

VALEDICTORY

Address by Hon Gareth Evans QC MP to the House of Representatives, Canberra, 30 September 1999 (Extract from *Hansard*, p 8370).

Mr GARETH EVANS (Holt)(5.33 p.m.) — Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am indebted to you. It is often said that the big problem about funerals is that the corpse never gets to enjoy the eulogies or the obituaries. Thankfully, that is not the case for political corpses, though I am not exactly sure that `enjoy' is entirely the right word for some of what has been said today and a lot of what has been said throughout the week. But I do thank very sincerely indeed everyone who has spoken today for their thoughtfulness and their generosity. I have been touched and amazed in about equal proportions.

As I look back now and relive my 21 years in this parliament, I feel as if I need a bit of a seat belt. Most politicians have their ups and downs, but in my case it seems to have been the equivalent not of some run of the mill Luna Park scenic railway but rather the Coney Island Thunderbolt. There have been some exhilarating highs but there have also been some rather sickening lows. I have been reminded with some vigour by colleagues and commentators, throughout the week and again today, that I do not even have the luxury of blaming anyone else much for those low periods. C'est moi qui etait le probleme.

Opposition members interjecting —

Mr GARETH EVANS — I have got to keep practising, so just bear with me. It does seem for a start that my tongue might just possibly have run away with itself more often than was strictly wise.

Opposition members — No!

Mr GARETH EVANS — For example, it may have been better in my maiden speech, right back at the beginning in 1978, if I had not said as a senator, `I feel that henceforth I should be given a little handbell to go around ringing in front of me and saying, like a medieval leper, "Unclean, unclean"'.

It may indeed have been better if on the occasion of the 1983 Tasmanian affair I had not made the reference to the stalker's defence, which in fact I invented. In particular, as Simon said, it may have been better if I had not engineered the Brer Rabbit in the briar patch response, actually suggesting to the journalist, `Whatever you do, don't call me Biggles' — something that has haunted me for the last 15 years. I should just say, though,

for the record, since it is really now a matter of dim and ancient history — I think Christian Zahra was 10 years old at the time when all this happened — it might have been better if Defence had actually done what it was supposed to do on that occasion. Then I might have kept out of trouble. It was in fact to help address a possible serious breach of Commonwealth law. The idea was for it to use a routine training flight going at 30,000 feet above the ground in clear weather, taking grid pattern photographs at intervals of a week or so so that the extent of the depredation or encroachment upon the wilderness could in fact be precisely mapped in a Federal Court case that was then looming. What happened, of course, was that Defence, with its usual efficiency, did not task the pilot with any of those constraints. The cloud was low on the first day in question. As a result, the F111 came in at 800 feet and gave a nervous breakdown to every living creature in its path. It did not go unnoticed, and the rest is history.

Of course, as Peter Reith adverted to today, it may well have been better if I had not threatened to garrotte Bronwyn Bishop or, indeed, to offer an explanation of why people seemed to take an instant dislike to her. It might have been a lot better if I had just said something gentle and whimsical like, 'I don't know what Bronwyn uses to sustain her coiffure, but I sure as hell wouldn't be wasting it on my hair.'

Again, it may have been better if I had not actually got the 'f' word into Hansard for the first time, apparently, in an English speaking parliament since the Earl of Sandwich quoted John Wilkes in 1783. I then of course made matters worse by explaining to the President that it had been an involuntary ejaculation. It would have been much better to have done what the Tory whip did in the House of Commons in 1988 when he was similarly caught out, overheard having a sharp exchange with the one of his backbenchers. He got up to explain that he had simply been having a conversation about sex and travel. Again, it might even have been better if I had followed Pierre Trudeau's example in the Canadian parliament in the early seventies and got up and insisted that what I really said was, 'Fuddle-duddle'.

Again, it may have been better — of course it would have been better; I am sure it would have been better — if I had not described myself, when back in opposition after 1996, as suffering from 'relevance deprivation syndrome'. I should obviously have said I was having a whale of a time. How the hell I could have done that, when as shadow Treasurer I was facing the Reserve Bank delivering five successive interest rate reductions in a row, nobody has ever quite told me. Shadow Treasurers — as Alexander Downer, if he were here, would well recall — only really enjoy life when they can wallow in schadenfreude, that malicious enjoyment of others' misfortunes. On the subject of Alexander Downer, I suppose I should say finally just for the record that I acknowledge it may have been a lot better if I had not described him, on his elevation to the role of foreign minister, as a 'dim, flatulent, Bertie Wooster kind of a character'. Because really I have to say — and I do say it in all honesty for the record — Alexander Downer has been remarkably generous and gracious to me in recent times in the context of the UNESCO candidacy, as indeed has

been the Prime Minister, to whom I have also said some rather ungracious things in recent days.

