

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Vale, Danna, MP

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Mrs VALE (Hughes) (1.14 pm)—I had great difficulty starting this speech. How do you distil 14 years into 20 minutes? There is a lot to tell, a lot of successes, a few monumental stuff-ups, a lot of memories and a lot of good people to thank, including the 97,000 people in the electorate of Hughes. In a way, this valedictory is a companion to the first speech I made in this House as a member of the ‘Class of 96’. As bookends they will provide my constituents, my family, my friends and supporters, indeed all the people of Australia, with a measure by which they can judge if I have discharged the awesome responsibility and been worthy of the hope and trust they placed in me back in 1996.

The road to Canberra was hard and long, but it was not a lonely road. There were many good people who began the walk with me and without whose support and assistance I would not have been able to serve as the member for Hughes during the golden years of the Howard coalition government. We should never forget that the real reason the Australian economy is doing so well today is the tough decisions made by the Howard government and that Costello legislation that imposed the strong prudential rules that underpin our banking here in Australia. I was proud to be on team Howard during those challenging years.

Women often define themselves and their place in the world by their relationships. So, firstly, I acknowledge my long-suffering husband, Bob, for his love and his friendship and his longstanding support. Before the journey began, I did seek his permission and I did ask him what he thought about me standing as the member for Hughes. Actually, I knew what he thought. It was a safe Labor seat, I was going against a minister of the Crown, I needed a 6½ per cent swing, I was an unknown working mum: I had no chance. But he said, ‘You go for it, love. You know I’ll support you.’ Much to his astonishment, we did win the election in 1996 and we won with a swing of 11.6 per cent. His world has never been the same since. But he has been true to his word. Despite the fact that he has often said, ‘I married her for better or for worse; she never said a word about politics at the time,’ he has been there to support me in the good times and in the tough times and I am grateful for his love and affection and for the fine character of the man that he is.

The role of a federal member of parliament and its impact on time and distance places a lot of pressure on

relationships. Of the 39 members of that unique Class of 96, there are not very many of us left who are still married to the same person. There were times when I wondered if Bob and I would be one of those casualties. Yet, in so many ways, we have grown stronger for the journey. As we go towards our 45th anniversary, it is now my turn to honour him and to start cooking those home baked dinners that he has missed so much. After all, he is the only husband I have and I plan to make him last!

I also acknowledge the strong relationship that I have had with my local branch members of the Liberal Party and I publicly record the high value I place on the friendship I share with all members of the Hughes Federal Electoral Council. They began their journey with me and, with their hard work and commitment on election day, made the success possible. While I cannot name each and every one, my special thanks do go to Brett Thomas, who took the onerous role of campaign manager back in 1995 and has remained at the helm for the following four elections and is a good mate. My special thanks also go to the Hon. Chris Downy, once the state member for Sutherland, whose political nous and strategic devilry make him a great campaign director. Thanks to our generals in the field: core stalwarts like Lee Evans and his late dad, Keith; Gary and Julie Law; Peter Vermeer; Coral Slattery; Berenice Nixon; Don Minehan and his son Matthew; Michael Darby; Simon Newport, who is also doing a sterling job as our FEC president; Bob Osborne; Kristine Thomas; Pat White; Max Lombe; Councillors Ned Mannoun and Melanie Gibbons; and special friend Michael Henry. Dear friends Bill Meehan and his son Luke must be added also to that list. Bill efficiently managed my electorate office for me for over eight years. When I first met Bill, his son Luke was only seven, but he would always come along with his dad on the campaign. At the last election Luke captained his own booth for us. Like so many friends and supporters, young Luke has been with us every step of the way.

Warm thanks also go to my branch president, Lorraine Rodden, and branch treasurer, Val Wilkinson, for their commitment and treasured friendship formed over many years. I found Lorraine to be a formidable woman of substance when, as mayor of Sutherland Shire Council, she stood with me to fight against the Holsworthy airport proposal on behalf of our local community. We have been firm friends ever since.

Also on the team in another way were our faithful supporters, who have contributed in so many ways to the success of our campaign. I say thanks to the Britton boys, Bob and Steve; to the laughing Brett Thompson; to Ron Stapleton; to John Emond; to my late friend Max Vidler and his family; and to my old boss, solicitor Mr Sam Macedone and his wife, Margaret.

