



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

FIRST SPEECH

SPEECH

Tuesday, 16 August 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 16 August 2011
Page 4502
Questioner
Speaker Di Natale, Sen Richard

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator DI NATALE (Victoria) (17:22): It is an honour to be standing here in this chamber, one of only several hundred people to have ever been given that privilege. It is also an honour to be standing here representing the great state of Victoria, a state of majestic forests, of rugged mountains and a stunning coastline, a state whose capital ranks amongst the most cosmopolitan, multicultural and progressive cities anywhere in the world.

As the first Greens senator for Victoria, I also feel a great sense of expectation. I am here today because a number of people—far too many to mention by name—gave up their time for a cause far greater than any of us. I give special thanks to the army of supporters and volunteers who knocked on doors, who attended street stalls, who handed out on election day. I give thanks to those visionary Greens MPs, past and present, who paved the way. I give thanks to the community groups, to the unions and to the environmental organisations who offered their support in many different ways. Above all, I give thanks to the almost half a million Victorians who voted Greens, some for the first time. All that I can offer in return is my best.

I stand here today as the product of that wonderful Australian experiment called multiculturalism. My mother and her parents left San Marco, a small village in southern Italy to board a ship to Australia in the late 1950s. They did not speak any English but they were armed with something far more important—the hope for a better life. My grandfather opened a grocery shop in Brunswick. He took mum and her sisters out of school; he put them to work in the shop. Mum resented the long days. She dreaded the arrival of granddad's truck because it would mean hours of stacking heavy bags of potatoes and boxes of fruit. She was only 13.

At the age of 29, my father left Siracusa in Sicily to come to Australia. He learnt English while doing his electrical apprenticeship and he was shocked by Australia's strange timber houses. To dad, it was unimaginable that a house could be built of anything but concrete. Dad went on to spend the best years of his life on building sites, inside roof cavities, under floors to provide the life for me that he once dreamt of for himself. Their story is a universal one. It is on their shoulders and those of millions of families just like theirs that this nation has been built. My family has contributed teachers, doctors, factory workers, builders and lawyers and now, a senator. I owe them a great debt. I owe this country a great debt.

Multiculturalism is one of this country's enduring successes. Rather than dividing us it compels us to be clear about those things that unite us as a community: respect for our democratic institutions, for universal human rights and for equality of opportunity. The real value of multiculturalism lies not just in being able to get a curry or a lasagne—as nice as those things are—but also in the fact that relationships with people from different cultures offer important insights into our own. We expect newly arrived migrants to share our values but we also learn from theirs. Politicians often talk about the importance of family values and respect. Nowhere is the role of family and respect for the wisdom of elders more evident than in the many new cultures that reach our shores and the ancient one that predates us all.

The sacrifices that my family made gave me the opportunity to study medicine. They gave me the chance to make a real difference to people's lives. During my time working in Aboriginal health in the Northern Territory, I came to appreciate that writing a script for an Aboriginal man with chronic diabetes, or travelling in the back of a four-wheel-drive to dispense eye ointment, was not addressing the reasons that made people sick. I became friends with a young Aboriginal boy who developed kidney failure. He became so unwell that he would lie on the grass breathless while his friends would run amok kicking the footy. We helped him through the first few weeks of his dialysis. It meant pouring several litres of fluid into his abdomen four times a day, every day, just to stay alive. It was especially tough knowing his illness, like the illnesses of so many kids in that community, was entirely preventable.

Some years later I took up a position with the Nossal Institute for Global Health. We set up a drug treatment program in India to prevent children as young as 12 from injecting heroin and other drugs, from sharing dirty needles and from becoming infected with HIV. We worked with drug users, sex workers, health professionals

and government officials in a pioneering treatment program. These were formative experiences that confirmed what I had long known. Firstly, if we are to make real progress in health we need to tackle those factors that lie outside the health system. Our efforts as health professionals are futile unless we also improve people's access to housing, education, clean air and water, secure employment and participation in community life. The reality is that inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society. Reducing health inequality is a marker of our progress towards a fairer society. At its core, health is a social justice issue.

Secondly, prevention is critical. Giving some medication to someone for their diabetes is nowhere near as effective as good diet and regular exercise. During my time in the Territory I spent a season playing footy with the Tennant Creek Eagles, a local Aboriginal team, where young, barefoot Aboriginal men would dazzle the crowd with their sublime skills. I probably achieved as much for the health of that local community because of my involvement with the football club as I did through my work in the health clinic.

Finally, it is important that our health system implements interventions that are based on the best international evidence. Our program in India saved lives. Regardless of whether it is medication for heart failure or treatment for substance dependence, evidence based care can make a real difference. It was not long before I came to understand—whether the issue was providing decent housing for Aboriginal people, increasing our aid budget to fund more work like that in India or stopping the advertising of junk food to young kids—that political action is essential. If I wanted to make a real difference, a lasting and positive impact on people's lives, the time had come to take off my stethoscope, roll up my sleeves and take action.

A generation or so ago the decision to join a political party was based on tribal loyalty or class. Today things are different. I wanted to join a party that offers a progressive, optimistic and compassionate vision for the future. I wanted a party that had the courage to stand up for what is right, not just what is popular. I wanted to join a party that got things done. I found my home in the Greens. It is a party that represents the best of social democracy, for example, through its commitment to public dental care and support for the rights of workers, whether in the building industry or on the factory floor. It is a party that represents the best traditions of liberalism, expressed through its support for individuals to make decisions without interference from government, whether it be the right to die with dignity or to marry the partner they love. It is a party whose commitment to the environment is part of its DNA. As Guy Pearse recently wrote, the Greens are more labour than Labor, more liberal than the Liberals and, not surprisingly, far greener than both.

