



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Thursday, 30 September 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Thursday, 30 September 2010 Page 291 Questioner Speaker Bandt, Adam, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
--	--

Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (11.03 am)—I am enormously thrilled and proud to be here as the first member of the Australian Greens elected at a general election and especially to be representing the electorate of Melbourne. I spent the first 10 years of my life in South Australia, in Whyalla and Adelaide, and the next 13 in Perth and Fremantle. But the longest stint of the next 15 years has been spent in the electorate of Melbourne.

Melbourne is an amazing place. It has the highest proportion of young people and tertiary students in the country, bristling with creativity and a desire for a better world. It is the electorate with the most public housing dwellings and also one of the highest number of professionals. It has one of the highest concentrations of research, educational, sporting and cultural institutions. It is the new home of many recently arrived refugees, and now the much older home of many others who have raised one or two generations since their arrival. And Melbourne is home to many people who share a growing feeling that the way we were doing things in the 20th century simply is not sustainable environmentally, economically or socially.

As human beings we have an amazing capacity to interact with our natural environment. But we have also sought to tame and master it, and now we have learned that in the long run such a relationship is unsustainable. Our actions in heating the planet have led us to a very real climate emergency. In 2007, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, said, ‘This is an emergency, and for emergency situations we need emergency action’. In recent congressional testimony in the US, the NASA climate scientist, James Hansen, warned:

We have reached a point of planetary emergency ... climate is nearing dangerous tipping points. Elements of a perfect storm, a global cataclysm, are assembled.

We would not get on an airplane if it had a 50 per cent risk of crashing or even a 15 or a five per cent risk. Yet these are precisely the kinds of risks we seem prepared to take with the planet and all its inhabitants. Accepting the science means accepting the science, not what we would like the science to say. Their consensus is a heart-rending cry for urgent action, imploring us to cut greenhouse gas emissions massively within a decade, after which it may be too late. The scientists have spoken; it is now over to politics to craft solutions. We urgently now need to master our relationship with the natural world, not the natural world itself.

Real sustainability means thinking again about how we live every aspect of our lives. Many people for many years have been leading the way, showing us that a green life is a healthier, happier and more secure one, where a global outlook means that the bonds of the local community are strengthened. Now these ideas are well and truly breaking out of the private realm and are taking their place firmly on the national political stage.

A sustainable future means rethinking our infrastructure priorities, industry policy and the regulation of energy supply. Maybe it is something in the water in the electorate of Melbourne that makes its member think about revenue and finance, but urgently in need of review is the allocation of public spending: every dollar that goes to backing losers in the fossil fuel industry is a dollar that is not creating a clean energy future. The former member for this electorate, Lindsay Tanner, for whom I have great respect, also said that he thought a key question for us is: ‘What will Australia sell the world in 15 years time?’ A good question, but on current policy settings it seems the answer is coal, with us on track to overtake Saudi Arabia as the world’s largest carbon exporter in the next 15 years. This is not global leadership on climate, but failure.

We will also be required to tackle head on that brand of economics that prioritises endless growth over sustainability and that leads to economic crisis, for if there is one lesson from the recent financial crisis it is that things have not changed. Our economy continues to lurch from boom to bust and history repeats itself repeatedly, rarely as farce and almost always as tragedy. Our world has become more unequal over time. And in a replay of past economic crises those who preached free markets and deregulation during boom times were the first to come cap in hand for public support and intervention when they were in trouble.

I am not advocating any simple nostalgia, suggesting we go back to some mythical time when we had the balance right. Nor can we simply presume government intervention and regulation will solve all social

ills. Indeed, in many areas—like our rapidly growing communications technologies—we are now so globally interconnected that the last thing we need is government seeking to regulate what we can and cannot do as new global citizens.

My experience representing power workers in the Latrobe Valley in the aftermath of privatisation has taught me that governments need to provide real assistance in times of transition so that as governments close polluting power stations like Hazelwood we never forget there are real workers and families involved to whom we have a responsibility as we move to a clean energy future.

