

Maiden Speech 30 Sep 10

Thank you Mr Speaker.

May I start by saying I'm intensely proud to stand here as the new member for Denison, one of the five Tasmanian electorates and the one which hugs the eastern side of magnificent Mount Wellington and takes in the cities of Hobart and Glenorchy. It's a diverse electorate taking in just about every sort of Australian, where someone somewhere is affected directly by the work we do in this place. I commit to represent each and every one of them to the very best of my ability.

Mr Speaker, politics for me is rooted in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

At the time I was working in the Office of National Assessments. And from where I sat it was clear that the Howard Government's official case for war was fraudulent - that the weapons of mass destruction argument was grossly exaggerated, while the Iraq-al Qaida terrorism claim was pure fantasy. The Government was lying about going to war and should forever stand condemned for that misconduct.

So I resigned my intelligence post, about a week before the invasion, and went to the media to explain how the Howard Government had consistently spun, skewed, fabricated and cherry-picked the intelligence to prop up their case for war. In response the Government vilified me, more intent on silencing dissent than coming clean.

If only the architects of the Iraq war, especially those who mourned United Nations Special Envoy Sergio de Mello who died when the UN's Bagdad compound was bombed, had cared as much for every other casualty. Perhaps there would have been fewer body bags and coffins. But they didn't. The bloodstained pages of history are filled with such people: men and women with no understanding of the real risks and costs of aggression, or care for the consequences. There's no chance of them or any of their loved ones lying in the chill desert night air paralysed with fear, or being gutted alive by razor-sharp shrapnel, or losing a foot

or worse from a mine or cluster bomblet, or having the flesh burned from their bones as they sit trapped in their blazing vehicle.

There were always other ways to deal with the odious Saddam Hussein. But The US, UK and Australia raced to a war which has killed 5,000 US and Allied troops and somewhere between 100,000 and 1.5 million Iraqis. Even now 50,000 US troops remain in the country, the violence continues and Iraqis keep dying.

We must learn from this and commit to never make the same mistake again.

Mr Speaker, my Iraq whistleblower experience was hard for me but it has a happy ending. More often whistleblowers end up on a heap having lost everything including their job, their family and friends, their life savings and even their life. But yet a succession of Federal Governments has dodged the self-evident imperative for such legislation, preferring instead the status quo where those who try and tell truth to power are regarded as troublemakers or criminals.

The exceptions are the Rudd Government, which finally started the process of developing whistleblower legislation, and now the Prime Minister who has agreed with me to introduce a Bill to protect whistleblowers and have such legislation passed by 30 June 2011.

The counterpart to the whistleblower legislation will be the Evidence Amendment (Journalists' Privilege) Act which will strengthen the protection provided to journalists and their sources. This so-called 'shield law' will put the onus on the authorities to prove there is a genuine public interest in forcing a journalist to disclose his or her source. I've given notice to introduce the Bill into the Parliament and hope to do so during the next sitting week.

Finally Australia is on the cusp of having a framework to protect the men and women who risk all to reveal official misconduct. This is a remarkable development.

Mr Speaker, the focus of Australia's war fighting has shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan where the international community, including Australia, confronts a dreadful dilemma. On the one hand it could walk away from the seemingly inevitable disaster that would unfold. Or it can stay and fight, as it plans to, in the hope of somehow avoiding a different but equally inevitable disaster.

It didn't need to be like this because the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 created an unprecedented opportunity. But security collapsed when the United States virtually withdrew in 2002 to prepare for the invasion of Iraq. Much of the promised foreign aid never materialised. And the new administration has turned out to be a deeply incompetent and corrupt mob with next to no power outside of the capital.

The one bright spot – that Afghanistan is no longer an exporter of Islamic extremism – is dulled by the fact that extremists have migrated across the border to nuclear-armed and unstable Pakistan. And in any case the global Islamic terrorist threat morphed years ago into a global network independent of any one leader or safe haven. That we must stay in Afghanistan to protect Australia from terrorism is a great lie peddled by both the Government and the Opposition.

