

A Speech from a truly great man

Valedictory – Senator Joe Bullock

Speech to the Senate

Tuesday March 1st 2016

It was early in the spring of 1973 that I drew up my courage to the sticking point and rose to speak. It was not a speech that I felt would find favour in a room packed with serious, striving parents and the dignified pedagogues in whose charge I had all but completed serving a twelve-year sentence for youth. My chosen topic was ambition. I spoke against it. It had occurred to me some years earlier that the path to personal fulfilment lay through service to others and not in the pursuit of wealth or self-aggrandisement, which I suspected of being the defining motive of the majority of those in attendance. It was, therefore, with surprise verging on astonishment that I greeted the decision of the wizened panel of adjudicators to award me the Old Trinitarians Union public speaking prize. With that prize came the realisation that it was the fate of some to peak early and that the road for me henceforth lay, in all probability, downhill.

Having renounced ambition, I endeavoured, over the long years following, to ensure that self-interest played as small a role as possible in setting the course of my life. Only once have I been tempted to make a written application for employment. That application having received the most dismissive of replies from the Shell Oil Company, containing not the slightest hint of the possibility of an interview, I concluded that, having at first not succeeded, I should not trouble myself to try again.

Given my total lack of qualifications, specialist training or any readily identifiable skill, a life of poverty and unemployment would doubtless have been my lot had I not discovered that I had a knack for being elected to office. Aside from being able to participate in parish councils, preside over cricket clubs and publish a newspaper, some of the positions to which I have been elected have carried with them salaries which have afforded me more than I have needed. One of the fringe benefits of a lack of ambition is the understanding that one's true material needs are essentially modest and that the surfeit can be attributed to either undeserved good fortune or, to the extent that one is so inclined, to the grace of God.

My first electoral success, much celebrated on the day by my colleagues and me, came at the annual general meeting of the University of Sydney Students' Representative Council, on 11 November 1975, when a team of self-styled moderates swept the hard left from the field and I became director of student publications—the publisher of *Honi Soit*. The left regrouped early in 1976 and ousted all of the moderates from the offices which they held except for the Director of Student Publications, who went on to serve a full term.

From this, and from the experience of the ensuing 40 years, I have come to the conclusion that, if, after having been elected, you do those things which you promised to do before you were elected, you work diligently to fulfil the explicit and implicit requirements of the role to which you were elected, you consistently work to advance the interests of the people who elected you and you treat your opponents as though they were more capable

than you truly believe them to be, then there is every prospect that you will be re-elected. I mention this, which I regard to be an utterly unremarkable insight, for the benefit of those of my good friends on both sides of the chamber to whom it appears not to have occurred. I will return to the issue of fulfilling the explicit and implicit requirements of the job shortly.

It was about three years after my ambition speech that I first met the now Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull. Generational change in student politics is quite rapid, and, in those pre-Abbott days, I was looking for someone to be the public face of the moderate team in the students representative council elections. Here it is necessary to note that there were two student organisations at Sydney university. The SRC was the Australian Union of Students affiliate, the ideological battleground and the arena of conflict in which the paid organisers of the Communist Party of Australia, along with single-issue left-wing extremists and their fellow travellers, waged battle with everyday students to determine the political agenda of the student body.

Running quietly alongside, but aloof from the fray, was the University of Sydney Union, which ran the catering and hosted debates and dinners. Steeped in history and tradition, achieving prominence in the union was a perfect means by which to hobnob with professors and stake out a social status. Offered the prospect of engaging in the contest of ideas and the chance to rally regular students against the political agenda of the extreme left, young Malcolm Turnbull did not hesitate. He chose the reputation, exclusivity and opportunity offered by the university union. As a very young man he was committed to burnishing his CV rather than fighting for principle. He presented as the very personification of ambition. I took a deep and instant dislike to him. Nothing has occurred during the intervening years to persuade me to change my view. As I see it, Mr Turnbull's life has constituted a single-minded pursuit of wealth and personal advancement, even to Australia's highest office. Here is a man who, 40 years ago, publically announced his intention to be Prime Minister, and when asked, 'For which party?' he replied, 'It doesn't matter.'

The early indications are that Mr Turnbull saw the fulfilment of his ambition through the Labor Party. This is evidenced by his support for Lionel Murphy and for, in his words, 'the much-loved elder statesman', Gough Whitlam and in his 'warm personal friendship' with Peter Dowding. Politically, he will be remembered for his support for changing the Australian flag, for the establishment of an Australian republic, for changing the definition of marriage and for an emissions trading scheme. These are all positions that sit comfortably with the political Left.

