

Senator Hollie Hughes
Liberal Senator for New South Wales
Maiden Speech
5pm 30 July 2019

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Thank you, Mr President.

I'd like to acknowledge that we are meeting today on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal People. I acknowledge them as custodians and traditional owners of this land and I extend my respect to their elders, past and present.

I am so deeply humbled and honoured to stand here in this chamber as a newly elected Australian Senator, representing the state of NSW and the Liberal Party of Australia.

My journey to this place began 44 years ago, and of all the political leaders to share a birthday with, it turned out I was fated to share mine with Abraham Lincoln.

I'm sure none of us in the class of 2019 would claim to be heirs to Lincoln. But standing here in this great Parliament, we all feel the power of his words.

His description of democracy that has never been bettered: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

His conviction that democracy has to be protected – it has to be worked for, fought for, and sacrificed for.

And his strong belief – a belief I share – that politics is about empowering individuals, not engineering society.

Today I think of the founders and builders of our own Australian democracy – politicians inside this Parliament, but also countless everyday Australians outside it.

And I make this observation.

Until relatively recently, that history of our country – and so many others – has been told as the history of great men.

Of course, our Australian democracy has indeed been shaped by great men. Too many to name. From our own founding fathers through to Menzies, Hawke, and Howard. But our history is also every bit as much the story of strong women.

From pioneering parliamentarians who have served with such distinction here, to the women in every community around the nation who work and fight and sacrifice every day for a better life for themselves and their family.

In my own personal story, strong women loom large.

I'm thinking of Thelma McQuillan, my maternal grandmother, who judging by every wartime mini-drama ever made, committed the sin of all sins by conceiving a baby out of wedlock. But unlike many women at the time who feared social castigation – and in spite of immense pressure – Thelma did not give up her baby.

She kept him and raised him with the fierce love we knew her for.

Thelma went on to marry my grandfather Charles – Chicka – who raised baby John as his own.

That strength and steely determination was passed down to my own mother, June, and whilst mum cannot be here today, the toll of severe dementia, I have never known a woman so strong – and so selfless.

You see, when my mum married my dad, Dennis Nolan, 50 years ago this past March, mum was a flight attendant. It was then both a legal requirement, and an accepted part of society, for women to resign from their jobs once they got married.

In one generation, our society has moved from a place where women had to remain “available” if they wanted to have a job, to where a woman who is both married and has children can be elected to the Australian Senate.

And I pay tribute to all the women and especially all the mums serving in Australian parliaments today, like my friends Lucy Wicks and Sussan Ley in the other place.

Having a family was very important to my parents and I grew up knowing how desperately I was wanted. I was my mother’s eighth pregnancy. My beautiful mum lost seven babies before me, all at different stages – and some not early.

My parents were in the planning process of adoption when I became determined to make an appearance on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday – I like to think it was an early sign of political ambition!

My mum and dad went on to welcome two more babies into their lives after me, my brothers Tim and Sam.

After a lot of heartbreak they finally got the family they tried so hard for – and my brothers and I could not have been more loved.

Without the fortitude of these women – without their strength at times when it would have been easier to conform to patriarchal norms – I would not be the person I am today, and nor would I be standing here before you.

Strong women form the core of my being.

But while I had these amazingly strong women in my life, I do have to fess up to being my father’s daughter.

We’re alike in almost every way – our personality, temperament, even the fact we both pretty much have the two worst singing voices ever to grace this earth.

While my dad cannot be here today, as he is caring for mum, I want to acknowledge him. At the time of their lives where “till death do us part” has real meaning; my Dad has excelled in his new and difficult role.

My family history meant my own pregnancies were often hard fought and anxious, but three times I have been blessed to hold my own newborn babies – Millie, Fred, and Rupert.

Everything changes in that moment you meet your baby for the first time.

You know your life has a new meaning. Your perspective shifts forever, and for the better.

Millie, Fred, and Rupert – who are here today – are the greatest blessings in my – and – my husband's Stewart's life.

I am here today because of my parents and grandparents.

I rise today – determined to make the most of every second in this place – because of my children.

The strength and perseverance they have shown me give me all the purpose I could ever need, and I hope they see the same resilience in me.

I want to take some time today to reflect on another strong woman whose influence has shaped my path to this place.

A woman who had the strength to dissent.

To ignore what the hierarchy insisted upon.

To resist calls for her to know her place – even to the point of imprisonment.

A woman who knew, even 400 years ago, that “women in time will come to do much”.

