

First Speech - 20 June 1996

Mrs VALE (Hughes)(11.55 a.m.) —Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In all my life, I had never dared to dream that it would be my honour and my duty to stand before you in this honourable House to represent over 83,000 of my fellow Australians. That I am here can be attributed to a confluence of circumstance and destiny in a personal spiritual journey, together with an awareness that, as a lucky citizen of this still lucky country, I have reached that time in life when something must be put back for that which has been received. This is not altruism, but my own fearful anticipation of an inevitable appointment with divine reckoning, where the idiosyncrasies of my life will be balanced with any good bits—and, mea culpa, I am more than a little short on the good bits.

If birth is the great lottery of life, then I must have been one of the winners. I was lucky enough to be born in Australia, to have grown up in Sutherland shire and to have met and married a man who is good and gentle. My husband, Bob, and I had four sons in five years—which was more good luck than good management—and we were lucky enough to have raised them in Sutherland shire. I was lucky enough to be a full-time mum and lucky enough to have been there to share the joys of rediscovering the world through the bright eyes of our four little Vale boys.

I mention them today because they are the achievement of my lifetime. Together with Bob, I have raised four young Australians who understand the meaning of love, family and commitment. They stuck together as children, and they stick together now, and they have a loving affection and respect for their old dad. So to our sons, Robert, Christopher, Matthew and Alexander, I want to say thank you for coming to live in our house. For so many years, you were my reason for living, you were the only glory I ever wanted, and I am so very proud of you all.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I was also lucky to have had a childhood in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. My mother and father, Albert and Delma Ward, built our family home at Sylvania near the Georges River just after World War II. I was the eldest of their six children and, with my brothers and sisters, our childhood was spent mucking about in old rowing boats on the river. We were the last of the billycart generation, before the invasion of television and technology stole all the real fun from an Australian childhood.

I left school and began working at 14, and I was lucky enough to get a job almost immediately as an office junior. But, for a girl, I had a restless spirit and dared to dream of things not usual for girls at that time. When I was 18, I dreamt of flying aeroplanes. I was told this would be impossible—I came from a working class family, I did not have any contacts in aviation and, besides, at that time such a pursuit for a girl was irrelevant in a world of men. But I was lucky. I worked hard at two and sometimes three jobs and I obtained my pilot's licence by the time I was 20.

When I was 34, I dreamt of going to university to study law, but my betters said it would be impossible for me—I did not have any contacts in the legal profession, and I did not have the intellectual fortitude to undertake the rigours of the discipline. But I tried anyway, and I was lucky enough to graduate from Sydney University—one of the most prestigious and oldest universities in the country—with degrees in arts and law.

So you see, Mr Deputy Speaker, Australia has truly been the lucky country for me. It is now my turn to pay something back from the bounty that I have received, and to begin to redress the imbalance of the lack of any good bits before my time comes for the greater accounting, by committing myself to the service of the people in my electorate.

My electorate of Hughes lies to the south of Sydney and for a greater part includes the western end of Sutherland shire, extending north-west to Chipping Norton. I have heard many of my fellow members wax lyrical on the beauty of their electorates but, as the representative of Hughes, I must be silent on its secrets. The secrets need to be kept because from Coalcliff to Como, from Menai to Moorebank and all the areas in between, Hughes is where God comes for his holidays.

However, I do wish to draw the attention of this House to a particular issue in the electorate—that is, the completion of the Woronora Bridge, which has taken on great significance in local politics. The last Liberal state government began to build a new medium level bridge. However, after the victory of the state Labor government in March 1995, funding for the bridge was stopped. Today the bridge pylons stand silently in the river, mute testimony that the state Labor government—despite a petition of almost 13,000 signatures, urgent overtures by Sutherland Shire Council and hundreds of personal pleas by local residents—remains deaf to calls to complete the bridge.

During the election I strongly supported the completion of the new bridge. I now understand that the federal government has already granted \$230 million in untied road grants to the state government in the 1995-96 budget. I challenge the state ministers for roads and transport to explain to the people of the electorate of Hughes why some of that federal funding could not be allocated for the completion of the Woronora Bridge.