Quite apart from all the things which, in the interests of my own reputation, I should not have said, there are also quite a few things I should not have done: for example, to have ever let a camera anywhere near me on a golf course and, again, to have ever let a camera anywhere near me on a dance floor, particularly when there was an election in the offing. And I guess on that one occasion back in 1983 — in my early days as Attorney-General — when I got a bit tetchy with someone, I should not have allowed myself on that one occasion to bang down a stapler on my desk, only to see it skidding across the desk onto a couch about three or four feet away. I should not have done it because it has been the source of endless legends about hardware shops and fruit shops full of missiles being hurled at hapless interlocutors. From such small acorns have very large oak tree legends grown.

But I generally have taken the view that it has been better all these years to allow my natural exuberance a certain free rein, because I have taken the view that if you do not do that sort of thing you come out in boils. I am obliged to concede that, on a scale ranging from Buddhist tranquillity at one end to advanced mania at the other, I am slightly tilted towards the driven end of the spectrum. Perhaps, as I said in the Press Club the other day, that is written in the stars because, as I quoted the astrologer, Mystic Medusa, 'No-one on earth has self-expectations so ghastly and grandiose as a Virgo, not even Aries on a bender.'

The truth of the matter is that I am the kind of politician who does not really — although I have contributed to it on occasions, I suppose — get a huge buzz out of the theatre of politics: being there, being close to the action, hurling the verbal missiles across the chamber. My real pleasure in politics has always been in trying to actually achieve something, to make a real difference to the quality of people's lives, to make a real difference to countries' capacity to live with themselves and with each other without deadly conflict.

It is fair to say, when I really think back over my public life, that my parliamentary life had two great obsessions. Some lesser obsessions, I have to acknowledge, were constitutional reform including the republic and, dare I say it, the flag as well, but we are not allowed to talk about that; bills of rights; civil liberties generally; abortion law reform; public administration and governance; and a whole lot of other crusades associated with various portfolios that I have held in government. But I have had two really big obsessions. One has been an intense emotional hostility to racism in all its forms and the second has been a really quite passionate commitment to internationalism as an approach, as a habit of mind and as a driving strategy for government.

As far as racism is concerned, the very first published article I ever wrote — back around 1970, I think, while the White Australia Policy was still in force — was called 'The Browning of Australia' and I was arguing for a totally multicultural society to evolve. It was a theme that I echoed in that appallingly accented Oxford interview which keeps being played over and over again. I talked about Australia becoming a khaki coloured country. I got a bit colour blind on that occasion: it probably was the closest I have ever come to being a green. I was really talking about a yellowy-brown kind of a country, not a greeny-brown one, but the theme was there and it goes right back to the beginning.

It was very evident, as Daryl Melham acknowledged, in the work that I did for the Whitlam government as a consultant to Lionel Murphy in the drafting of the Racial Discrimination Act and in the work that I did for Gordon Bryant as Aboriginal Affairs minister in the Kulaluk/Larrakia land rights issue in Darwin — which was really the first one to take wing in the Australian context — and involved as I was in the establishment of Aboriginal legal services right around the country.

It is evident, I guess, in a lot of the personal friendships I have had over the years with Aboriginal people, never more so than with a young man called Brian Kamara Willis, a young mixed blood Aboriginal, whom I and my family helped sponsor through school and in starting law school in Melbourne, who really did struggle to find a place between the two worlds, who did not make it, and who in fact blew his brains out in front of his wife and two young children. That was the only time in my parliamentary career I completely broke down.

It was evident, I guess, also in my campaign for Malcolm Fraser for Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. Despite all the horror and hostility that was there arising out of 1975, Malcolm Fraser was someone who was absolutely genuine — rock solid — on the question of race, not in a large majority in that respect in his own party, but someone for whom I had the utmost personal respect as a result of that. Although in other respects it was a bit of an assignment from hell trying to get Malcolm elected, it was a task that I accepted with great enthusiasm because of my respect for him on that issue. Finally of course there was ultimately and most recently my role in the passage of the Mabo Native Title Act, which was in many ways a culmination of all that had gone before. I think the moment when it was passed, close to midnight in December 1993, remains — out of all the 21 years I have been in parliament — the single most exhilarating moment in my parliamentary career, just having that go through.

My commitment to internationalism as a theme in public life — not at the expense of national pride of course, but as a larger theme — has been on public display for quite a long time, including again in that awful Oxford Four Corners interview when I was heard to say in a terrible accent that I was committed to bringing Australia kicking and screaming into the seventies, as it then was, and in particular urging that there be a much greater engagement with Asia. It is a theme about which I have been genuinely passionate

for a very long time. Eventually I had the opportunity to give that passion relatively free rein in the nearly eight years I spent as foreign minister. If I had exhilarating moments in other portfolios on other occasions, that whole eight years was really pretty exhilarating as foreign minister. It was a magic time to be alive when you think about it.

