



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

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VAGRANTS, GAMING AND OTHER OFFENCES [FLAG PROTECTION] AMENDMENT BILL

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (9.41 p.m.): I rise this evening to speak in support of the Vagrants, Gaming and Other Offences (Flag Protection) Amendment Bill introduced by the member for Gladstone. As a strong believer in the individual's right to protest I, like the member for Gladstone, would not support any moves to hinder that right in any way. The best part of our democracy is the freedom we have to express our opinions via the ability to protest. However, in saying that, I am totally opposed to the purposeful destruction of our flag as part of a protest. I believe that dissenting views can be given regarding a particular issue or belief without destroying or damaging something which is regarded as sacred by so many within the community. Our flag, as the symbol of our country, represents the people, the ideals and beliefs which we live by.

Whilst I am sure that there are some members who do not have much allegiance to our current flag and would like to see it changed to reflect a different aspect of our history, I am sure that if they ever did get their wish of a new flag they would have the same loyalty to that flag as those of us have to the current flag. To many people our flag is inviolable and sacred and is something that men have fought under and died for. Whilst it is not for the material or tangible aspect of the flag, it is what this flag represents that people hold dear to their hearts. It is genuinely heartbreaking to see our flag being burnt or ripped as part of a protest, particularly in the eyes of our old diggers and all of our returned service personnel.

The respect our flag engenders is an intangible thing and something that is felt. There are so few things in our lives today that we can still hang on to and openly revere. It is often regarded as politically incorrect to feel national pride. Patriotism has become a dirty word, and I wonder how this was ever allowed to happen. Our flag symbolises what and who we are, and I defy anyone in this House who watches the Olympic Games to have a dry eye at that moment when our flag is hoisted and the national anthem is played. To me that vision brings about the most incredible feeling of pride and is something that I am sure we can all relate to.

I will never forget how proud I was when, as a private, I was given the job of raising our flag outside the army barracks at the beginning of each day and then standing back and saluting it. It was a great feeling and a great honour. We were even trained that we were never allowed to let any part of the flag touch the ground as this was a chargeable offence. Rules such as this one further instilled in us how valuable our flag is. When someone who is valued dearly by all passes away the flag is flown at half mast and is one of the greatest honours which can be afforded to someone.

As already mentioned, I believe the ability to protest is a right, not a privilege, but to deface our flag takes away from the cause which the protest is about. To do something intentionally to our flag is the ultimate sign of hatred for a country and its people. I regard it as hypocritical that on one of Australia's most well-attended public displays of pride, Anzac Day, thousands of people wave their flags as a sign of respect and is something which unites us as a country. To be able to turn around and destroy that same symbol as part of a protest is shameful.

As a result of how I was brought up and the schools I attended, where we had to sing *God Save the Queen* and *Advance Australia Fair* every morning in front of our flag, I regarded the flag with great reverence and always assumed that it was illegal to deface our flag. It was only recently that I found out it was not. People may call me ill-informed, but because I have always felt the same way about our flag I simply assumed that it would be so.

When our prominent politicians, police or defence personnel die they are entitled to have their coffins draped in the flag. This is of tremendous significance and value to family and friends who are left behind because they feel that their loved one has been regarded with importance and significance and the last and loveliest noble gesture which could be bestowed. I personally believe that the flags of every nation should be treated with respect. I do not care whether it is an indigenous flag, an American flag or an Iraqi flag. A flag represents the people of that nation and should be regarded with the reverence that such a symbol deserves. On behalf of the wonderful people who make up my electorate, I am proud to commend this bill to the House.

open to future danger and abuse because he has no alternative.

While I am well aware of the standard of many of the institutions and the deep sleep treatment back in the seventies, it would have been much more appropriate and financially feasible to clean them up, so to speak, employ decent people and ensure that each facility was accredited, with each facility having departmental staff spot checking them on a random basis to ensure that all residents and clients were being looked after instead of abused and taken advantage of, as they had been under the old system. The current system does not work. There are too many people being left with inadequate or no support at all, particularly in the electorate of Gympie.