

## First Speech

11 November 1998

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and congratulations on your election to office. I am certainly extremely proud to be here today. I am not sure that my heart will be racing quite as much next time the bells are ringing as they did this morning, but I am proud to be here in this House as the member for Gellibrand, covering Melbourne's inner western suburbs. Since its creation in 1948, Gellibrand has only ever returned Labor members. It has an unashamedly proud Labor history and a strong industrial past as the engine room for the city of Melbourne. It is a living, working, vibrant region.

Gellibrand has also been the first settling point for decades of migrants, from Maltese dock workers to Vietnamese shopkeepers. It has set a fine example of a harmonious, multicultural and diverse community. Through this example, the workers and families of Footscray, Sunshine, Spotswood and Altona North, amongst others, have sent a message to the rest of Australia about our capacity as Australians to work and live together, to respect each other and to have pride in our diversity. Many of these migrants came here to Australia escaping oppression and extremism in Europe, like my father's family, or they came from South-East Asia, and more recently Africa and the Middle East. Australia offered not only a safe and prosperous country to resettle in but also a strong democracy supported by an independent and accessible legal system.

The electorate has been very well represented by its former member, the Hon. Ralph Willis. For just under 26 years he represented the people of Gellibrand and had a remarkable career, being on the front bench for 20 years, in government for 16 years and a minister for 13 years, with a term of that as Treasurer. Ralph was first elected to parliament in 1972 with the Whitlam government. I was only five when he was first elected. I was finishing high school when Ralph was building the revolutionary prices and incomes accord in the mid-1980s. He was addressing ILO conferences as the Minister for Finance when I was completing my honours law degree at Melbourne University.

The point is that my generation grew up after Vietnam; we grew up after Whitlam; we grew up after the fiercest fights for equal pay and equal rights. Equality before and access to the law were becoming a reality, no-fault divorce was an unquestioned concept Medicare was an institution and universities were accessible to thousands who never thought they would be able to go to university. The social framework of my whole adult life was shaped by Labor's agenda. Labor had been in office, both in Victoria and federally, for most of the years of my political discovery, radically reshaping the nation by promoting multiculturalism environmental rights, fairness before and access to the law and reconciliation with indigenous Australians. When Labor was making history again with the native title legislation, I was working with the Hon. Justice Mary Gaudron at the High Court. It was a great honour for me to work with the first—and unfortunately at this stage only—woman ever appointed to the High Court. Not only was she an inspiration to me but I learned first-hand the value and strengths of an independent legal system.

When Ralph Willis was appointed Treasurer of this country, Jeff Kennett had been Premier in Victoria for some time and a major upheaval in industrial relations had begun. So too had an attack on judicial independence. Judges and commissioners were being sacked. Frankly, it came as quite a shock to my generation of Labor supporters that any of these institutions and achievements could be under threat. It was a jolt that our well-established and accepted tribunal system, which provided the community with independent umpires to protect their basic rights, could be under attack.

It was at this time that I was employed by the National Union of Workers as a union organiser, and this began my earliest connection with the seat of Gellibrand. As I have said, Gellibrand is the industrial heartland of Victoria, and it was my job to visit the many warehouses, food factories and chemical plants in this area, discussing wages, safety and training with our union members. It was a wonderful opportunity to spend time listening to and learning from these people and helping to fix workplace problems. The workers I met with and the working community of Gellibrand were a broad cross-section, ranging from women packing foods and pharmaceuticals to forklift drivers in blueys, men working in freezers at minus 30 degrees Celsius, Macedonian abalone packers and Filipino and Scottish refinery operators. These workers were a wealth of knowledge about the world, and from one worker to another they shared the aspirations of our region.

The constant blending of new cultures in Gellibrand has strengthened, not dampened, the essential spirit of the western suburbs—that spirit being to protect and support each other, to have pride in our Labor and industrial heritage, to believe vehemently in fairness, equity and independence, and to share a pride in our families, their education, hopes and aspirations. This spirit is a Labor spirit.

