



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
FIRST SPEECH
SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (5.45 pm)—I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal people, and by showing my respect for the first peoples of this land. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land, and it is incumbent on those of us who have chosen to represent this nation that we take responsibility for past wrongs and seek to address these current injustices. I am not afraid to say sorry to our Indigenous peoples, and I look forward to the day when we will acknowledge their voices and do them justice by enabling their true representation in the governance of this nation. It is to our shame that we are the only developed nation which has failed to achieve this and that the plight of our Indigenous peoples continues to worsen.

I stand here as the fourth in a line of determined Green women from the West to take on the Senate and progress the Green vision. It is my great pleasure to acknowledge the presence of Dee Margetts in the public gallery. Thanks for your support, Dee. At the heart of our Green values is a vision of community—a community that extends beyond the borders of our neighbourhood, suburb or state; a community in which people care about each other and the future of our planet and act carefully and responsibly to ensure its ongoing success; and a community that embraces diversity and understands that people living creative, fulfilling lives are more innovative and productive and will make a greater contribution to society.

I am deeply concerned about the direction this nation is heading in. The nation's current policies are based on a naive and outdated belief that the market will deliver, and embody greed and selfishness and an attitude of everybody for themselves. This has led to an increasing influence of the business sector on government, at the expense of the wider community. It has become abundantly clear that the pervading culture of greed and selfishness is not delivering, as even the 'successful' individuals are finding that wealth accumulation alone does not bring happiness.

Recent surveys of public wellbeing show that our improved standards of living in Australia have not made us any happier. Despite most of us having more than we have ever had before, we are less happy and more stressed. We are learning that having more stuff does not lead to being more happy. The current approach is unjust and unfair. It degrades our environment and it leads to unhappy, fearful, unhealthy communities. It weakens democracy in this country and puts key elements of civil society at risk.

Participation in political processes and policy development is a key part of a healthy democracy, and in Australia we have a large number and wide variety of community groups and non-government organisations who make an invaluable contribution to this process. Having worked for a community organisation for many years, I know the important role the sector plays in advocacy and community development in providing information to government, the opposition, minor parties, business and the broader community and in providing access to community members who find it difficult to engage in the political process and have their say. Community organisations commit hundreds of thousands of hours of voluntary time each year to making our nation a stronger and fairer place. In many cases they are the institutional memory of government and they hold government accountable. Consistently their involvement improves policy and leads to better outcomes. They do not have vested interests other than the good of the community they represent and the issue they are working on.

I am deeply concerned by the manner in which over the last decade non-profit organisations, such as community advocates, have had their advocacy undermined and attacked. Their funding has been reduced or taken away completely, as evidenced in the recent slashing or, in many cases, the complete removal of funding from the conservation councils around Australia. We have recently seen attempts to use tied funding in an effort to restrict groups from speaking out and we have seen a failed attempt to remove tax deductibility status from groups involved in advocacy or political lobbying. This is a blatant attack on advocacy. In my eyes this type of action undermines the consultative process and weakens the effectiveness and legitimacy of our governance.

Ironically, at the same time the legitimacy of these not-for-profit organisations has been under attack, we have seen a rise of the influence of the corporate sector on government. Community organisations are accused of

failing to be representative enough, ignoring the fact that they are voluntary organisations accountable to a broad voting membership who are there at their own volition and can opt out at any time. The same criticisms are not levelled at big business lobbyists, who are accountable only to the interests of their shareholders and the market.

At the same time that government has been undermining community organisations, it has been increasing the demands on the community sector by cutting government services and outsourcing welfare organisations, and expecting volunteers to pick up the slack. So on the one hand it is okay for the community sector to care for the disadvantaged and the environment but it is not acceptable for them to try to actually improve their circumstances. A healthy democracy requires open communication channels between government and both the community and corporate sectors, and it is crucial that there are mechanisms in place to maintain this balance. Otherwise those concerned, caring people who work hard behind the scenes looking out for the disadvantaged, caring for the poor and sick and preserving our environment and our way of life will lose the capacity or volition to help, and we will all be worse off. As Greens we want to see a healthy business sector that plays a valuable role in our community and we call for the development of policies that encourage corporate responsibility as a basis for sustainable growth.