Imagine if we reacted to the financial crisis in the same way as the climate crisis, with global meetings deferred for years at a time. Perhaps if the planet were a merchant bank, we might see the speedy, internationally coordinated and massive government activity we saw during the financial crisis. Keeping Australia out of recession and avoiding double digit unemployment is of course the right thing to do. I simply hope our institutions of government here and abroad will extend to the planet the same courtesy that they do to the finance sector.

Equality is more important now than ever. As neoliberalism and the ideology of market dominance have defined the social and economic policies of successive governments led by each of the old parties, and sometimes ripped apart local communities, devastated small producers and prioritised free trade at the cost of fairness, so has the idea of full substantive equality receded from public life.

In our new times, chance has replaced equal entitlement, opportunity has replaced equal right. Worse, we now do not even blink at treating some people as less equal than others. There are so many exceptions to the principle of full equality that the exception is becoming the rule. We all have the right to get married, unless your partner is of the same gender. We pride ourselves on our great sovereign nation and then excise parts of it as being not really Australia for the purposes of migration. We say human rights are indivisible and then we suspend them for Indigenous Australians.

Having spent many years standing up for the rights of workers and their unions, I know that equality should not stop at the office door, that democracy should not disappear at the factory gate. The name 'The Greens' has its origins in the activism of community members and workers who in the 1970s joined together to prevent the destruction of important parts of our built and natural environment. Petra Kelly, visiting Australia at the time, was so impressed by the 'green bans' imposed by unions and the community that she took it back with her to Germany where they founded Die Grunen—The Greens.

Anyone who took such a stand today for green bans would face the Australian Building and Construction Commission, would be denied the right to silence, interrogated in secret and exposed to threats of imprisonment and fines. When members of one section of our work force have not just fewer rights than other workers but, indeed, fewer rights than accused criminals, we cannot say that we are all truly equal before the law.

I join those who want to put compassion back on the agenda. If you ask most Australians, they will have a positive story to tell of a co-worker, friend or extended family member who came to this country as a refugee or whose parents or grandparents did. Yet, instead of seeking to fan this positive sentiment, politics has tended to play to the worst in us.

If fear and suspicion are the organising principles of our approach to fellow human beings who come here from other places, then we are condemning ourselves to revisiting this issue election after election and setting ourselves up for an isolationist and dark future. Ironically, it is usually those who want the fewest barriers for money to move across borders who want to build the strongest walls to stop people doing the same. But when we lock asylum seekers and refugees up indefinitely, in city and desert prisons, we have more than enough evidence that we destroy their lives and the lives of their families.

There is a palpable hypocrisy in saying that the threat is so dire that we must send our soldiers to fight in places like Afghanistan, yet when people flee that threat we close the door to them. Until we bring compassion and practicality to the fore, we will be taking some of the world's most vulnerable people, who are fleeing persecution, war and hardship, and simply subjecting them to torture of a different kind.

While elections have often played to the worst in us, politics can also have a much more hopeful, optimistic future, for there is another side to humanity: one that sees someone in trouble and extends a helping hand; one that says we need more love, not less; one that offers hospitality even when times are tight; and one that says

it is better to live within the limits of the planet rather than putting everything on the never-never and leaving our children and grandchildren to pay the debt.

These values of sustainability, compassion and equality that will form the foundation for tackling 21st century problems are, of course, not new. Many people have known them for quite some time. They are the campaigners in the forests and at the coal and uranium mines. They are the scientists who fearlessly tell us the truth about climate change. They are the first Australians who have never given up their sovereignty and who rightfully still seek a treaty. They are the innovators whose creative labours at home, at work and in the globally interconnected public sphere are forging new, exciting and sustainable ways of living our lives. They are the workers who will stand on picket lines to advance principles that are bigger and deeper than any one individual. They are the people who have helped our cause in the ways they can, from handing out how-to-votes to attending rallies. They are the Greens members of the local councils and the state and federal parliaments, who have advanced beliefs and put them into practice. All these people and many, many more are the ones on whose shoulders I stand here today. I hope that I can do justice to you.