That woman was Mary Ward, founder of the Loreto Order, and ever present at John XXIII College in Perth and Loreto Kirribilli in Sydney, where I went to school.

Mary Ward believed fiercely in the education of girls and the enabling of young women to do anything a young man can do.

When you grow up with the legacy of Mary Ward as your educational philosophy, it never occurs to you that you can't or won't!

I was encouraged throughout my childhood and education to strive to be the best I could be – and never to feel constrained by my gender or anything really for that matter.

As I embark on my term in the Senate, I bring with me an amazing network of strong Loreto women who support and encourage me no matter what.

Women such as Shayne Miller, Belinda Bremner, Lisa Whibley, Susannah Lawrence, Anna Chandler, Amanda Rawnsley, Mary-Lou Jarvis, and Aerin Gordon Heinrich, and of course Deb Gordon.

In this highly critical, often viciously judgemental online world, we must never lose sight of the importance of real, tangible, unconditional friendship and love.

For those of you to not benefit from Mary Ward's teachings but who've shown me the true meaning of friendship, plus demonstrations of understanding the importance of dissent – Lucy Purcell, Susan Adamson, Lisa McGee, Victoria Bertie, Edwina Vine, Paula Richardson.

Thank you all for always being there.

Along with the example of Mary Ward, the other great philosophy I bring with me to the Senate is of course grounded in the timeless values of the Liberal Party – the belief in equality of opportunity, free enterprise and reward for hard work.

I joined the Party in 2002, and ever since then, it has given me the priceless chance to put my personal beliefs into political action – as well as the chance to meet incredible Party members and inspirational Party leaders.

Serendipitously, one of those leaders was a certain Scott Morrison, who saw me working on a local campaign – with my then mentor Rhondda Vanzella – and brought me into campaign headquarters first for the 2003 NSW State Election, then for the brilliant 2004 Federal Campaign.

It's my great privilege 15 years later to serve under Scott as Prime Minister, and as part of a Government determined to do the right thing, create opportunity and secure prosperity for the quiet Australians.

Elections bring people together like no other experience in politics, and I have been fortunate to work with some amazing State and Federal Directors and campaign teams who remain colleagues and friends to this day – Mark Neeham, Tony Nutt, Chris Stone and Andrew Hirst – Louise De Domenico, Jarrod Lomas, Luke Nayna, Mitch Redford, Alicia McCumstie, Vincent Woolcock, Susan Leithhead, and Reg Chamberlain.

Particularly, I have been blessed by friendships with three people that have included births, deaths, and marriages and everything in between – to Alex Hawke, Nick Campbell, and Bill Heffernan – the three of you have been with me since the beginning and are here with me today.

Your support has been unwavering and words really cannot fully convey the weight of my thanks.

I tried to think of some of the many words of wisdom Bill has passed on to me over the years, unfortunately, none of it was repeatable here is this place!

To Scott Farlow, Taylor Martin, Natasha Maclaren–Jones and Damien Jones, Tobias Lehmann and Dean Shachar, Simon Fontana, Chantelle Fornari–Orsmond, Penny Fischer, Yvonne Keane, and Joe Tannous– I'm so very grateful to these people and so many others, too many to name, in the Party and the Organisation for your presence in my life over the years.

Thank you to Danielle Blaine, a former Federal Executive colleague, a mentor, and more importantly a friend for always believing in me.

To my friends who've become family – Michael Tiyce, Lee Furlong, Adla Coure, Marie Simone, Marie Sutton, Kent Johns, and Anne–Marie Elias – you provide support and humour whilst always demonstrating a sense of community and the importance of giving back.

And a huge thank you for all the support from the Salt & Shein Team. It means so much that the whole team is here today!

Whilst politics can be adversarial, at times relationships across the political divide can become some of the most important. To my lovely friend of 15 years, the Member for Oxley, Milton Dick, what a journey for both of us since that Young Political Leaders trip in 2004. I have no doubt our friendship will remain strong, boosted by the fact you sit in the other place.

All of you here in the chamber, have played a part, in one way or another, in helping me to stand before you today, because, as we all know, my own journey to the Senate has been anything but typical.

In the immortal words of Sir Paul McCartney – It really has been the “long and winding road.”

The door it has led to – the door to this Chamber – is one of many that I thought might never open to me.

Now that I’m here, I am determined to use every minute in this place striving to open doors for Australians.

For those Australians who feel that their road to help is just too long and winding.

And especially for those whose voices are going unheard in our national and political debate.

These are the Australians I came here to represent.

