



Speech by

**ANDREW FRASER**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT COOT-THA**

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Hansard 18 March 2004

### FIRST SPEECH

**Mr FRASER** (Mount Coot-tha—ALP) (2.14 p.m.): Madam Deputy Speaker, can you pass on my congratulations to Mr Speaker on his re-election. I often recall a conversation I had at the Grand Central Hotel in my home town of Proserpine in north Queensland a couple of years ago. A young man only a couple of years younger than me approached me saying, 'You're involved in the government in Brisbane, aren't you?' Without really waiting for an answer he proceeded to tell me that 'they' really should do something about that road down his way. As he explained his view of the world and how a lot of what 'they' were doing was wrong or misguided, he casually added, 'I don't actually care about politics. I don't even vote, but they really should do something.' There it was in perfect microcosm: the yawning gap between this notion of 'us' and 'them'; between what 'we the people' think and what 'they' do; the bankrupted trust between the citizen and their agent—not just a healthy cynicism but a complete absence of faith in the institutions of our democracy.

During the months I spent knocking on the doors through the hills of Paddington, Bardon, Toowong and the surrounding suburbs of the Mount Coot-tha electorate, I came across other people so utterly disconnected from politics that they had never enrolled to vote and denied my urging them to not only obey the law but also see the value in their own power to participate. Research by the Electoral Commission of Queensland released last year found that 29 per cent of people aged between 17 and 20 in Brisbane did not even know it was compulsory to enrol. Add to that those who know it is compulsory but do not enrol, those who are enrolled but who have failed to keep it up to date, those who enrol but fail to vote or those who vote only to have their name marked to avoid the fine and you quickly survey the fundamentals of a generation dangerously close to uncoupling from our democracy. If there is a control room anywhere, then the big orange light should be on.

To be sure, the ills of our democracy are now almost unconsciously accepted and in no way is this limited to one demographic. It being now the common wisdom that interest in politics is in decline, politicians held in abysmal regard, a sense that it does not really matter who wins anymore and a camaraderie centred on the notion that the exercise of one's vote is to be undertaken principally to avoid the fine. We can point then to the existence not only of the consciously disengaged, those who undertake to actively avoid participation in our democracy, but also of the unconsciously disconnected, those who have never assumed the value of their own participation.

The matter of our need to awaken the unconscious forms a central endeavour of what I offer today. In *The Unconscious Civilisation* we are said by John Ralston Saul to 'deny the legitimacy of the individual as a citizen in our democracy. The result of such a denial is a growing imbalance which leads to our adoration of self-interest and our denial of the public good.' I believe in the value of the individual as integral to the worth of the common good. I believe in the obligation of the individual to the common good and the obligation of the community to the individual.

I was not elected because I am one person. I have not been elected to a position of power but to one of obligation. I was elected to hold a position of trust for the term of this parliament—nothing more and certainly nothing less. This position is not mine to do with it as I please and nor is it anyone else's. It is not to be exercised or utilised in pursuit of gain or glory. Nor is it a matter for me to claim any sense of accomplishment at the mere fact of my election. What matters is what comes next. What matters is what you do with that entrustment and what matters is the manner in which you discharge

your obligations and necessarily precedent to that how you configure the nature of your obligations in this place.

There are scores who have been accorded the honour of having their name recorded on the wall outside this chamber as having been elected to public service. This can never be the extent of one's endeavour. I recall a certain former parliamentary leader in our country declaring that, ultimately, leadership is about doing what is right, not just what is popular. Happily, many times what is right will be popular. Indeed, this is not merely a function of circumstance but causally related. Our democracy functions to adjudicate matters to be right or wrong, and if a decision is mandated then it is definitively right regardless of its arguable normative value.

