



Jennifer Houston MP

House of Assembly

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Electorate: Bass

Ms HOUSTON (Bass - Inaugural) - Madam Speaker, I rise to deliver my inaugural speech and formally commence my role representing my constituents in Bass and serving the people of Tasmania. I am very proud to have been elected as Labor member for Bass. This is a privilege and a great responsibility, one I will carry out to the very best of my ability.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate all other members in this place on your elections; many have returned and many, such as I, have been elected for the first time.

Madam Speaker, I am a proud Tasmanian. The roots of my family tree run deep into the ancient heart of this island. I am in the words of my great grandmother's great grandmother, 'A native of this colony and a daughter of the original and rightful inhabitants of this place'. This island has been our home for thousands of generations. We have hunted, gathered, fished and farmed here. We have built lives and raised families, formed communities and we have left our mark upon this island as it has upon us. Following the invasion of these lands in the early days of the colony we survived a genocide and dispossession. We endured enslavement and exile and fought to return to our homeland. Through necessity we became part of the colony occupying the no man's land between indigenous and colony. We avoided the gaze of the state. Even through such difficult times we persevered and at times prospered. We have contributed greatly to the social and economic fibre of this state.

I come from a long line of ordinary working people - proud, honest, hard working Tasmanians who have toiled for centuries to shape our state. They built the roads, worked the quarries, felled the trees and milled the timber, built the towns and laid the railways, drove trucks and trains and buses, grew the food and swept the streets. They sheared the sheep and worked the mines. When they heard the call they marched off to war and when they came back injured they were pretty much ignored.

My grandmothers, one a widow and the other the wife of a wounded World War II veteran, worked their fingers to the bone for starvation wages in textile factories. My mother started her working life in one of those factories aged just 15. The necessity to work and help her parents make ends meet put a premature end to her education. She worked in that factory until a ban on married women working put her out of the workforce and saw her spend the next decades raising her six children and helping raise the next generation. It is largely because of her dedication to family that I was able to work and study and succeed.

We are working class Tasmanians. I grew up in a family with strong Labor values; a family where fairness, honesty, justice and equality were impressed on me from a very early age. My grandfather had a list of commandments, rules to live by: when you are old enough to work, work hard. It does not matter what you do as long as it is honest work. When you get a job, join the union. The union will look after you. If they call a strike walk out with them. Never cross the picket line. No-one likes a scab. As soon as you are old enough enrol to vote and vote Labor. Always vote Labor. Those other lot do not care about us. As with many other things time has proved him right.

Injustice was apparent to me from a very young age. I recall my grandfather's struggle to claim a Veterans Affairs pension in the 1970s. His application was rejected despite his active service in World War II, his injuries and him being offered a TPI pension following the war. He declined the pension as a younger man. Instead he declared that he had the right to work. And work he did until age and the consequences of his war wounds caught up with him. By then, however, the Fraser Liberal government seemed to have forgotten his service to his country and initially denied both the legitimacy of his service record and his pension claim.

This situation led us to an encounter and an enduring relationship with an excellent role model in Gill James, a former member for Bass. It was from her I gained an expectation of what a politician should be: caring, compassionate, committed and relentless in her pursuit for justice. She is for me the very embodiment of Labor values. It is largely because of her impression on me as a small child that I stand here before you today. It is often said that you cannot be what you cannot see and in her I could see that working class women had a place beyond the home and beyond the factory floor. If I can be the type of politician she was I will serve the people of Bass very well.

The Labor Party is the party of ideals. It is one of our many and greatest strengths. Enduring principles of justice, equality and opportunity mean we are the party that puts people first. If ever people needed to be put first it is now.

No member of this House should find it acceptable that the cost of living increases while wages stand still. Our standard of living is in a downward spiral, we are in the midst of a health and housing crisis, our hospitals are at breaking point, ambulances are regularly ramped and homelessness is at a critical point. Winter has closed in and families are living in tents and garages, while both private and public housing sit empty. The elderly struggle to make ends meet and many will be cold this winter because they cannot afford to heat their homes.