The only way to turn Afghanistan around now is to immediately stabilise the security situation and hastily rebuild the governance, infrastructure, services and jobs which give people hope and underpin long-term peace. But this appears increasingly unachievable because the foreign troops which anchor such a solution are now seen by many Afghans as the problem. Moreover the resultant nationalism is fuelling the rapid Taliban resurgence. In short, there can be no hope of enduring peace until foreign troops are withdrawn.

The Government and Opposition seem to think Australia's ongoing involvement is somehow a measure of the strength of our relationship with the US. The same misplaced sentiment explained John Howard's determination to join the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Neither seems to understand that Canberra would be at less risk of being taken for granted in Washington if sometimes we just said 'no'.

No one should be fooled by the periodic Australian Government efforts to tinker around the edges with Australia's commitment to Afghanistan. The reality is that the best plan the Australian Government can come up with so far is simply to continue to support whatever the US Government comes up with. And that alone is no plan - it's just reinforcing failure.

I welcome the Government's decision to have an informed political debate about the issue.

Mr Speaker, Afghanistan also remains a significant source of asylum seekers and this is another area in which I want to see reform.

My stance has nothing to do with being hard or soft on asylum seekers. It is simply to do with meeting our obligations as a signatory of the United Nations Refugee Convention. And that means doing what we can to stabilise source countries like Afghanistan and Iraq to reduce the flow of asylum seekers. It means helping countries of first asylum like Iran and Pakistan to cope with the millions of refugees they host. And it means working effectively with transit countries like Indonesia to crack down on the only people who are doing anything illegal here – the people smugglers.

In other words, we need a more sophisticated solution for something that is much more complex than border security. Offshore processing, the excision of islands, and even mandatory detention, need not be part of it.

A part of our asylum seeker policy should, logically, include a recommitment to meeting our Millennium Goal of paying .7% of Gross National Income to foreign aid. We're still only half way to that goal and many Australians find that unacceptable. If our economy is a world leader, as the Government tells us at every turn, then by implication there's no excuse for us lagging other developed countries, as we do, when it comes to foreign aid.

Mr Speaker, closer to home the Iraq war was for me as much about poor governance as it was to do with the unwarranted invasion of a country for fraudulent reasons. And the more

I've immersed myself in politics, the more I've learned about the opportunities missed in Australia and of the countless people not so much falling through the cracks as being shoved through them.

For example problem gamblers.

Let me introduce Steve, a pokies addict for more than 30 years who lives in Denison. He has racked up some eight years behind bars on account of pokies-related crime, costing taxpayers somewhere between \$.5 million and \$1 million. More important are the opportunities lost for this good and highly intelligent man who struggles to overcome his addictions.

And then there's the man now serving time in Risdon Prison in Tasmania for murder. His victim was unfortunate to have crossed the path of this desperate man, carrying her purse after the man had lost all his cash during a pokies binge earlier that day. The elderly woman never stood a chance.

Or the couple who explained to me how they'd been bankrupted by a dishonest employee who, over a couple of years, stole so much money from the till to pay for her pokies addiction that the business went to the wall and the owners lost the lot.

And the parents who wrote to me recently to explain that their disabled daughter had only recently become hooked on pokies and was already losing virtually her entire pension on the day she receives it. Their email pleaded for me to keep fighting for reform of poker machine legislation. And I will.

These are not uncommon stories because about 100,000 pokies players are believed to be problem gamblers while hundreds of thousands more are said to be at risk. Add to those figures the five to 10 people adversely affected by every problem gambler and the total number of people touched by problem gamblers is huge. And every one is someone's mother, father, son, daughter, brother or sister.

The Productivity Commission reports that 15% of Australia's 600,000 regular poker machine players have a gambling problem and they lose an astonishing 40% or more of the money lost on poker machines. So those in the poker machine and hospitality industry who argue against any harm minimisation measure which significantly reduces cash flow are really saying they should be allowed to continue to trade off the misery of problem gamblers. I will not allow them to do that and I applaud the Prime Minister for agreeing to expedite the Productivity Commission's recommendations, including the implementation of a uniform and full pre-commitment system by 2014. The industry needs to see the sense of this, or at least gets out of the way so well meaning people can get on with the job.

