

Valedictory Speech

Senator Andrew Bartlett (Queensland)

Wednesday 25th June 2008

This formal valedictory speech is probably the most difficult speech that I have ever had to make during my time in the Senate. Even though I have given many, many speeches, probably more than some would have liked to have heard, I consider this more a valedictory for the Democrats as a whole than for me. So, even if I had four hours to speak—do not panic; I shall not attempt to—it would still be impossible to do proper justice to the incredible story, the enormous efforts and the many, many achievements of the Democrats and the thousands of people who have been part of that journey over the last 30 or so years. To try to do so in 20 or so minutes is not only daunting but, I think, almost impossible. However, I shall try my best.

As the longest serving and, quite possibly, final Democrat senator from Queensland, I do apologise in advance if my comments are too Queensland-centric. I do at the outset acknowledge the immeasurable positive contribution made by literally countless Democrat members, staff, supporters and parliamentarians from all states and territories during that period. I also acknowledge the efforts and achievements of all the other senators departing at this time. I sincerely wish them well, and I deeply and sincerely thank the many other people who contribute to making the Senate the crucial mechanism that it is for legislative consideration, public engagement and a check on what can otherwise sometimes be the unfettered power of the executive, the government of the day: the clerks, the staff of Senate committees, the attendants, the drivers, the public servants—everyone who assists us in doing our job, which is both an enormous privilege and an incredible responsibility. In a normal valedictory, I would acknowledge the contribution of others more fully. But, as I say, this is not a normal one and so I will do that in other circumstances and contexts.

I joined the Australian Democrats back in 1989, attracted, above all, by their ethos of recognising the importance of participation and the importance and value of encouraging everybody to try and contribute not just within the party but within our community and the electorate. Within 12 months, I found myself a junior member of the state executive of the party in Queensland and, on 1 July 1990, almost exactly 18 years ago, I was a part-time member of Cheryl Kernot's staff on her first day as a Democrats senator. What was initially meant to be a temporary appointment did not turn out that way and, somehow or other, from that day 18 years ago onwards, my life has been almost completely immersed in the Senate and in the Democrats. I was 25 years old at the time. I am a little bit greyer now—partly because I dyed my hair even when I was 25 but stopped somewhere along the way!

Unlike my fellow departing Democrats senators here today, throughout that time I have been heavily involved continually not just in the parliamentary wing but also in the organisational wing—what is sometimes unkindly called a party hack. But, as Senator Minchin often rightly notes, that is an important role that perhaps deserves a higher reputation than it is sometimes given. I would say that, I guess! Since that time I have not only been engaged with the Senate almost continuously but also held one position or another on both the governing body of the Queensland Democrats and the national executive over most of those 18 years.

I have known the Democrats and the Senate, indeed, longer than I have known my wife, who I met through Democrat activity. I married her over 11 years ago, both of us unaware that less than 12 months later, in rather unanticipated circumstances—as people may recall—I shifted from Senate staffer to senator, almost literally overnight. Both she and my mother were present when I gave my first speech on 11 November 1997, and I am pleased that they are both here again now. In my first speech, I thanked Julie for her love, her patience, her support, her kindness and her forgiveness; she has had to forgive me for a fair bit more since then, I must say, and I am pleased that she is able to be here today.

I am even more pleased that there is someone here who has appeared since then, our beloved and truly delightful daughter, Lillith. I am thrilled that she is here now and blessed to have her as part of my life. As all of us here would know, our devotion to our duties as senators means that our children, where we have them, pay a price. But I can assure her that the price she has had to pay has certainly been to the benefit of the wider community, because she has provided to me extra enlightenment, a greater understanding and a capacity to open my heart that has made me a far better politician and legislator. So her loss has definitely been the public's gain, even if they may not fully appreciate it. She was born during the 2001 federal election campaign and, virtually from her first days, I have had to live with the fact, and always will, that, even when she was five days old, during that election campaign she managed to get more publicity than I did. Some may recall a famous photo that the then leader, Senator Stott Despoja, had in that campaign, looking what I might politely call alarmed, holding a baby—that was Lillith. She managed to be either on the front page or on a page inside in that photograph for pretty much a week straight, whilst I struggled to get a single sentence reported anywhere in the paper. But we all know those frustrations.

I do want to particularly acknowledge the work of my Queensland predecessors: Senators Michael Macklin, Cheryl Kernot, John Woodley and John Cherry. Indeed, the seat I relinquish today traces directly back to Michael Macklin and the 1980 election. It is a source of great disappointment to me, and a source of some concern, that that seat is no longer a Democrats seat. It is not just that Queensland no longer has a Democrats presence in the Senate, but that we have nobody from outside the major parties representing Queensland in the Senate for the first time since 1980. That also applies in New South Wales. That is not to say that the Democrats or minor parties are always better than the major parties. But I think the loss of diversity and of that opportunity to raise different perspectives—which, at times, is not so easy for people in the major parties to raise or to give the focus that those perspectives might merit—is a real problem. In saying that, of course, it is what the people of Queensland voted for. But it is a consequence that I think people need to be conscious of in trying to make sure that some of those issues which would not otherwise be raised still get put on the agenda.