Young people cannot access the skills and training they need to obtain employment. Working families struggle with basic costs like food, rent and electricity. The most vulnerable are forced to wait weeks for assistance from Centrelink. Meanwhile, emergency assistance supplies are stretched as more and more families find themselves in hardship, created by increased costs of living and stagnant wages.

Many vulnerable children are living in situations that are unsafe and not receiving the support and assistance they require. Over the past decade, an increasing disparity in the training and job opportunities on offer in our state, particularly the north of the state, compared with the mainland, has led to more young people being forced to leave our state. This must be rectified.

The role of government is to serve the best interests of the people. Only a Labor government can do this. In a democracy it is the role of government to build a decent society for all. A good society should be seen as more than an economy. It is an expression of our common and shared humanity. A good society, a decent society is a place where nobody is left behind, where we look out for one another and care for each other.

It is the role of government to provide the very best health care to every member of our society. Health care is a basic human right. It should be free, universal and publicly provided, rich or poor, refugee or Aboriginal, frail or fit, old or young. None of these attributes should hinder the quality of health care a person receives, but it does.

Everyone is entitled to a home. Not just housing, but a home, a stable, safe and secure place to live. It is the job of government to ensure everyone has somewhere to call home.

One of government's greatest obligations to the people, is to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to pursue an education.

It is also government's role to ensure that people who want to work can get a job. Right now, tens of thousands of Tasmanians want a job or more hours of work, but they simply are not available. This is no fault of their own.

It is government's responsibility to create work for all who want it. Good work, decent work, full time with fair pay and the full benefits of the conditions that have been fought and won by generations of working people in the struggle for a better world.

It is government's job to ensure that people have the ways and means at their disposal to live a decent life; not just to get by, but to live a good life. That means supporting people who are struggling, not penalising or punishing them. The treatment of people who rely on often measly and unacceptably low Centrelink payments to get by is appalling. The government should be looking out for people and helping them to improve their lot.

It is government's role to fix this situation. They should be raising wages, raising the minimum wage, protecting penalty rates, improving conditions for working people. We should be making it easier for those who need help to access assistance. We need to raise the payment rates. Some payments are shockingly low. It is well past time for these payments to be raised to give honest people who are down on their luck, through no fault of their own, the dignity and respect they deserve.

We need to stop penalising people who are doing their best to look for work, who want to work, when we have already established that no such work exists. Welfare should not be a dirty word. Living wage and full employment is something we should aspire to. It is all about the common welfare of the people.

I am a proud member of EMILY'S List. While I am in this place, I will always strive to expand the access women have to full reproductive health and termination services. This is the right of all women, including and importantly, women in remote parts of our state.

One of the government's greatest obligations is to keep our people safe. When we talk about safety, one area that is always overlooked by Conservatives, is workplace safety. The right to go to work and come home at the end of the day, unscathed, is paramount. It is government's role to make sure this is a reality for all workers. Sadly, this was not the reality for my father who, after a serious workplace injury, was never able to return to work. His experience had a profound impact on his life and our entire family. I will never forget it and I will dedicate myself at all times to improving workplace safety and holding bosses to account where safety is

neglected. Our success in doing these things that are the responsibility of government are the markers by which we can measure our society's strengths.

I come to this role with a great deal of life experience. I have six children aged between 14 and 31, and seven grandchildren. When my eldest child was born I was just 15. At that time this put an end to my education. The general feeling of the conservative education sector of the day was that my presence would be a bad influence on other girls, so I was excluded from my high school education aged just 14. A lack of viable alternatives meant I never completed high school.

