



Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria



Speech by Senator Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria

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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I begin first by thanking Family First in South Australia for inviting me to speak to you today.

May I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the person who is responsible for us all being here today – The Hon. Andrew Evans MLC.

Andrew is an inspiration. Not only because he has led the way for the many others we hope will follow. But because he accepted a challenge which most of us would have dismissed as impossible. He became a member of parliament with no resources other than the goodwill and support of the people he had met and who had grown to trust and respect him over the years. Further, he is such a decent and sincere person that he brings credit to any group with whom he associates. Thank you Andrew.

I of course, am a new senator, having started in July this year. I have really enjoyed my time and along with most other senators I am learning to work in a Government-controlled Senate.

The Federal Government's control of the Senate has raised the question of whether government control of upper houses of parliament limits their ability to fulfil their role. We have become used to neither of the major parties having control of most upper houses. Indeed that has been the situation with the Senate for more than twenty years. Most observers agree that the Government's Senate success last year was an accident rather than a conscious decision by voters. The speed with which the Senate is being made to deal with issues such as industrial relations and the sale of the remainder of Telstra leads to criticism that it is not adding value to the legislative process – it is not acting as a house of review.

What then is a *house of review*?

In my opinion a house of review, whether it is the Senate or, in the case of South Australia, the Legislative Council, recognises that the people have elected the government of the day and that the people expect the government to govern. They don't expect upper houses to obstruct governments. Rather they expect upper houses to improve legislation, to make governments accountable for their decisions and to restrain governments when their decisions don't reflect the wishes of the people.

In other words, it is not the role of upper houses to be the Opposition. This means that minor parties should not have the mindset of an opposition. Instead they should see their role as improving the performance of the government.

This role is one reason we need Family First. But it isn't the only reason we need Family First. After all, other parties would claim they are capable, to quote the original slogan of the Australian Democrats, of 'keeping the bastards honest'.

The need for Family First is much more fundamental. Family First represents a view held by many average Australians but not reflected by the major parties. The major parties say that they are pro-family. But neither of them consistently puts families first when they formulate their policies. Family First believes that legislation and policies ought to be examined through the prism of families and seeks to apply this prism to all issues whether they are economic, social or moral.

Family First also places great importance on the balance between personal responsibility and community obligation. The combination of this prism and this principle not only distinguishes us from every other party, but in the eyes of some makes us radical rather than conservative.

In my maiden speech I made the following comments:

- "the major parties struggle to reconcile their professed 'family values' with their 'free market' mantra – they struggle because the two cannot be reconciled";
- "there seems to be a growing concern that many Australians are there to serve the market rather than the market being a tool to serve them, especially families and small businesses"; and I also said that,
- "... Australians are not economic units, households are not harbours of consumption and children are not commodities".

These observations led to a critical editorial in *The Australian* newspaper and antagonised some members of parliament. One asked if I wanted a return to socialism.

There was a similar response when I opposed the sale of the rest of Telstra. I opposed the sale on the basis that the provision of essential services such as telecommunications is a family issue. Many families, especially those living in outer suburbs and regional and rural areas are likely to be worse off. Some members of parliament suggested the sale is

an economic issue and not a family issue and one said that mine was a great fighting socialist speech. I suspect that many of today's Coalition politicians would brand Sir Robert Menzies, the founder of the Liberal Party, as a 'socialist' and he would fail to win pre-selection for a seat.

Family First is not socialist. Just as the economic rationalists threaten the viability of the family because of their almost exclusive focus on the individual, so the welfare state threatens the family which it seeks to replace with the state.

If we need a reminder of the legacy of the welfare state we need only to turn to the efforts of Noel Pearson to restore dignity and respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For years Mr Pearson has been an outcast among Aboriginal people and the welfare lobby. Yet he could not be denied because the statistics speak for themselves. Telling Aboriginal people that they did not need to have a sense of personal responsibility has been disastrous for them and very expensive for all taxpayers.

Noel Pearson's message is relevant to all Australians. We do not serve people well by telling them that they are not responsible for their own welfare or for those who depend on them.

Those who think that Mr Pearson's observations are harsh should read the writings of a British doctor, Anthony Daniels, who has spent the last 14 years of his professional life as doctor and psychiatrist in a Birmingham slum hospital and nearby prison. Before that he worked as a doctor in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific.