As a man driven by ambition rather than principle, it is no great shock that Mr Turnbull has no principled objection to leading a government committed to advancing the interests of business and the wealthy at the expense of the average Australian worker and their family. This can be seen in the freezing of superannuation contributions—denying workers financial security in retirement while padding the bottom line of business. I am yet to hear, in any set of wage negotiations anywhere in the country, any employers say that, as a result of not paying increased superannuation contributions, they are prepared to top up their wages offer. This myth that less superannuation translates to more money in workers' pockets could only be believed by people so out of touch as those opposite. Those opposite who do not believe it but nonetheless peddle the myth are guilty of a cruel and wilful deception.

The attack on workers is also seen in the attack on penalty rates—a naked move to transfer money from those who work at socially undesirable times to the bottom line of business. Even more deplorable is the singling out of workers in the retail and hospitality sectors. These are workers already struggling on low wages and for whom every dollar counts. The attempt to split the electorate by making these workers' financial lives expendable is beneath contempt. The only organisations to whom these low-income workers can turn to defend their interests are their unions. It is by no accident that those organisations are clearly in the sights of the government.

And what of the GST? There can be no doubt increasing the rate of the GST by 50 per cent and removing the exemptions for food, health and education were central to the plans of this government. Who would pay and who would benefit? The GST is a regressive tax, disproportionately burdening the poor. Raising the rate of the GST raises the burden. Removing the exemptions compounds the unfairness to lower paid workers, which even Prime Minister Howard recognised as being inherent in a regressive tax. And who benefits? The beneficiaries were to be business and the wealthy through tax cuts.

Make no mistake: the only reason Australia is not now facing an increased GST is the absolute determination of Bill Shorten and Labor to resist this grossly unfair impost on working people. And do not believe that Mr Turnbull has seen the light on principle. He is not capable of being moved by such a foreign concept. Rather, he feared the political backlash from the working people of Australia would throw him out of office. Self-preservation, not principle, determined this retreat.

So where does the Liberal Party now stand on economic reform? Mr Turnbull led the coup against the elected Prime Minister because the government had no salesmen for its economic plan. Well, the government has new salesmen in Mr Turnbull and Mr Morrison, but the awful truth has been revealed. It was not that the government had no salesmen; it had no plan.

While Bill Shorten and Chris Bowen have been, step by step, outlining Labor's plan to restore Australia's prosperity, the government has revealed itself as devoid of economic policy. Mr Morrison has proven already that he is no Paul Keating. Mr Morrison is no Wayne Swan. Wayne Swan confronted the world's greatest recession in 80 years with prompt, bold and decisive action. To steal Paul Keating's phrase, the government's economic policy is a shiver looking for a spine to run up. All of this, without mentioning the \$100,000 university degrees, the hikes in health costs, the cuts to the family tax benefit and the age pension. This government has declared war on the average Australian.

Against this background, we enter 2016, an election year. This is the year when we have the opportunity to create history, to turf out this anti-worker government and bring to a shuddering halt the driving ambition of Malcolm Turnbull. While to have dedicated myself to this end would have been utterly predictable, life has posed me a question, the answer to which has necessitated an alternative course of action.

My difficulties began with the 2015 national conference of the Labor Party and the much-anticipated homosexual marriage debate, which was its last order of business. I had expected one of two outcomes to this debate; either the issue, were it to come before the parliament, would continue to be the subject of a conscience vote or, alternatively, the

conference would decide to change its position and deny Labor members a conscience vote. I was prepared to deal with either outcome. On the one hand, if a conscience vote were allowed, I would vote with my conscience against homosexual marriage; on the other hand, if a conscience vote were denied to me, I would vote with my conscience against homosexual marriage and reluctantly accept the inevitable consequence of such defiance being expulsion from the party. This I could justify to myself on the basis that the party to which I had been elected afforded members a conscience vote on the issue—that it would be the party and not me which had changed the ground rules and that it could not reasonably expect me to abandon my conscience on that meagre basis.

To my surprise, the conference adopted a third position, which had previously not been foreshadowed. Labor members would retain the right to a conscience vote, but only until the election after next. This posed a new and unexpected problem. Labor members of parliament would be required to campaign, in 2016, for a party which proposed to deny its members a conscience vote on the homosexual marriage question. To the best of my knowledge, on the voices, I was the only vote against this proposition. I walked away from the conference shocked, alone and in deep despond.

How could I reconcile my position on this issue with my obligation to the party? This question crystallised further a couple of weeks later when I presented a paper on tax reform to the Endeavour Forum in Melbourne. Shortly before this meeting the organisers asked if I would also say a few words on homosexual marriage, given that the issue had attained some prominence at the time. I complied and in addition to a wide-ranging and detailed exposition of some personal views on tax reform I set out, somewhat incongruously, my position on homosexual marriage.