It was at the end of the Cold War, an awful lot of rethinking and repositioning was going on, not only between the major powers and their acolytes and allies but in everybody's relationship with everybody else. It was the occasion and it was the environment in which it was appropriate and helpful to be able to think anew about middle-power diplomacy and all the things that we talked about. In embracing the kinds of principles that I spelt out in an MPI debate earlier this week — and I will not repeat them now — we did make some quite significant gains for Australia, for the region, and perhaps even in a limited way for the world. In Cambodia — it cannot be said too often — the peace plan could not have been put together without very close cooperation with Indonesia. The same can be said about the development of APEC, and there was the development of the ASEAN regional security dialogue forum. On a more global level, during that period we played a rather important role in the final demise of apartheid through our campaign on the financial sanctions issue. We succeeded — and this is far more to Bob Hawke's credit than mine — in getting Antarctica established as a wilderness heritage area. We played a hugely important role in advancing the world trade negotiations through the Cairns Group in the Uruguay Round. We brought to a successful conclusion the Chemical Weapons Convention. We initiated a whole new international debate on the elimination of nuclear weapons which, unhappily, has not been followed through subsequently. We were a useful force around the place.

There were, I have to say, some terrible disappointments during that period. It was not all unmitigated achievement, buzz, excitement and satisfaction. Nowhere was there a greater disappointment than in our inability to move forward the situation in East Timor. This is not the occasion today to track back over all of that. I want to say for the record that we really did do the best we possibly could with the cards that we had at the time. We never as a government acknowledged — and we do not to this day — the legitimacy of the original military invasion of East Timor. We always accepted the continuation of the right to self-determination of the East Timorese people as a non-self-governing colony, whether the sovereign power was Portugal or, as we later acknowledged, Indonesia.

We did nothing to prejudice the rights of the East Timorese in relation to royalty flows and so on from the Timor Gap area. Those rights were alive as a matter of international law and will be fully enjoyed by a new, independent East Timor. We did work incessantly for political autonomy, for a massive draw-down of the oppressive military presence and for a general improvement in the human rights environment. That was acknowledged from time to time by East Timorese spokesmen, but sometimes it gets forgotten. It was not until 1997 — with the economic meltdown and all the political turmoil that followed from that, culminating in the demise of President Suharto — that circumstances changed and it was

possible to move the game forward in East Timor, for better or worse. But that is all history.

Apart from policy matters, achievements which we were not able to realise and a few score other things that went wrong — a lot of stuff-ups over 21 years; a lot of stuff-ups over 13 years in cabinet which have been lovingly talked about by a lot of people during the last few days — I do not leave parliament with any overall sense of regret at all. There are a few specific regrets that I can and should mention. I do not think I made the shift to the House of Representatives early enough — not for any reasons of personal ambition but for my own sensitisation as a politician. Despite what senators always say to the contrary, it is a very humanising experience to have a constituency for which you are responsible and where policy issues are addressed not just at the level of high abstraction, which does tend to be the case in the Senate.

But when you are down at the grassroots level, as I have been — with a huge amount of enjoyment — in Holt over the last three and a half years, you get a whole new sense of what the political process is about. I rather wish that I had had that sense, that experience, quite a lot earlier. It might also have made me a more comfortable performer in this place to have been here longer. This never became 'home' in the way the Senate had been. Maybe you need a period at the dispatch box on the other side to acquire that degree of comfort. But there it is; that is one regret.

Another regret is that I am not now in a position, even in the next few weeks, to make the contribution I would have liked on the republic referendum. I do regard the passage of this proposal as being of quite fundamental importance for our sense of independent national identity. I do have a sense of regret that I will not be around to help, in my own quiet way, Australian foreign policy get back on to the kind of internationalist track from which it seems to have been rather recently derailed. I spelt out a little earlier this week in this parliament the kinds of things that need to be done. I do not need to repeat that now, but I am concerned about where we are at, and I do think some hard thinking needs to be done by the government about precisely where it is going.

Let me say that I do not regret at all the decision now to move on. There is absolutely no sense of disappointment at all in me that I did not make it that one rung higher. Many are called but few are chosen in politics, and I think the ALP is in fabulously competent hands now with Kim Beazley, as will be the country under his leadership of it next time round.