Special thanks must also go to my electorate staff over the years who have helped me to serve the people of our electorate. Thanks to our blonde bombshell, Ros Bowker, who has been with me for nearly 12 years and who is in the gallery today. Thanks Marc Landrigan, Britt Keneally, Alan Hornery, Aaron Findlay and workers Rita Leghissa, Neville Ashdown and Michelle Cotterill.

Since 1996 the electorate has had four boundary changes, yet the well-honed Hughes campaign team secured the success of all our campaigns in 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2007. In the 1998 election Hughes was the only seat in Australia that recorded a swing to the Howard coalition government. In 2001 we won every one of our 47 booths. The Hughes campaign team deserves to be applauded. I would not be here without them.

I acknowledge with humble thanks the reason that I am here: the special relationship that I have with the people of my electorate. I spent eight months doorknocking the electorate before the 1996 election. Because we did not have any money, Bob paid for a small business card out of our family budget that I left with residents. Written on the back was an old Chinese proverb which encapsulated my values and which has been on the back of my cards ever since. I also promised the residents of Hughes that I would be their public voice in Canberra. At the time I did not realise how soon that promise would need to be delivered.

In the early days of the Howard government a second airport for Sydney was proposed for Holsworthy in my electorate. My very first speech in the party room was a declaration of war. Some colleagues here may still remember. Not long after, I was grateful for a telephone call from the legendary Peter Reith who advised, 'You stick to your constituents, Danna, and they will stick by you.' There are no instruction books on how to be a parliamentarian and as a brand-new member with training wheels I was greatly encouraged by the kindness of this senior cabinet minister. His sage advice proved to be true. I have stuck by the people of my electorate and they have stuck by me. Together we were ultimately successful in our community campaign against the Holsworthy airport. It provided valuable lessons and I met so many people from all corners of the electorate.

It is the pastoral nature of the role of a member of parliament in caring for and supporting the people in the electorate that has given me great satisfaction. While I cannot change the world, I learnt that I could change the world for one person and I did many times. The people of Hughes are well-educated, articulate, very community minded and they know how to press a cause. We had many successes and in the finite space available I would like to mention only two.

Local parents, Senia Gaunson and Brad le Hay of the Moorebank junior cricket club made representations to me about the need for a new cricket field some years ago. Working together we eventually gained a new playing field for the Moorebank Sports Club located near Harris Creek. I was able to secure excess defence land and a sum of \$750,000 from the government for its development. Known as Kokoda Field, it has now been in use for almost two years and is being put to excellent use by our local junior cricket and AFL teams.

Another successful effort began when working with passionate local resident Judie Stevens to amend the tax act to allow accident victims to take a compensation payment as a structured settlement without attracting a tax liability. After a very tragic motor vehicle accident involving her family, Judie saw the urgent need for such an amendment and it was a great outcome for Judie and a great satisfaction to me to see the Taxation Laws Amendment (Structured Settlements and Structured Orders) Act 2002 become law for the benefit of many of our fellow Australians.

There were other less public efforts made on behalf of the people of my electorate which I saw as my clear responsibility. One was to put a stop to a cabinet discussion to put a nuclear waste reprocessing plant at Lucas Heights in my electorate. For the record, I found that Prime Minister John Howard was always available to speak with his backbench and often I was able to use such access for the benefit of the people of my electorate. One such private, frank and forthright discussion, as they say, was in regard to an idea before cabinet to put a nuclear waste reprocessing plant in my electorate at Lucas Heights. Prime Minister Howard finally saw it my way and I had a great sense of relief when the suggestion was dropped.

ARPANSA was another matter. It stands for Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency and, depending on your point of view, I will either take the blame or the credit for its existence. With the prospect of a new reactor at Lucas Heights to replace the ageing HIFAR reactor, I convinced Prime Minister Howard that, following world's best practice, it was high time Australia had its own independent nuclear oversight agency. While I do thank the then minister for health, the honourable Dr Michael Wooldridge, for his efforts in this regard,

I make no apology for my harassment of him in pursuing the progress of the legislation. I was a woman on a mission and was immensely satisfied when the mission was finally accomplished and the enabling legislation was passed in 1998. The establishment of this independent nuclear oversight agency was essential, not just for the people of my electorate, but also for Australia. I also acknowledge the fine work of the first CEO of ARPANSA, Dr John Loy, and thank him for establishing the excellent reputation for which this institution has since been renowned.

