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**GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH**

**Address-in-Reply**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 19 February 2008**

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Thomson, Craig, MP

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**Mr CRAIG THOMSON** (Dobell) (6.12 pm)—Can I say right at the start what a great honour it is to be here today representing the people of Dobell in this place. Not many people get the honour and privilege of representing in federal parliament and to be counted amongst them is an immense privilege.

At this stage, I need to acknowledge the fantastic advice and assistance I received from Mark Arbib, Karl Bitar and Sam Dastyari from the New South Wales ALP head office. All of the Labor shadow ministers in the last parliament were great, but, in particular, Wayne Swan and Anthony Albanese need to be acknowledged for the support they gave to and tireless work they put into my campaign. Senator Hutchins has been a fantastic supporter for many years and has helped to create the opportunity to win back Dobell. Along with former member Michael Lee, he has provided tremendous insight into the many issues that affect the people of Dobell. I would also like to acknowledge the work of former Prime Minister Bob Hawke. He visited my electorate four times, along with many other electorates around the country. The shot of old Hawkie charisma was just the lift that my campaign needed.

I must thank Criselee Stevens, Sue Mueller and Matt Burke, who were there every day throughout the campaign. They are dedicated people and, to my relief, all agreed to work for me following the election. Branch members one and all need to be acknowledged, but, in particular, Bernie and Isobel Lowe, Pat and Owen Llewellyn, John Hawkins, John Shanny, Marie Watson, Bob Mulvey, Gloria Watson, Bill Smith, Richard Keating, Adam Wardroupe, Brian Sullivan, Robbie Kellog, Alan Wilcock, Barry Broadhurst, Darcy Waller, Brian Kirk, Jack Higgs, Ceri Aubrey, Iris and John Knight, Dermot Keane, John Redfern, Jim Briggs and, finally, Peter Cooley, who drove a busload of people down here today; they are in the gallery. I also acknowledge the assistance of Daniel Parish, who donated the use of a full-sized bus for six months of the campaign. Assistance from Mark McLeay; Struan Robertson; Karene Walton; the member for Wyong, David Harris MP; Councillor Neil Rose; and Mark Robinson also needs to be acknowledged. Special thanks must also go to Zoe Arnold, who has been a great support to me throughout this campaign.

This was a campaign in which unions were at the centre of crucial debates on industrial relations. The

support I received from the entire union movement but in particular from Unions New South Wales, the TWU, the CFMEU mining division, the PSA, and of course my own union, the Health Services Union, was phenomenal. Michael Williamson, the HSU national president, was a marvel in relation to the long-term support he provided to me. I would also like to acknowledge the support and friendship of my former state branch secretaries, but in particular, along with Michael, I would like to acknowledge Dan Hill, from Western Australia, Lloyd Williams, from Victoria and Chris Brown, from Tasmania.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my friends and family for what they have had to put up with and to acknowledge that in some cases they have had to make permanent sacrifices so that I could be here today. Politics is a great and exciting profession, but it can extract a high personal cost from those involved and those close to the candidate. To my parents, who are here tonight, my sister, Jane, and my brother, Struan, through to Christa, my partner of 15 years: thank you. You have all taught me so much and supported me in all my decisions.

I am a unionist, a former trade union official of the Health Services Union. Can I say that I am immensely proud of that fact. This election showed everybody that 'union' is not a dirty word, and we should never again allow our country to go down the path on which the former Prime Minister and his cohorts opposite were trying to take us. The economy and how its proceeds are distributed are always the major issues in any election. Those sitting on the benches opposite chose in this most recent election to forget that the purpose of developing a strong economy is so that it can drive and fulfil the aspirations of this great country's citizens. A government that presides over an economy that is performing strongly has, in my view, an obligation to make sure that improvements in citizens' lives result. It is socially divisive when most of the benefits of a strong economy go to those who are already prosperous.

Without needing parliamentary privilege, let me say that the electorate of Dobell is blessed with physical beauty unsurpassed by any other region in Australia. It is also the home of the soon to be crowned A-league champions, the mighty Central Coast Mariners. We are uniquely located, midway between the cities

of Newcastle and Sydney, but with a population of over 300,000 on the Central Coast we very much have our own stand-alone identity, separate from those of Sydney and the Hunter region. Our world-class beaches, intricate lake systems, unspoilt national parks and pristine valleys are a source of constant pride for all of us who live there.

