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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**FIRST SPEECH**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 24 August 2011**

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# SPEECH

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<b>Speaker</b> Rhiannon, Sen Lee	<b>Question No.</b>

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**Senator RHIANNON** (New South Wales) (17:09): I acknowledge that we are standing on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. I pay my respects to their elders past and living and I recognise that the crimes committed against Aboriginal peoples across this nation require urgent redress.

I dedicate this speech to Simone Morrissey. She died suddenly on 5 August this year. She was 24 years old. Simone was a friend, a unionist, a member of Marrickville Greens and a Greens NSW candidate. Simone's wisdom, commitment and independence of mind and spirit are deeply missed. I extend my condolences to her family, friends and work colleagues.

Thank you, Mr President. It is wonderful to be sharing today with so many friends.

History demonstrates that while parliaments make the laws, people are the driving force for social change. I believe one of the great strengths of the Greens is our constructive parliamentary work, combined with our commitment to amplify in this place the voice of progressive people's movements.

I am passionate about working with people—helping to improve their everyday lives, learning about their good experiences and how they cope with tough times.

In this chamber, while there is a divide on some fundamental issues critical to the future of the planet, I still believe that our shared humanity means that on many causes—often more than we realise—we do agree. I look forward to working with all senators to find common ground wherever we can.

As senators we are able to pursue our work because of the hard work of others. I wish to express my appreciation to the Clerk, the Senate staff and all the parliamentary staff who have helped us so much in recent weeks. And to my staff, a very big thankyou.

Much of our quest for social justice has its roots in the industrialisation of Europe in the first half of the 1800s, when many started to question the inequality in power and wealth distribution. These struggles by people who were marginalised, victimised, and in some cases sent to penal colonies in Australia, played a key role in the development of the tenets of modern-day democracy.

I pay tribute to our forebears whose courageous work and sacrifice has helped to build our democratic institutions and our rich legacy of progressive campaigning. The Chartists and the Irish rebels sent here as convicts were political prisoners whose voice for democracy and the liberation of Ireland from British colonialism were early examples of radical causes that became mainstream.

The Eureka Stockade extended far beyond the Ballarat goldfields, also adding to our fine tradition of people's actions that lead to parliamentary reforms. Mark Twain on a visit to Australia in 1895 summed up this great event:

It was revolution—small in size, but great politically; it was a strike for liberty, a struggle for principle, a stand against injustice and oppression.

In my life's journey my work at times has brought me into contact with members of the federal parliament. The first time was in 1968. The Vietnam War was raging and peace talks were about to be held in Paris.

I came to Canberra aged 16 years with about 100 high schools students carrying our message 'Paris must mean peace'. Former Labor MPs Dr Jim Cairns and Tom Uren met us on the steps of the old Parliament House and hosted our visit. I remember their words of encouragement. These two great Australians urged me and all the young school students at that protest to always speak out to expose injustice. On 14 May 1968 Dr Cairns and six other MPs presented our petitions to the House of Representatives.

Supporters of this protest included Reverend Ted Noffs, Reverend Alan Walker, founder of the Liberal Reform Group Ken Thomas, and a number of unions. The *Hansard* for 16 May 1968 shows that some conservative MPs used the grievance debate in the House of Representatives to misrepresent our motives as 'communist inspired', with insults not dissimilar to what some commentators have said recently about my current political work.

Forty-three years after my first visit, I am proud to stand here as a Greens senator. The Australian Constitution sets out that this parliament has 'power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government' of the nation. I respect the institution of parliament and I will work hard with my colleagues to play my part in achieving these objectives. Many factors have brought me to this job. I was the first in my family to have the opportunity to finish school and gain a tertiary education. My public school education has been critical to defining who I am today. My principal, Doreen Wane, at Sydney Girls High, my science teacher, Ruby Komon, my English teacher, Colette Tucker, and so many others inspired me about learning.

My science classes were a joy. They led me to study botany and zoology at university. Mrs Komon opened up the world to my inquiring mind. She insisted her pupils read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which reveals the damage humans were inflicting on the earth and its species. Across disciplines we explored the interconnection of the planet's living and non-living cycles. I learnt that these beautifully tuned systems are to be studied, marvelled at, but disturbed at our peril.

