



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

**Mandela, Mr Rolihlahla
(Nelson) Dalibhunga, AC**

SPEECH

Monday, 9 December 2013

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (14:05): How wonderful it is to hear those words from the Acting Prime Minister. I second the motion. There is a story from Robben Island which speaks to the power of words and art to inspire and sustain the human spirit. The story goes that the political prisoners used to secretly pass around a copy of Shakespeare's collected works, and on one occasion the men marked their favourite passages. Mandela chose one from *Julius Caesar*:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once.

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,

It seems to me most strange that men should fear;

Seeing that death, a necessary end,

Will come when it will come.

It has come now for Nelson Mandela. We should be thankful that he lived, fought and led his country, but we mourn the fact that he has now passed from this world.

There was a news report a few nights ago where the presenter remarked that dawn was breaking in South Africa for the first time in 95 years without Nelson Mandela. There is something in that. Such an iconic figure can sometimes take on the stature of being permanent, but the nature of human history is that everything is fleeting: 'a mere brief passing moment in time and space', as Mandela put it. No longer do freedom fighters have the living and breathing Mandela to look to; he belongs to history now, the man who spent more than a quarter of his life—long, lonely, wasted years—imprisoned by a regime which he was prepared to give his life to bring down, only to preach reconciliation on his release.

The man who brought down apartheid without, in the end, a shot being fired now belongs to an echelon reserved for leaders like Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, who first said those words that Mandela repeated on his release: 'Free at last.' The names of these indomitable fighters for the expression and realisation of human dignity will always inspire millions to think, to act and to fight.

We are all bound by the times we live in. There has been some commentary in the last few days pointing out that Mandela was no saint, as if that is a criticism. Of course, he was not. He was a political leader engaged in a bitter struggle, a political leader reacting to the unpredictability of human events and the grotesque nature of apartheid—or, in his own words, he was a product of the mire that his society was. It is one of those ironies of history which reveals the complexity of the human condition. Men and women created something as repressive as apartheid but the men and women of South Africa and around the world led by Mandela were part of the movement of millions which brought it down. The contradiction of all of this is that, while Mandela's struggle reveals complexity, it also has a perfect moral clarity. Dividing a country based on race and class is wrong. Denying a person his or her inherent rights based on the colour of their skin is wrong. Fighting racism is right, and uniting a troubled country through reconciliation and forgiveness is right.

We should never forget those millions who fought alongside Mandela. While they were lucky to have a leader of his stature, their struggle should never be forgotten. Mandela and his people's struggle was a touchstone for generations of progressive people around the globe. There would be people in this parliament today who can trace their political awakening to the anti-apartheid movement; it was formative for many of us. I am proud to be a member of a party which supported Mandela's struggle for the decades that he was in prison, and I am proud

to be part of a labour movement of party activists and trade unionists which long supported sanctions as one of the fundamental ways the international community united to help bring down the apartheid regime.

There can hardly be a person who was of age in February 1990 who cannot recall the jolt of excitement as Mandela walked free and likewise the triumph of his 1994 election. We were lucky to share Mandela's times. He said that to overthrow oppression has been sanctioned by humanity and is the highest aspiration of every man. The world is better because he lived and fought. Like the valiant in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, he has now come to the necessary end, which we all will taste.

Mandela once remarked that the names of only a very few people are remembered beyond their lives. He will be one of those people. Australia mourns his end but gives thanks for his life.

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 and those in the gallery.