

Valedictory Speech

18 June 2013

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand) (12:01): on indulgence—I intend to start this speech rather than finish it with my personal thanks, because I think they are the easy ones to miss at the end in a rush. All that we as politicians can achieve for the community fundamentally relies on a lot of other people. Families, friends and staff help us, support us, sooth us and share our triumphs. I have been incredibly blessed on all of those fronts: a wonderful mother and sisters, the best staff imaginable—a number of them are here today; you can see that getting this out early is a good idea—and, of course, plenty of friends in and out of politics have helped to keep me sane. Most of all I thank my gorgeous, reliable and very funny husband, Michael. Together, Michael and mum helped me manage a busy life as a senior cabinet minister with a young child, the first woman to combine such roles. Without mum travelling with me for the first year while I was breastfeeding, I am not sure I would have managed, and without Michael, then and ever since, I certainly would not have. Deb and Tiffany have also helped make Rebecca the happy, confident and loving little bright spark that she is.

Mum is responsible for a number of funny moments in my political life, and the former Prime Minister might remember one of them. My favourite was in 2007 when mum marched up to Kevin, then just a newly sworn-in Prime Minister, on the very day that we were at Government House, pushing ministers to the side and demanding that he promise to give me some time off to get married, or she feared it would never happen. That is probably the only time I have seen Kevin stuck for words.

In 15 years in Canberra, I have also been very lucky to have good friends to flat with—for many years with Adrienne and for last four years with Lisa, Michael and their three children. Warm company, nonpolitical discussion and chocolate was a much needed balm on many occasions after a day in this place, and I thank them. Perhaps weirdly, I also need to thank Tony Abbott. I wish to thank him for providing the material for some of the most memorable moments of my political career: standing me up and then swearing at me at the Press Club in the 2011 election campaign, although it was awkward at the time, I think cost him and the Liberal Party much more; for producing those silly golf balls that made for an irresistible gag in the parliament; and for continuing to take donations from tobacco companies, allowing me to coin the phrase, 'Kick the habit, Mr Abbott.'

More seriously, thank you to the ALP members in Gellibrand and the electors of Gellibrand, allowing me the honour of representing them at five elections. From Western Health, ethnic community leaders, the Bulldogs and Maidstone community house to local councils, I have loved working with the community and hope that I have lived up to their expectations.

There have been more staff than I can thank here for their friendship and their hard work. Suffice to say that any of my successes were theirs too. I am glad some of them are here today. I am looking forward to the big cook-up that I am doing for them soon. Getting and keeping good staff is one of the best compliments a minister can get and is one of the wise investments to make in political life. I want to particularly thank my longest-serving staff member, Narelle, for her professionalism and friendship, and Angela for her brains and leadership over so many years. I would like to take this chance to wish Chris and Connie all the best for their upcoming wedding.

For colleagues, it is an exercise of love and loyalty to work for this great Labor cause that we believe in, but to do it together makes it even more satisfying. Thank you to my friends here, particularly to my Victorian colleagues, the class of '98 and my ministerial friends. A particular thank you to Mark, Justine, Warren and Catherine for their work as the health team during the very busy health reform days. This brings me to a special thank you to the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. She is an amazing Prime Minister, a great Labor leader and an impressive woman, and she is a good friend to me. We should be proud of her and her work, but more of that later.

Thank you also to the staff of the parliament and the two secretaries and staff of the departments of health and the Attorney-General's. People love to send up bureaucrats, especially Canberra bureaucrats, but I found you and your teams highly capable, very professional and hard-working—and I thank you. I fear that those

opposite, in wanting to tap in to this common prejudice against public servants, will slash many staff without really understanding the scope of the work that they do. The PBS cannot list new drugs for sick Australians if bureaucrats do not work through the process of approval. Emergency hotlines cannot be staffed if the importance of having a person at the end of the line is not recognised, whether it is for flood assistance or a GP after-hours service. Already we know that we stand to lose more than 40 front-line health workers locally—psychologists, mental health nurses and pharmacists—if the Liberals are elected and abolish Medicare Locals, as they have committed to doing.

