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Speaker Di Natale, Sen Richard

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Senator DI NATALE (Victoria) (13:33): I listened to the Governor-General give the Prime Minister's speech, and there were many things in the speech I could comment on but the thing I was struck by most was the lip-service given to what has been described as 'the great moral challenge of this generation'. That, of course, is the challenge of climate change. How is it that—despite the evidence of catastrophic global warming growing stronger day by day, and despite the pleas of the scientific community around the world begging for action on climate change—we have a government that is now on track to repeal some of the most ambitious and important climate change legislation anywhere in the world? What is going on here? How is it that seemingly rational people can behave so irrationally?

I started thinking a bit about this and I started thinking about the mechanism known as denial. As a medical practitioner I was really struck by how often people used denial as a way of coping with very uncomfortable truths. It is like the drinker who is on their way to liver failure but denies they have a drinking problem. It is like the pokies addict who has lost their home and their relationships but denies they have a problem on the punt.

There is one case in particular that stands out to me. There was a middle-aged woman who I treated for palliative care because she had end-stage breast cancer. This lady had developed a lump. The lump grew and grew; it ulcerated; it became infected; it started to smell—she still did not see a doctor. It was only when the smell got so bad that her husband said, 'You've got to go and check this thing out,' that she did so. She had hidden it from her husband, her partner, and from her family. How is it that somebody in a situation like that can wait until their husband can no longer tolerate the smell from a fungating breast cancer that they finally see a doctor? Well, it is because of denial.

Denial is a very, very powerful defence mechanism. It is a primitive defence mechanism. It is one of those things that is characteristic of adolescent development. And it is functional: it helps us to avoid an uncomfortable truth—a crushing reality. It is very, very functional. It exists with good reason.

So what we have here is a government that refuses to accept the science of climate change because at the very heart of this government is denial. It is why we have a government that gets itself into contortions over its direct action policy. On the one hand you have Tony Abbott calling carbon dioxide 'a colourless, odourless gas'. On the other hand, you have him coming up with a policy that stinks, a policy that is friendless—there is not an economist worth their salt willing to back it up.

You see, we have a lot of members—not all of them, but many members—of this government that are climate change deniers, and a few in the opposition. You have to ask yourself why. What is it about climate change that represents such an uncomfortable reality to those people? I think that it is an issue that comes up hard against their conservative world view and in fact requires a fundamental reassessment of that conservative world view. It is a world view that says man has dominion over the earth and says that there is only one model for progress, for growth, for consumption, only one model that works. It is a model that says that environmentalism is the new communism—that environmentalism threatens human freedoms in the same way communism did.

It is interesting. Yesterday Tony Abbott alluded to climate change, a carbon tax and socialism in the same sentence. It reminded me of my first encounter with the new Speaker of the House, Bronwyn Bishop. We were at a function. There were a few senators and members at the function. Bronwyn Bishop, the new Speaker of the House, came along to introduce herself. I had never met Bronwyn before. It was my one and only encounter with the new Speaker. I introduced myself as the Greens senator for Victoria, and Mrs Bishop's response was: 'Oh, the Greens! You're worse than the communists.' What an interesting little window into the world of the conservatives that was. What an interesting little window we had into the world view of the economists.

Most of this is absolute nonsense—the irony of having the party of the market propose a policy to hand out cash to the polluters while denying a market mechanism! My economics teaching made it very, very clear that, if you

want to maximise freedom, you put a price on externalities, you internalise them and you give individuals the opportunity to make choices. But not this government: 'We'll write out the big cheques to the polluters.'

You could ask about the freedoms that the people of Kiribati are currently experiencing while their homes sink under rising sea levels. Tell me about their freedoms—or the freedoms of the people in the Philippines now who have lost their homes and their families. What about their freedoms? Of course, we will be told that linking extreme weather events to climate change is opportunism. It is easy sport, picking on the Greens. I have not heard anybody pick on the representatives of the Philippines, currently at the climate change talks in Warsaw, who made exactly the same point. Where were the editorials from News Limited? Where was Simon Birmingham's criticism of the Philippines delegation? Of course there was not one, because they are gutless.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Edwards): Order! Senator Di Natale, you must refer to members of this chamber by their title.

Senator DI NATALE: Just like the woman with breast cancer who refused to get treatment until it was too late, it is far too difficult for the coalition to reassess their view of the world in the face of what is a looming catastrophe.

Of course, it is not just about climate change denial. That would be far too simplistic. It is this heady cocktail of denial and political opportunism. It is how we end up with conviction politician John Howard, who says: 'You know what? That ETS I put to the election in 2007? Well, I didn't really believe in it. Actually, it was more about the drought, and people were a bit worried about that, and then there was that movie from Al Gore. That was a bit of a problem. And we had Kevin Rudd, and everyone jumped on that bandwagon. I had no choice.' It was political opportunism writ large.