My opportunity to get serious about putting something back into my community came with the approaching federal election and the need for the Liberal Party to win seats like Hughes. Yet again I was told by those who

knew better than I that it would be impossible to succeed. Not only was the sitting member a minister of the Crown but also he had at his disposal the considerable resources of his incumbency plus a 6½ per cent majority for good measure. It was against the odds, I was told.

Without resources and without finances, I took unpaid leave of absence from my job as an associate solicitor in Jannali, and in August 1995 began the hard slog of doorknocking the electorate. I wish to thank the partners of my employer, Macedone Christie Willis, especially Sam and Margaret Macedone, for their support and goodwill, and for keeping my job safe for me if I did not succeed. That our little campaign in Hughes was so successful that it nearly doubled the national swing is a tribute to the many friends and supporters who gathered to sustain us along the way.

It would be impossible to thank them all, but thanks must be extended for the kindness and generosity of the people of Warringah conference—to its president, Angus Robertson, and to Jane Vincent, David Begg and the member for Warringah (Mr Abbott), who even came doorknocking with me in Engadine. Thank you Andrew Maiden, Scott Briggs and Meredith Laverty and all the wonderful members of the Young Liberal Movement who worked in the campaign.

Thank you senators, Michael Baume, John Tierney and Bob Woods. Thank you to the member for Berowra (Mr Ruddock) and the member for Bradfield (Dr Nelson) and to our state members for Georges River and Miranda. Thanks must also go to our golden oldies, who worked in the campaign rooms—to Edna and Jack Gentle, Mary Stewart, Nola and Des Lawrence and Norm Humphries, and to the many others who kept the campaign rooms at full operational strength.

A very special thanks and full credit go to our campaign director, Mr Chris Downy, state member for Sutherland, our brilliant ideas man who gave us his experience, his encouragement and his friendship. Thank you to our campaign manager, Brett Thomas, and his wife, Faye; to our generals in the field, Gilbert Vanderjagt, Ian Leeding, Bill Meehan, David Adamson and Steve Simpson; and to our fundraising committee, Jill Deering, Lorna Stone and Jennifer Turville. Thank you to all our supporters and workers who turned out on the day, up before the sparrows so that our booths were ready to deliver long before any opposition arrived.

Thank you to my own family, Delma and Don Matheson, Hilary and John Tipping, and the most loving thank you of all to my 81-year-old mum, Delma Ward, who came down from Tuncurry and 'womaned' the booth in Bangor all day.

To all my men, the four Vale boys and to my darling Bob whose peaceful life I have turned upside down—he married me for better or for worse, not necessarily for politics—my loving thanks. Bob, I couldn't have done it without you, mate.

I stood as a candidate for government because there are things I see in our society today which I do not understand. I am moved to question why, in a country rich in natural resources, mineral wealth and of a population of high creativity and ingenuity, our compasses are all awry. We have not only a huge \$8 billion deficit but also over 805,000 of our citizens unemployed, 280,000 of whom have been walking through the experience of unemployment for more than a year and a half.

I have seen the homeless, the hopeless and the aimless. I have seen children, one as young as 11, left to face the juvenile justice system alone, deserted by whatever passed for a family in his young life and abandoned as if he were the flotsam and jetsam of life. I have seen the despair caused by youth suicide in my own electorate, the parents and the families, the teachers and friends disconsolate in the depths of despair and no answers as to their questions of why.

I have seen the shameful lack of support facilities for the old, the frail and the disabled in our community, and seen how governments fail to support the carers, those wonderful few who toil unselfishly in the care of their loved ones, taking over a burden which rightly belongs to governments.

I have seen how we have abandoned our responsibility to those amongst us who suffer a mental illness, and I have seen our once friendly, gregarious Australian society change in recent years to one which exhibits a high level of anger and aggression. I have seen a culture of violence flourish, encouraged by the entertainment media where depravity is celebrated and homicide is presented as a brutal form of conflict resolution.

