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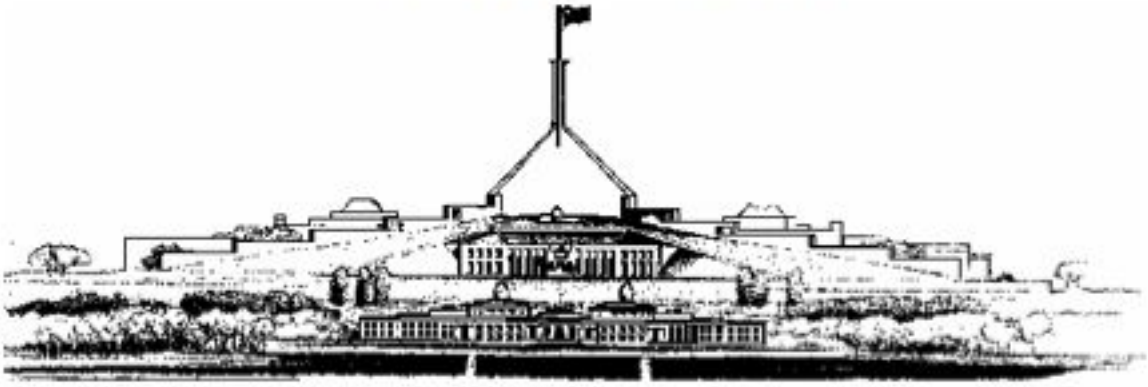

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Thursday, 30 September 2010

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SPEECH

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Questioner		**Responder**	
Speaker	Owens, Julie, MP	**Question No.**	

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (12.15 pm)—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and congratulations—you are looking good up there! It is good to be back in Canberra; it is good to be back in Parliament House. I suspect that towards the end of the last session most of us were looking forward to getting out of Canberra. But for quite a while now I have been looking forward to getting back here and working in this new parliament. I enjoyed watching the process of the formation of government over the 17-day period in which that occurred. Once I separated my own circumstances from that process, I found that it was an incredibly interesting path that the nation took over that period of time. I think we are entering a very good time, because there is work to be done in government—and I am looking forward to getting on with that—but also because a parliament that is put together in the way the Australian people have put this one together brings new possibilities that could be good for the nation if we let them be and if we work to make it so.

Most members of the House would know that I have a bit of a background in business, and I have always believed that, to do well in the long term, cycles can actually be quite good for you—not aggressive cycles but moderate cycles of good and leaner times. In good times you can explore, you can harvest, you can prepare, and in tougher times you pare back to your core activities—you focus on the essentials, you remove the fat, you go back to basics and you question the trends, habits, assumptions and shortcuts that grow so easily in good times. You question the things that you can sometimes get away with when times are good and resources are plentiful. As a government I think we are in many ways in one of those leaner times. It is a very good opportunity for us all in this House to question those trends, habits, assumptions and shortcuts that have grown up over what is now 60 years or more of majority government and to focus our attention on priorities, the things that actually matter and the purpose of being in this House.

I am going to refer to two of my colleagues—Brendan O'Connor and Bob McMullan. Brendan, who is a minister now, and Bob, who is retired, are probably wondering, with some trepidation, what I am going to say. In my first months as a member of parliament, both of those gentlemen said things to me that I carry now that I think are particularly pertinent to the situation that we find ourselves in. The Hon. Bob McMullan said to me: 'We can only move as fast as the people move. We have to take the people with us. You cannot get ahead of the community—you can lead them, but you must bring them with you.' I think there is a very important lesson for us all in that. I suspect that, in times of majority governments, we on both sides have come to believe that we can do things in this House without fully bringing the people with us, because the majority gives us that power. We are of course, in that sense, in a different paradigm. I do not think it is this parliament which tells us that; it is the decision that the people made to create this parliament.

We are very much at a time when the community is powerfully divided on a number of key issues that this nation needs to address. The issue of climate change is one where we have very strong views at both ends of the opinion bell curve. The issue of asylum seekers is another where the community is incredibly strongly divided. This is a time for us as a nation to acknowledge that moving forward in whatever direction we choose requires absolutely that we take the community with us. For this reason I was very pleased to hear the Prime Minister, prior to the election and since, talking about the need to build consensus on these issues. That is an incredibly important function—a function that is not just the responsibility of government. Community, too, has a responsibility to engage in the debate and to talk more broadly on these issues.

