



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**FIRST SPEECH**  
**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 27 August 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

---

## SPEECH

<b>Date</b> Wednesday, 27 August 2014	<b>Source</b> Senate
<b>Page</b> 5778	<b>Proof</b> No
<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Rice, Sen Janet	<b>Question No.</b>

---

**Senator RICE** (Victoria) (16:59): Thank you Mr President. What a privilege to be here.

I honour and give my respects to the Indigenous peoples of Australia, their elders past and present, particularly the Ngunawal and Ngambri peoples, who are the traditional owners of the land we are gathered on today, and the people of the Wurundjeri tribe from my home in Melbourne.

The biggest injustices done in our short history since colonisation have been done to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Their land was brutally taken, without treaty or consent. People, cultures and languages were decimated, children stolen. In the words of the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation, which hangs on my wall at home:

Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.

I am grateful to know so many inspirational Indigenous people who work so hard to improve the lives of their communities. They are a testament to the strength and endurance of one of the longest living cultures in the world. I pledge myself to work for self-determination for Indigenous Australians and for a treaty, enshrined in our Constitution, that recognises the prior occupation and sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

I clearly remember the moment when my journey to being here today began. It was 1980. I was studying science at Melbourne University. I had just left a climatology lecture given by Dr Barrie Pittock, and the implications of what I had learnt were still spinning in my brain. Barrie had just explained the emerging understanding of the greenhouse effect and the likely impact it was going to have on our climate and our planet. I walked out of the lecture into warm spring sunshine, past other students who were having lunch. All I could think was, 'This is serious! The world needs to be doing something about this!'

Learning about global warming politicised me. I completed my science degree and had to act on my scientific knowledge. I had to help create change, to stop the damage being done. I had not had much awareness of things that needed changing in the world up until then. I had led a happy life with a loving family, a quality education, good health and wonderful friends. I grew up in Altona in the western suburbs of Melbourne, in the shadow of the oil refineries and in a street full of families, many of them post-war migrants.

My mother, Margaret, is here today, and so are all my siblings. I was the middle child of five, so I learnt early on how to negotiate and how being cooperative brought its own rewards. Thanks for everything, Mum, and Jenni, Kathy, Diana and Peter, for all your love and support. Mum was a kindergarten teacher and has been active in the Altona community for over 60 years. I am so inspired by my mother and by people like her all over the country who are the glue in our communities. Mum at 82 is still a church organist, still running playgroups and trying her hardest to hand over the organising of the local carols by candlelight to someone a bit younger!

My father, Bill, was an engineer with the defence department. Dad grew up on a farm in the Mallee during the Depression. He could fix anything and did not throw anything away in case it came in handy one day. Our world growing up was one where the tops of toothpaste tubes became knobs on the black-and-white TV that Dad had built. Dad had the creativity, the technical skills and the ingenuity Australians are renowned for.

These are the skills we need to tackle the huge challenges we face as a country—the skills our education system needs the resources to support. For me, a good education meant the world was open to me. High-quality education available to all, from preschool to postgrad, is fundamental to our success as a society.

As a girl, I knew I could do anything. I was a feminist from an early age, long before I realised it. And expect me to continue championing the rights of women in my time here! My upbringing was one where you had a

responsibility to contribute if you could and to follow the golden rule of doing unto others what you would have them do unto you. They are the values of a caring society.

I grew up believing in a just society. I believed that if people were law abiding and hardworking then they would have the opportunities to live successful lives. And I believed that government decisions—in Australia at least—were evidence based and in the best interests of society as a whole. Other countries had cruel and corrupt despots, but not Australia.

Global warming made me realise that justice was not always done, that governments ignored things they did not want to confront because of powerful vested interests or because the problems were hard and the benefits of taking action took longer than an election cycle to be realised. So I became an environment campaigner, beginning with the Franklin blockade. I worked with the Conservation Council of Victoria, now Environment Victoria, and fell in love with the forests of East Gippsland. I experienced their beauty and learnt everything I could about their ecology; their wildlife; their values for tourism, for water and as carbon stores; and about the impacts and economics of the forest industries.

I remember the first time I visited a forest that had been recently clear-felled and burnt. It was on the Errinundra Plateau. I can still vividly picture the smouldering stumps of trees hundreds of years old. These trees would have needed a dozen people arm to arm to encircle them. The forest was destroyed, and I was appalled—not just because of the loss of the forest, the potoroos and spotted quolls, but because it was all so unnecessary. The forests were being logged not because we needed the sawn timber but for export woodchips, with minimal employment in their processing. And we the taxpayers were—still are—subsidising every log removed, every animal killed, every silted-up stream.

I became a leader of the East Gippsland forests campaign, working with thousands of supporters. We built the campaign in the community, and we got political. And we had some big successes. The wonderful rainforest and huge eucalypts of the Errinundra National Park and the catchment of the Rodger River are protected because of our campaigns. But, despite the support of over 80 per cent of the population, despite the significance and value of these forests, neither Labor nor the coalition were willing to commit to protecting more of them.

