



Speech by

Rachel Nolan

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (7.51 pm): Mr Deputy Speaker, it is my privilege to stand before the House today as a third-term member for Ipswich. I ask that you pass on my congratulations to the Speaker and my thanks to the Governor for her address. This election was a special one, not just for the honour of again being chosen to represent the good people of the city I love but because in this term I have come back with many friends, most notably with Bonny Barry—a courageous and principled woman who fought cancer through the last term and saw many dark days on her way to being returned to this place. It is a great joy and a great pleasure to be with you, Bon.

As a third-term member of parliament at the age 33 today the position I hold in public office is an unusual one. I am a member, nothing as grand as a spokesman, of a new political generation and I propose today to take what I have learned so far—my glorious learnings may benefit Queensland parliament—and present some thoughts on the political path ahead. The election result in Ipswich was a great one. The primary vote jumped two per cent to 67 per cent on top of a 15 per cent swing last time. I thank the people for their confidence and I promise to represent them with integrity and to the best of my ability. The result exceeded my expectations but, to be honest, I took little joy from election day.

Anyone who has been working at polling booths for a long time will tell us that at each election the mood is harder to read. While once voters came forward with purpose and energy, sometimes pausing for a surreptitious wink to their chosen side, that enthusiasm for polling day has now been lost. Now people complain that all politicians are the same and voting has come to be seen not as a privilege, not as a small price to pay for the many rights of citizenship but rather as an imposition. The vote is seen less and less as one of incarnation of an abiding personal values base and more and more as a short-term individualistic, financial calculation of who is offering a better deal this time around.

Sure it is anecdotal to talk about the mood in Ipswich on election day but there is no doubting that Australians are decidedly off politics. Party membership has declined—in the case of the Liberals from 200,000 in 1949 to 80,000 today. The Australian Electoral Commission reports that a quarter of young people—that is, those under 24—are not enrolled to vote and the most recent Australian electoral survey showed that in reflection of a longitudinal trend across all age brackets 51 per cent of young people say they have little or no interest in politics.

It is often said that in many senses Australia follows the United States but in that country, where voting as we know it is voluntary, the last time more than 60 per cent of voters bothered to show up was 1968. So what has changed since the 1960s? The American example I mentioned before I think sheds some light on that. In modern political history the election which has captured the minds and attracted the votes of the most Americans was the 1960 presidential election in which a record 63 per cent of American voters turned out to vote for or against John F Kennedy.

At the heart of the Cold War history shows us that Kennedy won that election. In his great inaugural address he went on to define the age when he said—

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.

The power to abolish all forms of human life: history tells us that the Cold War ended. Many would say—perhaps my colleague the member for Stafford would agree—that that was no thanks to Kennedy. That really was the last time that politics mattered quite so much. Since the end of the Cold War the Western World has entered the longest period of peace and affluence in human history. While Australian politicians still talk about battlers and struggle, the truth is that we are the healthiest, richest, fattest and happiest people ever to have lived. Average life expectancy in Australia is now 82 years, up from 55 in 1900. The average size of a new house in Australia has doubled since 1955 while the number of people living in it has diminished. Food is so abundant that every day Australians waste enough food to feed New Zealand.

While there is no doubt that terrible inequality, indeed terrible poverty, continues to exist in Australia, the Australian middle class are more affluent than their grandparents could have imagined. The biggest thing that has happened in the Australian economy in the last decade is that household debt has doubled from 60-odd per cent to 125 per cent of average income, largely because middle-class Australians borrow rather than choose between a new kitchen, a new car and a trip to Bali. While we talk about struggling we in fact suffer from affluenza, a condition Clive Hamilton describes as 'spending money you don't have to buy things you don't need to impress people you don't like.'

Since the Cold War, politics has rolled on. But the issues have been fundamentally about divvying up the spoils of that wealth. These issues are important and they have been considered, by and large, by a generation of honest political souls but they are not the life and death matters of the Cold War such that it is hardly surprising that people have switched off to such an extent that many people now give more thought to deciding whom to vote off *Big Brother* than whom to elect to Australia's parliaments.

To put it simply, the conventional wisdom that the only thing wrong with modern politics is the politicians is errant rot. What has changed in politics since the 1960s has not been the moral fibre of our leaders; it has been a boom so big and so long that people decided they would enjoy peace and prosperity pretty much whoever was running the show.

My concern is that while we all enjoy this wealth we fail to appreciate that much of it comes from the natural resources provided by God's earth. Our use of those resources is so profligate that last year the New Economics Foundation was reported on the BCC as estimating the date on which the world went into annual ecological debt as 16 April. My fear and the fear of my generation is that as we deplete our natural resources and damage our environment we well may return to John F Kennedy's immortal words: 'we hold in our hands the power to abolish all forms of human life.'

Our wealth and our way of life are, in historical terms, very new. The move from an agricultural to an industrial economy resulted from the 1879 invention of the internal combustion engine. Modern transport flowed from the 1859 discovery of oil. Today's comfortable domesticity is a result of Thomas Edison's 1879 development of electric light and the electric circuit and population grew in the last century from two to six billion because of the 1910 development of the Haber Bosch process for converting natural gas to fertiliser, which facilitated an explosion in the production of food.

In the last 50 years we have refined those trends and those inventions so perfectly that the growth in our population, our health and our wealth has become exponential. There can be no real comparison between the life we lead with the benefit of those innovations and that which existed before. Each, however, brings with it a significant environmental cost or, at least in the case of oil, serious natural limitations to its capacity. Climate change is today's issue. While the possibility of carbon affecting climate was first mooted 110 years ago in 1897, we have known for a long time now that this phenomenon is here and it is real. The position was confirmed in January when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is generally accepted to be a conservative body, released a report determining it was now 'very likely' that recent increases in atmospheric carbon concentration from 315 parts per million to 370 in the past century are causing climate change. We know for sure that the ice caps are melting, that incidents of extreme weather are on the rise and that sea levels are gradually rising.