I am proud to be part of a Liberal team dedicated to strengthening our nation with a strong, forward-looking economic agenda focused on the aspirations of all Australians.

But there are two areas I am deeply passionate about, that are very close to my heart and that I will pour my blood, sweat, and tears into.

The first is drought assistance and regional economies.

The second is autism and disability support.

And fortuitously for me, I get to work for a Prime Minister who has promoted the NDIS portfolio to Cabinet, ensuring it is now a national priority, as well as bringing the importance of our country communities to the forefront of the national debate.

To come into this chamber sharing my passions with the Prime Minister’s priorities gives me even more drive to work as hard as I can. For him, for families, for the quiet Australians, for everyone.

Let’s start with the drought. This crisis, occurring in many parts of regional Australia seeps into every aspect of rural life, the way water would be sucked into every skerrick of a dry creek bed.

I have experienced this first hand in own family.

Stewart and I and our three kids spent over a decade on the land, running a farm services business, helping to harvest, involved in the local community in a variety of ways.

Making a little money one year, smashed by a flood the next, always trying to do the best we could to make it work, Stewart out on his harvester for long hours, away for months every year as he chased the work.

Like so many other Australians on the land, we struggled along – we kept it all together – until climate and fate dealt us a double blow.

First, sustained drought devastated our small business and then my mother’s decline accentuated the need for us to be closer than a 10 hour car ride away.

It was incredibly difficult, seeing everything we worked so hard for gone; but we have each other, our health, three wonderful kids, we are rebuilding, trying to start again in many ways.

So many others don’t have that same option.

That is the real tragedy of the drought.

The businesses reliant on agriculture which don't have land-based assets as a safety net.

Businesses that for too long have been left out and allowed to fail.

Yes, it's the market, but once they are gone, they're gone.

Grass grows when it rains, businesses don't re-open.

Towns wither and die, and it becomes so much harder to provide essential services to those left behind.

Support for businesses such as Mick and Zelch Cikota's, Econolodge Moree, expanding in the face of drought, supporting a town that is facing a third year with no winter crop. Or Print Anything that Georgie and Roly King run over three country towns, all impacted by drought.

Farmers are the backbone of regional economies. But Families are the lifeblood of the towns that centre around them.

They are resilient and determined.

But they need our help – They need Liberal Government help – They need this Parliament's help.

I have always fought for families in rural and remote NSW – whether securing the return of QantasLink services to Moree through a community-led campaign, along with the indefatigable Lou Gall and Gig Moses, or establishing a rurally focused charity for special needs families.

As Senator for NSW, I will continue to fight for our farmers and the communities that depend on them. To honour their relentless efforts, not with sympathetic words, but with real action. Not band aid solutions, but policies that create long-lasting, positive change.

We need a big, bold, optimistic vision for the economic future of our primary industry. We need a plan to drought proof agriculture without destroying our stunning natural environment.

How good would it be if we could repurpose our existing infrastructures, like the NBN – that encapsulates regional Australia – to provide families with a secure income in places where they are primarily dependent on agriculture? We are a nation of innovative, smart thinkers. We can figure this out.

For those farmers who are agile enough to adapt to change and harness new technology, I will work hard to bolster their visions – rather than cutting a blank cheque to those who simply aren't willing to do the work.

I am determined to build on my personal experience; my years of advocacy; on my legacy as Chair of both State and Federal Liberal Rural & Regional Committees; and use the platform this great chamber provides to be that strong, loud, voice – that thunderous fighting spirit – for my country constituents.

I also intend to use my voice in this place to speak up for another community – one our family unexpectedly joined over seven years ago, when my gorgeous son Fred was diagnosed with autism.

Fred is the light of our family's life in so many ways, whether it is all the developmental milestones he's passed when doctors said he wouldn't, or his love of Godzilla, New York, and San Francisco, old fashioned media or just he and I watching David Attenborough specials, there is no one more loved or who brings more love to this world than our Freddo frog.

And while we did not choose to become a part of such a large club as the Autism community, we have found it to be one united by a great passion and determination to succeed. These children and adults are cared for by tens of thousands of parents and grandparents, siblings and local communities who band together with love and determination to do all they can to meet their needs.

Families living out their lives and working for a better future in spite of severe adversity that only these unique Australians truly know.

It would be easy for them to feel despair at the seeming unfairness and injustice of it all.

Instead, they just get on with it.

They don't ask for much.

But they do look to us in Government to ease their challenging journey – to clear away the obstacles to the fulfilment of each child's potential.