Now workers rights and conditions are under attack again. The so-called industrial relations reform agenda—some would rather call it the deform agenda—seeks to undermine the award system, reduce workers' wages, strip away workers' conditions and attack the right to collective bargaining. It clearly aims to break unions and sell out working families. These actions will not contribute to the nation's collective wellbeing. Instead, they will further concentrate this nation's wealth in the hands of a few. These deforms are ideologically driven and are an attack on the human rights of Australians.

The changes will hit hardest those least advantaged in our society: young people, women, those in low paid work, casuals and temporary workers. This is neither fair nor just. Taken with the new welfare to work provisions—such as those that are pushing single mothers back into the workplace—they are a recipe for injustice. For example, working mothers are more likely to be taking part-time or casual positions where leave loading will no longer be guaranteed. They are also more likely to need the sick and family leave provisions that will be stripped away. They will not be in position to bargain and both they and their children will ultimately lose out.

The Greens believe that workplace laws should be fair, protect all workers from unjust treatment, promote industrial harmony and enable us to organise collectively to negotiate fair pay and conditions. The proposed IR changes are not in the interest of working Australians, families or small businesses. They will not strengthen our economy or improve our way of life. In fact, they will undermine it by lowering wages and stripping away awards, rights and conditions—conditions that we have all fought so hard for over the last century. They are a none-too-subtle effort to destroy the union movement and make the already powerful in our society more powerful.

For further injustice, we need look no further than the plight of the first peoples of this nation. Just last month that well-known left wing think tank the Productivity Commission found in its *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage* report that a large gulf remains between Aboriginal and other Australians, and that on most of their key indicators things are clearly not getting any better. To quote its chair, Gary Banks:

It is distressingly apparent that many years of policy effort have not delivered desired outcomes; indeed in some important respects the circumstances of Indigenous people appear to have deteriorated or regressed. Worse than that, outcomes in the strategic areas identified as critical to overcoming disadvantage in the long term remain well short of what is needed.

Rather than addressing the causes of this disadvantage and seeking to empower Aboriginal Australians to improve their living conditions, our government has taken away any form of Indigenous elected representation or control and it has blamed them for the failure of mainstream services to deliver outcomes to remote and urban Indigenous communities.

The proposed solution to these problems, the further mainstreaming of services to Indigenous communities, ignores the wealth of data and evidence that shows clearly the difficulties that mainstream agencies encounter in reaching out to their Indigenous clients and in providing appropriate and accessible services. It ignores the fact that two of the main areas of disadvantage are health and education—areas where services were always provided by mainstream departments, not by the much maligned ATSIC.

It also ignores the requirement for healing. The Greens believe that true reconciliation is the first fundamental step to this healing. We will not be able to make real progress in addressing Indigenous disadvantage until we say sorry, until we overturn the myth of terra nullius and acknowledge the original owners of this land, until we

deliver the treaty demanded by the British crown all those years ago and until we return to them the means to sustain their communities through their relationship with their mother land.

I met with representatives of the Aboriginal tent embassy earlier this week. They came to me to express their concern that moves are afoot to redevelop the embassy site. They have been excluded from the so-called community consultation process and are now fearful that they will soon face eviction.

This morning, the Senate was given notice of a motion by my Green colleague Senator Bob Brown dealing with the scourge of petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities. I would urge you all to support the introduction of a comprehensive roll-out of the non-sniffable Opal fuel throughout the Central Desert regions of Australia. It is a small step to make in addressing the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal Australians, but this relatively small amount of money could make a great deal of difference in the lives of those affected.