It is a reality that has meant we have made some powerful enemies. They attack us relentlessly, but I welcome their attacks. They give my mission clarity. They say that we must protect our borders. We say that to offer refuge and protection is a sign of strength, not weakness, and that now is the time for decency and compassion. To do otherwise is to consent to a dark chapter in this nation's history. They say that to protect itself, Australia must align its fate with a foreign power. We say that a free and strong nation like Australia can take its own place in the world with an independent foreign policy. It is wrong that decisions that were once made for us in London are now made for us in Washington. Our parliament, not a foreign president, should decide whether this nation goes to war. They say that our vote has peaked. We say that Australia's two-party dominance is not guaranteed. The Greens are reshaping Australia's political future, just as the labour movement did a century ago. With the emergence of the Greens there is a new light on the hill, but this time powered by renewable energy.

We understand that many Australians are worried and anxious. In a world transformed by globalisation and no longer constrained by institutions such as church and state, the possibilities are endless. But increased choice is both liberating and disturbing. It was not long ago that someone would live their entire life in the same neighbourhood, working the same job and voting for the same political party. Instead, today's world is characterised by a constant state of flux and uncertainty. In this world no single ideology provides a blueprint for the future. Such a world provides fertile ground for the politics of fear and inertia and for the politics of short-term gain, but politicians have a choice: they can appeal to people's fears and anxieties or they can appeal to their hopes and dreams. Leaders choose the latter.

It has become a political mantra in this country to talk about how tough life is for ordinary Australians. Of course some Australians are hurting. Some are trapped in an entrenched cycle of poverty. Some have lost their retirement incomes because gamblers have speculated on the stock market with their savings. Some have a gambling problem of their own, supported by state governments whose addiction to this revenue shows no signs of letting up. The reality is that by almost every measure, whether it is income, housing, education or health, most Australians are doing better than the citizens of almost every country on earth, and far better than at any

other time in human history. At a time of global turmoil our economy is one of the world's shining lights. When almost half of the world's people live on less than \$2.50 a day, Australia has experienced a prolonged period of economic growth, low unemployment and low inflation. Our nation has never been better placed to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. Now is the time for courage and vision, to lead rather than follow.

Never before has leadership been so important than on the vital issue of climate change. We are now at a critical juncture. Many will not confront the facts on climate change because the facts offend their ideological beliefs. But science requires us to follow facts wherever they take us, no matter how uncomfortable those facts may be. The climate change debate in this nation has become a battle between ideology and reason. Martin Luther King believed that the arc of the moral universe was long but that it bent towards truth and justice, and I believe he is right. I only hope for the sake of my children that it will not be too late.

Leadership is required to meet our economic challenges. Over the short term we need to increase our investment in infrastructure and training, stop government spending that promotes asset bubbles rather than genuine investment and reduce welfare that contributes to income inequality. In the longer term, we cannot continue with an economic model that relies on endless population growth, resource extraction and consumption. Unless we begin to acknowledge the natural limits of our fragile planet and to work within them, continued economic progress is not assured. Achieving genuine sustainability is the great challenge of this century. The time has also come for us to redefine progress. Every generation has its fashion and we are cursed by the belief that narrow economic measures such as Australia's GDP and the performance of the stock market are all that matter. It is time to develop genuine indicators of Australia's social, environmental and economic wellbeing and to measure our progress against these because they are what really matter.

This Greens vision is of a world of more, not less—more time with our families and friends, more meaningful work and more time for creativity to flourish; a world where individuals can achieve their full potential and where the great inequality that exists within nations and between nations is a thing of the past; a world where our air and water are clean and where we are happier, healthier, more engaged citizens.

These things will not come easily. It is a world that we must fight for. We live in an era where the big end of town sees government as an inconvenience, as an impediment and, even worse, as illegitimate. To paraphrase Franklin D Roosevelt, we know that government by organised money is just as dangerous as government by organised mob. Slogans and sound bites have replaced serious news while conflict has become a substitute for debate. I hope to play my small part in enriching the public conversation. In the contest of ideas I will be determined and forthright but always respectful. I hope to show leadership and good humour, courage and purpose. A closed mind is often paraded as a virtue in politics but I will always be open to changing my mind after listening to the facts. In the face of cynicism I hope to hold onto my idealism.

I embark on this journey with some trepidation, not just because of the responsibility that it entails but also because of what it will mean for my family. None of this would be possible without the encouragement, support and love of my wife, Lucy. She left England 15 years ago, met a scruffy traveller at a hostel in Kalbarri and now finds herself on a small farm in regional Victoria, with some tough years ahead. Lucy, I love you and am forever grateful. I hope that the wedge-tailed eagles flying over the house and the kangaroos living in our patch of bush will remind you why I am here. To my two boys, you are too young to appreciate this now but I hope that one day you will forgive your dad for the missed football games and school plays. I will do my best to earn your understanding. And please, for heaven's sake, be good to your mum.

When my parents arrived here half a century ago they dreamt of a better life for themselves and their family. Their success gave me the chance to dream of a better life for this nation. It is a dream that charts a new course towards a more socially and environmentally just future. It remains my guiding ambition and I am humbled to be able to pursue it from inside the chamber.