Let us remember that the new Prime Minister is only Prime Minister because he saw a political opportunity within his own party to make a case for winding back action on climate change—because Prime Minister Abbott is the weathervane on climate change. He managed to scrape over the line by a vote. The climate change deniers in his party won out, and the political opportunism of the Prime Minister gave him the leadership of the Liberal Party.

Of course, that would be letting the former government off the hook too easily. There was the refusal to take the ETS to an election, followed by the election of a new prime minister who initially ruled out a carbon tax, proposed the citizens assembly, reintroduced the carbon tax and then, at the last election, withdrew the carbon tax. So we had the situation of political opportunism meeting political cowardice, and that is how we have ended up in this position.

The experience of the tobacco lobby and the association between smoking and lung cancer is instructive in this instance. It took 50 years before we were able to establish it definitively and get government action on smoking and lung cancer. How did it happen? It happened because a hugely powerful vested interest, a few crackpot scientists and some politicians thought this was all part of some conspiracy by the public health lobby: 'Those pesky doctors; they want to curtail our freedoms. That's why we can't let anyone believe that smoking causes lung cancer. It's all part of a global conspiracy to curtail freedom.' How ridiculous. How utterly ridiculous. Look into the eyes of somebody who is dying from lung cancer who was told for years that their smoking had nothing to do with it and talk to their children about their freedom to have a life without a parent.

That is what we are faced with in climate change. We have John Howard, whose gut instinct was that this was overblown; this was all part of some crazy conspiracy: 'My gut tells me that—you know what?—we're going a bit too far with this climate change nonsense.' I would love to practise medicine like that: 'Yes, that lump under your arm looks a bit nasty, but my gut tells me there's nothing wrong with it. Go home, take a Bex and have a lie down.'

The world of science does not operate like that. The physical world does not operate like that. Your narrow view of the conservative dogma to which you have subscribed all your life does not work like that. We are now in a situation where we have this farcical policy, direct action, a policy which is not backed up by an economist worth their salt. We have record storms occurring right around the world and we have record stupidity in this parliament with the government proposing to undo some of the most ambitious and most important climate change legislation anywhere in the world.

How is it that only in Australia is talking about climate change and extreme weather a political statement? It is not in the Philippines. The Philippines delegation to the UN talks in Warsaw are urging us to take action. In their words, 'If you deny climate change, get out of your ivory tower and come to the Philippines to see what

havoc and destruction have been wrought on our people'—their words, not mine. We will not see Andrew Bolt's editorial on that today. It is much easier sport to attack the Greens—much easier and gutless. That side of politics has a vision which says that small government is the aspiration. That is not a vision; that is no vision at all. We want better government.

Senator Ryan: Not from you maybe!

Senator DI NATALE: We want a government which says, 'We're dealing with the reality of climate change. Let's pull together and let's do something about it.' We are all in this together, Senator Ryan—I see my colleague nodding his head. The atmosphere and the oceans are everybody's problems. If we do not take collective action, not the Greens, not an individual like Tim Flannery, but the vast body of science right around the world—you know that thing called science, that tool we have for gaining knowledge and wisdom?—is telling us we have to act. The great tragedy is that it is not going to take much—only a small proportion of our GDP and a much smaller impact than the imposition of the GST. How is it that our politics have become so ossified that even this tiny little adjustment means we cannot take action? It is because the deniers are in charge. The climate deniers are in charge and are in an unholy alliance with the big end of town.

The community are confused at the moment; I understand that. We are at a very low ebb. We have seen the abolition of the Climate Commission. The Clean Energy Finance Corporation has been told to stop investing. The Climate Change Authority is being ignored. A body of expertise in the government is not able to act. We have the spectre of Greg Hunt, so committed to climate change, saying, 'I'm going to do my thesis on a price on carbon,' and then crawling back into his cave and saying, 'I don't think we'll send a minister off to the climate change talks in Poland.'

Regardless of whether this parliament acts, the earth is going to do its own campaigning with more droughts, more floods and more tropical storms, with more deaths and more disease. You cannot just sit in your ivory tower, in the words of the Philippine delegates to the UN climate change talks, and do nothing about it, because the earth will make its own statement very clearly. We need to act and we need to act quickly. We need the government to show courage and leadership and some direction on this issue. We do not need the government, with its buddies in the big end of town, to live in this state of denial and not be prepared to say, 'This is something we need to confront. Maybe we've got some things wrong. Maybe we need to redefine some of our notions of progress. Maybe we need to uncouple the idea of growth from fossil fuel development and exploitation.' If we were to do that, maybe we would create new jobs and have new industries. Maybe we would have a situation where people in parts of Victoria like Portland and Waubra can get jobs in high-tech, value-added industries—engineers, manufacturers and so on. There may be opportunities here which we can exploit. But no. The politics of fear won this election but soon the Australian community will truly fear what the future may bring in an environment where climate change is with us, where extreme weather gets worse and where our children's children will not enjoy the same quality of life we enjoy. When we get to that moment and the Australian community begin to acknowledge that what they have been sold for the past three years is a campaign of fear and ignorance, then we will begin to take the steps needed to truly address action on climate change.