By the time I was 21 I had three children and was working at the local abattoirs as a cleaner. I later operated my own business for my some time before returning to education in my 20s. I was a single mum with three kids and various part-time jobs when I signed up for an Aboriginal enabling program at the University of Tasmania in 1996. It was a constant struggle to keep a roof over our head and three children clothed and fed. It often meant long hours working for minimum wage in between classes and study commitments. Nonetheless, I persevered. I never gave up and never gave in. I graduated with my first degree in 2001 and my second in 2005. I worked throughout and had three more children in this time. I was employed in a lecturing role in 2004 and left academia to work in the community service sector in 2008. By 2009, I was the acting CEO and general manager of a mid-size not-for-profit resettling refugees in the north of the state. Following that I worked in a community development role with Anglicare Tasmania. That role ended with my election to this House.

I know what it is like to balance work and family. I already had three children when I met and married my current husband in 1999. We had three more children between 2000 and 2003. He spent the first four years of our relationship as a fly-in fly-out worker spending six to 12 months at a time on a ship at sea in the Middle East and Asia, earning less than \$1500 per month. It took until mid-2003 for him to be allowed to stay in Australia and work here. Then he spent four to six weeks at sea per swing. I worked full time, was undertaking a research degree and looked after our three young children. I often spent more than half of my income on child care. Those years are a bit of a blur now.

It has been a 33-year journey from pregnant teenager to my swearing-in to the House of Assembly. It was been a journey with hardship and poverty, suffering and hope. It was a journey marked by people in positions of authority and power telling me you could not have children and an education, or have a large family and a career, or work when you are pregnant or have small children. You could not be a politician. I have never taken well to be being told I cannot do things and generally I respond by proving them wrong. It is a journey I could not have made without the opportunities provided to me by an education and the opportunity to re-engage with education as an adult. It is a journey I could not have made without the support of strong, smart and determined women who work so hard to ensure others have the opportunity for a better life. Indeed, I could claim to stand on the shoulders of giants if only any of those women were over five foot two.

These people will feature prominently among those I must thank for assisting me on this journey, but first, thank you to my husband, Victor, my greatest supporter and tireless campaigner. Thanks also to my children and grandchildren, who have endured and participated in two campaigns. Thank you to my mother, who often feared what I would do next but never tried to stop me. Thank you to all the remarkable Labor women who have supported me, particularly Michelle O'Byrne, Gai Brodtmann, Gill James and Jessica Green. Thank you to EMILY's List for their support, and to those who paved the way and understood that education really is the greatest equaliser.

I acknowledge the wisdom of the late Aunty Molly Mallett and her work in improving access to education and child care. I thank Dr Linn Miller for her support throughout my education; Aunty Patsy Cameron for her support, instruction and advocacy; Aunty Lola Greeno for her kindness and encouragement over the years; and Aunty Suzanne Maynard for always turning up when I needed you the most and for being here today. For the enduring friendship and support of Kellie Maynard, thank you. I also thank the union movement, particularly my union, the Health and Community Service Union, a force to be reckoned with and one which does so much to support many working Tasmanians.

I thank the Labor Party for believing in me and endorsing me as a candidate in two elections. I thank the Labor members for Bass, including Adam Clarke, who supported me for my first preselection. To the small but dedicated team of volunteers that supported my campaign, I thank you. Your help will always be cherished and never forgotten. I particularly thank Debbie, a volunteer who went above and beyond to help my campaign after I met her at a community forum in Ravenswood.

I also thank our leader, Rebecca White, for her support and encouragement as well as her tenacity and enduring fighting spirit. You are an inspiration to us all. I also pay tribute to my fellow Bass Labor candidates. We had few resources but we each gave it our all. I thank my cousin, Peter James, for his unwavering faith in me and always believing I would win a seat.

Finally, I make this commitment to those people who voted for me: I will always fight for you. I will never give up on the principles I stand for and you voted for. I will always look out for the worker, the vulnerable and the

dispossessed. I will work my hardest to improve your lot in life and make our society a fair, decent and good place to live. Equality and fairness will be my mantra. This is my enduring commitment to you. I thank the House.

Members - Hear, hear.