



Mr Eric Abetz MP

House of Assembly

Date: 21 May 2024

Electorate: Franklin

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[2.30 p.m.]

**Mr ABETZ** (Franklin - Leader of the House) (Inaugural) - Madam Speaker, whatever time I might be afforded in this place will be dedicated to service to the best of my ability: service to God, King, the people of Franklin, and the people of Tasmania. For those who voted for me, pray that I might live up to your expectations. For those who did not vote for me, pray that I do not.

Talking of praying, we all have religion whether we admit it or not. We all have a world view or religion which helps us to make sense of the world. As legislators, I trust we are all agreed that we seek to encourage good behaviour and discourage bad behaviour through the legislation that we champion. Sure, some legislation has no moral dimension, such as the side of the road on which we drive, and that will be the only occasion on which I will not assert the moral superiority of the right.

In seeking to pursue the encouragement of good behaviour and discouragement of bad behaviour, we need to have a moral framework from which we glean our sense of good and bad, which in turn beckons the question, from where do we get our moral framework? It is, of course, from our world view or our religion. We all have a religion or a world view, whether we admit it or not.

For me, it is the Judeo-Christian world view. For those who would urge that people of faith should leave their religion at the door of Parliament House, I pose the question, 'What would happen if we required that of everyone who entered this place? From where would any of us obtain our moral compass to determine our approach to legislating?'

Christianity provides a robust, consistent world view beside providing two essential elements for human well-being: hope and purpose. Christianity has been a civilising force for the world, delivering healthcare, education, welfare, artistic endeavours, research, societal structures, and informing personal behaviour, which makes the countries with a Christian heritage the envy of the world. When well-known atheist Richard Dawkins admits he likes the cultural Christianity of his society, he is genuinely onto something.

Similarly, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, when it sought to discover the reason for the West's success. It first thought it was the military superiority, then its economic superiority. Finally, it concluded, and it had no doubt, the success of the West was built on its religious foundations. We discard those foundations at our peril. It seems some want the house, but not the foundations on which it is built.

As TS Eliot warned, on the eve of World War II:

If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. ... You must pass through many centuries of barbarism.

Regrettably, we are in the very throes of doing so, and the current societal indicators expose the folly and consequences of such developments.

Recent attacks on our archbishop in this place are part of that malaise. While allegedly celebrating diversity and inclusivity, there is an element which seeks to cancel and exclude anyone who has a view differing from their own. These attacks defy any rational explanation. Are we to really believe that a Catholic school is not to teach Catholic beliefs? We even had a member, self admittedly of no faith, seeking to determine what our archbishop should believe and what Catholic teaching ought to be. It would be like a person of faith joining an atheist society and demanding it be opened with a hymn. Yet the obvious silliness of such a proposition appears to escape consideration. Tolerance and inclusiveness, if honestly understood and genuinely appreciated, are in fact two-way streets.

While my Christian faith will inform my decision-making, honourable members and the public can be assured that I will not allow my policy positioning to be swayed too often by the Vicars and Deans in this Chamber.

As a constitutional monarchist - indeed, the former NO Republic campaign chair of the Australian Monarchist League under the excellent leadership of Philip Benwell - I will dedicate myself to the protection and advancement of our system of governments, which has served our community so exceedingly well. In founding the Liberal Party, Sir Robert Menzies established, as the first principle of the party under whose banner I sought election to this place, belief in the Crown as the enduring embodiment of our national unity.

Those who seek to denigrate our rich history of constitutional monarchy do our country and her people a great disservice. Our constitutional monarchy provides continuity and stability. It provides a much needed and cherished unifying, nonpartisan representative of the state. For example, our men and women in the armed forces serve under the Unifying Crown rather than a politician. Constitutional monarchies provide an independent umpire who owes no allegiance other than to the constitution. On the Democracy Index, constitutional monarchies rank right up there, while the worst 50 are all republics. Our forebears, in establishing our constitutional structures, did so with a constitutional monarchy at its centre, over 100 years ago. Australians overwhelmingly backed it in again in 1999. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' is a worthy injunction for many aspects of life, especially for constitutional arrangements.