After the speech there were questions and answers. Depending on the nature of the audience, I enjoy questions and answers. They allow me to abandon the script and provide frank and fulsome answers which, when I am in flood, both inform and entertain. They also occasionally get me into trouble. I had dealt with two or three questions on tax and felt that I was getting into stride, when an innocuous-looking elderly gentleman in the front row, about three people to my left, raised his hand. Feeling confident, I gave him the call. He asked a perfectly simple question, which I remember word for word. He asked, 'Given your views on same-sex marriage, how can you support the Labor Party?' I stood there flummoxed. I said a few nice things about the Labor Party and generally avoided the question. I do not imagine that my answer satisfied anyone in the room; more particularly, it didn't satisfy me.

This question has dogged me for six months. How can I, in good conscience, recommend to people that they vote for a party which has determined to deny its parliamentarians a conscience vote on the homosexual marriage question? It is a question which I regard as having a fundamental significance to the future shape of our society. The simple answer is that I can't.

This answer has consequences for me as a member of the parliamentary Labor Party, which are distinct from its consequences as a member of the party itself. As a member of the party, I am free to disagree with party policy, to lobby for change and to encourage people to join the party with a view to achieving that end. As a party member, that is something to which I am committed. As a member of the parliamentary Labor Party I have

different obligations. It is a part of the job description of every Labor senator to work as hard and as effectively as they can to persuade every voter possible to direct their vote to Labor so as to maximise the prospect of a Labor victory. As a Labor senator, it is my job to tell voters that it does not matter that Labor will outlaw the conscience vote on homosexual marriage and to recommend a vote for Labor without reservation.

That is the job description of a Labor senator. It is a job which I cannot do. This is a new experience for me. For 37 years with the SDA it never occurred to me that my job might require me to do something which I regarded as wrong. Nevertheless, instinctively I know that if your job requires you to do something which you believe to be wrong, there is only one course of action open—resign. The prospect of my resignation has attracted considerable attention since even before my swearing in. The secretary of United Voice held a press conference to call for my resignation, a call echoed by much of the Left. At least half a dozen journalists rang me back then to inquire whether I might consider a future on the cross benches, a question which journalists have continued to ask periodically ever since.

Not a week goes by when my good friends in the National Party don't ask when I might be joining them. There are, of course, worthwhile contributions to be made from the cross benches, as Senator Madigan's successful motion calling for a root-and-branch review of the Family Court last month amply demonstrated. There are two circumstances in which I could consider remaining as a crossbench senator. Firstly, such a course could be justified if Labor improperly expelled me. Secondly, it could be justified if my personal vote was high enough to have secured my election without party endorsement. Neither of these circumstances pertain to my current situation—happily, there is no question of my expulsion and, although I received a very high below-the-line vote in the 2013 election, it was not nearly enough to have secured election in my own right.

I note in passing that, as I recall, my below-the-line vote in 2013 was higher than all but one of the 61 other candidates and higher than that of any of the Liberal or National Party candidates. I made no attempt to secure below-the-line votes. And the people who voted below the line for me were not Labor supporters; Labor supporters could have voted for me by simply voting above the line. In this connection, I remind the Labor Party that the key to winning elections is securing the vote of people who do not routinely vote Labor and it follows that preselecting a few more candidates who might actually change people's vote might not be a bad idea.

So, putting that to one side, if I am to resign, it cannot be to continue as a senator. I was elected to the Senate and elected as an ALP senator only because I was on the ALP ticket. The ALP needs all of its senators to work without reservation for the election of a Labor government. I can't do that and I am morally obliged to resign from the Senate and allow my party to fill my position with someone who can give the commitment that I cannot.

Accordingly, it is my intention to write to the President to tender my resignation. I understand that such letters take effect immediately upon receipt and in consequence I will defer writing for a short time. I will continue until the end of this session on 17 March, so as not to deny Labor a vote and thereafter for a few weeks to finalise my correspondence, clean out my offices here and in Perth and, most importantly, to do my best to ensure the successful transition of my loyal and dedicated staff, who until this week were unaware of my decision, to their next roles within the party or elsewhere. I hope to have the

opportunity to say a few more words about them and others if I am afforded the opportunity of a further speech. I realise that my decision to resign from the Senate over this issue, a decision so patently contrary to self-interest, might strike some as odd but it is utterly consistent with the views of the schoolboy who stood before a room full of parents and teachers to forcefully put the case against ambition and, for me, consistency is a virtue.