As a member of this House, as an Australian citizen, there are some questions about the state of the nation that I am driven to ask. It has been a long time since anyone has been burnt at the stake for heresy. But I would dare to ask questions of the kinds of principles and values which guide the decision making process of this House which ultimately become the values which determine the priorities in our lives, in our relationships and in our Australian society.

The recent tragedy of Port Arthur has seared the psyche of our nation like no other single event in our history. Australia will never be quite the same ever again. I add my voice to the expressions of sympathy extended to the families and the people of Port Arthur by the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) and the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Beazley). The event at Port Arthur has left, in its destructive wake, some tough lessons from which we might derive some understanding of the direction in which our modern Australian culture is heading.

We in this House are supposed to be the leaders of this nation. If we do not give our time for serious discussion on the nature of our society, to the kinds of guiding principles we want to uphold as those our society should value, then the compasses may always be awry, and heaven help us all in the future. And the future is our children today. The kind of adults they will become will depend on the kinds of values we uphold as worthy of our own commitment.

Mindful of my heresy, I dare to ask the economists among us why is it that the principle of efficiency is the guiding principle upon which our economic realities are based. That such a principle is apparently so readily accepted without debate by both sides of this House tells me that it has the status of dogma. I am not an economist, nor can I pretend to be. But I do have a problem with the dogma of economic rationalism which sacrifices people in the name of 'efficiency'.

Why must every activity, enterprise, business or industry be rationalised in the name of 'efficiency'? Efficiency of what? It cannot be the efficiency of our economy, not with a deficit of \$8 billion. It cannot be the efficiency of our industry, not with 805,000 people unemployed. I remember a time in the 1950s and 1960s when Australia fairly bristled with a manufacturing sector which made us wealthy, independent and secure in an insecure world and which gave our young people employment and hope and a future. But a new generation of economists has no place for old-fashioned economic structures, especially tariffs and other forms of protection. Their litany includes terms like 'level playing field', 'open economy' and 'rationalisation'.

So what if our manufacturing industry of the 1950s and 1960s was inefficient? Was it so wrong? It provided jobs for the greater majority of Australians and hope for our future. Why is it that a better outcome is to have a small remnant manufacturing sector which may be efficient but which provides very little employment for Australians?

This reminds me of a scene in *Yes, Minister* when Sir Humphrey wanted to give an award for efficiency to a brand new hospital. 'But it hasn't any patients, Humphrey,' said Mr Hacker. 'But that's not the point, Minister; it's the most efficient hospital we have. We don't want any patients in it,' said Sir Humphrey.

I would like to tell the Sir Humphreys amongst us here that we need to factor people into the economic equation if we want real, effective outcomes for our nation. Otherwise, the only outcome we will have will be the effect of higher and higher levels of unemployment. The impact of unemployment in a society is well documented. It has a millpond effect and causes loss of self-esteem and self-identity, mental depression, hopelessness and helplessness, and family and relationship breakdowns. It adds to our crime rate and increases in domestic violence. At its very worst, it eventually impacts as a generational phenomenon.

I would take this further: the tough dogma of economic rationalism which places no value on people and dominates our political and economic culture is also reflected in the pursuit of self-focused materialism and personal convenience in our society. The devaluation of people in the economic world is reflected by a devaluation of people in society generally. It can be seen in the way society values its relationships and the kind of language the society uses. Of recent years, there has even been a shift in the language to accommodate such pursuits.

Commentator John Hyde, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 10 May 1996, suggested that if we are to re-assess our values we should start with changes in our language and that we should start to use the words 'right and wrong' instead of the words 'efficient and inefficient'. I agree with him. There are certain principles which underpin human relationships and Port Arthur has as much to do with human relationships and the devaluation of human beings as it does with guns, mental health and violent videos. It is a fundamental principle that love is necessary to enrich and sustain the relationship of the family, which is the basic building block of our nation. Families tell us who we are and let us dream of what we might become.