Australia is a gold-clad democracy; it is the finest in the world. The reach of our backbench can stretch into the cabinet room and can provide members in this place with a real opportunity to make real changes for the benefit of the people we represent. Sometimes, however, an issue might arise which is not about your electorate but is one about which one feels very deeply and may drive one to consider committing political harikari for a higher cause. For me, one such defining issue was that of mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory in 1998. Prior to coming to parliament, I had been a Children's Court duty solicitor and was the founding coordinator of the Sutherland Community Aid Panel for First Offenders. Those Northern Territory mandatory sentencing laws were an anathema to me. Amongst other things, they dealt with 17-year-olds as adults and sent them to adult prison on their very first offence. I thought, 'Not in my country they don't.' The issue ran hot in the media for weeks and my colleague, the member for Murray, Sharman Stone, may remember being with me on that Tuesday morning. The then Prime Minister had suspended the party room.

A private member's bill on topic by the late Peter Andren, the member for Calare, was to come before the House the following Monday and that morning three of us in the party room had indicated we would reserve our right. That morning, I asked Prime Minister Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello for funding for diversionary programs for the Territory, for a juvenile court protocol, for funding for interpreter services, to raise the age of majority to 18 years, to hold a review of the initiative in 12 months' time and, not very humbly, to appoint me on the committee to oversee the program—then I would not need to cross the floor.

I take this time to record my respect and admiration for two of my fellow members, who I found to be men of outstanding principle and commitment on this issue. They appeared to share my outrage and I name them. They were the member for Kooyong, Petro Georgiou, and the then member for Astin, the late Peter Nugent. I was grateful that they were both prepared to support this solution, which secured \$20 million over the next four years, to implement these initiatives for the young

people in the Territory, and this was later repeated for a second four-year period. Speaking for myself, I thought I had committed political harikari that day. I did learn a lot about political leverage though and I learnt a lot about the character of the good people with whom I was privileged to work in this House.

In the end, we three did get a good result and it did change the world for the young people in the Territory. To that end, I also acknowledge the fine efforts of Ms Jane Halton, who was then of PM&C, and Police Inspector Graham Waite, an officer of first rank with the Northern Territory Police Force, who is here with me today in the gallery. Both were charged to ensure the delivery of the initiatives and the diversionary programs and both were committed to exemplary outcomes.

After this, it was a bit of a shock to receive a telephone call from the Prime Minister in 2001 inviting me to be the new Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence. I recall I was painting the front bedroom at the time and I fell off the ladder.

To me, this ministry was a sacred responsibility and in my role as minister I was exceptionally well served by the highly professional people in my ministerial office. Thank you to Paul Evans, a sound political and strategic thinker who worked tirelessly as my first chief of staff; to advisers Ben Hayes and Eacham Curry and to the diligent Jo Hutchinson; to my first media adviser, the excellent Rachel Thompson, and latterly, the efficient Clare Bannon. Thanks also to my last Chief of Staff, the venerable Warwick Bracken, valued not only for his sagacious advice but also for his treasured friendship and that of his wife, Fay, ever since. They all put in long hours and worked very hard to ensure I had an efficient and effective team—and as a team they did their best to keep me out of trouble as their minister. However, because I often managed to thwart their best efforts, I confess here for the record that any stuff-ups were mine.

I was deeply aware of the profound privilege to serve our veteran and war widow community as minister. Like many Australians, my own family was touched by war. I was the granddaughter of a digger whose name is on the Menin Gate. Private Donald Peter Dempsey died at Ypres, in the third battle of Passchendaele in October 1917. I thank John Howard for one of the defining moments of my life when, as Minister for Veterans' Affairs, I was able to represent Australia at the Menin Gate on Anzac Day in 2003. My grandfather's name on the gate was marked with a flower, from Passchendaele, by the good people of Ypres—I am not really crying, Mr Speaker. That day is indelibly etched upon my soul and will remain there for my eternity. After the Great War, my grandmother

raised my mother in great hardship. There was no welfare then. There was no Legacy, because it did not exist in those early days.