I feel proud and honoured that these people of Gellibrand have chosen me to represent them in Australia's most important forum—that they have entrusted me to be their voice, the voice making sure that the region's needs are recognised. I thank them for their support, particularly Ron Palmer and my campaign team, and assure them that they should feel confident that I will do all that is within my powers to ensure that our community's aspirations are realised.

There are also a number of people who had the foresight to encourage me early, and to them I am deeply grateful. Thanks must especially go to Bill Shorten; Greg Sword; Denis Lennen; the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Simon Crean; Senator Stephen Conroy; Marsha and Kelvin Thomson; Simone Hurst; Natalie Sykes; and John Cain. For their personal assistance and support, I thank them. I am sure that it is not over and their support will still be required in the future. These people know that when the Howard government was first elected in 1996 unions and workers braced themselves for a new period of instability and unfair attack. They also saw this spark my political activism. They saw me move back to the law as an industrial lawyer with Labor law firm Maurice Blackburn. I returned to the law to be able to protect and represent working people at the front line of attack by the Howard government in the Industrial Relations Commission and in the courts. I now, with their encouragement and support, have the opportunity to continue this fight in parliament.

Having briefly reflected today on Ralph's 26 years in politics, I invite you to imagine what, in the next 26 years, our society will look like. What will the next generation of Australians, like me before them, take for granted? I would hope that in that society the 40 per cent of families living in my electorate who survive on a family income of below \$500 a week will be confident that despite all of the difficulties that they face their children will still have access to affordable and quality education and free quality health care should they become ill. They will have a chance, equal with all others irrespective of income, to do better for themselves and their children. They will have the opportunity to work. This simple aim is becoming more and more difficult to achieve, as we all know, in our world of chronic and pervasive unemployment. We will have regional industry policies which will be strategic and long term, looking to our country halfway into the next millennium, not just to the turn of the century. We will have an employment service which offers support and assistance to our unemployed and does not view them as a vehicle for profit making. When we do work, our jobs will be secure and we will be respected.

In the society I aim for, the unemployment figures which are particularly devastating in the western region of Melbourne, will not be used by unscrupulous employers as a threat to add to the insecurity already felt by so many in our fast-changing world. Currently job seekers are constantly being told, 'You should be grateful for a job, grateful for any job, grateful no matter what the conditions are, grateful to have the Christmas holiday, grateful for a tea break, grateful even to belong to a union even though you will be too scared to talk to them.'

It may be a dream of some in this House—although they do not appear to be here to show that dream—to force Australian workers to this form of modern day servitude where workers are grateful for any job under any conditions. But it is not a dream that I can share nor can any of my Labor colleagues.

In this government's last term we saw it use the current economic environment with its high levels of unemployment as an opportunity to promote its industrial relations ideology. This should be a time when we are putting all our energies into creating jobs and employment, not using the opportunity to drive down working conditions.

On this side of the House we know we must fight to pursue that goal of secure jobs with decent award wages. We know that it cannot be fought for by individual workers at individual workplaces. We know that it cannot be fought for just by unions, industry at a time. We know that it cannot be fought for by lawyers in courts as each case arises. It needs to be fought for by all of us in the broader labour movement, in all those places and

by us on this side of the House. I feel sure that I speak for all in Labor's ranks when I say that we are committed to fighting to uphold these decent standards.

It is my belief that the lack of job security has struck a strong chord within our community because the arbitrary and unfair behaviour that is being condoned in the workplace by this government could easily spill into other aspects of our lives. The spillage has, in fact, already begun. The Industrial Relations Commission has had its powers curbed by the Howard government. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission is chronically underfunded. Legal Aid has been cut beyond the quick. These institutions were just some of Labor's ways of ensuring protection for all in the community, particularly those most likely to suffer at the hands of the more powerful like big business and government. These were methods for regulating a decent society. They helped align our legal system more closely with our notions of justice. Our legal system under the current government is fast becoming a casino for the rich and inaccessible to all others.

