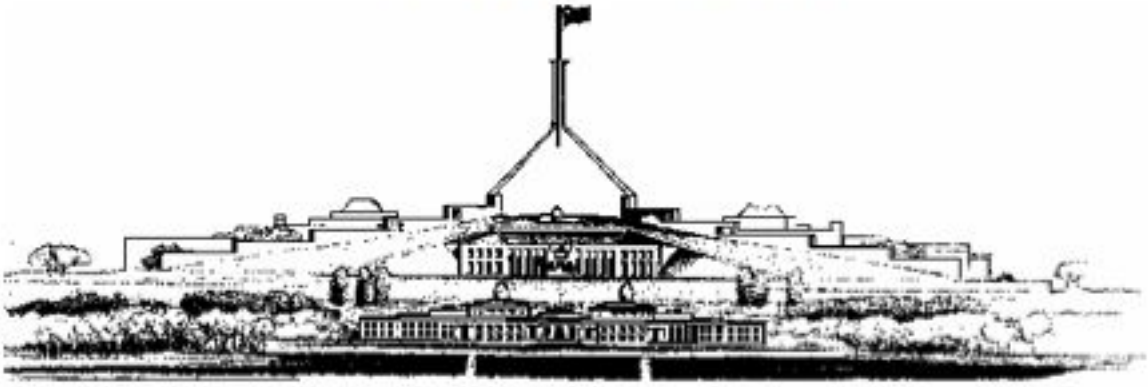
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Environment: Sustainable Use of Resources

SPEECH

Monday, 2 April 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date	Monday, 2 April 2001	**Source**	House
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Questioner		**Responder**	
Speaker	Billson, Bruce, MP	**Question No.**	

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (5.27 pm)—I rise tonight to talk about sustainability—sustainabilty of our nation, our economic capacity and our people—and to suggest to the House that the big challenge for the coming century will be to have a century of sustainability when we learn to tread a little more lightly on our earth and to be not just well resourced but more resourceful to make sure that the standard of living we enjoy in this country can continue and be passed on to our kids. The word `sustainability' is thrown around a great deal. At times the concepts are widely articulated but, when you are looking for tangible examples of how to pursue sustainability, they are not quite as readily talked about and as readily accessible as some of the rhetoric would suggest. Madam Deputy Speaker Kelly, I listened with interest to your contribution earlier in the day about the role that ethanol and other biofuels could play. I commend you for that as an example of things that we as a nation should be thinking about and moving towards now so that we do become a more resourceful, more sustainable country.

I have talked before in this place about the link between our quality of life and sustainability. I have said and would like to repeat today that you look at vital communities, whether they be in rural and regional Australia or outer metropolitan areas, and you see they are vital for a number of reasons. They are important because they are people's homes—that is where they live and that is where they are pursuing their aspirations—but they are also vital in the sense that they need to be animated, energetic, optimistic and forward looking, and so much of that depends on whether they are on a sustainable footing or not. So often we hear people in the communities we travel to as part of the work of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage talking to us about how their natural systems are degraded or saying there is some concern about the longer-term vitality of their communities.

It is interesting. I think to myself: what is the point or the purpose of a community if its lifeblood, its natural systems, are degraded to the point where the community cannot support itself, cannot sustain its existence or cannot generate the wealth and the resources not only to properly care for its citizens but to pursue future opportunities and to fulfil the potential of its people? So I see a very direct link between the sustainability of those communities and their longer-term future, and I feel that the health of our natural systems is a central part of that.

I very much welcome the observation of the Democrats' environment spokesman, Lyn Allison, who shared a platform with me at the University of Melbourne some weeks ago, where she quite rightly, in my view, described the current Howard government as the government that has done more for our environment and our natural systems management than any other government in this country. I think that is about right. The effort of the Howard government can be seen in the Natural Heritage Trust, in some of the greenhouse programs—a number of which have been mentioned—in the land and water audit and in the salinity initiative, just to name a few. It can also be seen out in the marine environment, where we have an enormous responsibility and an enormous opportunity. These things demonstrate that the Howard government understands that the health of our natural systems has so much to do with our capacity into the future and with securing better opportunities for our nation and its citizens.

