



Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria



SPEECH BY VICTORIAN FAMILY FIRST SENATOR STEVE FIELDING

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for extending to me the privilege of speaking to you.

I say privilege because those who take an interest not only in family issues, but in cultural issues generally, are indebted to the AFA, and to the late Bob Santamaria in particular, for the contribution you have made during the last 30 years to the fight for the family and community values.

I was not fortunate enough to meet Bob Santamaria and so many of you have an advantage over me. However, there are some aspects of his life which I find relevant to my situation.

One is that, following the demise of the DLP, he voted informal more than once. He was in good company. On at least one occasion before Sir Robert Menzies died, Menzies is said not to have voted for the Liberal Party. In other words, both of them, after devoting a lifetime to promoting their values and ideas, concluded that the commitment of either of the major parties to the values which concern us could not be taken for granted.

The second is that he had a holistic view of life. Everything from his concern about the family through to his focus on economics in the latter part of his life was underpinned by a coherent philosophic framework.

One of the lessons I have learned already in the few months I have been in the job is the importance of parliamentary strategy. It seems to me that, with one significant exception, since the demise of the DLP, the parliamentary strategy of the family movement has been to rely on exerting influence over one or both of the major parties. The decisions of Sir Robert Menzies and Bob Santamaria suggest we cannot assume that is sufficient.

May I take a moment to pay tribute to that significant exception – Brian Harradine – with whose legacy many of you are more familiar than I. He also did not subscribe to the view that we could simply rely on the major parties to give the highest priority to promoting the interests of the family.

Returning to Mr Santamaria's world view, may I say that I think the responsibilities of those willing to be active in promoting the family are even bigger than some of us might think. I do not think we can assume that the pressures on the family today lie solely in one area. Pornography is a threat to our children. So is promiscuity. So are drugs. So are the values which dominate much of our society, including schools. The Family Law Act is a factor in today's disturbingly high divorce rate.

However, if we think that social and cultural issues are the sole cause, or even the dominant cause, of pressure on families, and cause of family breakdown today, we are mistaken. We need to focus simultaneously on all of the significant causes of pressure on families today, and that includes economics.

This is a reality which Bob Santamaria and Brian Harradine recognised many years ago.

However, there is more to economic issues than campaigning on income tax or family support.

This was driven home to me by a social and cultural analysis of the last federal election commissioned by a left-wing union, the timber workers division of the CFMEU, as part of their efforts to influence the direction of the Labor Party.

The analysis is called *The Brompton Report*.

It has been posted on the internet and I highly recommend it to you. I think it summarises the values and aspirations of the average Australian.

I do not think we can understand how significant the action of the timber workers was in the last federal election was without reading this paper.

Their campaign was about much more than jobs. It was about fighting for regional communities and challenging the political domination of a cultural élite, who, on many fronts, are as much of a concern to us as to the timber industry.

The paper devotes much attention to economics, not in terms of economic theory, but in terms of social and cultural impact.

Much of this analysis is based on the thinking of a former Professor of History at Rochester University in the United States, the late Christopher Lasch.

Professor Lasch believed that the heart of conservatism lies in:
'Lower middle class culture, (which) now as in the past, is organised around the family, church and neighbourhood. It values the community's continuity more

highly than individual advancement, solidarity more highly than social mobility. Conventional ideals of success play a less important part in lower middle class life than the maintenance of existing ways. Parents want their children to get ahead, but they also want them to be good: to respect their elders, resist the temptation to lie and cheat, willingly shoulder the responsibilities that fall to their lot and bear adversity with fortitude. The desire to preserve their way of life... takes precedence over the desire to climb the social ladder.'

I suspect that many of us would readily identify with these values. Yet, I wonder how many of us have ever thought that the economic orthodoxy which dominates this country undermines these very values.

To again quote Professor Lasch:

'If conservatism is understood to imply a respect for limits, it is clearly incompatible with modern capitalism or with the liberal ideology of unlimited economic growth...'

And again:

'(t)he more closely capitalism came to be identified with immediate gratification... the more relentlessly it tore away the moral foundations of family life'

In the few months I have been in federal politics I have already seen how threatening some government members find these concepts. It is interesting, for example, the way three Liberal MPs responded when I voted against the sale of the rest of Telstra and insisted that the government ought to tell families how full privatisation would impact on them.

One MP said this issue was an economic issue, not a family one, and not one for me to be concerned about.

Another commented that my speech against the full sale of Telstra was a rousing, socialist speech. I responded by saying I was bemused at how some Liberal politicians still hark back to Menzies when they want to establish their legitimacy, when it seems that today Sir Robert would be flat out winning a Liberal preselection as he would be branded a socialist! I have not received a response.

Some of you may be aware I have raised concerns about how the free market mindset has undermined working conditions which were designed to promote family and community life.

One example was that the government's new workplace system would not protect public holidays, which is an issue I again raised yesterday after the Prime Minister broke his promise that meal breaks and public holidays would be guaranteed.

Public holidays were not introduced as a defacto pay increase and I reject the notion that they should be bargained away for money, even if some workers are willing to do so.

Another is my concern that penalty rates are no longer serving their original purpose, of discouraging the working of anti-social hours so as to promote family and community life. This concept has been undermined by free market thinking, and so I asked the Government to establish an independent inquiry into how we might achieve these objectives in the 21st century. The government refused.

Ladies and gentlemen, the message for me from *The Brompton Report* is that economic theory is underpinned by a set of values, whether we are conscious of it or not.

It is important that the values which underpin our economic policies are consistent with the cultural and social values we promote.

Today, the dominant economy theory is based on individualism and is therefore not family-friendly and, as I have said, actually undermines family values. This is a reality we cannot ignore.

However, the Keynesian ideas of the Left, do not provide an alternative for champions of the family. To quote Professor Lasch again, '*(t)he bankruptcy of the left...reveals itself in the left's refusal to concede the validity of conservative objections to the welfare state*'.

The challenge for Family First, and in my view, what I describe as the family movement, is to pursue ideas which, to quote Professor Lasch, '*reject both the market and the welfare state in pursuit of a third way...(T)hese positions belong to neither the left nor the right, and for that very reason they seem to many people to hold out the best hope of breaking the deadlock of current debate.*'

Thankyou