Of course, I could not stand up today in this place, in this line of work, and not acknowledge that it does not feel like I am giving a speech at a hard time from Labor. Even for true Labor believers there are times when it can feel frustrating or hard work to come out and support a cause that we all believe in deeply for a party that we all love deeply. But for Labor, by its nature and its causes, we are a party of optimists—a party that believes that we can, through politics and government, help improve the lives of those around us. We cannot let the critics, the nay-sayers and the nasties define us. They are never going to acknowledge our hundreds of achievements, so the truth is we might be down but we are not out. Our party is older than the nation itself. Our causes are timeless, although they take on different forms over different decades.

Whether it was Medicare and the Snowy Mountains schemes of the past or DisabilityCare and the National Broadband Network of the future, Labor are the only party that delivers compassion and nation building in equal measure. We can and should be proud of this. We can and should focus more on this. We have allowed internal tensions to overshadow our core mission for too long. We are a proud party with a proud record; now we need to start behaving like one.

Politics moves so fast these days that we find it hard to reflect on and absorb what has been done. The media struggle to report policies that salve decades-old ailments, preferring the daily itch. Perfect examples of this are the NDIS, health reform, the National Plan for School Improvement and the NBN, even the new ASIO review system. These are structural, compassionate, complex reforms and investments that will deliver lasting improvements for the nation. Because progressive parties like ours want to achieve so much, we do not often take the time to reflect enough on what has been achieved.

Labor in government has been so busy, arguably too busy, that we have been on to the next challenge without taking the time to stop, appreciate and be proud of all the work that we are doing. Retiring gives me a good excuse to pause and focus on what has changed in my time here; locally in my electorate of Gellibrand, but more broadly for the nation. Not all my hopes of 15 years ago in my first speech have been fulfilled—that is true; becoming a republic is one of them. But a great many others have, and those issues that are left and new ones to come just underline the point that Labor's mission is still a work in progress, not one where our work is complete.

Locally we can take great pride in the reduction in unemployment and pulling many thousands of families living in poverty up into better circumstances. We have opened up university for more kids than ever before. We have set up the National Congress for Australia's First Peoples. We have ensured that people have better access to doctors and nurses when they need them, and more chance of becoming them if that is what they want. We have put fairness back into the workplace and introduced the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

As an issue I raised strongly in my first speech, I am pleased that we have achieved much for women; although that path still has a long way to travel. We should celebrate supporting pay equality for the lowest-paid women in the workforce; increasing government assistance for child care; having the first female Governor-General, Attorney-General and Prime Minister; and better protection from violence against women and children in family laws. And we have paid parental leave—at last—thanks to Labor.

We can be proud of those things and many more, yet I cannot help but despair a bit on this front as well. We have a capable, tough, smart, determined woman as our Prime Minister, yet she has been subjected to some of the most crass, silly, petty, sexist and just plain rude behaviour for years. At the same time we have the Defence Force grappling with degrading, demeaning and plain awful treatment of women in and out of the

workforce. The proper treatment of women has long been a priority for me. In the law, before I came here, I acted for too many women, young and old, who were treated appallingly in their workplaces—from pizza shops to TAFE colleges. These latest events show us that there is a dangerous underbelly still compromising women in Australia and that the feminist cause is just as urgent as before.

It really is time for people to understand how corrosive sexism is, to acknowledge that it deliberately sets out to diminish authority and sideline the real issues, and to realise how constantly sexualising women disempowers them and how extreme and violent language can turn into or encourage violent and dangerous behaviour. I am proud to be on this side of the House amongst so many Labor women and men fighting to tackle these issues that affect so many Australians in many walks of life. Men are joining women in these fights. Stephen Smith, as the Minister for Defence, could not have been more clear in his expectations for our military despite his strong stand being criticised initially within defence. Bill is fighting to get rights to request part-time work into our laws. Simon and Kevin, as leaders, were never afraid to have good women in senior roles in their show.