To every supporter of the Melbourne campaign: you have done amazing things; you have made history. I want to single out a few for special mention. Rohan, Damien, Lucie, Sharif, Kajute, Jake, Olivia, as well as many others, worked their guts out in the Brunswick Street office. Kathleen, Brian and Cyndi: it is a delight to work with you and I hope I can do more of it after November. To Nick, Jarrah, Lily, Sofia and all your team: your advice and work was invaluable. In particular to all those people in Melbourne who have come here recently or who came here some time ago from Africa and surrounds: your work is truly inspirational. To our state MLCs, Greg, Sue and Colleen, to senator-elect Richard and to all my Senate colleagues, Bob Brown and Sarah Hanson-Young in particular: thank you for throwing so much support behind our campaign in Melbourne.

To those unions I have worked with over many years, but especially those who took a big leap to support me and the Greens: your commitment to principle and to real change for the benefit of your members is humbling. Along the way as an industrial lawyer representing you I have learned much, most importantly that, while sometimes cutting a deal is the best thing to do, at other times there is much more to be gained by taking a strong stand and having the courage of your convictions. In particular, I want to thank Peter Marshall from the United Firefighters Union for his support and wisdom over many years. And I thank you, Peter, and Mick Farrell for coming here today. To Rosemary Kelly and the Medical Scientists Association, who were prepared to objectively analyse the policies of the parties, including ours, and put that information in front of their members: I thank you. And to Dean Mighell and the State Council of the Electrical Trades Union: your strong support was so valuable and your willingness to stick your necks out in the interests of your members inspirational. To Len Cooper, Joan Doyle and their respective colleagues at the CEPU, and to Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers: your support was greatly welcomed. It is with great interest that we are witnessing the development of unions prepared no longer to automatically support one party but instead to assess parties and candidates on their merits and support the one that is best going to represent their members, which I think is of great merit for Australian democracy and for the cause of unionism and workers in general.

To my beautiful partner, Claudia, whose advice, support and humour have made this possible: a deep thanks and love. And to my parents, Moira and Allan: your beliefs in social justice and lived environmentalism, and the amazing parts of Australia and the world that you have shown me, have helped bring me here. I am so happy that the three of you are all here today.

We all have a very short period of time in which to respond to the climate emergency facing us, to this planet's rapidly dwindling condition and to the nagging feeling many of us share that this way of life simply is not sustainable. We are all in this together but we should never forget the amazing things humans are capable of when our creative labours are unleashed. We chose to go to the moon—and we made it. To quote Jodi Dean, the Apollo project boldly predicted the 'we' of a common humanity aspiring to break the bonds of particularity and reach beyond our imaginations.

It is that commons that we can find again. It is with dreams of great proportions that we will solve our current crises. It is around the core values of sustainability, compassion and equality that we can forge a politics for the 21st century and create a new community. I know that this desire is shared by many in this country. Indeed, Mr Speaker and fellow members, although one might not know it looking around at the composition of this chamber, at this election around the country more than one in nine people voted for the Greens. If this chamber proportionately represented the views of the Australian people, there would be at least 17 Greens MPs sitting here. Whilst I might be only one member in this parliament, I hope it is also appreciated that the values I am representing here are supported by a much bigger proportion of the population right around this country.

But it is the people of Melbourne who have seen fit to elevate these values to the national stage by electing the first Greens member to the House of Representatives at a general election. To everyone in Melbourne who exercised their powerful votes and put me here: I am grateful and humbled. You should know that your votes have already had an impact. It is a joy to be here on your behalf and I hope that I can do justice to you, the people of Melbourne, as your first Greens representative.