I would hope that in 26 years time we have a legal system in this country which protects people, and which is cheap and accessible to everybody. Without this we cannot ensure that our community will continue to have a peaceful way of resolving disputes. We must not weaken the system to the extent that we leave the powerful to run roughshod over others, or worse resort to violence and intimidation to get their way— as occurs in so many other countries around the world.

As part of United Nations Refugee Week last month, I had the opportunity to reflect on some of these other countries. I heard many stories of countries where the infrastructure and democracy had crumbled around them—devastation, crime, abuse of power and complete disorder ruled. I was particularly moved by a Vietnamese refugee, now a senior monk at a major temple of ours in Braybrook, who spoke quietly of his hardship in escaping Vietnam and resettling in Australia. But this quietly spoken Vietnamese monk became quite animated telling the assembled crowd of his most satisfying and thrilling experience since settling in this country—the day he cast his first vote in an election. He described this as a precious moment, a sign not just that he was accepted within our community but that he was truly a participant in it and a participant in a genuine, stable democratic process—something that so many of us take for granted. It is funny that we must look at our country occasionally through the eyes of others who have suffered through war or tyranny to truly appreciate what it is that we have.

I believe that looking through others' eyes at our institutions can in fact strengthen them, including the institution of this parliament. I am committed, in the next 26 years, to further strengthening our country's institutions. Hopefully we will, by that time if not well before, be a republic. I would hope that the new batch of members, all Labor of course, will not swear allegiance to the Queen but to serving the people of Australia. That republic will more appropriately represent the changing and growing face of our community.

We should also aim for this republic of Australia to embrace an egalitarian spirit, one where women in this country will be truly equal and, if they so choose independent. We must work so that in 26 years time the next generation will take for granted affordable and accessible child care, and take for granted workable sex discrimination legislation; and that we will have many women judges and more directors on boards of public companies than we can count. Very importantly, if this government is intent on pursuing a tax on consumption we must have true equal remuneration.

My generation of feminists are impatient that these basic issues and others have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. But, at the same time as continuing those fights, we want to be heard on other issues. The economy is still not regarded as a women's issue; tax is not regarded as a women's issue; industrial relations industry policy—the list goes on. But these mainstream issues are of vital importance to women. They are key matters that must be debated with all parts of the community in mind.

The world in the next 26 years should be able to take for granted and acknowledge that women are a mainstream issue in themselves. We are not a single issue to be marginalised. Our needs and interests must be considered in all decisions made by government and our voices must be heard in those areas. I am delighted to be here today and to be joined by so many other Labor women also making their first speech in parliament. I would hope that in 26 years time, in a speech like this, it will be so unremarkable that neither

the fact that I am young nor that I am a woman will even be noted. Instead it will be a world where it is noted that I am a lawyer or a unionist or that I come from a family of strong women, or some such other personal or professional description which we may all find of interest.

Today is not just about my hopes and aspirations; it goes well beyond that. Today is about what I want to do to work towards achieving those hopes and aspirations as part of Labor's plan for the next generation under the next Beazley government. In fact, today is not just about our plans for the next generation, it is also our plan for the existing generations. For my mother sisters and other relatives who are in the gallery today, I want to ensure that we live in a country that is comfortable for you to grow old in, where you will be treated with respect as you age and will be confident that the community will provide you with care and support if that is needed.

Today is also about our capacity on this side of the House to drive the agenda for change in our society: to make it fairer and stronger and more humane. We are brimming with that capacity and have a powerful mix of experience and new perspective in our ranks . This will ensure that Labor can continue to be the progressive party of this country. We will strive to create a nation that can face the new millennium and beyond with humanity, fairness and security as the keys to our policy.

My parents taught me at a young age about fairness and decency, generosity, having a go and helping others. When my father died, when I was 10, my mother taught me about independence and integrity. These values were the foundation that ultimately led me to the Labor Party and they are the yardstick against which I continue to make my judgments today. If I can leave this House having upheld and furthered those values, I will be very proud to have lived up to my family's hopes and aspirations.

**Honourable members—Hear, hear!**