Nevertheless, I come to this place with an intellectual affinity to the Burkean principle of representation. Mindful of the raw mechanics of our election to this place, it is my fervent view that we must not only be mere functionaries of the majority but also be the guardians of the few. If we are to re-engage and awaken the unconscious, we need to be more than predictably reflexive. If we are to have an active civil society, we must have a truly deliberative parliamentary assembly. How we as a parliament auspice public deliberation is central to any ambition of an enlightened civil society. We must be the authors of ideas and the defenders of inquiry. The microchip and gene mapping were not invented in one day. The *Glassbead Game* was not written in one day and *Hotel Sorrento* was not filmed in one day. So why, I wonder, must every idea promoted in political discourse be adjudicated upon in one day? The rush to pronounce an idea as infallible or disastrous within one spin cycle surely detracts from our obligations as a deliberative assembly. Our first duty must be to thoughtfully seek out and investigate what is worthy, just and true, and surely this lofty pursuit is never to be completed within 12 hours.

Rather than achievement, right now I sense only the enormity of the awesome horizon of opportunity. To my mind it is a dereliction of duty upon being elected to this place to merely enjoy the view. No-one should enter this place to only watch the sunset or marvel at the dawn. Horizons stretch out before us to entice us to the limit, to chase the rainbow, to lure us to the next. It is the task of each of us to reach for horizons that further our cause. We must strive to govern for what is to come, to take an over-the-horizon view. We must never govern just for today.

The ephemeral reportage of government are the flowers and thorns that wilt quickly. It is the far-sighted plantings that reap the true bounty. To that end I offer some thoughts. I ask for nothing more and hope for nothing less than that these ideas might last longer than 12 hours. As an MP, the work in achieving success for our electorate is comprised, for the most part, of the hopeful lobbying of the executive, should we find ourselves part of the government, or the constant generation of noise in support of an issue, should we be sitting in opposition. To get a school ramp installed, find a grant for a new fridge at a soccer club or install a pedestrian crossing represents a significant investment in bureaucratic effort. This takes time and is characterised by the lingering doubt of ultimate success at every step. I believe we should consider giving MPs a greater ability to act of their own volition. Departmental priorities mean little to the local football club that has a busted barbecue. Voters wonder what MPs actually do. Let us permit them to act, to do, to respond and to quickly demonstrate their worth.

I also wish to address the manner in which we govern, not just for our own constituency but, in the Burkean tradition, for other concepts of constituency not contemplated by single member representation for geographic divisions. I address our obligation to govern to promote equity not just contemporaneously or across genders, backgrounds, orientations or religions, but intertemporally and intergenerationally. There has been many a word spoken about saving an animal species, a river or a forest for generations to come, but less often do governments realise their incumbent responsibility to save our cities, our health and our education systems for generations to come.

My generation has recently been told to work forever, but we have grown up being told to never expect that we would hold a job forever. We are admonished to stop spending and save harder to gain entry into a property market that has made a quantum leap beyond the reach of many of us. But for many of us, casual employment is all we have ever known. We are told to study harder and longer to gain more skills to secure one of the scarce jobs of tomorrow, but we are told it will cost more and more to gain these qualifications. For the most part we have been told this by a generation of people who have enjoyed economic and employment security, have benefited from ballooning residential values and have picked up their degrees free of charge. We have even been lectured on the 'survival of the species' while otherwise having the end of freedom enacted in front of us and our own aspirations to flourish talked down under the fog of fear. With all due respect, perhaps we should not wonder long why there is a caustic disregard for the institutions of our democracy amongst this generation.

Mount Coot-tha is one of the youngest electorates in this state. Nearly half—a staggering 47 per cent—of all those domiciled in my electorate are between the ages of 19 and 39, compared to just 29 per cent statewide. The folk of Mount Coot-tha are a discerning mob. Their cumulative profile shows them to be educated, hooked into the Internet, employed and earning above average incomes and are geographically mobile.

Inaugural speeches can sometimes amount to soliloquies of gratitude. I direct my first expression of gratitude to the people of Mount Coot-tha, who have discerned me worthy of their trust and, in so doing, provided me with this humbling opportunity. I direct this gratitude to every voter: those who voted for me and those who voted against me who obliged themselves and the rest of us by voting in the election. To those of every age and creed, background and persuasion, I undertake to you my every effort to serve in this parliament to your best interests now and in the future.

How then do we govern for the future? We must provide for the future. When we unpack the components of demographics and productivity that drive our economy we should be confident that Queensland is uniquely placed to meet these challenges. Our prudent fiscal management has grown our net worth and our absence of net debt is the envy of many governments. We have a growing population and high levels of employment participation. Indeed, I am proud to be joining a government that is truly looking over the horizon.