In one article, Daniels who uses the pen name, Theodore Dalrymple made these observations:

- "One of the natural laws that the Welfare State has revealed is that if you pay people to have bogus symptoms and sham illnesses, they will have them";
- "When need rather than desert is the criterion of reward, people are infinitely inventive in rendering themselves needy"; and
- The people whose job it is to serve welfare dependents "... need the welfare dependents far more than the welfare dependents need them. They are a powerful and organised lobby group, who are easily able to play on the public's gullible sentimentality".

This said, there is a need for balance. Taken to an extreme, this line of argument could lead to the equally destructive conclusion that we don't have any obligation to those who have fallen on hard times. It might suggest that we are doing these people a favour by not giving them a helping hand when they need it. That's why I expressed concern in August about a Government *Welfare-to-Work* proposal which would mean that single mothers whose youngest child had turned six would be worse off, even if they genuinely could not find 15 hours work a week.

While the Government's proposed changes to welfare have generated a debate about financial poverty, I believe there are other forms of poverty which are just as important and require equal attention. I am talking about the poverty of our relationships and the poverty of community life, which is a consequence of our poverty of time.

We live in an age of self: self-interest, self-fulfilment and self-promotion. It is also an age of materialism in which too many of us define ourselves by what we own, where we live, where we go on holidays and where our kids go to school.

While we live in bigger houses than our parents and have more gadgets, the evidence does not suggest we are happier if divorce rates, suicide rates, drug use and obesity levels are any measure. These are measures of poverty of time, a poverty which I think the Government's proposed industrial relations changes will make worse.

I do not agree with our Prime Minister that businesses ought to be able to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Nor do I agree with the Prime Minister that working at 1 am is the same as working at 1 pm, working on Saturday is the same as working on Wednesday and that working on Christmas Day, New Years Day or Anzac Day is the same as working on any other day.

I believe that the idea of a day in which there is 8 hours work, 8 hours rest and 8 hours for family and community, for which our grandparents and their parents struggled, is a great idea. I believe there are many families which would love to be able to spend more time together as a family.

Instead, the Prime Minister says that the five day working week is a relic of the past.

I believe we need to find ways to promote family life – not to undermine it. That's why I think we should examine how effective overtime and shift allowances are now, in achieving their original purpose. Their original purpose was to deter employers from employing people during socially undesirable hours and for excessive hours. We should develop alternatives if penalty rates no longer achieve those objectives.

Given the Government has not agreed to an inquiry into overtime and shift allowances, I think it is important to make sure that the Government's intention to protect overtime, shift allowances and public holidays is put in law.

In my view employees should not be able to trade public holidays even if they want to. Public holidays were not created as a trade off for a wage increase in some enterprise bargain. If the reason public holidays were created no longer stands, there is a strong argument for abolishing them rather than allowing the market to reduce them to just another form of pay.

I think the challenges facing political parties today are:

1. To accept that the idea of personal responsibility is not at odds with the notion of community obligation. We have to strike a balance between obligations and

responsibilities. The major parties, and many vested interested groups, find it difficult to think that way.

2. We need to understand that today there is more than one form of poverty. As a community we suffer as much from poverty of relationships and poverty of time as some suffer financial and material poverty. This requires a set of values which go beyond materialism - an idea the major parties seem unable to confront.
3. We also need to seek to apply a consistent set of values to economic issues as well as social and moral issues. This new way of thinking challenges the major parties which need to cling to an outdated Left/Right framework to justify their existence.

Family First **does** accept these challenges, Family First **does** understand the various types of poverty which confront us today and Family First **does** seek to apply the same values to all aspects of our lives. That makes Family First different. We **are** different from the other political parties and it is imperative that the values Family First stands for are represented in our parliaments.

May I conclude by commenting on the fact that we live in an era in which politicians are treated with distrust, if not contempt. Most Australians think either that they cannot influence political decisions or that politicians do not represent them. Back in 1918 the famous German sociologist Max Weber gave a speech at Munich University entitled 'Politics as a Vocation'. In it he said that 'the 'strength' of a political 'personality' means, in the first place, the possession of the qualities of passion, responsibility, and proportion.

It is my hope that by demonstrating these qualities of passion, responsibility and proportion that not only will Family First make a difference to politics in Australia but it will also re-instil in average Australians the belief that **there are** politicians and political parties **who do represent them** and that by becoming involved, they too can make a real difference.