But the family is changing. In modern Australia there are parents who do not see any need to provide the nurturing and love needed by their offspring and the word 'care' is now used instead of 'love'. Relationships increasingly end in divorce and separation without any consideration of proper strategies to deal with the distress of the children. Contrary to fashionable opinion, I can tell you that divorce and separation hurts. We cannot put personal ambition, convenience or the pursuit of lifestyle above the emotional needs of our children and expect to bring up confident and well-adjusted young adults. We cannot convince a baby of its intrinsic value as a very special human being in our lives if it is left in long-term care from the time of its birth and is collected after work with the milk and the bread.

There may be those at this very moment who are gathering the wood to burn this heretic, but it seems to me that the process of devaluation of people in the dogma of economic rationalism in this House is reflected in the devaluation of people in relationships in many households in our country. It is the role of government to provide the leadership necessary to reverse the cultural shift and to make this nation a kinder society where effective outcomes are those which include the human equation. Otherwise, I have a fear, a very real fear, that the tragedy of Port Arthur will be revisited.

I now wish to refer to the recent decision of the government to reconsider Holsworthy, in my electorate, as a possible site for a second airport in Sydney. I give notice to this House that I and the people of Hughes are implacably opposed to Holsworthy as a possible site for an airport and I will fight the government on this issue.

Once again, my betters are telling me I am taking on the impossible and I cannot win. There are many environmental and other issues which cause grave concern for the people of my electorate. These will be fully addressed in the EIS process and I do not intend to address such issues here. However, I wish to make it clear that I am very proud to be here as part of the 38th parliament of Australia and to be on the team led by our Prime Minister.

During the campaign, John Howard spoke up for the family, integrity and small business. He spoke his truths clearly and firmly. The heartland of Australia heard his call and voted for John Howard. His name is now firmly etched upon the escutcheon of this nation. For me, he is not only the Prime Minister of Australia; he is my Prime Minister. I am very proud of him. I would be proud to hoist my colours alongside his in any fight, at any time.

I want this House to know that it gives me no pleasure at all to fight the Prime Minister and his cabinet on the proposal for Holsworthy. But I have a sacred duty to the people of my electorate and it is with a resolute heart that I stand with them against this proposal. There is a grave principle here for which I have a very real concern and that is the principle of trust that underscores the relationship between the government and its people.

The people of Hughes and I began a very special relationship during the campaign. I knocked on their doors; I shook them by the hand; I looked them in the eye; and I asked them to vote for me. I am their member, they are my constituents. They are my extended family and I will do my best to look after them. Already they have felt the impact of the proposal but not as much as the sense of betrayal they have in this government.

I ask our Prime Minister, who stands up for families and family life, and the Minister for Transport and Regional Development (Mr Sharp) to look elsewhere for a location for a second airport. We should not repeat the mistakes of Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport in one of the fastest-growing areas of Sydney where it will have an impact on over 100,000 homes.

I have told the people of Hughes that I would fight for them on this issue—and I will not betray them. I come from a long line of heroes and I give my word of honour on this. My grandfather, Mr Donald Dempsey, and his brothers were Anzacs and he and two of his brothers paid the ultimate sacrifice over there. Of his two brothers who returned home, one was full of shrapnel and the other had the Military Medal. My father, Albert Ward, and his brothers fought for Australia in the Second World War and served in Syria, Egypt and Palestine. My husband, Bob, has a citation for bravery from the Royal Humane Society for the rescue of a pilot from the Georges River near Milperra in 1974.

I tell you this, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I want the people of Hughes to take heart. They will look at me and see a small and insignificant woman but I have inherited the heart and the stomach of an Anzac. I know how to fight and I will never desert them. From this time forward I am at one with them; they are my heartbeat and I am their voice. For them I will take on what others tell me is impossible. I will fight this proposal to the death knock. I will do it with determination and I will do it with guts. I will do it for the people of Hughes and I will do it with the grace of God.