Our efforts to drive job generation, support new industries and invest in education and skills development should be the model for governments throughout Australia. What is the Smart State? It is jobs and it is our future. We need to be careful, however, that at times of economic prosperity that we should not be embarrassed by our surplus or visit the temptation to diminish our fiscal capacity in acts of short-termism. We should look to the longer term investment of our surpluses into financial assets that have the capacity to provide for the future, to build the infrastructure that will drive productivity and withstand the pressures of our demographic destiny.

This is not folly. In 2011 it is predicted that the pressures of an ageing population will begin to bring pressure on the capacity of all governments to sustain service levels. Our ability as a society to accommodate these pressures will be determined in large part by the federal government. I believe in the underutilised ability of state parliaments to be incubators of innovation in our federation. In current times I believe in the obligation of this parliament to create an island of justice for Queenslanders in the sea of injustice in which we find ourselves.

The matter of our federation is worthy of more dignified debate than the discourse of blame shifting, responsibility dodging and callous policy set-ups. I am proud to be part of a government that funds dental health care and will trial the imposition of bulk-billing clinics near our public hospitals. The courage of this government in meeting those challenges is worthy of commendation.

Perhaps over the horizon lies a time when cooperation and commitment to policy solutions will characterise our federation. The states must be provided with the capacity to deliver their services, not be squeezed by a Commonwealth government spending like a drunken sailor and raising short termism to a practised art form. The answer for so many reasons is not simply the GST, the illegitimate child of the Commonwealth of which it is so ashamed that it does not include it in its budget statements. Here is my challenge to the Commonwealth: please take back the money from the GST—every last cent, 100%. In return it might perhaps consider dedicating a modest 40 per cent of Commonwealth income tax receipts to all state governments.

I would like to return to my central theme of enlivening our democracy. In thinking carefully about the causes of a lack of faith in our democracy I considered the case of someone turning 18 in December this year, who will most probably wait until well past their 20th birthday to exercise their right to vote. It may be that every other obligation and privilege of attaining legal adulthood will be exercised by them for more than two years before their opportunity to participate in our democracy is provided to them. Perhaps by obliging younger people to contribute to our society long before we deal them into our democracy contributes to a disconnection from the political process. It is time again for a debate on the merits of dealing in our younger citizens at an earlier time into our democracy.

The debate on making government relevant to our citizens has a further dimension. At the birth of our entry as Queenslanders into our nation's federation could anyone have certainly predicted that the framework of our joining would carry us the distance reached today? Doubt toward a new endeavour should never deny our aspirations to undertake such endeavours. Ultimately, the examined life makes a virtue of uncertainty. To that end, I am of the view that as a state in our great nation, we should entreat our pioneering spirit and contemplate our own expression of the essential Australian spirit. I think the following passage says it succinctly—

The meaning is simple and ... irresistible—as simple and irresistible as the idea of a Commonwealth of Australia was to the Australians of a century ago.

The meaning then was a nation united in common cause for the common good. A nation which gave expression to the lives we lead together on this continent, the experience and hopes we share as Australians.

The meaning now is still a product of that founding sentiment—it is that we are all Australians. We share a continent. We share a past, a present and a future. And our Head of State should be one of us.

The same practitioners of the intellectual dishonesty that broke the nation's heart in 1999 today preach about the worth of our great friend, the great nation of the United States of America, a country built on the full expression of their own determination as a people. A modern presidential inauguration's prayer provides an instructive message, 'The founders knew then that to endure their nation had to change.'

And so must we. As a nation and as a state our founders always contemplated our need to update and refine the architecture of our government. From the tables of the *Lucinda*, they knew we would not forever stand still. I am proud to be joining a government that has been at the forefront of this chapter in the forging of the narrative of the Australian story.

Some other bloke named Fraser hung around in politics for a while and is remembered for a few things, including the famous quip 'life wasn't meant to be easy', and it surely is not. But it is easier if we embrace the things we have rather than yearning for things not yet attained. I have plenty.

