PURPOSE IN POLITICS (1990)

In May 1990, the Labor Government presented its Budget and, at the same time, an Address in Reply debate was instituted in the Senate in which a formal address was made to the Governor-General. In such a debate, senators may speak on anything they wish. In the context of the Budget that had just been brought down, I made the following remarks about purpose and politics. It was actually a speech about an important aspect of philosophical liberalism. I also spoke about evaluation.

My first task is to congratulate the mover and seconder of this Motion and to thank them for their maiden addresses.

This contribution will draw attention to the poor state of political debate in Australia. The debate today is too personal, too trivial, too technical but above all too little attention is paid to matters of purpose, of goals, objectives.

As a result people have been moving to support third parties and independents. They have been moving away from the main political parties that enjoyed their support traditionally. An independent member won a seat in a formerly safe Liberal area offering no specific policies but projecting hope, integrity, concern and involvement.

There are lessons in these voting movements. Either we move to understand them or else we will continue to see support moving to third parties and independents.

It is sad that so little of the public statements of the major political movements so far has related to the lessons of this phenomenon or to the ways in which we might seek to respond to a new and deeply felt public demand that things be done differently.
Let me return to the assertion that political debate in Australia today is too technical, too personal, too trivial and too little addressed to matters of purpose. We should be determining the strategic goals first, providing the inspiration, exciting our young, inspiring all Australians. That we do not achieve this is the greatest indictment of the current Australian polity. That too much of debate is too detailed and too technical is sadly borne out by yesterday’s speech by the Governor-General.

Most people do not understand it. Most feel it does not touch them or their lives. Almost none is inspired by it. Programs are not presented in terms of goals, but in terms of activity and structure, or in terms of inputs.

Senator [John] Button came close to getting it right when he told a camera crew that it would be another expletive deleted boring speech. It need not be so. It is possible to communicate between politicians and people.

Great crises have occurred throughout this century. One characteristic of leaders during those times is that they have been able to articulate goals with which the majority of people could identify. The most recent example that comes to mind is the case of Václav Havel. This man has been chosen as the ninth President of Czechoslovakia. He is a poet. His skill is to communicate brilliantly. He communicated the aspirations of a nation crushed by dictatorship. His speech on his election was one of brilliance and passion—not one of dreary detail.

It has been said of Churchill that, in a time of greatest crisis for the United Kingdom, he made of the English language a weapon of supreme clarity and power, and used it to gather the people of his country with him in a noble common purpose. He did so without being overly specific as to details, but by being quite specific as to purpose.

We have no such common purpose in Australia today. None is offered to us by our national leaders. We are offered instead statements of inputs, of structures to be established, of things to be done. Being busy, being active, doing things, seems now to be enough for tired governments.

But one can be busy on quite ignoble things. This Government, for example, decided a few years ago to withdraw the supporting parents’ benefit from a particular class of beneficiaries. The proposal saved money and disadvantaged some needy and vulnerable women and families. At no time did the Government present any logical statement of the social purposes behind its action. It did not because there was none. What it did was to meet a financial objective—to save outlays—and there was no defensible social purpose at all. On the contrary, that decision made inevitable the emergence of more latch-key children and more difficult the task of single parents wishing to be home-makers.
But that is but one example of myriad actions. While I criticise this Government for its program as we heard it yesterday, I have to say that the Labor Government, in another area, has taken action that is to its credit. It has moved the Public Service towards program budgeting and requires that the budget be presented in program terms. This means that spending is grouped under programs, that for each program there must be stated objectives, objectives which can be examined and tested and challenged and that there should be performance measures related to those objectives.

What I ask is that the same government apply to itself in what it proposes to do what it now requires of those who work for it. We must judge the speech of the Governor-General against these benchmarks.

Did the speech point the way towards a better nation? Towards a fairer future? Towards new opportunity and hope?

These tests are what are important today. Not the specific programs. Not just busyness. One can be so busy doing quite ignoble things in which there is no virtue.

So let us now look at the speech of the Governor-General. First, let us acknowledge that it is the Government’s speech uttered faithfully by the Governor-General on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Ministers. So, if it is deficient in any way, the deficiency must be sheeted home to those who wrote the message, not to the man who delivered it on their behalf.

Recently I re-read Alan Reid’s book *The Whitlam Venture.* In it he recounts the night of the election of 13 December 1975 when Labor suffered a massive election defeat. As he left the tally room he reports that he had the following thoughts:

> As I left the tally room I wondered what that victory would mean for the future of Australia and the futures of the average, ordinary Australians of whom I was one.