Indeed, when one looks back at the contributions of one's predecessors, back in the nineties, the eighties and even the late seventies, one can be struck—sometimes with amazement, sometimes in quite a depressing way—with how much things sometimes remain the same. To read Democrats senators in the eighties urging attention to be given to the unacceptable gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal Australians, including children, and other Australians, and to see literally no improvement over that time is disappointing. To see the continuing calls for better human rights made over 20 years ago by my predecessor, Michael Macklin, in China, for example, and in many other areas around the world, and to see that we are still fighting those battles—the calls for disarmament, the calls the Democrats made from our first days for greater attention to be given to developing renewable energy and alternative fuel options—and to have made in some ways so little progress since that time is not as uplifting as it might otherwise be.

But it is also important to acknowledge the progress that has been made and to take credit, on behalf of the Democrats, for our role in that progress in some of those areas I have mentioned, as well as many others. We have moved forward. We have undoubtedly moved forward in regard to accountability, fairer electoral laws and transparency. At the time the Democrats started we were the sole voice in this parliament not recognising the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, and were a lone voice for a long time in the parliamentary arena. That is obviously an area where significant progress has been made but where—as always should be acknowledged—more needs to be done.

Our role in speaking out on issues that are not popular is one that is crucial to a democracy. The continuing and deliberate focus of so many Democrat senators on what are sometimes unfairly portrayed as marginal issues just because they do not fit into the dominant political narrative of the day is crucial. It is precisely when people are not seen as vital to the immediate interests of the major parties or vital to a newsworthy story for the mainstream media that they do need a voice. I am proud to note our continuing role in this. From the earliest days, we strongly spoke out about the need to fight against discrimination against gays and lesbians, for example. We continue to talk about the importance of basic human rights, of getting the balance right. We were successful in strengthening the laws protecting our environment. They certainly

need to go further, but from our role in the early days of the eighties in pioneering the first World Heritage protection legislation through to the late nineties, with significant expansion in the environmental powers at Commonwealth level, there are things that we can and should be proud of.

Above all, I think our legacy is the role we have played in the Senate itself. The very fact that the Senate is seen as such a significant chamber, such a crucial check on the government of the day, is one of the major achievements of the Democrats. It is something that all parties now need to recognise, or do recognise, and must ensure lives on. Whilst the Democrats' time may have ended for now, the Senate's role is more important than ever, and that is a legacy that we bequeath to all of those that come after us, particularly those that sit on the crossbenches here. I certainly wish the Greens well in their role here. Whilst they have a right to be proud at having reached the level of five senators, it is important to emphasise that the number of people on the crossbenches here in the Senate, which will be seven after 1 July, is actually at a level that is lower than it has been for more than 20 years. And that means a pretty big workload in terms of trying to provide that alternative perspective on all those committees and all those different issues. It also means that there is an extra responsibility on people in the community to make sure that those issues are put forward and heard, because it is not just up to the politicians.

To me, that has been another key part of the Democrats' legacy—to emphasise that, however fabulous the current representation in the parliament may be, there is so much to tap into out in the wider community. To me, by far the best thing about the enormous privilege of being in the Senate is the amazing people you get to meet, not so much around here—although you're not too bad!—but the everyday Australians you meet who just go about trying to improve their world, improve things for others, improve the environment and make a difference in all sorts of different ways. We can all learn from them much more than we do. I am not saying we ignore them—we certainly do not—but I think we need to tap in much more to that expertise and that energy that is out there in the wider community, because that is the way to make the parliament work at its absolute maximum effectiveness.

The other aspect that the Democrats have been successful in that I think needs to be acknowledged—and it has in some ways made our life more difficult—is that we have blazed a trail for other smaller parties. When the Queensland Senate team ran for the first time in 1977, there were seven groups on that Senate ballot paper. Last time around, when I was unsuccessful, there were 24. There is a lot more competition out there. That makes it a bit more difficult, but I actually think it is a good thing. More diversity, more choice, for people is good, and the opportunity for people to have their voices heard through the democratic process is important.

I want to particularly note the significant contribution of Michael Macklin, the founding member in Queensland, and Cheryl Kernot. Obviously it was not helpful for the party when she resigned, but she cannot be blamed for what happened from then on. I think a lot of people have forgotten just how effective she was as a Democrat in this chamber, just how good a communicator she was and what an impact she had on a lot of issues that still have her legacy today—the area of superannuation, just to pick one.

Apart from the issues I have already mentioned where I believe the Democrats have had a great role, I want to emphasise the area of multiculturalism and immigration, which has been probably the biggest focus of my time in this chamber. The experience I have had in working with people in the community who did not support the approach taken by the former government—broadly speaking, supported by the opposition—towards refugees and asylum seekers is one of the most inspiring that I have had. I am talking about thousands of Australians who simply wanted to express an alternative view and to convince other Australians that there was a better way, that the way that things were being done was too extreme and too harmful.