In the gallery I have three of the good folk of the electorate of Whitsunday, who so wisely returned my friend Jan Jarratt at the poll, along with a resident of the enlightened citizenry of the division of Aspley, which astutely chose to re-elect the finest ever member for Aspley. My parents and my grandmothers have travelled from Proserpine and from Trouts Road in Aspley to hear what I have to say. They have been listening to what I have to say for a few years now. I am glad that they are in the gallery to finally hear me say thank you—most especially to my mother, Jeanne, who expended her long service leave in a hot, windowless, non-airconditioned office on an old used car lot during the seemingly interminable days of the election campaign. My dad, Peter, my brother, Ben, and my sister, Catherine, also arrived toward the end to lend a hand to what was truly a family campaign.

I would also like to thank the state of Queensland for the opportunity to receive such a fine education as the one I did at Proserpine State School and Proserpine State High School. Not many people can name five Academy Award winners, five Australians of the Year or five Nobel prize winners, but most people can name five of their teachers at the drop of a hat. I have outlined some of the values I hold true in this speech today, and a good many of those were learned at my state schools. Education is my passion and I am lucky to have so many great schools in my electorate and I will be their fierce advocate.

In the gallery today there are also present many other people, some of whom were in the room when I first joined the great Australian Labor Party. To Aide-de and Skiptoma, a rare find and the embodiment of the Labor Party, I finally get to record my thanks for teaching me and giving me so much. To Greg, simply my eternal gratitude for having faith in me. No-one has given me more. I have known Michael Dart even longer, and I thank him for his certain dedication to keeping the ship upright—a class act from day 1 way back in August last year.

I also want to acknowledge the work of the ALP state office, from Tash through to Cameron, and say thank you not just for the assistance during the campaign but for providing me with so many enriching challenges. I have benefited from support from across our great party and from many people in the union movement, and I thank them all. I would also like to make mention of my colleagues in Canberra. My good friend Tim is about to lead a famous campaign that will restart the enrichment of the narrative of the Australian story.

On the floor of this chamber I have a good many friends and mentors. We cannot just talk of mentoring of the next generation, of the importance of the leaders of tomorrow, without doing something about it. It is a proud moment for me to thank my colleague, the member for Nudgee, for taking a chance on me. Neil is a role model for integrity and hard work, and I strive to meet his standard. The member for Rockhampton taught me while in his employ that you can never compromise on compassion in politics. The former member for Ipswich and former Treasurer personified for me humility in politics. I also want to acknowledge another former member, the first ever Labor member for Mount Coot-tha, who provided me with every support.

I also make mention of another member who provided me with much guidance and opportunity. I was proud to serve in his office in the dark days of opposition, but I am prouder still to be here today as a part of his government—a government with a record that has been so resoundingly endorsed by the people of Queensland in recognition of his leadership.

We always save the best until last, and so I thank my wife, Therese, who is also here. I have said before in front of crowds much larger than this that she is my lover and my team-mate, my best friend and my soul mate and now it really is on the record. 2004 has already been a big year in our house, and it is about to get bigger. I cannot wait for our future together.

I want to close by borrowing from William Faulkner to plead at the start of my time here for a nobler, more hopeful pursuit than the quest for survival alone. I would like to adapt Mr Faulkner's most articulate acceptance speech made in December 1950—

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems with the spirit. There is only the question, when will I be blown up? We must reteach ourselves that the basest of all things is to be afraid and, knowing this, forget it forever. We must relearn that there is no room for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.

Without knowing this, we labour under a curse. We are concerning ourselves with defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. We grieve on universal bones, leaving no scars.

I, like Mr Faulkner, decline to accept the end of humankind. It is easy enough to say that humankind will be all right because we will endure and survive. I believe that we must not just endure, we must prevail.

And it is our privilege, as the voice of our fellow citizens, to help us all not just endure but to flourish. Together with the artists, the poets, the writers, the film makers, the teachers, the mothers, the fathers, the grandparents and all of the story tellers it is our job to reinforce our capacity as a people to lift up hearts so that we as a citizenry can endure and prevail. Where there is life there is hope, and we need some more of that.