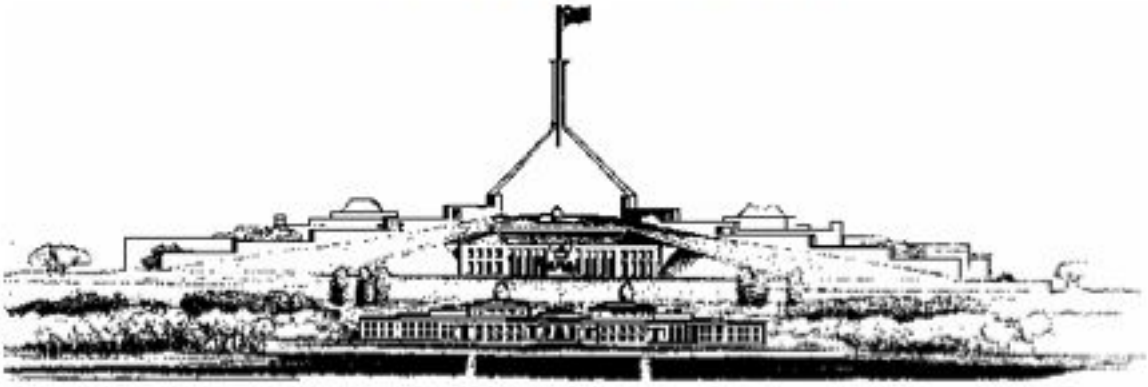
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

FIRST SPEECH

SPEECH

Wednesday, 27 June 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date	Wednesday, 27 June 2012	**Source**	Senate
Page	4710	**Proof**	No
Questioner		**Responder**	
Speaker	Whish-Wilson, Sen Peter	**Question No.**	

Senator WHISH-WILSON (Tasmania) (17:04): I would like to begin by acknowledging that we meet on the traditional lands of the Ngunawal people and by paying my respects to the custodians of culture and country past and present. The extraordinary living cultural heritage of this land extends back many thousands of years and enriches the lives of all Australians today. I thank all the friendly Senate staff who have helped me in the last few weeks and the good senators who are in the chamber to listen to my speech today. All the senators here have been in my shoes at some time, as have hundreds of senators before them throughout Australia's parliamentary history—and Lin soon will be. No doubt most have also acknowledged what a rare privilege it is to be in such a position. When I arrived home in Launceston on Friday evening last week after my first few days in the Senate, my daughter, Bronte, asked me how I felt. The first thing that came to mind was that I felt lucky to have been afforded such a great opportunity to represent the Tasmanian and Australian people and to have the chance to make a difference to our nation.

Big moments in your life are for reflection. My first reflection is that I feel very privileged to have a loving family and many friends to support me, good health and a rich tapestry of life experiences, some of which I want to share with the Senate. As a little boy I lived in the *Red Dog* days of Western Australia's early 1970s, but I have lived and worked all over the world—as a labourer in the Western Australian mines, as a stockbroker in New York and Hong Kong, as a farmer, as a stay-at-home dad and as a university lecturer. I have been lucky enough to have been brought up by my family, and to bring up my own family, in one of the most beautiful places on the planet, Tasmania, where my family roots go deep. Today I bring this experience, and my passions, to the Australian Greens and to the Senate. I never really planned or expected to be a politician but, rather, have been drawn into public life by a series of community campaigns and chance events. The most recent was the decision of Bob Brown to retire from the Senate. In his first speech to this Senate chamber 16 years ago, Senator Brown lamented that a lack of awareness and political commitment was preventing serious and irreversible human-made climate change. It is fitting that, in just a few days' time, we will finally have a price on the pollution that drives global warming, after over 40 years of talking and inaction. The Australian parliament, led in many ways by Bob Brown and Christine Milne, has shown great leadership in taking the first important step in investing in a better future for our grandchildren.

Showing leadership on important issues that you feel deeply passionate about should be what politics is all about. This has always been Bob Brown's message, and will be his lasting legacy.

I believe history will accord him an honoured place amongst the most well-respected and successful political leaders this country has produced. I thank you for being here today, Bob, and I look forward to having a glass of fine Tasmanian wine with you following this.

I have been lucky that Bob and other mentors have offered me guidance over the years. I would especially like to acknowledge Tasmanian MHA Kim Booth and Senator Christine Milne, both of whom I campaigned with in 2010. Working with both of these seasoned Greens politicians has been a great learning experience for me, revealing the degree of dedication, energy and skill required to be an effective parliamentarian. I have also learnt a great deal from many hardworking members of the Greens party, many of whom in Tasmania have become close friends.