Personally, I would like to thank Joe Ludwig for covering me so willingly while I was on maternity leave, and Anthony Albanese for insisting that I be given leave to attend Rebecca's first day at school. These fights are both small and big, national and personal. I am proud that, for Labor, it is the men and women fighting together for these changes. These changes will make us a better nation. They will utilise the nation's potential more thoroughly. After all, is that not what Labor is about? Whether it is women fulfilling their potential freely or getting all Australians access to high-speed broadband whether they are in city or country, rich or poor, for education, for employment or just for fun, or better schooling for kids who need the most help, this is the great work of our party. These issues along with many others highlight that our work is not yet done here and that our efforts are all part of a long Labor continuum that will continue well past today. Each step is just one in the great sweep of Labor history, taking years if not decades to build a better country.

As we fight each and every new challenge, we must remember that Labor is on the side of the nation's history. It is a record and history we need to discuss more widely and use to help shape a positive future. Focus on this example: when I was elected 15 years ago, a bright young kid in my electorate who dreamed of being a doctor could not train in the west of Melbourne at all. Now they can study in new science labs at Braybrook secondary school, or they can do their whole medical training in the west at Sunshine Hospital or at Werribee. Sunshine Hospital is home to Melbourne University's first new medical school in a century. They can train near home where their professional skills are sorely needed in a community they understand and are part of—all because of Labor investments. This story is replicated across the country, from the first Northern Territory medical school—making a medical degree more of an option for Indigenous kids wanting to stay close to land—to the Blacktown clinic or school training much needed health staff for the busy western suburbs of Sydney.

Of course, not all our kids want to be doctors, so we have invested in other facilities. In my electorate, budding young chefs can visit the hospitality school at Victoria University or see the new aviatronic centre being built at Footscray City College—all built as part of Labor's education revolution. We are the ones who rebuilt the schools and kept the nation's tradies in employment when other countries dipped into severe recession. We are the ones who invested in hospital, cancer and GP infrastructure. The states let down communities like Bega, Albury, Nepean, Whyalla, Townsville and so many more.

We have invested in people as well as infrastructure. In my part of the country that is the ring road, regional rail and now Melbourne Metro. All the while, the Liberals are promising to ease traffic burdens in the east. But this story is replicated across the nation. And that is not even to mention some of the long list of small investments, nevertheless significant, in Gellibrand such as the community chef in Altona; wonderful new housing for the homeless and disabled; the Australian Ballet warehouse; the Yarraville community centre; the Bulldogs sports centre; community child care; and green investments in industries such as Toyota and CSR sugar. The point is that locally and nationally we are giving people a better future, investing to build a nation and investing compassionately.

In my first speech, I mentioned my dad having died from cancer of the oesophagus when I was young. I did not imagine then that I would be later staring down tobacco companies and defending our actions in the High Court or that I would be speaking to the United Nations about our world-first plain packaging laws. Nor did I expect to be serenaded by Simon Chapman and Paul Grogan with their unique take on the song Leader of the Pack or to have Michael Bloomberg declaring in his New York drawl that 'when it comes to health prevention Nicola Roxon is a rock star'! I am very proud of that work. Whether it was my father dying too young 35 years ago or Minister Emerson's brother just last month, I am proud that we are trying to reduce the harm to other families. And I am proud of our regional cancer centres, PBS listings, High Court appointments and properly recognising midwives and nurses. I must say that the national pricing of performance measures in health and establishing e-health records must rate amongst the least sexy reforms to advocate, but they will enable efficiency and innovation into the future. I could keep going on with a much longer list—from the importance of setting up the royal commission into child abuse to at last seeing a national children's commissioner established—but I would keep you all here until dinnertime.

Form here on in, it is about members like all of you here and branch members, candidates and an army of Labor believers who will have a chance to play their part in the ongoing Labor story that we all work so hard to shape and deliver. The nation needs you to tackle the growing insecurity in employment that is starting to haunt workers, particularly women. We need you to jump on racism rearing its head again, whether in the AFL or close to home with the Sunshine police mocking our African communities. We need you to protect the environment and be champions of our mental health and dental care reforms. There are so many new chapters yet to be written in Labor's grand history and it is our collective responsibility to keep focused on this purpose, delivering to those in the community who need us to voice and act on their concerns. Nation-building and compassion, looking after those who need a bit more help and a lot more opportunity—this is Labor's enduring mission, it is one to be proud of, and it is a mission that we should fight for. Thank you.

The SPEAKER: I congratulate the member for Gellibrand on a fantastic valedictory speech.