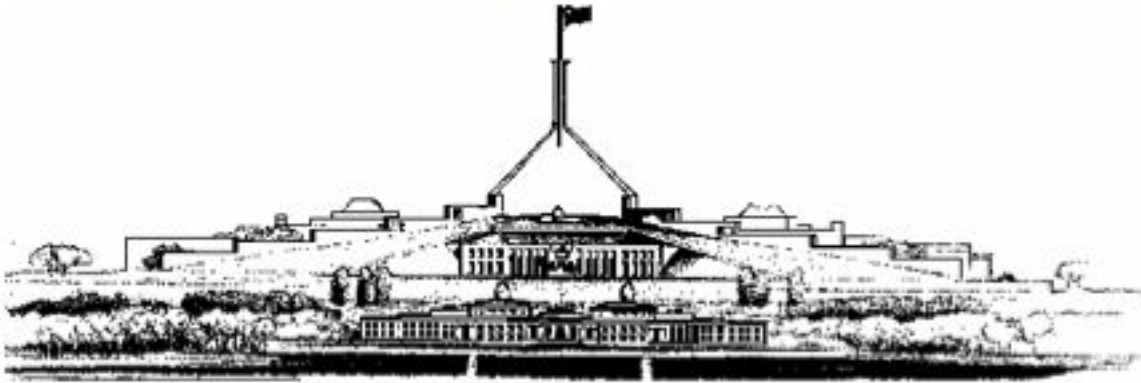




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

BILLS

Budget Savings (Omnibus) Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 15 September 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Questioner	Responder
Speaker Conroy, Sen Stephen	Question No.

Senator CONROY (Victoria—Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate) (20:53): Could I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate Senator Cormann for his constructive approach to resolving some of the difficult issues. Both sides were involved in a little bit of give and take but the approach taken by Senator Cormann speaks volumes for him. As it is very late, I seek leave to table the rest of my contribution so we can move on.

Leave granted.

The speech read as follows—

You should always go out on top. This week as Captain of the Parliamentary Soccer team I scored a hat trick. It must be time to say farewell.

In 1996 in my first speech in this place I said: "The Labor Party's next challenge is to confront the changing structure of Australia's work force. Technological change is forcing the pace as more people work part time and from home. A new type of poverty is beginning to emerge and its impact will need to be assessed carefully. We are seeing a growing gap between the information rich and the information poor. This has many implications for public policy. How do we ensure that every Australian child has the education including the standard of literacy they need to be able to use the new information technologies? How do we ensure that all Australians have access to the information carriers that will revolutionise the way we learn, work and enjoy ourselves? More practically, what can we do to make sure Australians have the skills and back up they need to be leaders in developing and providing these new technologies?"

There is nothing more fulfilling and no greater privilege than to be in Government and conceive, create and implement a strategy to deliver the economic and social opportunities that technology brings and reach all Australians wherever they live and whatever their backgrounds. The National Broadband Network will remain my greatest contribution.

The concept and plan for the NBN enabled me to meet some truly extraordinary people who have all been deeply involved in the internet debate. I am privileged to have met Professor Larry Smarr, a pioneer of the internet; Professor Jeff Cole whose insights into people and their online habits is world renowned and Larry Irving who created the phrase the Digital Divide.

These three great men inspired me even at the toughest times and I'm proud to count you as my friends.

I have also been able to contribute in other portfolio areas even from opposition. I have championed corporate governance reforms to try and make Boards and Executive Management more accountable to shareholders. Significant amendments to our corporate laws have allowed shareholders to reign in some significant areas of corporate excess.

I was Labor's trade spokesman at the time of the debate of the US FTA. I take pride in the fact that without my active support it would not have passed into law. I would also like to acknowledge the support of Phil Scanlon and the greatest Prime Minister Australia never had, Kim Beazley.

In the Defence portfolio the debate over the construction of Australia's submarine fleet was an enormous challenge. The then Prime Minister had done a deal to buy Japanese submarines and abandon our manufacturing base here in Australia. I was able to lead a campaign to overturn a decision of the National Security Council of Cabinet and protect Australia's national security interests and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of Australian families.

As I say farewell I would like to take this opportunity to publically acknowledge the recent retirement of a friend and champion of the trade union movement.

Wayne Mader was the Secretary of the Victorian Branch of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) from 2009-2016. He was a member of the Victorian Branch for 45 years and an elected official for 32 years. I consider it an honour to have served in the TWU with him for the four years before I entered the Senate.

Wayne Mader embodies the true spirit of the trade union movement. He is honest and trustworthy and has always put the interests of his members first.

Wayne is truly the salt of the earth, nobody could ask for a more loyal, decent and generous friend and I want to publically thank him for that. My success in politics has been in no small part due to the unwavering support he has given me over the 25 years we have known each other.

The Victorian Branch of the TWU is now in the safe hands of John Berger and I wish him well and look forward to proudly receiving my 25 year membership from him in a few years time.