Gandhi once famously said: 'You must be the change you want to see in the world.' A simple statement, but from my experience nothing better encapsulates the philosophy and spirit of the Greens.

The actions of Greens members to conserve natural environments, prevent pollution and help the less fortunate—including those desperate souls who risk everything to escape persecution and create a better life for themselves in our privileged and prosperous nation—are just a few examples of how the Greens are clearly focused on promoting the common good.

There is a reward for this hard work. Several years back, at the height of the legal battle to save the Wielangta forest, I remember hearing Bob Brown talking of how he didn't feel anger towards his detractors. Rather, he felt sad for them. This was because they did not share his special gift—an enduring and meaningful relationship with nature, from which he drew so much of his personal strength. I'm today wearing a Wielangta eagle badge, given to me by Bob. To me this is a symbol of Greens struggle and perseverance. There are millions of voters across Australia who share similar values and a connection with nature.

As a passionate surfer, my deepest and most enduring bond is with the ocean. We are truly a nation girt by sea. I love our Australian and wild Tasmanian coastlines and I have been fortunate enough to have visited and surfed most of the world's oceans. I feel happiest when I am in the sea. It is also a place that I have been humbled, stared down my deepest fears, and where I feel my strongest connection with the forces and majesty of nature. Many surfers, divers, and fishermen share that same connection. In fact, we all share an important bond with the ocean. It is integral to sustaining life on this planet. And the ocean keeps giving, and we keep taking.

But this special relationship won't last forever unless we cherish it and treat it with the respect it deserves. Overfishing, ocean acidification and pollution all threaten our rich, life-supporting marine ecosystems. Nothing is a clearer demonstration of the fallacy that environment and economy are in conflict. Unless we protect our oceans, the communities they sustain cannot flourish. I would like to take this opportunity today to say that if you love the ocean, then please give something back. Every little thing helps.

I would like to pay my special respects to those who have given something back, especially the work done by Dr Rex Campbell, Paul Maddock and Dr Thomas Moore at the Surfrider Foundation, Rebecca Hubbard at Ocean Planet Tasmania, and the many other good people I have worked with at these, and other marine conservation organisations over the years. They are all people who have been relentless in protecting our world's oceans, waves and beaches. They are also living proof that commitment, community, and a bond with nature can bring significant meaning to your life.

Respecting those with a deep commitment to the natural environment will be critical to understanding and solving many of today's environmental conflicts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in my beautiful home state of Tasmania. Recently I heard a well-known Tasmanian identity on radio, labelling those who oppose new developments in Tasmania's world-famous national parks as 'economic vandals'. Others have used the same phrase to describe conservationists opposing open-cut mining in the Tarkine wilderness area—an area of recognised World Heritage significance—and the clear-felling of our rare ancient forests in the Weld and Florentine. The irony of this statement is that these so-called 'economic vandals' are largely responsible for the preservation of Tasmania's world-famous landscapes and thriving ecosystems, which today deliver a significant economic boon to Tasmania.

There is a 'premium' on wildness in the world today, and few would dispute that our national parks, World Heritage areas and other conservation areas are the best assets we own in Tasmania, or that this is what distinguishes Tasmania from the rest of this great nation. Our wild areas are worth millions of dollars in tourism revenue, and help create thousands of jobs. They are also directly linked to the Tasmanian 'clean green' identity, originally promoted by Christine Milne in the 1980s, which is so critical and crucial to marketing our high-value, world-class agribusiness products.

It is estimated the conservation of our remaining forest reserves could also bring in billions of dollars in carbon-offset revenues into the future. By refocusing the extraction of our high-conservation-value native forests onto sustainable management, the world will continue to experience these magnificent places, and by doing so we could receive revenues to invest in schools, hospitals and programs for reskilling workers. Tasmania is on the cusp of this reality today. But this will require courageous political leadership, and a price on carbon pollution. So rather than attacking conservationists, economists like myself should be thanking them.

It sounds simple, but some respect and acknowledgement would be a good start to any future dialogue on controversial economic projects in Tasmania. Since I am assuming the Senate seat vacated by one of the country's most prominent environmentalists, much attention in recent weeks, especially in the media, has been focused on my background and path to green in politics. One thing I have learnt over recent years is that many paths lead to being green in terms of both philosophy and action. It is my experience that no-one has a monopoly on what it means to be an environmentalist or a social change activist. The common thread, however, is that most of these people can point to an event or a significant turning point that has shaped their life's journey or worldview.