And then came the 1990 federal election. In the lead-up, we were promised a process that would have led to the protection of further forest areas if there were 'prudent and feasible alternatives' to logging them. After the election, the definition of 'prudent and feasible' changed. We were sold out. It was a life-changing moment for me. I realised that we needed people in our parliaments who were as committed as we were to social and environmental goals. We needed the Greens. I threw myself into forming the Greens in Victoria and have seen it grow into the strong party it is today.

My six years as a councillor with the City of Maribyrnong, including a year as mayor, serving an amazingly diverse community, were a privilege. I gained precious insights into the extraordinary lives of ordinary people and the injustices they face. I realised how important it was for people to be involved in decisions which affect their lives. I learnt about the benefits of building community and caring for people and about how government can improve their lives.

In this place, we must never forget who we are here for. I am here in parliament for Footscray small business owner Lidia and her disabled adult son, Stephen. Lidia constantly struggles to get respite care for Stephen. The National Disability Insurance Scheme is long overdue for them. I am here for Laura, who I met in Frankston last year. Laura, which is not her real name, had a drug habit and was just out of jail. She also had a 13-year-old daughter. She wanted to get clean for her daughter's sake and wanted to retrain as a drug and alcohol counsellor. She had tried to get herself admitted into rehab, but there was a three-month wait. I think about how \$7 co-payments and cuts to welfare, education, and drug and alcohol services affect Laura and her daughter. They affect us all. Our lives are better when Laura's life is better. I look at the measures in this year's brutal budget and despair for the impact they will have on the sick, the poor, the young, the elderly and my neighbours struggling on a disability pension—people whom we have a duty of care for.

Our connection with each other and with all of nature underpins my politics. Australia is an incredibly wealthy country. We are extremely fortunate to live here. We have a duty of care to use our wealth responsibly, and to share our wealth with others not so fortunate. We can afford to increase our foreign aid to the Millennium Development Goal aim of 0.7 per cent of GDP. We can afford to care for many more refugees. Last year Jordan took in as many refugees every fortnight as Australia accepted in the entire year. We can help set up a genuine

regional approach, accepting refugees in an orderly way and not fobbing them off to countries that are desperately poor.

I am here for my friend Ali, a Hazara asylum seeker who is here today, and the 80 Hazara refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan who I met two months ago in Shepparton while I was on my journey to Canberra on my bike, listening to people and collecting their stories to bring here with me. Most of these people are not allowed to work or study and do not know if they will be allowed to stay. They worry about their families; Ali's wife remains in Iran and is not able to join him here. Many suffer from depression. One of them told me he had worked on vaccination programs in Afghanistan. He was targeted by the Taliban because he was an adviser to NATO Special Forces. He would be dead if he had not fled. What an asset to Australia he would be if he could work in community health here. All of these people want to contribute to Australia, like so many refugees before them. These are the lucky ones; they are not locked up on Christmas Island, Manus Island or Nauru. Our cruelty to these innocent people, to the children we have imprisoned, is a stain on our country's soul. We have a duty of care to them.

We have a duty of care to people and nature suffering and under threat from global warming. We do not have the right to turn a blind eye to the consequences of our dirty economy. Our pollution from the burning of fossil fuels is amongst the highest in the world per person and we are reaping huge economic benefits from our coal and gas exports.

We are major contributors to the world being on track to being four degrees hotter in my children's lifetime. Without urgent and meaningful action, it will not be possible to grow food crops across vast swathes of the world. In Australia, the climate of current wheat growing areas like Dubbo will become like the Central Australian desert. Extreme heatwaves will occur every 10 years instead of every 100—more extreme than the heatwave southern Australia experienced in 2009, that resulted in the Black Saturday bushfires and the deaths of hundreds of people. Land that is home to hundreds of millions of people, including Australian suburbs and beaches, will be swept away by the sea. The Great Barrier Reef will be but a memory. And Antarctica, which I was very privileged to visit last summer, will be on its way to being irretrievably ice free. Goodbye gorgeous Adelie penguins.

We cannot just sleepwalk our way into this dystopia. I think of the young women students from Castlemaine Secondary College I met while I was on my bike ride here. They deserve a healthy future. They are the leaders of tomorrow. They need us to play our part today. We know that it is not a matter of environment versus jobs. Destroying the basis of life on earth is bad economics. We are living on the global credit card, building up massive debts of increasing damage from polluting, resource-intensive, habitat-destructive industries.

The Stern review, *The Economics of Climate Change*, says global warming is 'the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen'. The World Bank advises we have more to gain economically by acting on climate change now than delaying action. We need economic activity to be a vehicle to build social and natural capital rather than destroy it. My trip to Canberra through regional Victoria gave tangible evidence of how this model can evolve if supported. We can shift from a throwaway society and create jobs and wealth in a clean energy economy in which goods are built to last—an economy with local jobs and services, networked together through faster better telecommunications, an economy based on working collaboratively and cooperatively, supporting local businesses and communities.

