



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Senator Jeannie Margaret Ferris**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 8 May 2007**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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# SPEECH

**Date** Tuesday, 8 May 2007  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Plibersek, Tanya, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms PLIBERSEK** (Sydney) (2.36 pm)—I take this opportunity to add my support to the motion that has been moved by the Prime Minister and seconded by the Leader of the Opposition. In a place where, by definition, our actions are political, Senator Jeannie Ferris stood out time and again as someone prepared to put politics aside for the greater good. That is not to suggest that she was not a strong and committed activist for her own side—she clearly had a long and devoted history of supporting the Liberal Party—but she had a lot more to her than that. She was a proud South Australian by adoption if not by birth. She was a journalist, a lobbyist and a political staffer. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has described her as a conservative. I am not sure whether she would have described herself that way but she certainly fitted my definition of a feminist. She was a strong supporter of equality between men and women and a strong supporter of women's participation in the political decision-making process.

She was an outspoken critic of internet gambling and the dangers it holds in increasing problem gambling. She raised at various times the dangers of marijuana smoking and its link with teen suicide. She stood up for grandparents who are separated from the grandchildren they love after the parents divorce.

Jeannie Ferris covered very many topics in her years as a senator, but perhaps she was best known for her commitment to women's health. Labor women have long known that there are allies in the coalition ranks, women and men whom we can go to when there are serious health issues at stake and say: 'Let's put politics aside. Let's work together for the benefit of the people we represent.' Women's health issues were always on the agenda for Jeannie Ferris, and we always knew that we would get a good hearing, we would get wise advice and we would get dedicated action.

Senator Ferris was an outspoken defender of reproductive choice. She understood that no woman makes the decision lightly to terminate a pregnancy. She always opposed the periodic suggestions to make access to pregnancy termination more difficult. She was a leader in the RU486 debate. She was also a firm defender of women's ability to access IVF treatment based on medical suitability rather than on age or on other discriminatory measures. In this she was absolutely consistent. Time and again she supported a woman's right to choose as much as is possible when and if to have a baby.

She also supported much greater choice for women once they had had their children. She was a supporter of greater funding for child care. She was well known for her work on stem cell research, too, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs has said. Senator Ferris said, 'Science helped save my life, so these days I listen very closely to scientists.' I am sure that her personal experience in the later years of her life was a very strong motivating factor. As usual, Jeannie was using her personal difficulties to benefit society more broadly.

Jeannie Ferris was a brave woman. Others have spoken about her travel to Iraq, despite fears for her own safety, to urge the Iraqis to take our wheat. But perhaps her greatest act of bravery was the dignity with which she dealt with her ovarian cancer. Even when she knew she was gravely ill she wanted to use that knowledge for the benefit of others. She chaired an extremely well-received Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs inquiry into gynaecological cancers. The report was well received by the government and was responded to within what must have been record time, less than six months, with most recommendations accepted in full. I know that the Labor senators who worked with Jeannie Ferris on that report credit her leadership for the excellent results they received.

I am sure that I speak for all members of parliament when I offer my sincerest condolences to Jeannie Ferris's family, in particular to her sons, Robbie and Jeremy, and to all of her friends. And I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that all those who had the benefit of working with her respected her outspokenness, her sincerity, her constructive approach, her dedication and her bravery.

**The SPEAKER**—As a mark of respect, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

*Honourable members having stood in their places—*

**The SPEAKER**—I thank the House.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Abbott**) adjourned.