In seeking to serve the people of Franklin, I first recognise the service of Dean Young. He worked hard and lifted his vote considerably from when he first sought election, bearing testament to his hard work. It was a privilege to be part of the Franklin Liberal team.

To those who missed out - Dean Young, Aldo Antolli, Jock McGregor and Josh Garvin - thanks for helping Mrs Petrusma, minister Nic Street and myself, over the line. We gave it our all. Next time, we will go for four seats, if not five.

It is an honour to be the plus-one of the parliamentary Liberal Party, Franklin being the only electorate which added to the Liberal numbers. The dynamic leadership of the party in Franklin was telling and, thankfully, allowed Antony Green, the ABC election analyst, to call me elected early on election night. It was a long night on the ABC election panel. It would have been painfully and unbearably so much longer had the result been different. The discomfort of uncertainty, let alone the prospect of defeat, was thankfully short lived.

What also made it a special night was the thoughtfulness of Australia's second longest serving Prime Minister, John Howard, leaving a message of congratulations a few minutes after Antony Green called me elected. I think he may have been secretly watching the ABC. Who could blame him when the Greens had such a 'polite' and 'congenial' panellist contributing? For Hansard, can you please put polite and congenial in inverted commas, lest I be misunderstood?

Franklin's geography is as diverse as its population and its job opportunities. From the picturesque and productive Huon to the more suburban based Kingborough and Clarence municipalities, it is a privilege to represent the electorate in which I have lived my life since grade one; growing up and commencing a business and raising a family, or, more correctly, where my darling Michelle raised our family, given my many absences. As a family, we will be forever blessed for having such a loving, forgiving, understanding and wonderful mother, wife and homemaker. The role of motherhood and devotion to family is to be cherished, honoured and celebrated. The role of motherhood and family in public policy decision making needs to be placed front and centre.

An election success is built by many, and there are many to whom I am deeply indebted: the membership of the Liberal Party, who kindly endorsed me with a singularly strong vote, and all the volunteers, too numerous to mention. I was greatly honoured that Heath Michael agreed to be my campaign manager and lent his experience and expertise to that task. Thank you.

To Senator Jacinta Price, a wonderfully brave Indigenous leader with great political instincts and values; to the distinguished Honourable Peter Hodgman, a former member for Franklin in this place; to the highly popular, dynamic and exceedingly capable mayor of the City of Clarence, Brendan Blomeley; to Dr Adler Adoyen of the Jewish community and medical leader; to Dr Virk, the chair of the India Australia Strategic Alliance, of which I am the Australian patron; to Dr Bruce Englefield OAM, a former Tasmanian of the Year for his work in protecting the Tasmanian devil. Thank you all for endorsing me so strongly in my election brochure, allowing me to be the beneficiary of your reflected credibility, status and the high regard in which you are held.

To Jeremiah Ambrose and the Young Conservatives for Christ team: thank you for your encouragement and energy, wobble boarding even as the mornings became cooler. To the coffee provider on those mornings: thanks for the sustenance and everything else.

To Gail Forder, who organised the letterboxing: thank you.

A further thank you to the dozens of volunteers who wobble boarded on the Friday afternoon before the election on the side of the Southern Outlet. To see the blue Abetz banners was a sight to behold.

Thank you to those commuters who spontaneously and so generously indicated their intention to vote number one for me with their upright middle finger. I am still puzzled as to why I received so much support from vehicles with green stickers on them.

It would also be remiss of me to not thank Labor operatives, including the Prime Minister, who gave me special regular mentions, including at the Labor launch. They provided me with free and much-needed media exposure that money simply could not buy. There were many others, many of whom I have and still need to thank.

To the election result generally, let me acknowledge and accept that the people of Tasmania sent the Liberal Party a message. Under the leadership of the Premier, we have regrouped, doubling our efforts on delivering for our fellow Tasmanians as a fresh new government, albeit in minority.