In that light, I was fortunate to be briefed by the Australian Conservation Foundation a few weeks ago about their document *Natural advantage: a blueprint for a sustainable Australia*. I would like to commend the ACF for its work. I know that I and a number of others are often on the receiving end of the insights that the ACF wishes to share with the public. What I really like about this document is that it is the start of a new dawn for the conservation movement in Australia. I think people are growing a little weary of the talk of Armageddon scenarios—that the world is going to come to an end; that if this, this and this do not happen then something horrendous is going to occur—and I think a lot of young people are getting quite disheartened by that sort of talk. However, the excellent body of work that Michael Krockenberger, through an international sabbatical, has put together brings to the table constructive and practical suggestions about how to enhance our sustainability in this country. That is really the sort of valuable insight and input that the conservation movement, not only here but also around the world, needs to look to into the future. It is one thing to identify deficiencies and problems; it is a far more character building exercise and a greater challenge to be helpful in identifying what we can actually

do about it. The ACF and Michael Krockenberger have done that by looking at what I would call `better practice models' that exist around the globe and by talking about how they may be applicable to our country.

I commend the document to people who are interested in the journey that I am on— that is, trying to find practical and sensible ways that provide genuine economic opportunity and employment prospects and that underwrite our potential and our future standard of living by ensuring that our natural systems are properly cared for and that we become a more resourceful country. I commend this publication to anybody who shares my interest in that area, because it is an important body of work. It is about getting the framework and the legislative regime right, about knowing what it is that we are trying to do, about measuring progress, about recognising that others are doing some good work and it is about working with the market, taking out of the economy subsidies that encourage activities which have a damaging impact on our natural systems—an impact that is not rectified as part of the production process—and looking at `green' businesses and those sorts of things.

It is also about communicating the message to the broader public. My travels have taken me up into your electorate, Madam Deputy Speaker Kelly, and into the electorates of others, where I talked with cane farmers and the like. They have an enormously significant contribution to make to our country as well as an enormously important role in and custodianship of the land that they manage. Frankly, we need to be there supporting them with that. If you are a cane farmer who has a property that has been in your family for two generations and if you happen to adjoin a world heritage area, my sense is that you have a disproportionate responsibility in helping to protect our environment and that the broader community has a role in helping you to pursue the values that are important to all of us. The question then is: is it a taxation measure or is it a cost recovery measure? I keep saying that, at the end of the day, it is tax or till. Australian citizens end up paying one way or the other, and we need to inform and work with the broader community and with the ACF and other organisations to look at practical solutions to those challenges.

On biodiversity matters, I have spoken in this parliament before about the responsibility we have for the exclusive economic zone—that enormous marine body around Australia for which our country has responsibility and duty of care. About two-thirds of the marine species in the cooler, temperate waters south of Australia occur nowhere else on the planet. In this age of biodiversity, surely we should be looking to understand and tap that capacity. We have land and water restoration challenges: salt is obviously a big issue, as are environmental flows and issues of biodiversity conservation. I commend this publication to people who are interested in that area of work, that body of intellectual endeavour, where we are trying to find practical, realistic, implementable solutions to natural systems challenges that ensure that our standard of living is also considered and worked towards.

A practical example of that work is in my own electorate. The Mornington Peninsula Shire, to their great credit, a few weeks ago conducted a public forum on `A sustainable peninsula—making it real'. On 24 March, 380 people came of their own free will, because of their interest in and engagement with this subject, to look at how to implement sustainability concepts on the Mornington Peninsula. For those who do not know it, the Mornington Peninsula is God's country. Only people who have been there would know how precious it is and that every other option of where to live in Australia is, frankly, a bit suboptimal. The Mornington Peninsula is a very precious part of Victoria because it is basically where we hold back the metropolitan urban sprawl—and, frankly, the Labor Party vote as well. So it has those two very important concepts. Some of the things most valued about that area are its biodiversity, its landscape values, the fact that the environment matters to its community, that it produces fine wines and foods and that it comprises 10 per cent of Victoria's coastline—an enormous responsibility for the council and the local community. They are having a red-hot go at embracing sustainability principles in a practical way and feeding them through the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council's strategic planning, policy framework and programs. Measures of performance are part of it, as is an examination of current policy to see where the gaps may be. It also involves some new policy development work and something that I am particularly interested in: looking to see whether a UNESCO urban biosphere might be one way of recognising that biodiversity matters and that humans are actually part of that biodiversity. I commend the Mornington Peninsula Shire for that work. *(Time expired)*