The physical beauty of the Central Coast, however, is not matched by its present economic strength. Despite 17 years of uninterrupted national economic growth, many hardworking families on the Central Coast have not seen the benefits of these good economic times. The Central Coast has the lowest median household income in New South Wales and consistently has double the national unemployment levels. The youth unemployment rate in the Wyong LGA is at an unacceptable level of over 19 per cent.

For those of us who work, the conditions are often harsher than for those who live in major cities. Anywhere between 30,000 and 60,000 Central Coast people commute to Sydney to work. Over a third of the full-time employees in the many new housing estates on the Central Coast commute to Sydney. These people are spending anywhere between two and five hours a day commuting. Many parents are off to work before their children are awake, and they are back after they have gone to sleep at night. It is not uncommon to hear of people on the Central Coast spending more of their income on transport than they do on housing repayments.

I am a proud member of the Australian Labor Party, which holds as a fundamental belief the creation of a competitive economy that delivers opportunity for all Australians. A strong economy should and can coexist with social justice. We as a Labor Party are serious about our role as a regulator to ensure fairness wherever markets fail. I am proud to be a member of a Labor government that at its outset is serious about urban planning and development; water infrastructure; universal, quality health care; and the economic and social benefits of a world-class education system.

The people of the Central Coast deserve a member and a government that deliver for them. They deserve a parliament that better channels national prosperity towards universal opportunities for the generations ahead. The former Howard government's boast that 'workers have never been better off' sounds very hollow in Dobell.

The former Howard government was never honest about its intentions for working families and instead attempted to disguise its intentions through spin, Orwellian language and doublespeak, and that is precisely why it can never be trusted on these issues. Just look at the naming of some of the

industrial legislation it brought before this place: the Workplace Relations Amendment (Fair Dismissal Reform) Bill, the Workplace Relations Amendment (Better Bargaining) Bill and of course the Fair Pay Commission. Each piece of legislation is designed to do absolutely the opposite of what its title implies. That is, the 'fair dismissal reform' bill makes it easier to dismiss employees, the 'better bargaining' bill makes it harder to bargain collectively with your employer, and the Fair Pay Commission was created to reduce the outcome of national wage cases. No wonder that in the union movement we most feared the 'building better and stronger unions' bills. The public is sick and tired of political spin and wants politicians to speak clearly and honestly. The best way for us to promote ethical language in public conversation is to say what we mean and mean what we say.

This led me to think about my childhood. I grew up in country New South Wales, in Bathurst, a town that, when I was there, had less than 30,000 people. When I was a kid growing up, we had a real sense of community. When people moved into the neighbourhood, they were surrounded by neighbours inviting them for drinks and the kids for a kick of the footy. People made an effort to make newcomers feel part of the group. Those leaving the neighbourhood were always given a rousing send-off and welcomed back fondly when they came to visit. If anything happened to someone in the community, people rallied round and helped.

My New Zealand grandfather had a heart attack, which meant my mother had to go to New Zealand to nurse him for six weeks. While she was away, my father had no problems with meals—even though he could not cook—because the neighbours were always bringing around meals specially prepared for us or inviting us over for dinner. There was nothing special in this—it happens all around Australia that people respond to those in need. Whilst mum was away, we were on a roster, with different people picking us up and taking us to school and sporting events and all the things we were normally involved in.

Our neighbours made sure that no-one in the community was left feeling isolated and alone when they needed help. Clearly this meant putting themselves out, not for their personal or individual reward but from a shared sense of making sure there was a fair go all round. These are everyday Australian values that make us who we are and bind us together.

At the same time, in the workplace, unions were accepted by the employer and, whilst there were often fierce disagreements and strikes, no-one ever questioned the legitimacy of the union or the employer. It was part of the Australian way. Just as in sport, bitter confrontation did not go on forever because the

Australian way was to go to the independent umpire, the Industrial Relations Commission, to help resolve the dispute. Whilst occasionally we on the union side had some bad luck with the umpire's decision, we knew that a strong, independent commission that helped protect the weaker from the strong was essential for our community. These things were taken as unquestionable truths in our society. It is these values of community—values of sharing a common sense of belonging, of looking out for those less fortunate—that those on the opposition benches threatened at the last election.

