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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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Main Committee

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Tuesday, 16 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Perrett, Graham, MP

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Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (6.12 pm)—I begin my address-in-reply to the Governor-General's speech contribution, firstly, by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are gathered on and thanking them for their continuing stewardship. Secondly, in order to counterbalance any suggestion that I do so through some out-of-place tokenism, I also wish to acknowledge all others. In the Australia of 2010, just who are the others I refer to? That is what this speech will attempt to explore. On one level, when you strip away all the ceremony from the commencement of the 43rd Parliament, today I am replying to the words of the country girl from Ilfracombe who, on Tuesday, 28 September 2010, detailed the policy framework and legislative agenda for the Gillard government. I sat idle throughout the ceremony that took place in the main chamber, in the Senate and along the well-trodden route between the two chambers. It was different from the start of the 42nd Parliament, Deputy Speaker—your first as well, I seem to recall. Back then, that ceremony created a sense of awe, fear and wonder in me. This time around, as a mere 'attendant lord', I was able to soak in a lot more of the details. This time, there was a Governor-General from Queensland addressing the nation. Her Excellency, after her stylish genuflection to political correctness, wherein she deftly affirmed our Indigenous peoples as the first law-givers of our land, said:

I also acknowledge the remarkable circumstance of our nation having its first female Governor-General and first female Prime Minister.

This historic conjunction should be an inspiration not only to the women and girls of our nation but to all Australians.

It demonstrates this is a land of freedom and opportunity. It should reinforce to every girl and every boy, that in this wonderful country, they can aim high and see their hopes fulfilled.

I come from the great state of Queensland, which has a female Premier, Anna Bligh, and our third female Governor, Penelope Wensley. Governor, Premier, Governor-General and Prime Minister—all women. Only a few short years ago, all these leadership roles were held by males—the same as it ever was. Perhaps now one might smell a gentle change in our seasons. Does this mean that the modern Australia that has created the 43rd parliament has a feminine agenda? I do not think so. Perhaps it is more of an historical fluke that merely goes some way towards righting some past wrongs. If 51 per cent of the chamber were female, there might be some possibility of a new wave of change and equity. However, the agenda of this place is determined more by policy and party than by chromosome. Some things are different, but much stays the same.

For me, it was not just the great, vacant swathe of green leather on my side of the chamber that made the tide of pomp this time around a different affair. It was the same mace and crown imperial and even the same speaker—eventually—who led us from this chamber into the mysterious red haze of the Senate. The ceremony's difference was due to the underlying tension that flows from the voters of Australia, who delivered almost evenly balanced numbers on the floor of this parliament. Consequently, there is a questioning of the presumptions that go with the, 'We've always done it this way,' starting point of forming government. Why? Because Australians have not done it this way for nearly 70 years.

Sometimes politicians make history with their words and sometimes historians utilise our words to reflect the history they want to write. Seventy years ago our 14th Prime Minister, John Curtin, famously said:

Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.

That was a watershed moment. Where will we be as a nation in 70 years time—perhaps when the next hung, or balanced, parliament comes around? We have changed so much since Curtin commenced something truly indicative of Australian independence—one of the first things, you could argue. Unfortunately, it was declaring war independently on a foreign power.

Nevertheless, it is worth revisiting the Australia of the last minority government, nearly a decade before the Nationality and Citizenship Act, more than 25 years before we had a referendum that counted Aborigines

and Torres Strait Islanders more appropriately and nearly 50 years before the Australia Act ended our connections with the United Kingdom. Well, it almost completely ended them—not that I am suggesting anything disrespectful in a response to the Queen’s representative. We love our Queen—God save.

Domestically, we are also a different nation from that of 1941. We are still a nation of migrants, but now the people who get off the plane or the boat have roots reaching back to a much bigger variety of countries. Yet, slowly but surely, they become Australians—‘new Australians’ first, and then what? ‘Old Australians’? If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are the ‘first Australians’, is everybody else a ‘second Australian’? Where is the cut-off between ‘new’ and ‘second’?

Those are rhetorical questions, but they relate to the ‘other’ I touched on in my opening remarks. Just what is this ‘other’? Just what is this Australia? For thousands of years, Indigenous Australians have understood Australia as a land of the Dreamtime. They maintain a strong spiritual connection to the land that most whitefellas cannot understand. The land is their food, culture, spirit and identity. There is a Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody song from the movie *One Night the Moon* in which the settler, the farmer, sings, ‘This land is mine,’ and the Aboriginal response is, ‘This land owns me’. ‘This land is mine’-‘This land is me’—two different voices, different perceptions.

If we step from the early Aboriginal times into the colonial period, we see in the literature and song of that time a hard life of settlers, drovers, jumbucks, convicts and explorers. It was in those times that emerged those common Australian ideals of hard work, mateship and the rebel underdog standing against the establishment. During last century it was phrases like ‘true blue’ and ‘the lucky country’ that seemed to capture something of the Australian identity. But when Donald Horne coined that famous phrase in his book by the same title, *The Lucky Country*, he was being ironic. He described an Australia of the 1960s that did not think for itself, that was bolted to its past with ‘colonial blinkers’. And he wrote this challenge:

If we are to remain a prosperous, liberal, humane society, we must be prepared to understand the distinctiveness of our own society.

I say this challenge remains before us today.