We are now living with the disturbance of the earth's natural cycles—human induced climate change. We know solutions are at hand: a multitude of renewable energy systems, efficient public transport and low energy use buildings. Direct public investment in clean energy and more resources for TAFE to expand our skilled workforce will be critical to managing the transition to a zero emissions economy. No one needs to be financially disadvantaged in this restructuring.

My family and friends bring me great happiness and love. I had a wonderful childhood and was encouraged to be an active citizen in my community. My working-class family placed great stock on education—not just formal schooling. It was about 'getting skills under my belt', as mum and dad would say. Dad taught me to surf and about self-defence. Mum taught me that women are strong. I was fortunate to grow up surrounded by generous people, like my parents, deeply committed to making the world a fairer, more peaceful place for all. My parents, Bill and Freda Brown, are no longer alive but would have supported me here today, as they did in all things. I am still surrounded by the love of my family: my partner, Geoff; my children, Rory and his partner Brooke, Kilty and her partner Peter, and Conor; and their children, my grandchildren, Jack, Kira, Rocco, Mimi and Jaya. Thank you for your love and support. I am so happy my Uncle Rae is with us today. These days he is the elder of our family and, importantly, a former Easts first grade rugby league player.

On my political journey, I joined the Socialist Party and I am proud of the campaigns on unemployment, women's rights and nuclear disarmament that I was involved in. Over recent months, there has been a revival of cold war rhetoric and McCarthyism style politics with the intent to discredit my work and in turn that of the tens of thousands of Australians who have joined socialist and communist parties. By far the majority of these people were motivated by altruistic values and a desire to serve the best interests of Australia and all humanity.

It means a great deal to me that Jack Munday is here today. The green ban movement, initiated by the Builders Labourers Federation when Jack was the NSW state secretary, is one of the world's great social movements that inspired the politics of the Greens and it is from where the Greens take our name. The face of Sydney would be quite different if, in the 1970s, the criticism of the green bans by conservative federal and state MPs had been accepted and acted on—the Rocks and Woolloomooloo were slated to be covered in office towers. I pay tribute to Jack and all members of the BLs, as they were once known, for initiating 42 Green bans in the early 1970s. More than 100 people were arrested in actions that saved homes and urban bushland and pushed New South Wales MPs to pass the first laws in Australia to protect heritage and promote community involvement in planning. The social movement unionism that the Builders Labourers pioneered—bringing together unionists, environmentalists, resident action groups, students and many concerned members of the public—developed a style of political cooperation that I am proud to say is a cornerstone for the Greens today. It is very special for me that I became a senator in the 40th anniversary year of the first green ban.

Although environmental challenges are growing, the achievements are monumental. When I was educated in the 1960s and 1970s, the word 'environment' was rarely found outside a science textbook. Today we have environment ministers, numerous international environment treaties and most political parties know that,

come election time, a policy on the environment is a must. Likewise, respected economists now agree that environmental damage is no longer an externality that can be ignored. These developments are a credit to the many courageous folk who have protested, written letters, staged tree-sits, organised banner drops and all the myriad of creative actions that have been the key to promoting environmental considerations into the body politic.

In the early 1990s I was working with the Rainforest Information Centre when I had the privilege to spend time with members of the Penan tribe and the famous Swiss environmentalist, Bruno Manser, who were in Australia campaigning to save the Sarawak forests. Their attitude taught me so much: their forest homes were being destroyed but they remained positive about the worldwide campaign to save the world's rainforests, arguing that it was a success as we were raising awareness. I wish to pay a special tribute to Bruno Manser, who went missing in Sarawak under suspicious circumstances. The continuing loss of the planet's forests is one of the many shameful acts of recent human history.

By the end of the 20th century, neoliberalism had successfully repositioned the public discourse around the dominance of the free market, unconstrained by appropriate regulations. Public provisions in housing, education and health had declined, bringing hardship to many. Laws protecting the environment had also been weakened under this influence. Recent history has shown us that without a strong regulatory environment the market leads to speculation and practices that undermine financial stability and security.

I am deeply troubled by the increasing power of large corporations. The influence of lobby groups, political donations and advertising campaigns, which are undermining good policy proposals including a mining tax and a price on carbon, is affecting our democratic processes. But I still feel confident in the future. The Greens' policies are my anchor; they provide a solid base for my work as a senator. The Greens are committed to addressing economic inequality. The burden of debt, both personal and through mortgages, for too many has become a permanent fixture of daily life. This stands in sharp contrast with the many CEOs who receive astronomical bonuses on top of their salary package, sometimes granted after the CEO has successfully shifted the financial crisis their company faced onto the public purse.

Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam writes about the growing class divide in the US, driven by the disparity in wages and economic security. Australia is also becoming a more unequal society. Twenty per cent of Australia's wealthiest citizens own 60 per cent of this nation's wealth, while the poorest 20 per cent own just one per cent. It is time to ensure intergenerational inequality does not become entrenched. Taxes on wealth, like an estate tax, and a sovereign wealth fund are needed in Australia. We also need an improved progressive taxation system. A starting point would be eliminating loopholes used by some businesses and investors to minimise tax obligations and taxing family trusts in the same way as companies.

I am looking forward immensely to my portfolio work and to the opportunity to build on some of our wins from my time in the New South Wales parliament. I pay tribute to former and current New South Wales state MPs. As a result of working with communities, we helped save Callan Park, create more national parks, win a funding boost for rural rail branch lines and lots more. We campaigned to transfer funding from the elite wealthiest private schools to public schools and we pushed for legislative reforms to deliver equality to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

The New South Wales Greens effectively built the case for electoral funding reform by campaigning to expose the influence of corporate donations on politics. The reforms achieved in New South Wales need to go national. In my home state we now have a ban on political donations from the property industry, tobacco companies and the for-profit alcohol and gambling industries. I would like to congratulate and thank Dr Norman Thompson for his years of hard work on the Greens' Democracy4Sale project.

My work with farmers and regional communities affected by mining expansion across New South Wales has again taught me the importance of building alliances. Farmers, environmentalists, city and country, people from differing ends of the political spectrum joining together to say that our nation's food bowl is too valuable to sacrifice to short-term mining interests. Now is the time to legally protect agricultural lands and their water resources. During my time in the New South Wales parliament I added my voice to the call for the abolition of the Australian Building and Construction Commission. There is no justification for laws that give some workers fewer rights than accused criminals, let alone other workers.

I am honoured to again have this opportunity to represent New South Wales as a senator and I look forward to working to protect its forests, coasts, rivers, farming lands and the rights of all residents. Among recent significant

achievements for the Greens, the standout for me was gaining two lower house seats. Hearing the titles 'Greens MP for Balmain, Jamie Parker' and 'Greens MP for Melbourne, Adam Bandt' still gives me a buzz. If we had proportional representation in the House of Representatives, the Greens nationwide vote at the last election would have translated into the election of 17 federal Greens MPs. A Greens priority is greater democracy in our parliaments, workplaces and communities.

We have an excellent party room. I feel very fortunate that I have become a senator at this time. Thank you to my fellow Greens members in this parliament and to their staff for easing me into the job. One regret, though, is that I will not be working side by side with our first New South Wales Greens senator, Kerry Nettle. Kerry, I aim to build on your fine endeavours. I pay a special tribute to Senator Bob Brown for what he has done for the Greens and for the planet. I first worked with Bob in this parliament in 1997, when Bob assisted AID/WATCH, where I was working at the time. Bob and I share many passions about the environment and politics, including watching the antics of the *Australian* newspaper and its take on our relationship. In the Greens we know we do not have all the answers. No one individual, party or organisation does. What we do have is a cooperative, respectful style of work that helps create the objective conditions to bring forward solutions. I think that is why I feel at home in the Greens.

One year and four days ago, 443,913 people in New South Wales voted for the Greens. I thank the voters and our hardworking campaign team. To all Greens members and supporters, I love your passion and commitment and I will do everything I can to take forward our platform during my term as a Greens senator. To the people of New South Wales, I will proudly serve you as a senator of our state. To all Australians, I believe that the Greens work in parliament, in cooperation with communities, will build the next chapter in Australia's history, where we will move to a zero-emissions economy, achieve greater equity and a fairer society for all, improve environmental protection and win justice for refugees.

I commenced this speech highlighting my great faith in people and my belief in our shared humanity and common decency. In the coming months and years I look forward to working with people across this country. That is where I draw strength and inspiration. I love this work, and I am so fortunate that when the meeting or parliament or the event that I have been attending is over I have my lovely family to head home to. That is pure happiness. Thank you, Mr President.