I started by saying that the language we use as politicians should be simple, straightforward and honest, easy to understand—childlike, one might say. That had me thinking about messages we teach our children as to what is good and bad, from an early age. A lot of these messages are based on our religious beliefs. I think it is worth having a look at some of those values and then comparing them to the former government's values on the same issue. Value: 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you.' Former government: 'Don't worry about what others might do to you. If you can, do it to them first.' Value: 'Make sure you share with the other kids.' Former government: 'Take as much as you can. Don't share. Fairness is not part of the system.' Value: 'If you have done the wrong thing, say you are sorry.' Howard government—we know what their position is on 'sorry', don't we. Value: 'Play by the rules and accept the umpire's decision.' Former government: 'If I don't like the rules, I'll get rid of the umpire.'

The meaning of Christmas, as well as children's stories, would change for the worse if we imposed the Howard government's values on it. With no vacancies in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph would not have been given the stable unless they were prepared to pay above the market rates. Joseph would not have been a carpenter, because there would have been no apprenticeships. Mary would have had to quit her job, as there was no maternity leave. We know those three wise men would not be giving handouts without some form of mutual obligation.

In terms of fairy stories, the ugly duckling would have been locked up in a detention camp for being different. The sheriff of Nottingham would have been the hero and Robin Hood some market interventionist attempting income redistribution. We all know here that Snow White would have had those seven dwarfs on AWAs. In the former government's world, fairy stories would have all been written by the Grimm brothers. These are not values we want as a nation. These are not values that reflect the Australia that I know and want to see flourish. As a Labor government, we cannot afford to treat the electors as fools through political spin. We

need to be honest and forthright and to pursue values that bring our nation together rather than divide us.

The industrial relations agenda of the former government was about taking away simple rights that all Australians valued. How can dad coach the footy team or join the surf club or the SES if he has no input or certainty about the rosters and the days that he will work? How is the economy improved by a radiographer losing rights through unfair dismissal? No amount of spin or clever advertising could hide the effect that these laws have on the lives of ordinary families. I believe that is largely why we are sitting on this side of the chamber and not the other.

However, as the government we have to stand for more than a decent workplace. We need to look at other fundamental values in our society that have been eroded or overturned, and to propose positive policy responses. In my union role I have seen two areas in particular where the former government let us down. These important areas need to be addressed by the ALP in a Labor manner whilst in office. Under Labor, a strong and robust economy should create a humane society that will distribute benefits to those most in need. The two areas in particular that I want to concentrate on are aged care and dental care.

A critical lack of staffing is the greatest problem facing the aged-care sector. With the rapid expansion of the industry to cope with an ageing population, shortages are becoming more acute. The lack of staff, however, is not all due to a tightening in the labour market. The former government's deliberate policy has been to neglect the question of staffing standards for this most critical area. There is clear evidence both in Australia and internationally of the link between staffing levels and the quality of care delivered to the elderly. Staffing shortfalls jeopardise the health, safety and quality of life experienced by residents in aged-care facilities. There is a greater risk they will be injured, be attacked by other residents, be given the wrong medication, not get sufficient exercise or treatment from specialists, receive inadequate clinical care and not be properly supervised even in an emergency situation. Workforce shortages also have a clear adverse effect on staff.

Aged-care staff are committed, motivated and strongly believe in the importance of the work they do. But for those in workplaces with inadequate staffing levels it is a demanding and stressful job. Working in aged care, for too many staff, has become more dangerous and less fulfilling. The National Institute of Labour Studies report commissioned by the previous federal government included a survey of over 6,000 staff, which found only 13 per cent of nurses and only 19 per cent of staff overall believed they had enough time to properly care for residents; 40 per cent of nurses

and 25 per cent of allied health workers spend less than a third of their time providing direct care; almost half the personal carers spend less than two-thirds of their time on direct care; and the major complaints of staff were that they did not have enough time to spend with residents, and the facility they worked in did not employ sufficient staff. International research confirms the link between staffing and care. The most comprehensive report commissioned in recent years was the report to Congress by the US Department of Health and Human Services on minimum staff ratios in nursing homes. The report, finalised in 2001 after four years of work, found strong and compelling evidence of a relationship between staffing ratios and the quality of nursing care. It found poor staffing levels had contributed significantly to an increase in the number of bedsores and the incidence of malnutrition, dehydration, weight loss and other preventable disorders and diseases.