As Greens, we support the vision of our Indigenous leaders and argue that the answer lies in strong communities with active cultures that support safe and healthy family environments. We recognise that the economic sustainability of Indigenous families and communities is fundamental to their wellbeing. Indigenous health and child development must be national priorities. We need a national Indigenous health plan that delivers: primary health care on the basis of need through Indigenous community controlled health services; comprehensive prevention and early intervention programs; a significant increase in the health work force, including more places for Aboriginal health workers; significant improvements in the delivery of basic services to Indigenous communities, and recognition that the health of Indigenous families cannot be separated from the health of their communities and organisations.

Aboriginal Australians learned the lesson of this harsh land and its ancient soils and variable climate. Their message for us is this: by looking after the land, our mother, we look after ourselves. It is a family relationship in which we look after each other and are taken care of through our own caring, getting back all the more in our giving. To put this in terms of the triple bottom line, ecological sustainability is the foundation on which a sustainable society rests, and a healthy economy is merely a means to this end.

Throughout my adult life I have had a commitment to the sustainable use of natural resources, and have been working closely with concerned farmers to address the sustainability of farming in the wheat belt of Western Australia. This commitment comes from my experience in studying agricultural science at university, working as a research officer in salinity and soil conservation in a small town called Jerramungup in Western Australia, and two decades working with the natural resource management community of Western Australia. As a result I am determined to ensure our rural communities can continue to survive and in fact thrive.

Unfortunately, Australia's prosperity has come at enormous expense to the environment. We have severely degraded our natural resources—our rivers, soils, biodiversity, wetlands, estuaries and coastal waters. They are all suffering. For example, in Western Australia alone nearly two million hectares of agricultural land have been lost to salinity, with predictions that up to six million hectares will be affected. This represents one-third of our agricultural land. In addition, 450 endemic plant species and over 900 regionally significant species are also at risk of extinction due to rising salinity.

European settlers did not understand the complexity and fragility of the Australian environment and landscape and with the best of intentions they put in place an unsustainable European farming system that ultimately degraded the landscape. Government policies aimed at developing rural industries and exports strongly encouraged land clearing and advocated ill-suited farming systems. The result is landscape fragmentation, loss of biodiversity, environmental weeds, salinity, and degraded rivers and wetlands.

Australia now faces a complex environmental crisis to which there are no easy answers. But we no longer have the excuse of ignorance. We must take action. The necessary, integrated, long-term solutions require government, agribusiness, land managers, farmers, conservationists and the community to work cooperatively at landscape repair, to develop and implement new agricultural industries that can be profitable and sustainable in the long term.

As Greens we share the concerns of farmers and rural communities for the sustainability of their communities and their lands. We have a vision for a uniquely Australian agricultural landscape—filled with deep-rooted perennials, harmonious and teeming with life—in which a profitable and sustainable agriculture supports vibrant rural communities by mimicking the natural ecosystems we have displaced.

The Greens approach to all we do is based on our key four principles: social justice, peace and nonviolence, participatory democracy and ecological and economic sustainability. We have a vision for a society where we have peaceful and healthy communities with a respect for one another, where all community members have access to basic services such as health and education, where your right to participate in civil society is unquestioned and your ability to do so is equal, where we have respect and responsibility not only for ourselves but also for one another, where our opportunity to achieve fulfilment is met and where we have systems and laws that protect our rights and our environment.

We need to remember that we live in a community, not an economy, that our economy is one means of sustaining that community—an important part, definitely, but only one. It is one we need to get right, but it is not the be-all and end-all. Ultimately, what we all want is the opportunity to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. If instead of striving to be richer we could strive to be more equal, everyone's wellbeing would improve and we would have healthier communities based on compassion, honesty, fairness, justice, respect and equality.

I have had great privilege in my career to work with the most amazing people. In closing, I would like to say thank you to all my friends and family, my colleagues Senators Brown, Nettle and Milne and my team members—Fluff, Scottie, Nic, Bec and Bridgett—with whom it is such a pleasure to work. Thank you for your tireless support. I would particularly like to thank my family and my parents, Jack and Paddy, who are in the gallery bursting with pride. Without their love and support I would not be here today. Finally, I would like to acknowledge that I come from the great state of Western Australia. I am committed to representing and progressing the interests of all West Australians and will strive to work effectively on their behalf.