I have had a terrific innings in terms of longevity, now being the longest serving ALP member. I have had a terrific innings in terms of leadership — all that period as Leader of the Government in the Senate and the period here as Deputy Leader of the Opposition. And I have had a terrific innings of course in terms of cabinet service — at 13 years, one of the two longest serving cabinet ministers in Labor Party history. But there comes a time

— and for me, I guess it is a matter of notorious public fact, it was at the last election — when you know that your contribution is really more behind you than ahead of you in a particular forum. You can choose to stick around this place either as a bellowing old bull or as a kind of grey ghost — and we all know examples of both — but neither option, frankly, appealed terribly much to me.

So I am moving on, and in moving on I have many thank-yous to give to people who have been very important to me. First of all, of course, I offer my thanks to my family and to my mother Phyl Evans — who I hope is listening to all this on the radio — who made it all possible and who, as readers of Keith Scott's book will know, is a rather formidable figure in her own right. And I offer thanks to Merran, Caitlin and Eamon, who have been — as so many people have very nicely acknowledged in their contributions — the front-line troops in dealing with all the stresses and strains and wear and tear and damage that is associated, unhappily, with public life in this country.

To my staff I owe a huge debt of gratitude. I have been blessed over the years with fabulous electorate and ministerial staff over the whole time I have been in parliament. As Casey Stengle, the manager of the New York Yankees used to say quite graphically, 'I couldn't have managed it without my players.' There are far too many people to thank individually. There have been scores of them over the years, although the turnover has not been nearly as fast as is often alleged. It would be invidious to single out too many people by name, but let me just mention four out of the scores and scores of people, with no disrespect at all to anyone else. The first I want to mention is Kelvin Thomson, the member for Wills, who was my very first parliamentary secretary and who, may I very simply say, set the standard for all else that was to follow — a terrific supporter. I would like to mention the two guys who were my drivers during the whole 13 years that I was a cabinet minister: Barry Stewart here in Canberra and Dominic Sciberras in Melbourne — fabulous blokes, friends and loyal supporters through some often very difficult times. Of all my other staff there is one in particular I would like to mention and that is Christine Neville, who is just one of those absolutely indispensable people that most of us treasure when we find them and hate to see go. Not least was her indispensability in playing that role of the Roman functionary who used to walk along one step behind saying, 'Remember, Caesar, that thou art mortal.'

I want to say to all my friends and colleagues in the parliamentary Labor Party and the Labor movement — there are various degrees of intimacy in those friendships, I suppose, political life being what it is — that, generally speaking, it has been a fabulous working environment to be in all these years and you have all been a terrific bunch of people to be associated with.

I want to say thank you to all the departmental heads and officials whom I have worked with — legendary people like Alan Woods in resources and energy, the late great Peter Wilenski, and Mike Costello, now delightfully with us back here in parliament. But not

just the heads of the departments; there are absolutely legions of others for whom I had the greatest respect and, at a personal level, the greatest affection. The Australian Public Service is a very fine and very undervalued group of professionals. To all the parliamentary staff — and again it is just impossible to even begin to mention anyone — who have put up with all sorts of idiosyncrasies of mine over the years, and worse, I do want to say how grateful I have been for the fabulous support that they have all rendered in their various roles.

I want to finish by thanking the people in my own Holt electorate with whom, in a relatively short time, I think I have formed a very strong bond of affection and respect. It has been a delightful and exhilarating experience to get to know them and to experience, in particular, the business of working in a community that is genuinely multicultural and genuinely represents the kind of Australia I was writing about all those years ago: I first started writing about it 28 years ago. In fact, it is a story that I have been telling in 50 countries around the world in the last three months as I have been campaigning for UNESCO because I wanted to make the point as graphically as I possibly could that Australia is not the monolithic white Anglo-Saxon Western outpost that the international stereotype still has us as being, but that we are a genuinely multicultural environment.

The way I have been most easily able to make that point is to say, 'Look at my own electorate. It is a working class suburb in Melbourne, not at the extreme end of the spectrum — 80,000 voters, 130,000 people in total. At the last census, more than half of them came up as having been born overseas — 52 per cent were born overseas. Another 20 per cent were born of parents born overseas. Nearly three-quarters actually born of first generation people — and they were not born in just a handful of European countries and one or two others but in a total of 140 different countries around the world.'

When I talk about that and when I talk about some of the anecdotal experiences of being in the Dandenong market and particularly the kids in the schools, it is a tremendously graphic way of explaining what it is that this country is all about and indeed what my candidacy is all about. So at that level as well as all the other levels of emotion that I feel about the electorate, it has been a marvellous experience working and operating there. I do not know how much they are going to miss me, but I am certainly going to miss them.

Let that be my last word in this place more generally. I do not know whether you will all miss me as much as Cheryl very kindly said that you would, but I am sure as hell going to miss all of you.

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