We must invest in our innovators, our researchers and our scientists who are developing the technologies that our future depends on. As part of this shift, businesses like Goulburn Valley Community Energy based in Murchison—a tiny town in regional Victoria—will thrive. They have evolved from a small community group to a business that has installed thousands of solar energy systems in their region. On my ride to Canberra, I asked the waitress in the local Murchison cafe what she would like me to do for her and her community. She replied immediately: 'Anything to get renewable energy back on track. It was going really well but now seems to be going off the rails.' I am here for her, for Goulburn Valley Community Energy and for other innovating businesses like them. I am here, too, for every household in Australia with solar panels on their roofs, LED lights on their ceilings and draught-stoppers at the door. We are reducing our electricity bills in the most effective way possible, and reducing the cost of power for everyone else too.

When Australia implemented the clean energy future legislation, I was proud that we had positioned ourselves as a world leader in acting on climate change and proud of the pivotal role of the Greens in bringing this about. And the policy worked—carbon pollution from power production reduced by almost two per cent in just one

year because of the price on pollution. At the same time, we added \$4 billion to the budget's bottom line and protected the vast majority of Australians from any increases in power prices.

But now we are left with a policy pit. If we do not act now, we will fall behind when China and India no longer want our dirty coal. And the longer we delay, the harder it will become for our country.

My agenda for my time here is clear. I want to be able to look my grandchildren in the eye and tell them that it was during my time in the Senate that Australia turned the corner and legislated to begin the shift to a zero-carbon safe climate economy. I suggest some simple steps to start us off: set pollution reduction targets based on science; stop subsidising fossil fuels; create more jobs by boosting clean energy production and energy conservation; start closing coal-fired power stations; say no to new coal and gas exports; and make the big polluters pay for the damage they are doing.

There are a few other things I want to tackle while I am here too. I have got a passion for transport. I am here for the residents I met when I was a transport planner in the City of Hume. They want efficient bus services and upgrades to country roads that are now serving whole suburbs. I am here for the residents of Shepparton, Wangaratta and Albury-Wodonga who want a reliable train service to Melbourne—surely not too much to ask for. I am here for young people who would cycle to school if only there were bike paths.

A transport mix that would serve the interests of people, the economy and the environment would be, I reckon, where one-third of passenger trips were being made by public transport—including high-speed rail—one-third by walking and cycling, and one-third by clean-energy-powered cars. I want to see much more freight on rail and deliveries of goods by electric vans organised through intelligent logistics systems. I will be working for legislation that requires decisions about transport investments to be publicly accountable and evidence based, using the criteria of economic efficiency, social wellbeing and ecological health. It is only fair to the residents of Melton, Point Cook and Geelong who are stuck in traffic right now on the Westgate Bridge. They deserve the choice of fast, efficient public transport over a congestion-creating East West tollway that will cost us \$1 billion per kilometre.

I am also hoping to deal with unfinished business and see our forest heritage protected. This means getting timber and woodchips from plantations, not native forests, and no burning of native forests in furnaces for energy. It means creating the Great Forest National Park just to the east of Melbourne. I am here in this parliament for the Leadbeater's possums that live there.

I am excited to be here, alongside my 10 Greens colleagues in the federal parliament, and with my fellow parliamentarians across the chamber. We have much work to do.

There have been so many people in my life who have made my political journey possible. To all my Greens family: thank you. And it is a big family! But there are some special people who have been with me for a long part of the journey who I do want to single out for special thanks: Margaret Blakers, who is with us here today; Liz Ingham; Trevor Coon; Mark Riley; Andrea Millsom; Linda Parlane; John Stone; Philip Sutton; and so many other campaigners, staff, Greens members, supporters and voters who have put their trust in me. Thank you! Thanks to my fellow Victorian members of parliament, Richard and Adam, and state MPs Greg, Colleen and Sue, local government councillors, and the rest of my Greens colleagues here, who have welcomed me so warmly—especially Christine, an inspirational leader and friend. And thanks to Bob Brown for his friendship, his extraordinary contribution and his wisdom.

I also want to pay tribute to some very special people who would have been cheering me on today who, sadly, are no longer with us. I have lost some great friends and colleagues in the past year. I want to acknowledge Paul Mees, Janet Powell, Linden Salter Duke, Glen Ochre, Karin Geradts and Chris Mardon.

My children John and Leon, up there in the gallery, have grown up with my Green politics, passions and commitments threaded through their lives. They are such wonderful young adults, sharing those passions—what greater inspiration could a mother have.

And Penny—my wonderful partner—has been absolutely critical in my life achievements. We have shared 28 years of married life—a partnership of love and support. We are proud of our status as a same-sex couple who were legally married in Australia, and I am resolute that all couples should be able to share this right. The time for marriage equality in Australia has come. I am here for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex

people and their families. We deserve recognition and respect in all aspects of our lives: at school, in workplaces and in communities. Penny's and my partnership shows that love is love and is to be celebrated. Thanks, Penny. And thanks, everyone. I am looking forward to journeying with you all and the rest of the Australian community over the years ahead. Thank you.