My life growing up was not privileged in financial terms, but it was in values of self-reliance, reward for effort, service to others and Christian values. As immigrants, the whole family had to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture. For those opposite, a state Labor government and the Hydro-Electric Commission provided us with an assisted passage for dad to work on the hydro schemes and therefore for me to be in this place. I say thank you to Labor.

State-school-educated and gaining employment whenever and wherever I could, I learnt many lessons of life. While studying I drove taxis and worked as a farmhand. The annual blistering of hands followed by the shedding of calluses on return to university was character building.

Establishing a legal practice with the help of a benefactor willing to guarantee the business loan was a break in life for which I will be forever grateful. The willingness to take a punt on me and my mate Roger Curtis was extremely generous. I still fondly recall the first two years of Abetz Curtis, working like a Trojan and living like a pauper, doing the toilets and cleaning of a weekend while living modestly to pay down the debt to release the guarantor during a time when the overdraft interest rate was 21.7 per cent. Amongst other things, I learnt economic management is vital.

Being a lawyer was a part of my working life I genuinely enjoyed. It was challenging and rewarding both financially and in providing the ability to serve all manner of organisations in an honorary capacity, varying from Riding for the Disabled, the RSPCA, and being on the foundation committees of a women's shelter and a youth shelter. The spirit of volunteerism through which I could engage with so many other civically minded people was truly inspirational.

There then followed a brief stint in the Senate during which I learned firsthand from the master, John Howard. Sound and responsible economic management is fundamental. Leaving the country in better shape, without debt, with historic low

unemployment while enjoying real wages growth is a worthy legacy. My various roles, including chairing the Native Title Committee and holding positions in Defence, Finance, Primary Industries and Employment, provided opportunities for which I will always be immeasurably thankful.

The most cherished position, albeit in opposition, however, was when my Senate colleagues elected me as deputy leader and then leader, unopposed. Having the confidence of the prime minister or premier is one thing, but having confidence bestowed by colleagues is next level. To be appointed as Leader of the Government in the Senate by Tony Abbott, a great prime minister disgracefully cut down by his own, was a singular honour.

In my absence from parliamentary service, I was delighted to be involved in Christian Homes Tasmania, Supporting Affordable Accommodation for the disability sector, seeking to promote a more community, environmentally friendly approach to planning and seeking to establish a national resilience institute with the former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the inspirational Peter Fritz. To date, the latter two projects have not completely hatched, but I wish both projects well.

During this time, I read many a book manuscript, providing advice to authors. The most captivating was a 486-page tome on Australian history by Christopher Reynolds - not to be confused with Henry - who imaginatively captures our history from original sources. There is a thought: history from original sources. He tells of equality before the law, where convict couple Henry and Susannah Kable on the First Fleet sued their ship's captain for theft and won in the very first judicial case in Australia.

He tells how Aboriginal women in South Australia gained the vote before their sisters in Europe: wonderful uplifting stories that make one so thankful to be living in Australia. It begs the question: why are our children denied this rich and inspiring history and instead fed a diet of irresponsible climate alarmism and the suggestion they live on stolen land, burdening them with needless guilt?

We do well to remember we owe our forebears an immense debt. The current trend to belittle our own elders and forebears is shameful and ignores their times. Overwhelmingly, they sought to do their best, as do we. Give us a few decades and the next generation will, if they follow suit, be condemning us. The time taken seeking to virtue signal at the expense of previous leaders' legacies would be so much better spent in acting positively. Cutting down our forebears - metaphorically at the knees, or ankles, physically, in the case of William Crowther - makes nobody any taller.

I was also a paid commentator and ran a consultancy business that was kindly promoted by the then Greens member for Clark. I also wrote unpaid opinion pieces for the local paper, including pieces strongly promoting the transformational stadium project, which will serve as an iconic gateway to our capital city, and strongly opposing the move by the university to the city. Future generations will not be thanking today's university leadership for taking the campus from an environment of expansive lawns and trees to the sterility of concrete and asphalt. Education and research should be the core business of the university, not property transactions that provide no value-add to educational pursuits.