Brendan O'Connor is probably thinking, 'What the hell did I say back then?' He said something to me on a number of occasions which I also heard him say to a number of others when we were wondering about our roles on committees and what we were doing. He said to me quite clearly one day, 'Julie, you have to decide whether you care about getting it done or you care about getting the credit.' It was a particular circumstance in which, when in opposition, as member of a committee I was able to make a substantial change to policy which I felt was very important, but I clearly was not going to get any credit for it. He said that to me on that day and I have heard him say it to others. It stuck with me. I think it is a lesson that we should all keep in mind—that we are essentially here to get things done, not for the credit. Of course, you have to get the credit at some point or you do not get to stay and do more and you do not get to stay and follow through. So there needs to be a balance, and

we all know that. But the first thing we are here for is to get it done. The credit is simply a mechanism to ensure that you can follow through. That priority, for each of us, is one that we need to reinforce in the make-up of this House. There will be things that we pass as a House that some of us may have had passionate views about for years, and we will watch someone else stand up and take the running and make it happen. But what matters in this House is that we actually get things done for the good of the nation.

We have very much the parliament that people gave us. This is democracy at work. People accuse us sometimes of being poll-driven. Well, the mighty poll which is election day has made the decisions for us again at this time, and we have absolutely the parliament that the people gave us. It is an interesting time. In some ways it is different from what we are used to and in other ways it is actually quite the same. When members of the House of Representatives have been talking about this new paradigm, some of my Senate colleagues have said: 'What new paradigm? The Senate has been operating under those sorts of constraints for a long time.' In Australia, that is true. The Australian people have a habit of choosing one party in a state, one party in the federal sphere and a third party in the Senate to ensure that we as governments negotiate our way through. I think it has served the Australian people very well. It has given us stability in government. It has generally prevented us from swinging wildly from one side of politics to another as elections unfold. It tends to push us into the middle. Some of us do not like that. There are times when each side would like to be further in whatever direction they choose. But the system that the Australian people have chosen for us for decades causes us to have to negotiate our path with people who do not share our views. And it has been very effective. We are going to do it now in the House of Representatives as well as in the Senate.

If you look at the negotiation process that occurs over ideas through to bills that go through both houses of parliament, there have been many times when governments on both sides have lost the argument. It was interesting to see the media yesterday making such a big deal of a loss. It does not happen often in this House, but in the last term at least 15 per cent of legislation was blocked at some point on that path. So this is not new. It is new in this House, but that negotiation process is part of political life. It is going to be very interesting for the House of Representatives to play a much more active part in what has been one of the great strengths of Australian democracy over decades. It is not so unusual.

There are some unusual things, though. With majority governments, even with a minority in the Senate, traditionally it has been only the government that has been able to get bills passed. Only the government had the potential to follow through on its commitments at an election campaign. That is not the case here. Both the government and the opposition have 72 seats in the House of Representatives and each of us can negotiate with the Independents up to 75. So, extremely unusually in Australian politics, the role of opposition is different to the one that it has been. I would ask the opposition to consider that the answers that they found to the question of what opposition is when there was a clear majority government are quite different in a hung parliament. I would encourage the opposition to explore the fact that they are in a position as an opposition to constructively engage in policy development, not just the criticism of policy, which is the traditional role of an opposition. We are in that sense in a very interesting time.

We are also in an interesting time in terms of the procedures of the House. I chaired the Procedures Committee in the last parliament, so I watched with great interest some of the recommendations of that committee be accepted by the House yesterday, plus some new ones that came from the Independents. I suspect, though, that one of the greatest changes in the behaviour of parliament will not be so much in the rules themselves—I have always said that you do not stop rule breaking with rules; people who break rules will break rules. If you introduce new ones, they will break those. The real change here is that the consequences for breaking the rules are more dire. I suspect that we would not see such a profound change if it was still possible for people to be ejected from the House. That would have a profound impact now, of course. So I wonder whether it is the rule change that will make the difference or the consequences of breaking the rules that will make the difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have just been told by one of my colleagues that it is the strength and gravitas of the Deputy Speaker that is controlling the House and causing people to obey the rules. Congratulations, Mr Deputy Speaker. I suspect, though, that the decision of the people to make us so finely balanced will have a far greater impact on behaviour in the House than any rules that we might introduce. That also is an extremely interesting turn of events.

We are as a nation incredibly innovative. We adopt new technology very early and we adopt ideas very early. There are technology companies that come to Australia to test their new products because they move so quickly through the Australian market. This is probably the last thing that I am going to say about this, but it is interesting

to contrast what is perhaps a natural talent for change with a decision by the Australian people over and over again to build protections into our democratic system that slow down the implementation of change and force us to negotiate a common path.

I notice that the Leader of the Opposition is now calling himself the leader of the coalition, as if the Leader of the Opposition position no longer exists. Every time he says that, I insert 'Leader of the Opposition'.