Recently, I was talking to an extraordinary group of advocates for children with disabilities.

What makes them effective advocates is that they are also parents who have fought for their children to have the best life possible.

We discussed gaps in the system, families who fall through the cracks and solutions we need to prevent the same things happening again.

And the common thread between all of us in that room was this.

The shock and the trauma at diagnosis.

The feeling of being completely lost as to who to turn to, where to go and how to find our way out of the darkness to create a life full of light and hope for our beautiful babies. Once again, that long and winding road to that unassailable door.

And then when you do finally find the strength to pick up the phone and discuss a pathway for your child – the last thing you need is reels of red tape.

Processes that are hard to understand, being explained to you by someone who, try as they might, cannot empathise with your situation.

But don't get me wrong.

I am a BIG believer in the NDIS.

The NDIS is the biggest social and economic reform Australia has undertaken since the introduction of Medicare.

There were always going to be challenges along the way.

There's no doubt that the NDIS gives us a much stronger infrastructure of support – but there is still much more work to make it truly fit for purpose.

But we should remember as Parliamentarians – as Australians – is that the NDIS is for every Australian. It is, after all, an insurance scheme – invest early/intervene early to ensure better outcomes for everyone, as you never know when your family may be affected.

Whether it's a child with autism or a car accident that leaves a loved one immobile – the NDIS is for all of us.

And that's why we should all care about getting it right.

For this generation, and for future generations.

It's our responsibility to represent the full spectrum of the electorate we ask to elect us to high office.

And when they do honour us with their trust, our job is to be the Government – the Parliament – that makes the NDIS work for every Australian who depends on it.

In 2013, I established the Country Autism Network (CAN), a charity centred on helping rural and regional families through the maze.

Earlier this year CAN had the opportunity to partner with Surfers Healing, an American charity founded and run by Izzy Paskowitz, former world champion surfer and dad to Isaiah who has autism. There's an amazing Australian team who put this event together – Steph Smith, Sean Tobin, Belinda Hitchcock, and Christine Fitzgerald.

The only way to describe this event is the personification of joy – thank you for letting me and CAN help you take close to 800 autistic children surfing this year, to experience the water in ways many never thought possible.

I have developed relationships with autism carers and autistic adults across our community, and I plan to use the honour and privilege bestowed on me by the people of NSW to be the strongest advocate I can for continuing the betterment of the NDIS. And in turn, to represent the interests of all of the incredible children, families, and adults who need a voice to represent their complex needs.

Ryan Norn, you are simply the best.

Tim and Judy Sharp, Therese and Ineke Potma, David and James Langford, James and Sam Best with Benison O'Reilly, Charmaine and Jack Fraser.

What I have learned from these amazingly resilient people and from my own life is that personal setbacks pale into insignificance when someone you care for suffers random misfortune.

I have learned that being morally or intellectually in the right is meaningless unless you get out there and make things happen.

And so, I have learned to fight back with all my strength, for my family, my community, and for the hundreds of thousands of others who look to this chamber, not for a hand-out, but simply for the help they need to get ahead and build a good life for their loved ones.

If my journey to this Parliament has taught me anything, it's that Australians are deeply resilient, inventive and optimistic.

We have the capacity to shape the brightest of futures.

And as Australia's representatives in this great democracy, it's our responsibility to walk alongside our fellow Australians, to hear them, to support them, to empower them.

My long and winding road to the Senate would not have been possible without the support and friendship of so many people that I've touched on in this speech.

None more so than my incredible husband – what a ride it's been. Stewart, hopefully we see a little more of the bright side for a while, but your humour, resilience, dependability has seen our family through it all. I love you.

My incredible parents. My children who light up my life.

The strong women who surround me, support me and inspire me.

Aerin Gordon Heinrich, Hannah Monaghan, Amy Lehmann, Jane Beer, Candice Steffensen, Abbey Neeham, and Callum Gurney, my amazing team.

The Liberal Party colleagues whose values we share, and whom I have worked alongside for so long.

The rural and regional communities, the families and carers of autistic children, and the many others I have had the privilege of meeting.

Everything leading up to this very point only makes me more determined to honour your belief in me – for as long I have the privilege and responsibility of serving in this place.

As your representative in the Senate, I will never lose sight of where I come from, who I represent, and why I am here.

To keep travelling the long and winding road.

To keep opening doors.

To keep fighting.

To keep speaking up.

To play my part here for a better Australia and a stronger democracy.

Thank you.