I want to particularly mention one person, named Ali Sarwari, who was recognised as a refugee here and was living in Melbourne. I met his daughter, Sakina, and his wife on one of the times I went to Nauru. I do not know why, but it never leaves me, having to hear his daughter ask why she could not see her father and hear them continually talking about the pressure for them to be sent back to Afghanistan. They were separated. They were treated as being separate from Ali. Even though their father and husband was seen as a refugee, they were not seen as

refugees. They were imprisoned on Nauru for over two years, along with so many other children that I met when I was there. That one girl sticks out in my mind particularly. That man had to live here knowing his family were being pressured every day to go back to the horror that he had fled and knowing that his daughter was there wondering why they could not be together. He had to leave and go to settle in New Zealand for that family to be reunited.

That was a direct consequence of the temporary protection visa legislation passed by this chamber in 1999. That to me was an example, probably the starkest example, of a policy that was deliberately designed—consciously, specifically—to cause harm to innocent people. It sure as hell did. It did not deter boat arrivals, I might say, but it sure as hell caused a lot of harm. I know it is a complex issue, asylum seekers, and that needs to be acknowledged, but I would never want to see us again passing a law that so deliberately causes harm to vulnerable people, particularly children.

Let us not forget in this chamber the many children and others we locked up behind razor wire for years. Our government, on our behalf, even took court action and fought an appeal all the way through the courts to stop people in detention from getting access to mental health treatment, despite clear psychiatric diagnoses. It is unthinkable now, but it is true. I never want to forget that, even though it is distressing, because I do not want that sort of thing to happen again. It may be in another policy area from refugees and migrants, but that sort of thing should not happen again. There has always got to be a better way than doing that.

I say that not particularly to criticise—although, obviously I have many times—the past government and the former opposition for their positions, but to emphasise that it was politically rewarded by the Australian people. The Australian people validated and accepted that. As an Australian, I think we collectively have to take responsibility. We must acknowledge that that was done, ask ourselves why, ask ourselves if there is a better way and try to stop that happening again.

I particularly remember Ali Sarwari because, even more tragically, when he did finally get freedom in New Zealand and settled with his family, he was killed in a car accident. Life is not funny. Life is a bitch sometimes and it is strange how things work out. People like that should not be forgotten.

I want to finish by acknowledging the members of the party again. More than any other party, the Democrats sought to recognise the value of enabling members to contribute on key decisions. That was sometimes mocked. It still is and probably will be for a long time to come, but it is a process now adopted by many other parties in other countries. Whilst these things always have to be done with appropriate balance, it is a simple ethos that everybody has a valuable contribution to make. All of us in this place know that we could not have got here without our party members supporting the party selflessly and loyally, along with the staff that worked for us.

As always, it is very dangerous to single people out. I want to especially acknowledge those who have been members of the party through a very tumultuous 30-year history. We had a number of upheavals over our time, not just the more recent ones from five or six years ago. Some people stuck through all of that, and they need to be acknowledged. They stuck through it not because of blind loyalty to the party but because of a belief in what the party can achieve. Because they have been around that long, they would know one of Don Chipp's slogans, not the famous one about keeping the bastards honest, but the slogan: 'You can change the world.' We all can change the world; they did, in big ways, and I thank them for that.

I want to especially single out—and I know it is dangerous to do this—Fay Lawrence, who is in the gallery today, as she was in my first speech, and her partner, Bob. I think she is the ultimate loyal Democrat. She did it all because of the commitment to changing the world. I thank her for doing that and perhaps using me as a symbol of the many thousands who also played that role, large and small—and I thank them all.

I want to thank my staff as well. I have had a lot over the years—so, again, singling them out is dangerous—but I have to particularly thank Tracee McPate, who has been there from day one

and is here right at the end. She was a great help. Again, as all of us in this chamber know, none of us could manage to perform our role without the skills, loyalty and support of staff. I also want to acknowledge the team that I had around me when I was leader of the party. Because of the circumstances at the time, I was not able to properly acknowledge their contribution, but they were a great team who made a great contribution not just to the party but to the parliament and the people of Australia. I acknowledge them and the team I have had since then. There have been some difficult times, as we all know, and the fact that they have stuck through that is something that I wish to pay tribute to.

I think it is time to acknowledge that the Democrats catchcry of 'Keeping the bastards honest' was a blessing but sometimes also a curse. It is certainly well-known; it is probably the best known slogan in Australian political history in some ways. In many ways, it will always define the party, but in some ways it also unfairly confines it. We did a lot more than that. When you boil it all down, one of our greatest achievements has been to bequeath that concept to the greater body politic. To some extent, as we leave this chamber for the final time, at least in our current incarnation, that concept will live on—that desire for greater honesty, greater transparency and greater effectiveness. People getting a better deal out of our politicians and our political process is something that we, and also those of us out in the wider community, can all take on board.

One other thing that we would always emphasise is that you cannot expect politicians to deliver everything. We cannot all sit back out in the wider community and leave it to the politicians and the political parties. I am about to leave this chamber and go out into the wider community. One thing I intend to focus on more than anything else is to remind people throughout the wider community that they can make a difference. Pitch in and have your say. I know all of us across this chamber, and in all the political parties, usually do like to know what people think. The more people make their views known and the more they contribute, the more positive impact they can have on making our wonderful country an even better place.