Mr Speaker, there is one further issue that I cannot help but raise today in some detail. During my campaign for election I was emailed by a couple who invited me to their home for a cup of tea. They had sparked my interest with an email expressing concern with mental health care in Australia.

So I went to their home where they told me of their daughter who had suffered severe bipolar disorder for decades and who eventually couldn't stand it any longer and took her own life.

They asked me to do something to improve the lives and chances of people, like their daughter, who fall through the cracks of an overloaded health system designed mainly to deal with physical ailments. Do something, they urged, to ensure mental health is accorded the same priority for funding as GP and hospital services. If only each and every Member had sat with me that day. Many of us would have cried and then got on and together achieved what no government of any persuasion has done yet.

Twenty per cent of Australians suffer a mental illness every year. It costs lives. It costs money. It needs to be genuinely brought into the health mainstream. The challenge is ours.

Mr Speaker, I went into the election hoping for success but expecting such a success to be limited by the seemingly inevitable Labor or Coalition stranglehold on the Treasury benches. Yes, I would have done my very best to represent the good people of Denison. And yes, Denison would have been important enough for the Government to have felt the need to pay an insurance premium in the form of occasional largess. But such windfalls would obviously have been limited by the reality of politics, and in particular the Government's perceived need to shovel as much money as possible into the marginal electorates elsewhere. In other words an Independent Member of the House of Representatives was always going to be good for Denison, but the advantage was going to have its limits.

No one really expected a hung parliament or the need for Independents to take sides. But it obviously did come to pass and with it the invidious need for all the Independents to put supply and confidence behind either Labor or the Coalition. In my case this was an obscenely difficult choice, if only because my political support comes from right across the political spectrum and whatever decision I made was set to trouble a not insignificant number of Denison voters. In unfortunate twists I needed to cater to the public interest in stable government by backing one party or the others, at the expense of my political self-interest, for which I've copped quite a bit of criticism for seemingly having giving up my independence.

On a positive note, however, is that by doing so I've been able to raise the profile of Denison, and southern Tasmania for that matter, in ways probably not seen for 20 years or more. Already there is a commitment from Government to open up a new round of the funding from the Health and Hospital Fund which will release some \$1.8 billion for health-related capital works nationally, including \$340 million for the rebuilding of the Royal Hobart Hospital. And finally some Federal Government interest seems to be being shown in the nationally significant Jordan River levee aboriginal heritage site.

Mr Speaker, much more remains to be done of course and the Government has been made well aware of some 20 priorities I hope to see some progress on during the life of this Parliament, for example the need to withdraw all Federal Government approvals for Gunns'

Tamar River pulp mill and focus instead on a raft of pressing infrastructure and community needs in and around Denison.

More broadly there must be urgent action on climate change, including a price on carbon; incorporation of dental care in Medicare; funding for schools according to need; increased Government pensions and enhancement of the method of indexation; a conscience vote on same-sex marriage; increased funding of aged care facilities; and the introduction of a national disability insurance scheme.

Yes these are long lists because it's been a long time since southern Tasmania, and Denison in particular, had a fair go from Canberra. More broadly a succession of Federal governments should hang their heads in shame because decades have passed, including some of the richest years in this nation's history, but still school classes are overcrowded and teachers stressed, people of all ages live with rotting teeth in their mouths, older Australians can't afford to heat their homes and live on dog food, legislated discrimination treats lovers as second class citizens just because of the people they want to marry, and people we love throw themselves off bridges for want of decent mental health care.

But every Parliament is another opportunity to discard political self-interest in favour of the public interest. As one of the richest countries in the world surely we have the capacity to solve the problems I describe. And as one with an unusually rich political mix, where the Government and the Coalition both have it in their power to work with the cross-benchers to progress good legislation, surely the possibilities would only be limited by lack of vision.

Before I finish I would like to thank all those who are part of my story, and in particular my wonderful wife Dr Kate Burton, our daughters Olive and Rose, and our extended families. I would also like to mention the hundreds of people who have supported my candidatures in a number of elections – thank you.

And finally, thank you Denison for putting your trust in me. I know some of us will disagree from time-to-time, but I do hope we'll always agree I'm doing my best job for you and your interests.

Thank you Mr Speaker.