As minister, it was satisfying to know that we were able to deliver in real terms to increase and enhance the service in support of our veterans and war widows, because this community so richly deserved it. During my watch, from 2001 to 2004, the budget for this portfolio increased from around \$6 billion to \$10 billion. In an initial response to the Clarke Review of Veterans' entitlements, we increased services and benefits by almost \$280 million. My appreciation and thanks must go to my friend the member for Gilmore, the indomitable Joanna Gash, and to the very able member for Dunkley, Bruce Billson, for their strong support and advocacy.

I had the benefit of the best professional support from executive teams of both the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Department of Defence. As other members have found, it is an edifying experience to work with our defence personnel. To work with officers of the calibre of General Peter Cosgrove, then Chief of Defence Force; Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, then Chief of Army; Air Marshal Angus Houston, then Chief of Air Force and now CDF, is to name only a few—it is to work with Australia's finest, but I could name any private. We have all been inspired by their shining integrity, their disciplined focus, their strong work ethic and, when appropriate, a larrikin camaraderie. Such values are legendary in our defence personnel and one is left ennobled by the experience of exposure.

A similar ethos operated at Veterans' Affairs and I was extremely fortunate to have been so ably served by Dr Neil Johnson as secretary of the department. Thoughtful and measured, his quiet presence reflected the authority of an exemplary public servant at the top of his game. Together with his tough-minded deputy, the forensic Ian Campbell, and two excellent repatriation commissioners, Major General Paul Stevens and later Rear Admiral Simon Harrington, they were the Repatriation Commission and they presented a formidable team. I also acknowledge with great respect and regard the remarkable Brigadier Bill Rolf, Chair of the Repatriation Tribunal. Also, I applaud the excellent efforts of the intrepid Air Vice Marshal Garry Beck, then Director of Australian War Graves, who created an Australian legend in London. He tackled the impossible and built a unique war memorial for Australian service men and women at Hyde Park Corner in London in less than 11 months from design concept to completion, despite the distance of over 13,000 kilometres. Her Majesty was to officiate at its opening with our Prime Minister on the morning of Remembrance Day 2003. The landscaping of the

memorial was completed at midnight on 10 November 2003. His success in meeting the full completion of his warrant on time is testament to his immense executive ability, and I publicly acknowledge his excellent effort.

One other significant memorial built on my watch, by Air Vice Marshal Beck, and one in which I took a personal interest, is the elegant but powerful memorial at Isurava on the Kokoda Track, which literally sets in stone the legends of the ANZACs that forged the foundation of our nationhood. Etched in gold on four mighty granite pillars are these words: courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship. They stand framed by the beautiful Kokoda Valley in the background. I thank my friend and colleague Bronwyn Bishop, who walked on the Kokoda Track and was there for the opening of that memorial.

The most important area of responsibility in the portfolio is the care of our serving personnel and their families. I was pleased to see the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act come into law in 2004. This benchmark legislation was framed and passed on my watch and set in place the most comprehensive changes in military compensation legislation in nearly two decades. Its drafting meant tough, long hours for Dr Johnson, Ian Campbell and Paul Stevens and those DVA officials who had the complex task of melding two pieces of earlier legislation—drafted for different purposes—the VEA and the SRCA. While I congratulate all departmental officers involved, special recognition must go to the principal officers for the intellectual rigor they each brought to the table. I also thank Arthur Edgar, Andrew Moorhead and Bill Maxwell from the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Mal Pierce from the Department of Defence. This military-specific legislation makes realistic provision for the widows and families of our defence personnel and it was long overdue—it benchmarks the world.

In the rarefied atmosphere that marks this place there are many fellow members who I have come to respect and admire for the values and other worthy attributes that they bring to this place. I feel a better person for having worked with them. I have been warned not to name anyone if I cannot name them all. But I do need to recognise one or two, because I have worked in close association with them for some purpose or another. I want to recognise the admirable Brendan Nelson, the best Prime Minister we never had, and Kerry Bartlett, Kay Elson and Gary Nairn, who have gone before. I will miss you, Joanna Gash, Margaret May, John Forrest, Kay Hull, Judy Moylan, Andrew Robb, Russell Broadbent, Nola Marino, Don Randall, Dennis Jensen and Alex Somlyay. From the other place, I will miss senators Nick Minchin, Ian Macdonald, Cory Bernardi, Gary Humphries and Marise Payne. It was

great to serve with you here in Parliament House in our great Liberal Party and I regret that I will not be here with you fighting the good fight next time. And we do have a winning chance next time.