> Australians who really did not ask for much but only for the right to work in jobs that would keep themselves and their families in reasonable comfort, for a bit of leisure, for homes that they owned and could take a pride in, for being left alone and in peace and not pushed round by government and bureaucrats; to know that they and their fellow citizens were getting a ‘fair go’ and that the underprivileged and vulnerable were being helped so that their lives became more bearable and their children had some opportunity to escape the harshness that their parents had known and to achieve a better life style.

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1 Reid (1976).
2 Reid (1976).
These are noble goals. They describe an Australia in which I would like to live; an Australia for the achievement of which I would fight and strive; they are purposes which promise the enrichment of the society which embraces them.

But the Labor Government has chosen not to do so. Worse than that, it has done the opposite. It has trivialised the opportunity presented by the opening of Parliament. It failed to set visionary goals; it was content to identify actions.

We have seen, not the enhancement of work opportunity but increasing evidence, now becoming apparent, of less jobs being advertised, of pessimism about future prospects for work, of longer periods out of work, of longer periods between jobs, of less jobs where they live. As for Alan Reid’s goal that Australians should have jobs which would keep them and their families in reasonable comfort, Labor has a lot to answer for and a lot to explain.

Family living standards have fallen and continue to fall. We are having more trouble paying for food for our families, more trouble buying shoes and clothes for our children, and so on. Individual living standards have fallen too. It is harder to afford small luxuries, to continue today to do what we could do readily seven years ago. As for getting a home that we can own and in which we can take pride, all the movements in Australia are in the wrong direction. It is almost impossible for young people to afford homes anywhere near their parents. My son is despondent about ever being able to afford a home in Sydney at all. He is a qualified person with good earning prospects and yet he has no hope, no optimism, that he will be able to own a home in Sydney. Many more decent, caring, responsible Australians are finding it impossible to continue to pay mortgages on the homes they have acquired. More and more are losing those homes. Others are spending larger and larger parts of their income on mortgage payments swollen by record high interest rates. For most it is harder and harder to keep that home as they would wish, harder and harder to maintain it properly, harder and harder to furnish it, and harder and harder to enjoy it.

This after seven years. There is nothing in the speech to offer hope. Nothing to inspire. Nothing to lead.

As for ensuring a ‘fair go’ for the vulnerable (as Alan Reid sought), we should be ashamed of what we see in Australia today: more and more alienated people; more and more homeless young people; more and more people living below the poverty line; more and more giving up the struggle. More and more unmet need.

Look into people’s eyes. Listen to them when they weep, when they tell you how it is, when they tell you how hard the struggle is, only then can we begin to understand. And while all this is happening to real people we have to listen to government rhetoric that seems not to understand and to government ministers
who seem not to care. Harshness is all around us and increasing, so that, far from achieving what Alan Reid had sought, we see more and more people condemned to experience and continue in poverty and misery, and condemned to repeat the cycle of dependence.

This is not a new or a young government. It has had years—the best part of a wasted decade—to deliver a better life for Australians, to deliver better prospects, more opportunity.

I looked to the speech of the Governor-General for some hope and direction. For some noble goals. For a vision to lead and inspire our young. For some message to draw people back to contribute to the mainstream of politics. But I looked in vain.

There is just one phrase on the first page of a 12-page speech. Otherwise it is a technician’s document—good for accountants or bankers or economists perhaps; good for technocrats who fiddle and adjust without knowing what it is they seek to do for people. Not only that but it will accelerate the flight of caring people from the main political parties to third and fourth groups and to independents who seem to identify with their needs, and hopes, and aspirations.

I would like to dedicate myself to achieving those purposes identified by Alan Reid so eloquently almost 15 years ago. To assert for individual Australians both rights and obligations. To reject those libertarians who would argue on the one hand for rights without corresponding communal obligations, and on the other to reject those socialists who would identify obligations but grant no rights to individuals, just as I reject that increasing number who would replace the government of people with the administration of things.

In order to achieve the Reid vision we must allow the energy, enterprise and vigour of Australians to be released. But we must at the same time ensure that our duties as members of a community of caring people remain committed to those principles of care and compassion, and of action to achieve good outcomes, which characterised so many administrations of my political persuasion in the past.

It is only by identifying objectives that we can see where the Government wishes to travel, where it seems to be going, where it has been, and only by identifying objectives can we judge the performance of the Government. To the extent that this or any other government continues to avoid setting noble, visionary, admirable, defensible, testable, objectives, so long will it sell short, to a lesser or greater degree, the community in which it operates, and in so doing it will continue to oversee alienation and cynicism. So long will it remain irrelevant to the problems blighting the lives of so many, and so long will it contribute to the flight of people away from the mainstream of politics.
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