On reflection, my journey to this place today started in the late 1990s when as a young stockbroker in New York I experienced an epiphany of sorts. The year was 1997. My company, the late Merrill Lynch, decided to restructure our Australian team and send me home to Melbourne. I am a person who values loyalty and after all my hard work I was gutted. On the day before my departure I was offered what was then a dream job, working as part of a global mining research team for UBS Bank Switzerland. I was given five quiet minutes to myself in the recruitment office to consider my new offer. I was standing and staring out the window of the south tower of the World Trade Centre watching the Staten Island ferry cross the Hudson feeling the hum of this vibrant city when the realisation came to me and I was finally brave enough to admit it to myself: I felt unhappy and unfulfilled. The pursuit of a bigger salary, bonuses and living the high life in New York meant little to me. I not only wanted to go home but from that moment I determined to change my life, pursue a different course and seek a deeper meaning. I have since found this meaning in nature and in the Greens.

A few years later when a 737 fully laden with fuel and passengers struck the south tower of the World Trade Centre that moment came back to haunt me. The horror of September 11, the war in Afghanistan and the incarceration of citizens without trial had a deep impact on my life and thinking. I marched in a rally for the first time in my life as a banker in Sydney in protest against the spin-fuelled madness leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Later, arriving at Circular Quay one morning on the Manly ferry, I remembered seeing a slogan 'No War' painted on the roof of the Opera House by two young doctors who opposed the Iraq war. The bravery of their act was the inspiration for my decision to finally downshift, move to Tasmania and seek a new direction in my life. I decided to plant some vines, go surfing and, most satisfyingly, be a stay-at-home dad.

The Tamar Valley was a perfect backdrop to my sea change. As many friends told me, I was living the dream. It is hard to believe how important a small patch of vineyard soil has become to my life, a tiny but vibrant ecosystem that has become an extension of myself. Studying such subjects as botany, plant physiology, soil science and chemistry at Charles Sturt University was a revelation, totally altering my worldview. Suddenly growing things is what seemed important as I found inspiration in nature's simplest and most ancient forms. It also helped to be working in the Tasmanian wine industry with its bunch of characters and fabulous creative people many of whom shared a similar philosophy and passion for rural life. I treasure those friendships.

But my ideal was soon to be shattered when in 2004 I found myself suddenly thrown into what has now been an eight-year community campaign at first questioning, then opposing, the proposal by Tasmanian logging giant Gunns Ltd to build one of the world's largest pulp mills in the Tamar Valley very close to our family home and business. If built, this pulp mill would dump up to 50 billion litres of industrial waste into Bass Strait each year just upwind of a seal colony, a popular surf break and fishing areas. Pulp mills have developed nasty reputations over the years all around the world, and deservedly so. Their history of polluting waterways with toxic effluent and making local residents sick from foul odours and noxious emissions is legendary. After visiting pulp mills in New Zealand myself on a fact-finding mission, I became extremely concerned about the impact that such a large-scale industrial development with its thousands of truck movements a day would have on the beautiful Tamar Valley, especially on the reputation of local vineyards, tourism operators and agribusinesses which rely so heavily on a clean and green image.

I was shocked at how rational, sensible people seeking answers were soon treated with contempt, were publicly attacked and ultimately were officially ignored when the Lennon Labor government abandoned due process, ditching the independent umpire to fast-track the pulp mill proposal through parliament in 2006 by special legislation for Gunns. I remember well the words that celebrated author and activist Richard Flanagan, a consistent champion supporting those opposed to this deeply divisive proposal, penned to my father. Richard said:

It may well be that lies are quick and the truth is slow, but the truth is also inexorable and undeniable. The lesson of history is that the truth is ultimately always heard … I take my compass in this life not from despair but from hope.

Only later did the truth emerge surrounding the reasons for Gunns' special fast-track legislation. Gunns had pulled out of the proper Resource Planning and Development Commission because it was deemed 'critically non-compliant' in many areas and was unlikely to receive approval for its pulp mill without addressing additional key risks identified in the independent assessment process. Many of these proposal risks remain unresolved. It is the key reason Gunns Ltd lacks a social licence for its project today.

