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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONDOLENCES

Harradine, Mr Richard William Brian

SPEECH

Wednesday, 14 May 2014

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Questioner
Speaker Fletcher, Paul, MP

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Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Communications) (10:01): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to rise briefly to make a statement of condolence in relation to the death of the former senator Brian Harradine. I had the opportunity to meet Senator Harradine and deal with him and members of his staff during the period between 1996 and 2000 when I served on the staff of then coalition minister for communications in the Howard government, Senator Richard Alston. Senator Brian Harradine was a wily and effective negotiator, as has been noted in many of the tributes given to him and given about him since his recent death.

I would like to focus my remarks particularly on the important role Senator Harradine played in the very important policy area of the privatisation of Telstra, a critical step in the path towards deregulating and opening up to greater competition the telecommunications sector in Australia. In 1996 the Howard government had come to power with a promise to privatise one-third of Telstra, with the proceeds to be spent on, amongst other things, the Natural Heritage Trust. The legislation went through the House of Representatives because the coalition of course had a majority in the House. It then fell to the minister with carriage of the legislation, Senator Alston, to see if he could get the legislation through the Senate. This was a daunting challenge, and I just want to quote something I wrote about this in my book *Wired Brown Land? Telstra 's Battle for Broadband* a few years ago. When I spoke with Senator Alston to get his recollections of that period, he said that in essence he was not optimistic that the Senate would pass the legislation but that 'it was such a major policy we were determined to at least show that we had done everything possible to get it through'.

It turned out that the key figure in that negotiating process was Senator Harradine, because if the legislation were to pass the Senate it would require his support and also the support of another Independent, Senator Mal Colston. The Labor Party had made it clear that they were opposed to this privatisation, although when in government they had privatised the Commonwealth Bank, they had privatised Qantas and they had privatised Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, or CSL, and a range of other government business enterprises. But apparently the privatisation of Telstra was anathema; it was poor policy.

But Senator Harradine had a more open mind. Senator Harradine approached the question with a willingness to engage. He did not hold himself out to be an authority or an expert on telecommunications policy, but he was certainly ready to engage and he was, of course, prepared to conscientiously carry out his duty as a senator for Tasmania. So a key question for Senator Harradine was: what would the implications of the arrangements be for Tasmania? That was the question, amongst others, which very properly he sought to answer as he deliberated on the question of whether he would support the government's bill to authorise the privatisation of one-third of Telstra.

During that period in late 1996 there were extensive discussions with Senator Harradine by Senator Alston and members of his staff got involved, as did members of Senator Harradine's staff. I can certainly say from my own personal experience that the tributes that have been offered to Senator Harradine by many, which have noted his ability as a negotiator, his clever and determined and a shrewd style, are observations which certainly gel with my own experience.

I am pretty sure it was on the day that the bill was to be voted upon in the Senate there was an announcement that the government would establish what was to be called the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund. This announcement provoked a response from New South Wales Senator John Faulkner, who had this to say in a direct attack upon Senator Harradine:

I do not think it is a coincidence, Senator Harradine, that Senator Alston put out a media release headed 'Telstra presence in Tasmania and Queensland'. For you to be so naive to come in here and suggest that we did not see a political deal or suggest that this media release and the government's announcement on the regional

telecommunications infrastructure fund was just a coincidence, I think is the most extraordinary flight of fancy on your part.

This illustrates, I think, another important theme in Senator Harradine's career. He started as a Labor man but he was expelled from the Labor Party in 1975 in the culmination of a vicious factional dispute. He carried out his duties as an Independent senator for Tasmania in accordance with what he saw as his obligations and in accordance with his conscience, and he was required to deal with the kind of hostility that I have just exemplified in the quote from some comments by Senator Faulkner from time to time—perhaps, more than from time to time. But throughout all his period as a senator he conducted himself in accordance with his principles and in accordance with what he felt was in the interests of his constituents.

He was, as I have said, a wily and effective negotiator. No less a commentator than former Prime Minister John Howard has remarked upon that. He certainly did not see eye to eye with the coalition on many issues, but when it came to the privatisation of Telstra, after deliberating very carefully, he did support the 1996 bill to privatise one-third of Telstra. The other Independent, Mal Colston, also supported it and, as a result, the legislation received the requisite 39 votes in the Senate so as to pass into law.

I thought it was important to reflect just for a moment on, of the many important things that Senator Harradine did, his role in contributing to an important outcome in telecommunications policy in Australia. I found it instructive and educational to have the opportunity as an adviser to then Senator Alston to have some dealings with Senator Harradine and I want to note my sadness at his passing and express my condolences to his family and friends.