No one can survive 20 years in the Federal Parliament without a genuine group of friends. It's no different in my case. I have had the privilege of serving with and being friends with a group of passionate and dedicated Labor icons. We have been called many things over the years but the name which stuck the most is the Roosters.

Wayne Swan, Jenny Macklin and Tanya Plibersek, three incredible individuals who refused to surrender their Labor values in the face of the greatest financial disaster in 70 years, the GFC. In the six years we served in Cabinet together they championed policies that protected and improved the lives of those who needed help the most. They were and continue to be committed to true Labor ideals. In my first speech I argued that Labor's mission was to civilise capitalism—that economic policy was not an end in itself. Wayne, Jenny and Tanya demonstrated that belief time and time again. They fought for that in ways that most will never be aware of, but I want to put on the record that I was witness to them fighting to improve the standards of living of working Australian families and that I know they will continue to do so.

I would also like to acknowledge the privilege it was to serve Australia's first female Prime Minister, my friend Julia Gillard.

I will miss my friends and colleagues terribly—our Saturday morning chats, our Sunday night plane trips, our Wednesday night dinners. All made the burden of being away from our families a little more bearable.

As each of the past few years slipped by other good friends have left this place and a piece of me left with them—Steve Smith, an original Rooster, ever the calming influence on Wayne and myself. What a tragedy for the people of WA that they will not get a chance to have him serve as their Premier. My skiing buddies Mark Arbib and Joe Ludwig, two friends and colleagues who always had my back no matter what.

I would also like to single out one of the most significant and long lasting influences on my political thinking. My first friend in the schoolyard when I arrived in Australia was a kid called Bill Johnston. This was in February 1974, Bill was the youngest from a large family. They were committed Labor voters and Collingwood supporters. 42 years later Bill is still one of my closest friends and it is with great pride that I will watch him be elected to the next WA State Labor Government and take his place as a Minister. His passionate advocacy for social justice burns as brightly today as it did when he was a teenager when his nickname was "Johnno the Como".

Peter Barron has been another significant influence on me. He has never allowed me to lose sight of the ultimate objective of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party—winning Government. Peter is the silent godfather of political advisors. He is one of the few people I have met who has the gut instinct to understand the 'mob' as he would say. His unerring wisdom has transcended 40 years of service to the Party and I think him for his patience with me over many years.

Peter always has the right words for the right times and on the news of the birth of our daughter Isabella, he described her as a "triumph of love and friendship". I am extremely proud that as a family we have influenced surrogacy laws around Australia.

As I look around Caucus today, I see an outstanding future Labor Cabinet to rival the best of the past. The most passionate and brightest have come pouring into the caucus in the last two elections. I'm especially proud of my fellow Victorian Colleagues and the contribution I know they will make in the Shorten Government. Tim Watts, Clare O'Neill, Richard Marles, Joanne Ryan, Rob Mitchell, Michael Danby, Peter Khalil, Anthony Byrne, Mark

Dreyfus and David Feeney. A group of true believers drawn from many backgrounds and experiences who share a common set of values to improve the standing of working people and to keep them secure in an uncertain world.

And to the next Labor Prime Minister of Australia. I have known Bill Shorten since the 1986 ALP National Conference. A bundle of energy and ideas from the first meeting. Bill and I have shared the highs and lows of all that life can throw at you. We have been friends, rivals and frenemies. He should never be underestimated. Malcolm Turnbull learned that on 2 July this year. Tony Abbott learned it on 14 September last year. The Canberra Press Gallery has still not learned it but they will.

As Opposition leader Bill has shown what I have always known—he is a resilient, smart, warm man of the people and for the people. He is Australia's Prime Minister in waiting. I'm sorry I will not be alongside you in the Federal Parliament as you take your place in history.

I would like to acknowledge one final Federal colleague, Kim Carr. Much maligned, a passionate advocate for unfashionable economic policies but a Labor warrior. If there was a tough battle in the Senate and you needed a wingman, you would always want Kim Carr next to you. People have always misunderstood our relationship. It is based on two simple things, trust and mutual respect. In the 25 years I have worked with, fought with and struggled together with, Kim Carr has never broken his word to me. In any walk of life that is the measure of a man.

I would like to single out some Victorian colleagues to whom I owe much. My two amigos, the founders of the LRA, Telmo Languiller and Theo Theophanous. Words cannot express how much their friendship and support means to me. They have believed in me when others have walked away, their loyalty has given me the strength to endure when I would have given up otherwise.

To my former colleague Mehmet Tillem, politics is a cruel game and it can be fickle. No matter how hard working, intelligent and compassionate you are it can cut you off at the knees. But Mehmet is a patient man and his time will come again.

Phil Dalidakis, a passionate, loyal and dedicated Minister in the Victorian Government. He is a powerful advocate for the people of Victoria and he is positioning the state to benefit from the jobs of the future.

