Dominic Perrottet said it demonstrated “exactly why she is the right person for this job”.

“The best community safety outcomes are achieved when our police force works hand-in-hand with our local communities. That’s how you build trust, that’s how you build co-operation,” he said. “You need a leader at the top who drives that culture.”

Governor Margaret Beazley highlighted the importance of being the first female commissioner, 106 years after the first two women were accepted into the state’s police force in 1915.

At the time the new Commissioner joined NSW Police in 1987, only 10 per cent of the force was female, she said. “Being first, you have made it possible for everybody else to achieve.”

The final word at the ceremony was given to the school’s two female captains, Abby and Hannah, who said the occasion delivered the message that “opportunity and success are within our reach, and we are not limited by our size and location” – or gender.

When the appointment [was announced in November](#), Mr Perrottet acknowledged the significance of the state’s first female head of police – but he also said gender was not a factor in the choice.

“She was appointed on the basis of her talent and her leadership skills. That was the only determining factor,” he said at the time.

On Tuesday, Mr Perrottet said her “honesty and integrity”, along with her experience, would make her an “exceptional Police Commissioner”.



A photograph of Karen Webb from her days as a student at Boorowa Central School.

Karen Webb's path to making history as NSW Commissioner of Police

- May 1987: Joins NSW Police Force at a time when only 10 per cent of officers are women. In years to follow she performs general duties and criminal investigations both in the metropolitan area of Sydney and Regional NSW
- 2003-2017: Holds position of Commander in various branches of NSW Police
- August 2017: Promoted to the rank of Assistant Commissioner at the Police Transport & Public Safety Command, where she was responsible for a number of frontline and specialist commands
- 2018: Appointed to the NSW Police Legacy Board and the State Rescue Board
- July 2019: Appointed the Deputy State Emergency Operations Controller, worked closely with emergency service agencies during the 2019-20 bushfires, floods and COVID-19 pandemic
- June 2020: Appointed as the first female commander of the Traffic & Highway Patrol Command
- July 2021: Promoted to Deputy Commissioner, Corporate Services
- January 2022: Sworn-in as first female NSW Commissioner of Police

In her 34 years with the force, Commissioner Webb has held roles in general duties, criminal investigations, forensics, and specialist operations with the marine and aviation commands, mounted and dog units, and highway patrol.

Her most recent role was as Deputy Commissioner overseeing corporate services. Before that, she broke her first glass ceiling as the first female Traffic and Highway Patrol Commander. After her appointment to the top job in November, Commissioner Webb signalled a shift in approach to drug policing from her predecessor Mick Fuller, calling for a “proportionate response” that was tough on suppliers but provided for a more health-focused accountability for users.

She also said she wanted to ensure victims of domestic and sexual violence could trust law enforcement.

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