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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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Federation Chamber

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SPEECH

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Speaker Fletcher, Paul, MP

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Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield—Minister for Territories, Local Government and Major Projects) (17:40): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the topic of Joe Hockey the former member for North Sydney. It does seem very difficult, almost unreal, not to be able to refer to Joe as the Member for North Sydney but, of course, he has now officially resigned from the parliament after a distinguished parliamentary career of nearly 20 years.

Joe Hockey as a politician was a genuine and authentic personality, a powerful political brand, one of the most recognised politicians in the land and recognised as somebody who people could tell was in real life exactly the same as the man they saw on television. I say that having known Joe since I first met him at Sydney university when we were both at least 25 years—in fact closer to 30 years—younger than we are today. Joe was active in student politics. He was active in just about every aspect of university life. He threw himself into university life with great vigour and enthusiasm, as he has thrown himself into life and politics for many years with great vigour and enthusiasm.

There was always a sense about the young Joe that he had a vision for the possibilities of politics. This calling, which attracts all of us in this place, sometimes leaves us shaking our heads but at its best can deliver outcomes that can be achieved in no other walk of life. It is that sense of the possibilities of politics to improve the lives of the people you represent which animated and motivated Joe Hockey throughout his political career. From the first moment that I got to know Joe at Sydney university there was a very clear sense about him of the possibilities of politics. That, I think, is what the Australian people responded to and why he became one of the best known politicians in Australia—because people could sense an authenticity, a genuineness about this man. They could sense that in real life he was as funny, as caring, as decent, as compassionate as his public persona suggested.

Joe, of course, has enjoyed a long and distinguished parliamentary career. He has been one of the most successful federal politicians on either side of politics in the last two or three decades. He entered this parliament at a very young age—he was 30. Perhaps by the standards of the member for Longman that is not young, but by objective community standards that is young. His career in this place started and rose very quickly. He came in in 1996. He was quickly assigned a prominent role by the then Prime Minister, John Howard, in relation to Sydney airport—a topic of great political controversy at the time. The Sydney Airport Community Forum was a body which attracted a lot of scrutiny. Following the 1998 election, he was made a minister—remarkably young to be a minister—and for the rest of his political career, save just a few days in the last few weeks, he was on the frontbench. It is a record of very distinguished political achievement in a number of portfolios. It is a remarkable mix. He was Minister for Financial Services and Regulation, Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Minister for Human Services and Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. When the coalition went into opposition, he was shadow minister for health, he was shadow minister for finance and of course for over four years he was shadow Treasurer, a role he discharged with great distinction before going on to serve as Treasurer of the nation for two years—also discharging that role with great distinction.

There is one other aspect of Joe that I would like to comment on because it is particularly of interest to me as a member representing an electorate on the North Shore of Sydney. It is not always easy to represent the North Shore. The North Shore can sometimes be misunderstood or the subject of attack. Sadly, when Julia Gillard was Prime Minister, she engaged in a disgraceful attack on the North Shore, describing its residents as 'cosseted' and suggesting that, in some way, people on the North Shore live a privileged life, protected from the daily exigencies and realities of life in a way that most Australians could only envy. That is a completely inaccurate description of an area of Sydney which is remarkably diverse and changing very fast, but an area whose residents are passionately proud of where they live.

If my electorate of Bradfield is one of the electorates representing the North Shore, Joe's electorate of North Sydney is another one. North Sydney covers the lower North Shore and Bradfield covers the upper North Shore. Those who have lived on the North Shore for some time will engage in lengthy discussions about precisely where the dividing line between the lower North Shore and the upper North Shore is to be found, but I think few would

contest the proposition that the electorate of North Sydney principally represents the lower North Shore, as well as some other areas, and that the electorate of Bradfield principally represents the upper North Shore. The point I wish to make about Joe Hockey is that he has been a passionate supporter, defender and champion of the North Shore of Sydney not just because it is his political duty but also because it is an absolute passion for him. He has spent most of his life on the North Shore, he grew up on the lower North Shore and he went to school at St Aloysius on the lower North Shore. His family real estate business, Hockey's—the business established by his father—is a very well-known business on the lower North Shore.

When Joe Hockey entered the parliament in 1996, he did so at the same time as another then young newly elected member of parliament, also representing a North Shore seat, my predecessor in the seat of Bradfield, Brendan Nelson. Indeed, as history now records, for a number of years Brendan's accommodation, when in Canberra, including during his time as Minister for Defence, was the garage of Joe's house here in Canberra. When Brendan retired and a by-election was held in Bradfield on 5 December 2009, at one point during the by-election campaign I was out campaigning with Joe Hockey, who was incredibly supportive and helpful during the campaign. He said to me at one point, 'Of course, mate, if you want it, Brendan's spot in the garage is available for you.' I was touched beyond words but, nevertheless, it took me only a few seconds to decline that offer. Even so, I do want to put on record now my gratitude that Joe Hockey was prepared to offer me Brendan's spot in his garage! I also want to acknowledge the friendship between my predecessor Brendan Nelson and Joe Hockey. They came into the parliament at the same time, they worked closely together and they have both flown the Liberal flag with great distinction in those two adjoining electorates.

I want to conclude by expressing my thanks to Joe Hockey, firstly for the personal support that he has given me in my time in the parliament. Arriving many years after him, he was generous with his encouragement, advice, support and friendship. Whenever I called upon him he was always there to assist.

I also want to express my gratitude, and I am sure the gratitude of so many people in the electorate of North Sydney, for the service he provided to that electorate and for the work he did in standing up for and championing the North Shore of Sydney. I want to express my thanks on behalf of the people of Australia, because a parliamentary career of the length and distinction of Joe Hockey's is one that does not come along very often. It is a remarkable effort. He has contributed an enormous amount across the many portfolios in which he has worked. He has always worked to advance the interests of this nation and to advance the interests of Australians. Across the many diverse portfolios in which he has worked, Australians have good reason to be grateful for the effort and the contribution that he has made. Thank you, Joe Hockey. Good luck with what your career now holds. You are only 50; you have many years of contribution left and you have much to be proud of for your time in this parliament.