The privilege of serving in this place means that those pursuits must of necessity be left behind or limited, especially keeping in mind that I am once again bound by cabinet solidarity. The reason I am so bound is because the Premier saw fit to appoint me to his ministry, for which I sincerely thank him. The need for common sense and decisive decision-making will be my aim, as will red-tape reduction.

Respect for all has to be at the forefront of public policy, and that also means, just from time to time, respect for the majority. Freedom of speech and association need to be upheld, a subset of which, of course, is freedom of religion. The rule of law protects us all equally. The teaching of critical thinking, encouraging analysis and alternative views, is what allows a society to grow and achieve greater heights. To label questioning minds as 'deniers' or 'bigots' are ham fisted, anti-intellectual tactics to shut down opponents.

Identity politics has captured the mind of some who believe that certain characteristics somehow defines them and others, which justifies all sorts of discrimination and demand-making. Let us be clear: as of necessity, one person's positive discrimination must mean someone else's negative discrimination. This breeds unnecessary and avoidable resentment.

As a Liberal, I believe in equality of opportunity, not of outcome. If there are structural issues which lead to discrimination, then that discrimination is only truly remedied by the removal of the obstacles, not by forcing an artificial evening up of the ledger by discriminating against others. We would do well to heed Martin Luther King's injunction when he told the American people that he had a dream where one day his darling children would not be judged by the colour of their skin but the content of their character. Let the pursuit of character be our defining identity.

It is a privilege to be chosen to serve by your fellow citizens, and with privilege comes responsibility to say and do the right thing, not to hold out false hopes, to acknowledge there are some things which governments simply cannot fix or overcome. Government cannot remedy all that life throws at us from time to time.

The virtues of self-help, resilience and philanthropy need to be promoted and instilled. This idea that somehow calling on government to do something can salve one's conscience and absolves personal responsibility needs to be called out and dispelled. Calling on government is in fact calling on government to raid the pockets of your fellow citizens while you do nothing to make the difference you expect others to make.

We have a responsibility to ensure we do not leave debt legacies for future generations because we are too selfish to tighten our belts. Maintaining our lifestyle today at the expense of the next generation is intergenerational theft and selfishness writ large. The current debt levels all over the country are distressing and need to be addressed. This will require tough decisions for the genuine welfare of the next generations.

Debt to pay for our regular expenditure is both unsustainable and ultimately immoral. Given tight budgets will be a thing of the future, all government priorities will need to be set based on genuine necessity. As part of the task, we also need to encourage

hard work and provide reward for effort, while backing in the productive job-creating sectors of our economy.

As Tasmania's Minister for Business, Industry and Resources, I will devote myself to that task, knowing each successful enterprise will be providing employment, which in turn provides succour and sustenance to the homes of Tasmanian families, and with a successful economy we can provide the services our fellow Tasmanians need.

This idea that we can increase expenditure on hospitals, schools and public transport at the same time as closing down mines and sawmills while opposing every new development, needs to be called out for the dishonesty it is. It is as disingenuous as calling on government to fix the housing issues while opposing subdivisions and unit developments.

Madam Speaker, no matter what our challenges may be, today or tomorrow, we can all take heart and dedicate ourselves with the words of the last of the 17 statements of principle enunciated by Sir Robert Menzies in establishing the Liberal Party, when he said:

We believe that under the blessing of divine providence and given the good-will, mutual tolerance and understanding, energy and an individual sense of purpose, there is no task which Australia cannot perform and no difficulty which she cannot overcome.

For today's purposes, allow me to substitute 'Tasmania' for 'Australia'.

We believe that under the blessing of divine providence and given the good-will, mutual tolerance and understanding, energy and an individual sense of purpose, there is no task which Tasmania cannot perform and no difficulty we cannot overcome.

Of that, I am absolutely convinced. Our future is bright and will continue to be so if we adhere to those timeless virtues and values to which I will dedicate my time in this place. I thank the House.

**Members** - Hear, hear.