The House standing committees are very much part of the real nuts and bolts of parliament and are very rewarding. Many of our members recognise this. I have found goodwill and sound cooperation across party lines as committee members work together at meetings and public hearings and I thank the secretariat, led by the excellent Anna Dacre and her team, who make the work appear easy. It has been rewarding to work as deputy to the chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration, Michael Danby. I thank him and all the dedicated members of that committee. It is good to know that some of our recommendations have already become law, which just goes to show how effective committees can be at addressing issues of concern to the wider Australian community.

I also acknowledge the chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Bob Debus, and the earlier chair, Richard Marles. I hope that we get to finish our important report on Indigenous juvenile justice, in which I am passionately interested. At public hearings across Australia committee members meet fellow Australians at the delivery end of the legislation that we create here in this place. Sometimes we come across some good success stories. Back in 2006, this ATSI committee, chaired by Barry Wakelin, then member for Grey, we discovered the Cairns and District Regional Housing Corporation under CEO Jack Szydzik and his board of Indigenous traditional owners, who not only provided quality housing for local Indigenous families but had an Indigenous employment component on their maintenance teams of around 70 per cent. That is not bad when the national average for Indigenous employment was two per cent. It is hard to argue with audited success, but this corporation, which operates under sound business principles and world's best practice, cannot even get an appointment with the minister. One has to ask why not.

Regrets, I have a few. I regret that I could not do anything about bad government industries, especially those related to Indigenous issues and the methadone program, which I believe is a program that uses a dirty, synthetic, addictive opioid that kills people. But they are battles for another time in another place.

Mr Speaker, thank you for being the Speaker. Thank you, too, to all your staff here in Parliament House. I know that I have had the benefit and privilege of working with you on parliamentary standing committees. I also thank the Clerks, Ian Harris and Bernard Wright; the House attendants; the security

officers; and especially our Comcar drivers. In one way or another, they have all looked after me since I arrived.

The future offers an unknown adventure but I surrender to 'the Greater Destiny' which shapes all our ends because I leave this place with a spirit that has been forged to a higher tensile strength by the unique pressures of the role. I thank the worthy John Miller, Jock Cameron, our Parliamentary Chaplain Peter Rose and other spiritual leaders for their stewardship and good counsel when I found myself on the edge of the political plank, which seemed to happen often. If I fell, I was aware that the media were ready to publicly disembowel me. You have to know who you are when you come to this place and what values you fly by. Otherwise, you do not fly at all. The reasons I stood against embryonic stem cell testing, abortion drugs and pornography are well documented in *Hansard* for the world to see. They are an extension of my Christian faith and my values.

Mr Speaker, for the record I would like to share with you and the House the Chinese proverb of which I spoke which is on the back of my card:

Where there is light in the soul,
There will be beauty in the person.
Where there is beauty in the person,
There will be harmony in the house.
Where there is harmony in the house,
There will be order in the nation.
Where there is order in the nation,
There will be peace in the world.
That means that peace starts with me, and I accept the responsibility.

I wish all my colleagues every good success at the next election. Tony Abbott is prime minister material. He is a man of principle, of soul and of great intellectual velocity and I wish him and the team the success that they deserve in the election. We have a good chance to win in Hughes with our Liberal candidate, local resident and local businessman Craig Kelly. I will be working with Craig to ensure that we continue to have a Liberal member for Hughes.

I hope to continue to make a contribution to my community. But the immediate future belongs to the long-suffering Bob. We will earn our stripes as grandparents and learn to be enchanted by the wonderful grandchildren that our fine sons and their wives—our Robert and Belinda; Christopher and Suzanna; Matthew and Sonja, and Alexander and

Melanie—have presented to us. I say to my children: you are the only glory that I ever wanted and I love you so much. And I love you, too, Bob; I love you, darling. I know that these last fourteen years have not been easy for you. Thank you for saving the last dance for me.

God bless you all, and God bless Australia.

The SPEAKER—I wish the member for Hughes continuing happiness with family and friends beyond this place.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Marles**) adjourned.