What is less well understood in the public mind, though, is that the effect of global warming will not be uniform and that, with an in-built tendency in the process towards exponential acceleration, it may well not be slow. There are leaders who tell us to relax to avoid the hysteria. They tell us it would be wrong to sign Kyoto because it is an imperfect policy response. We should take as much comfort from those political leaders as we did from the reassuring tobacco companies that assured us years ago that we should not move on tobacco because there was still a degree of scientific debate. Climate change is the first but certainly not the only environmental issue. We know that just as American oil production peaked and began to decline in 1971 world supplies of oil will almost certainly peak in the decade ahead, massively blowing out the cost of transport. We know that agriculture in many parts of Australia is threatened by water shortages, salinity and ongoing damage to soil.

The appearance of climate change in recent months on the pollsters' issues matrix marks not just the emergence of a new political headache as with health last year or refugees before that; it is the harbinger of a complete cultural change in the way in which modern politics has been done. For too long

modern politics has been characterised by the 'look over there' approach—managing the politics of issues, not the policy. The Prime Minister, Mr Howard, is renowned in this country as this game's master. This is fine when in the scheme of things the issue at hand does not particularly matter, but when the issue is as fundamental as climate change—the threat that agricultural land will be drought stricken and coastal lands lost—then a political strategy with a time horizon of the six o'clock news is not really okay.

I spoke before of President John F Kennedy and his ability to capture a moment that defines an era. I think he gives us the key to the next era with the immortal words 'the time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining'. The environmental threats and inevitable tendency towards natural resource depletion are not theories; they are changes which we know for sure are coming and for which we have a moral obligation to plan. The old reactive politics will not be good enough on these much bigger threats. The political impact of climate change is to shift the onus of proof away from those who for years have sounded the alarm and place it squarely on the dominant do-nothing brigade. This is the essence of politics—generational change. In Australian politics, not just at a state level but to a much greater extent at a national level, there is much more we could be doing.

Just as in 1995 the Keating government introduced national competition policy to move all Australian policy to an economically competitive footing, now it is time for a national sustainability policy which reviews all legislation and all policy, asking this time not is it anticompetitive but is it unsustainable. We need to move more quickly to establish genuine competitive pricing reflecting the real cost of power, carbon and water. And we need, as an absolute matter of priority, to include a safety net to minimise the impact on those who genuinely are poor. We need to establish a national program to return marginal agricultural land to environmental purposes, including biological sequestration, and we should pay marginal landholders out properly rather than continuing the cycle of drought relief that compensates farmers and major agricultural companies every time the next drought comes around.

It is not appropriate that in 2007 when climate change has started we still have a national tax regime which favours four-wheel-drives over small and more efficient cars. It is not okay that the national government actively promotes urban sprawl—something which I am certain will go down as one of the greatest ever wastes of our natural resources—as a solution to housing affordability. It is not appropriate that with all Australian cities having fewer than 10 per cent of journeys taken by public transport our nation has no national passenger transport plan. It is not appropriate that that same national government now promotes nuclear power as a serious energy solution, having for years stuck with a renewable energy target of a pathetic two per cent.

The move to sustainability in our resource pricing, our urban planning, our tax regime and our agricultural policies will be a long and, at times, difficult journey. As Clive Hamilton argues in *Growth Fetish*, there may come a time when we do have to genuinely face a trade-off between the environment and economic growth, but that is by no means where we are today. So far the culture of inertia in politics has been so strong that we have not even bothered to pick the low-hanging fruit. Sustainability, however, is by no means a story of bad political news. All the evidence shows that Australians are taking little joy from a cycle of work, consumerism and debt. Hugh Mackay describes the mood of many Australians with the quote taken from a focus group in which a woman said to him, 'I feel like I'm on a runaway train and I don't know how to get off.' 'That precisely,' Mackay says, 'is how many, many Australians feel.' We know that people are happier when they live more sustainably, if they have a sense of community and live close to work. The work, for instance, of Robert Putnam in the United States which has largely been replicated in Australia absolutely establishes that there is nothing worse for one's quality of life and one's sense of community than a long daily commute.

We know from a range of indices that, whereas greater wealth improved happiness in the Western World up to the 1960s, at that point—that is, the commencement of the consumer age—the two trends, wealth and happiness, became unhinged. My experience of talking about these issues is that people in fact react strongly and positively to the idea. Far from the conventional political wisdom that it is crazy in politics to talk about anything challenging or hard, I think that people know that we are on the verge of generational change. They do not want to just live a consumer cycle. They do not want to hand on a damaged world to their children. They want representatives who step up to the hard stuff and they want, in many cases quite desperately, to be a part of that debate. Political leadership on the matter will, I believe, be the key to restoring interest and, I strongly hope, confidence in politics. The bottom line is that there is an environmental, an economic, a social and indeed a moral imperative to develop a whole policy platform in Australia based on sustainability. I come back to the American example. President Kennedy left us many words that define the political era that came immediately before the one we are now in.

The new era into which we are moving will have its own orators, but perhaps for now we should again look to that young man who led his then new generation. I believe he left us with immortal words that give us the key to step from this political generation to the next. He summed up the moral imperative of one time, I think, in words that absolutely define the point at which we now stand. President Kennedy died young, but he left with us these words—

If not us, then who and if not now, then when?