Reports by the Australian Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency confirm the direct link between a lack of staff and poor care, as well as highlighting the inconsistent approach adopted by that agency. I want to look at two examples of that. At the Elizabeth Lodge facility in Sydney the agency found staff shortages and training problems affected clinical care, the management of medication, continence management, behavioural management and leisure interests. One recreation officer—that is one recreation officer—had to look after 129 residents, 16 of whom were in a dementia ward. At the Valencia Nursing Home in Western Australia inadequate staffing meant residents were only washed on alternate days. That is despite all 45 residents being incontinent. Care staff said they were too busy to talk to residents.

It is clear that the current aged-care system is failing to deliver sufficient staff to provide the care and safety that residents require. Regulatory requirements for staffing, stripped away by the former government, need to be reintroduced and significantly extended. Minimum staffing levels covering all care and ancillary staff are the only way to provide a basic guarantee of care and safety for residents and their families. Accreditation standards need to be rewritten so that they are measurable and enforceable. A government that looks after the economy and creates a strong economic base needs to be able to ensure that the elderly are looked after.

The second area I want to touch on is dental care. In dental care, Labor can make real improvements to people's lives. State governments have struggled to adequately look after dental care since the Howard government withdrew its contribution from the funding mix. What is required is a Labor solution to this problem. For some strange reason in Australia, for

medical purposes the mouth is not considered part of the body. That is, Medicare effectively looks after all other parts of the body that may fall ill or be hurt in an accident, except for the mouth. I believe this has to change.

Australia prides itself on its universal healthcare system, yet we have a tremendous gap in the services we provide. Having to wait years for treatments for painful tooth and gum problems is totally unacceptable. Australia's overall dental health is the second poorest among developed nations. It means that countries like Turkey provide better dental outcomes for their citizens than Australia. We were seen as being so bad in this area that in 2006 some Thai Buddhist monks came and volunteered dental services to the people of Queensland because of our chronic needs in dental health. So, whether it is *A Current Affair* with stories of people performing home dentistry or *The 7.30 Report* talking to industry experts, the answer is the same: dental care in Australia is in crisis and that crisis requires a national solution. Most Australians will suffer decay in at least 10 teeth by their late 30s and we have one of the highest tooth extraction rates in the developed world. Nearly 60 per cent of all care from public dental services is emergency care, with more than one tooth pulled every hour these dental services are open. It is essential that we have in place an affordable dental scheme that does not have people putting off going to the dentist until they have a chronic situation. My union did some research, through Auspoll, looking at the affordability of dental care. That Auspoll research was conducted in eight marginal seats and found that half the adults surveyed said they put off dental treatment that they needed because of the cost. Fifteen per cent of parents said they put off treatment for their kids because of the cost. Currently, public dental waiting lists have up to 650,000 people on them. The frightening thing is that these waiting lists are really just the tip of an iceberg when you have almost 50 per cent of people saying that they put off dental care because it costs too much money. Some Australians have been waiting for up to 10 years to get chronic dental issues resolved. It is time to end the pain and fix the problem.

In my electorate Mrs Hanley told me that after an extraction for an abscessed tooth in May 2005 she was advised that she would have to wait at least 12 months for a partial denture to be made. She has no molars in her lower jaw and cannot eat meat, salads and nuts. Dental care is of particular importance to the Central Coast because we have a large population of elderly people. We also have a high level of tooth decay that adversely affects the young and the elderly. One of the other 650,000 people waiting on the waiting list was Mrs Hanley's husband. He has been on a list for over three years waiting to get his

broken tooth fixed. The *Daily Telegraph* told of three-year-old Cooper Agius, whose young teeth have been eaten away by medication he was taking for serious respiratory conditions. He was told he needs new crowns and root treatment, but his parents were told to sedate him for 12 months until he could get public emergency dental treatment. Again, a strong economy needs to be able to ensure that people's dental health is not jeopardised because of its cost. We need to ensure that the fundamentals of the economy remain strong, that inflation is under control and that the benefits of that strong economy flow to all Australians, but particularly to those most in need and most vulnerable such as the elderly and those with dental problems.

We in the Labor Party are in the privileged position of being in government. For the sake of the people of Dobell, and the people of Australia, it is important that we use our time responsibly to ensure a strong economy so that we can improve the lot of our fellow Australians as only the Labor Party has been able to do in the past. It is a heavy responsibility that the Australian people expect us to deliver upon and a challenge that I look forward to with relish.