Much of Australia’s search for identity has been defined, I would suggest, by what we are not. If my name were pronounced in French, I might declare that we are not French. Phillip only beat La Perouse by six days, so merely because Governor Arthur Phillip hauled the Union Jack into the air before the tricolour our identity has a strong British flavour. We know this to be true, although there are members of the House like Mr Combet and Mr Ripoll and ‘moi’ who may say it differently, but the three of us are almost accepted as Australians. I forgot to mention that D’Ath is another French name that might be appropriate.

In fact, the composition of this chamber shows that this modern nation is quite accepting of many backgrounds. We have Jewish Australians, Muslim Australians, Aboriginal Australians, Welsh Australians and even English Australians like the Leader of the Opposition. The adjectival part of these descriptions—the Jewish, the Muslim, the Aboriginal, the Welsh and the English—helps to describe the MP’s roots but does it really help us to understand what they are now, what we are now and what we are as a nation and who we are as a nation? Am I defined by my French, Italian or Irish heritage, or by my country childhood or the state high school that I attended or my religion? Whose bones do we feel underfoot? Can I, as a whitefella, only feel Burke and Wills, or must we as a modern nation learn to feel the memories of the Murrumbidgee whom they wandered through, lost? Are we defined by sporting prowess? Are our successes or are our losses, like Gallipoli, more important? Or are we better assessed by how we treat our neighbours and those experiencing times of need?

The United States of America has the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. These help to make sure that all Americans, irrespective of their roots, have a set of ideals that transcend geography, race, religion, ethnicity and political persuasion. Sure, the gap between reach and grasp in the United States might be significantly larger than in Australia, but at least the Yanks know what they are reaching for, more or less. In fact, more Australians seem to know the words from their Declaration of Independence better than our marvellous Constitution.

The British also know their identity. Sure, they are grappling with what exactly it is but they are cogitating from an unshakeable state of Britishness. Nevertheless, Australians have a political system that is sometimes called the ‘washminster’ system—bits from Westminster and bits from Washington. We owe much to both these countries, the United Kingdom and the United States, for our political ceremonies and structures. These countries

have influenced our culture and our sensibilities, yet still today we characterise ourselves as a nation equally as much by these countries' legacies as by the fact that we are not British and not American. Yesterday they definitely shaped who we were, yet equally today they help to define who we are not because now more than ever Australia needs to find out what it stands for.

In the face of challenges like climate change, ageing, a vibrant multicultural swirl, media connectivity combined with social isolation, internationalism and fluid capital this is definitely not the time for a meek parliament. Now more than ever our nation needs us to be bold; if not, then history will harshly and horribly judge this 43rd Parliament. I passionately hope that there is a time of bravery and vision and strategic national positioning before us. And there can be because I proudly assert something right now that might upset the member for Lyons and perhaps some of the members opposite. I am going to use a word that Mr Oakeshott suggested was almost forbidden in this chamber—that word is 'mandate'.

I am not talking about a trip to the footy with another bloke; I mean mandate in the sense of parliamentary legitimacy. Every time our Prime Minister steps up to the dispatch box that was a gift to Australia from the British parliament she has a legitimacy that stretches back long before those 17 delicate minutes on 7 September 2010. As a Queenslander, home of the world's first Labor government, I know it stretches back even further to before the formation of our political movement under the Tree of Knowledge in Barcaldine. It goes back to Cromwell and the Magna Carta and every assertion of rights beforehand.

It does not matter if a group selects a leader by a thin majority—what is important is that there is a leader with legitimacy. The challenges in front of the Gillard Labor government are many. We see the traditionally strong economies of the OECD under assault, some even under siege, and the GFC has arguably accelerated the power shift from North America and Europe towards East Asia and our neighbourhood. We are particularly vulnerable to shifts in Sino-American relations due to our roles as trader and ally. And, alongside emerging superpowers like China, we see nations like India and Indonesia changing the power dynamics of our neighbourhood.

I believe that our art and culture can help to define our national identity, shore up our role in the Asian community and also benefit the economic bottom line. Therefore, we should take more of our art and artists off shore to our neighbours. No longer should our Asian neighbours be the lights seen below the wings of the planes carrying Australian performers to Europe and North America. So contrary to the assertions of some of the fear merchants, now is not the time to be insular in trade or cultural exports. In the hope of drumming up fear some people bleat that Australia should not become another's nation's quarry.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 6.25 pm to 6.38 pm

Mr PERRETT—So in the hope of drumming up fear, some people bleat that Australia should not become another nation's quarry. They say, 'Put up the trade barriers and raise the tariffs.' That is very short-sighted and completely unrealistic. In fact, there are two meanings in the dictionary for the word 'quarry'. It reminds me of a saying that the rabbit believes it is mesmerising the anaconda, but not for long. Australia must be fully aware of its size and relative strengths, yet it must still be a brave leader wherever possible on the world stage, particularly when it comes to acting on climate change.

The Taiwanese in my electorate have taught me much about aspirations in the real world. We should not be guided by the meandering mutterings of misguided myopic bumpkins. If the misguided and ignorant do not properly understand our history, how can they help shape our destiny? So I call on this Gillard Labor government to invest significantly in Asian languages and more artistic exchanges with our neighbours, particularly our near neighbours. This should change in a modern Australia. I believe that additional interactions and cultural exchanges with our neighbours can help to shape and define our modern identity. There is no need for anybody to fear a dilution of our British culture and history. Australia will be a stronger nation if we recognise our past, yet step purposefully into tomorrow.

An Irish singer once said that we glorify the past when the future dries up. I see rain ahead, not dry bones. Australia has a brave new world of other possibilities before it and I welcome them, full of faith, hope and charity.