It was always going to be a difficult fight for a community against a large, aggressive and litigious corporation, the government and other entrenched, powerful vested interests in Tasmania. But fight it we did and this fight continues. I commit myself to continue this confrontation with those who would destroy our natural world for higher short-term profits. Gunns' pulp mill proposal has become one of Australia's most public, bitter and controversial environmental battles. The pulp mill debate took a longstanding forestry conflict over the use of high-conservation forests for woodchips, out of mind and out of sight for so many, and landed it squarely in the backyard of many Tasmanians. The whole state, and indeed nation, was drawn into the conflict over Tasmania's ancient forests.

The pulp mill issue has both touched and reflected on just about every aspect of Tasmanian life and in many ways it is a mirror image of other disturbing environmental conflicts in Australia today: coal seam gas exploration, a controversial LNG plant in the Kimberley, coal ports abutting the Great Barrier Reef and offshore drilling for oil and gas in marine protected areas. One positive is that we can learn many lessons from the pulp mill saga in Tasmania. Do not cut environmental and other planning corners, because you will ultimately be held responsible for your actions and it will cost you in the long run. Listen to, respect and generally address the concerns of all stakeholders. Do not assume jobs and shareholder wealth should always be put before environmental and social concerns. In the end, unless the environment and the community are respected, jobs and wealth will fail. Passionate and informed people will fight to uphold their values. Expect this.

Whilst I have strongly opposed the pulp mill project on deeply felt ethical, social and environmental grounds, I accept that the cause of much of this environmental conflict in Tasmania and elsewhere in the country, lies in a lack of immediate and clear alternative job and business opportunities. I did not nominate to become a Greens parliamentarian simply to be part of a protest movement, nor to just question or oppose bad projects or policy. I am here today because I feel, given my business background and unique combination of life experiences, a responsibility to propose smart, sustainable alternative opportunities for employment and human wellbeing.

When campaigning with Senator Christine Milne in the 2010 federal election I learnt we had much in common, not least our connections with rural Tasmania. We shared a view that the Australian Greens must commit to developing platforms for progressive business development. It is important to stress that this does not mean I support economic growth for growth's sake or that I believe in free market philosophies; I do not. The idea that economic growth and the common good are the same thing is a dangerous one. People need much more than money and products for their health, happiness and wellbeing.

The philosophy underlying free market economics in its purest form has proven to be catastrophic to both global financial markets and to the lives of many people around the world. My first-year finance students at university could point this out. The lessons from the ongoing global financial crisis must be learnt; none more so than that governments must play an important role in regulating market behaviour.

We all need meaningful work and fulfilled lives. It is time to develop, in a mature and measured way, a new economic narrative on how we can best achieve this. Einstein once famously stated, 'We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.'

Looking at the world's economy and markets today, it is hard to deny that we have deep-seated structural problems. I feel my old discipline of economics, in which I have met and worked with so many good people at various universities, has in some respects lost its way and could play a much stronger leadership role in tackling these problems. I respect the integrity and independence of economic research, knowledge for knowledge's sake, but I would challenge that too little economic research is applied to the realities of the problems of our world today.

I suspect neither governments nor academics will, however, play the biggest role in the move to a more sustainable future economic footing for our global economy. Much of this responsibility will lie with corporations. The business community already has a significant responsibility to their owners and workers but the future will increasingly require a larger mandate than corporate self-interest. Although it will take time, I am confident that, with the right incentives and discourse, many businesses will be an integral part of the new economy that respects limits to growth and ecological sustainability, and promotes human wellbeing.

So arriving in the Australian parliament at this time in history comes with a special set of responsibilities. There is much hard work to do, not least in my home state of Tasmania, where pessimism about the economy has lately prevailed. My recently announced portfolio responsibilities of tourism, trade, small business and

competition policy, waste and Tasmanian marine issues will put me in a good position to work and deliver positive outcomes for both Tasmania and Australia. I look forward to working with my fellow Greens parliamentarians and indeed all senators in this chamber to seek new positive solutions and directions for Tasmania and Australia, ecologically, economically and socially. I hope that the future is bright green.

Finally, I would like to pay the biggest homage to those loved ones closest to me, who will ultimately share the burden of my work: Natalie, my lovely wife, best friend and life partner, who has supported me for so many years; my two rascal kids, Bronte and Finn; my brother, David, and my sister, Kerri; and the two most important mentors and influences of my life, my mother, Rosemary, and my father, Tony, who have always shown me unconditional love. If every child were lucky enough to have such parents, the world would be a much better place.

Thank you.