My friend and confidant Bob Smith, the man who taught me to play golf—my family has not forgiven him for that. Bob saved the AWU from bankruptcy after the corrupt leadership of Bruce Wilson. I remember talking with him often during this period. He was faced with a dire set of circumstances that would have defeated most others but he began the rebuilding of that famous union from the ashes. A pillar of strength for me so many times over so many years. I look forward to sharing many more games of golf in the future.

I also want to thank Tony Sheldon, the National Secretary of the TWU. A committed trade unionist, a passionate advocate for transport workers and someone who gives unflinching support to his friends no matter the cost to himself.

My many staff who have made me look and sound so informed, intelligent and thoughtful over 20 years. Your commitment to the Labor cause was above and beyond so many times. I have been humbled by your friendship and support. To my current team - Lucien, Claire, Garth, Helen, Andy, Haaki, David, Bassell and Sam, thank you for always believing in me. I could not pass up this opportunity to mention one other staff member, our dearest friend Jan Cleeland, who worked for me for many, many years and was taken from us far too soon. She was devoted to me and saved me from myself so many times.

To all the dedicated staff at Parliament House, the Hansard reporters, the Clerks, the Librarians, the Security team and the Comcar Drivers both here and in Melbourne. Thank you for your professionalism.

To the person who kept me functioning first thing in the morning, Dom and all the team at Aussies. Thank you. I will miss the daily discussion of the world game, mocking you over Carlton's increasing number of wooden spoons and your warm and friendly smile day in and day out.

I could not have survived the last 20 years without the support of a loving family. Having grown up in Canberra, I have had the advantage that my parents live here. Canberra has never been the empty cold flat I return to each Sunday night as many of you have. Each week I would return to my parents home, where I grew up, to the

welcoming smiles, the updates on my nephews and now my great nieces. Bantering with Dad about Newcastle's results, him mocking Chelsea's results given how much money we have spent on players and of course watching the Chelsea -Newcastle matches together. But what made the trek up to Canberra on a Sunday night was the prospect of Mum's Shepherd's Pie - at the end of the day I'm still just a kid from the North of England.

The internet has been a boon for communicating with family across the globe but it has its downsides too. After a few years I had to ask my dad to please not use his name on blogs if he was going to vigorously participate in political debates online as his comments could be taken out of context and used against me in Parliament or by journalists. His paternal instinct was strong and he was always keen to correct the many inaccurate comments about me. At one stage when I was a Minister there was a particularly vigorous online debate about a policy I was advancing. The full force of the internet trolls was raining down and my staff were monitoring the commentary which was very unflattering. They came to me proudly to show me at least one person was defending me staunchly in the face of the abuse. The looks on their faces after they handed me the printed versions and I explained that Derek Green was actually my uncle and even worse he lived in England and could not vote for me, was priceless. Even from half way around the world the Conroy/Clements clan still loyally stick together.

I have had one constant companion through this 20 year journey, my wife Paula. We met in March 1996 just as I entered the Parliament. She has been a rock for me and our now 9 year old daughter Isabella. It is almost impossible to explain to those outside the Federal Parliament the sacrifice that your family make while you are an elected representative. It's not just that you can be away almost half the year, but when you come home after an exhausting week and just want to rest and sleep and you can't immediately let go of work or what is happening in the political arena.

It is also the intangibles - coping with the coverage in the media, especially as the 24/7 media cycle has changed the nature of political discourse. Noting the glances and scowls as you walk down the street together. Explaining to my young daughter why people have shouted abuse at her Daddy in the street. Being immediately judged as you explain what your partner does or who he is based on the media image. I'm sure you would all agree that there should be a special place in hell for those who judge women based on their spouse's work. Paula has remained steadfast in her support for me while maintaining her own career but it is the incredible job she has done in raising our beautiful daughter Isabella while I have been absent that I owe her an undying debt of gratitude. It is often commented that Isabella has me wrapped around her little finger, but who could not be when confronted by such a smart, kind, considerate, funny and loving, no longer little girl. She increasingly misses me when I can't be at soccer training or a match. She would love me to attend at least one assembly a year and be there when she gets an award.

I often reflect on when I was a kid, how my father who worked shifts at ICL would never miss a single soccer match from the Under 11s to the Under 21s. Week in, week out. You never appreciate it at the time but you realize much later how special it was. I always vowed that I would be there for Isabella like my dad was for me. At Father's Day at her school recently Bella had to write about her Dad. She wrote that she loved it when her Dad taught her new soccer tricks.

When you resent being in Canberra because you are missing your daughter's soccer training it is time to retire from the Federal Parliament.

It's time for me to hang up my boots as Captain of the Parliamentary Soccer team and spend more time teaching Isabella soccer tricks.

It has been a great privilege to serve as a Senator for Victoria, as Leader and Deputy Leader of the Labor Party in the Senate and as a Cabinet Minister in two Labor Governments. It is also a great responsibility. To my fellow Senators a final word - it is our privilege and responsibility to serve all Australians - those who were here before us, those living here today and all those who will come to join us and continue to build this great country.

Thank you.