Both the government and the opposition made commitments prior to the election. It interests me that the opposition is so critical that a government would consider the make-up of the parliament. I urge the opposition to consider that it too has the potential to honour its election commitments on the same basis as the government can. It has 72 votes. It has the potential to choose its priority projects, as I am sure that it will. We are in for very interesting times.

As those 17 days progressed, I was able to reduce the elements of government policy to the matters that I profoundly care about. There are many issues that I profoundly care about, but it was interesting to watch over the 17 days which programs of government came to the surface as the ones that I would be most regretful of losing if we did not gain government. I was surprised that some of the ones that emerged were not the ones that I expected to emerge. The one that came up first was education, and not so much the answers that we have put forward—such as the computers in schools program, for example, which I am a great fan of—but the policy direction that underpinned the answers that the Labor government had put forward. I live in an extremely diverse electorate. There is an extremely flat bell curve in terms of demographics and socioeconomic status. There are large pockets of poverty; there are also substantial pockets of comfort.

We have in Western Sydney a number of longstanding issues, and previous governments did not work strongly to address them—certainly the immediate prior government, the Howard government, did not. We had retention rates that peaked at about 70 per cent just prior to the Howard government's election, and the high school retention rate stagnated over the next 12 years. In Western Sydney those retention rates are lower. In some areas they are quite low. They are particularly bad for boys in Western Sydney and substantially better for girls. So we have a situation in Western Sydney where large numbers of our young people are essentially opting to limit their future prospects. That situation was relatively stable for the 12 years prior to the election of the Rudd government in 2007.

The Rudd government and the Gillard government introduced a number of programs to try to address the stagnation of the high school retention rate, set some very substantial targets to improve it and began work on that. That included increasing budgets for education, including for trade centres, the My School website and a whole range of elements which were designed to improve the retention rates in high schools. That is an important matter for the Australian economy as a whole and, for those individual young people who leave school, it is perhaps one of the most important things that will happen at this time in their lives to impact on their future. It was something of great distress to me that we could actually have gone back to that stagnation if we had lost government. That is something that I am really pleased to be standing for here on this side of the House.

I was also incredibly pleased to hear during the election campaign a commitment to increase the family tax payment once a child turns 16. Currently the situation is that when a child turns 16 the maximum payment rate of family tax benefit part A reduces by about $150 a fortnight whether they are in school or not. The election commitment reverses that and increases the family support by up to $4,000 a year per teenager. That was an incredibly important but relatively small announcement that did not get a lot of attention during the election campaign. But I knew that that was going to make a profound difference in my electorate for families for whom keeping a child in school was not necessarily financially possible. I come from a region where, when I was in school, bright, intelligent kids got permission to leave school before the age of 15 because their parents simply could not afford to keep them there. That is something I think is long overdue and which I am incredibly pleased to be able to implement in government.

I was also concerned very much by the potential winding back of the BER in particular. There are currently 1,800 people in my electorate of Parramatta who are employed on Building the Education Revolution projects, plus about 200 employed on social housing and 425 employed on apprenticeships, thanks to the Apprentice Kickstart program. If you add that up it is about three per cent of my workforce. That is a substantial number of people who are working because of the way the stimulus program was designed. Unemployment in Parramatta is already seven per cent. It is higher than the national average and in some areas of my electorate, in the south, it is up around 12 per cent. An increase of three per cent in unemployment would be a substantial blow to my local

community. I am incredibly pleased to see those 425 young people on apprenticeships. It is a very good start to life. It is an incredibly successful program. Again, I am unbelievably pleased to be on this side of the House so that I do not see those important programs dismantled.

The environment is probably the last issue I am going to get to talk on today. Again, I am incredibly pleased that we have the opportunity in this parliament to move on climate change. I believe that we need to, and I believe that we need to put a price on carbon. We obviously need to do it for the good of the environment and the way in which we live in it but also because as a nation we have a great talent for innovation. We have an opportunity, if we get in early enough, to move beyond the carbon age and to use our talent for creativity and innovation to build a place for ourselves and to build our economy in the modern world. Again, this is our talent. We used to lead the world on solar technology. We no longer do. We can again. We have in our land all of the things we need—the wind, the waves, the hot rocks and the sun. We have an extraordinary natural resource when it comes to building a world beyond the carbon age and a human capacity to explore those potentials and build ourselves a very strong economic future. The longer we delay, the less opportunity there will be for us to build a place for ourselves in that world. So I am very pleased that the government, the Independents and the Greens have decided to work together to try to find a path through what is a very fraught issue for our community. We need to build a consensus. We need to find a way through. We need to act for the sake of our economy and our quality of life. I am very pleased that the government will be able to do that.