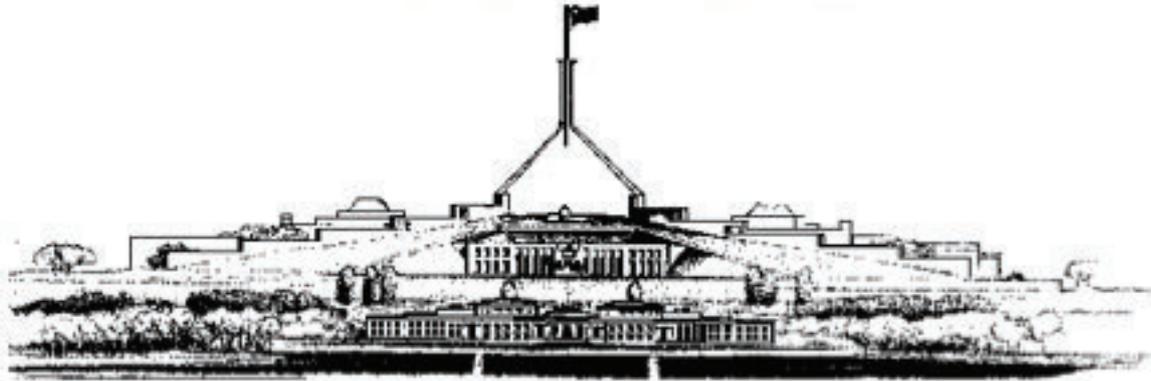




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

CONDOLENCES

Tillem, Mr Mehmet

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 November 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 12 November 2019</p> <p>Page 41</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Kitching, Sen Kimberley</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Senator KITCHING (Victoria) (16:05): There have only been 624 senators of the Commonwealth of Australia. There have been 103 senators for Victoria, and my friend former senator Mehmet Tillem was one of them. He was here for a short time, both in the Senate and, so sadly, in his life. 'Inshallah'—if God wills—said his family at the hospital on Saturday, when they were hoping he would be able to breathe independently. His best friend said to him, 'Let your heart which has touched so many work again.' Sadly, this was not to be. My friends and I were so determined that he would return to fly Labor's flag when his health was restored. We needed him. We need him still. We needed his Zen-like calm; his wisdom well beyond his years; his careful planning; his willingness to call out rubbish—he would have employed another word—and to laugh at the extremes of political correctness; his nurturing of young, ambitious talents; and his deep pragmatism and firm values rooted in his upbringing. We need him now, just like we always did.

Mehmet's lovely wife, Ferda, his son Mikail and his parents, Ramaza and Fatima, were his first love. He lived for them, and they are rightly so very proud of him. He loved this country with a fervour that few would know. He loved the Australian enthusiasms of footy and cricket, and he was a competitive—as in really competitive—backyard cricketer. I record my gratitude here to the AFL's Jude Donnelly for helping ensure that Mehmet and his son could attend their first football game in a while, on grand final day this year, where he saw Richmond demolish its opposition. It meant a lot to him not just because of the result but because he was able to share it with his boy Mikky. He was very keen to go because in 2017 he missed Richmond's first premiership in 37 years by reason of being in a coma during that month as part of his ongoing battle with his health, which left him in a wheelchair. But none of this was going to stop him seeing Richmond win that flag, and see it with his beloved son—a grand final triumph that was to be the very last AFL match he saw.

Mehmet had learnt a lot, he told me, as a patient in hospitals and in rehab and as one of many Australians trying to get sense and support out of the NDIS. My friend the President of the Senate and I were both trying to help him get the support he needed from that rather complex and not always responsive government agency. His involvement in Labor politics was long and ran deep, driven by the strongest of beliefs and the steepest of thinking. He has had and will continue to have, due to the good people he helped preselect, a long impact on politics in this country.

We had many shared adventures due to our participation in backroom Labor politics. We plotted and planned, both before and after Victorian party offices meetings. He played a vital role in helping remove some nefarious characters from a high-profile union in desperate need of saving, despite being emphatically told by various bosses not to be involved. Indeed, they might be surprised, if they hear this speech, to know that he was! He put his job on the line for principle and did so frequently. How many people in this building are, or were, willing to do that?

I do want to mention one incident from a union campaign. I only really feel vaguely comfortable talking about this at all because the statute of limitations for defamation has passed! A letter had been drafted outlining, in helpful and clear bullet points in the same typeface as *The Sopranos*, some of the more newsworthy and titillating actions of various officials at a particular union. It was sent to Mehmet for redraft, and then to print. So imagine the campaign surprise that some of the dot points that had only really been drafted for Mehmet to have a chuckle at, and then to delete promptly, made it out to about 15,000 members, mainly older women who might have been a little taken aback. Certainly that's what their phone calls to the campaign office seemed to indicate. Mehmet's view was that the original copy made the necessary point.

He had good judgement about political communication and how to reach people and, obviously, how to impress a point upon them. He was tough, principled, fanatically loyal, sensible and pragmatic. He had a perpetual twinkle in his eye, reflecting the fact that he was always up to some great scheme, a grand plan, one big dream or another. He was a centrist, not because he was cautious but because he knew that lasting Labor changes like super, Medicare and the NDIS came from earning trust and gradual wins, not 'issuing woke revolutionary decrees'. Those are his words. He did not believe in shutting down industries and denying workers work in the name of

—again his words—'highfalutin inner city causes'. These were not academic issues to him. They were his life; they were real life. He grew up surrounded by factory workers in Broadmeadows. And that big smile! Mehmet loved being here in this building. He loved life, whether it was here, under the trees in his backyard, at various cafes plotting or outside the ALP's head office in King Street, where it was then located.

Mehmet and I competed for a Senate vacancy in 2013. He was backed by his friends and I was backed by mine. It was a family feud of sorts in a group unpleasantly called the ShortCons. The Labor Left sensibly kept out of it. They probably weren't sure whom they liked least! Mehmet won. His grace and generosity of spirit after a tough contest is the perfect expression of what Mehmet was like. We all know people in politics who are not gracious winners, but Mehmet kept it all in perspective and that was Mehmet. When some panicked in a crisis, he was calm. When some flinched at the first sign of conflict, he stood up. When lies were told, he spoke the truth, even if it was going to cost him.

I assumed from that disappointing contest that I should focus on being the best lawyer I could be. I did give some consideration to become managing partner of the law firm where I was, and Mehmet was actually helping me through the office politics there too. I would be involved in politics from a respectable distance, cheering on my friends and offering advice, which, hopefully, was worth more than they paid for it. But Mehmet encouraged me to stay involved. Mehmet was often involved in events that would reach the media, but often his name wouldn't. His achievements vastly exceeded his profile. He moved quietly, stealthily and very, very effectively. He worked for some of the most powerful politicians in all the land, but no power on earth could constrain Mehmet's strategic mind, his passion for politics and his loyalty to his friends. One of his ministers, Phil Dalidakis—now a very senior executive at Australia Post—called him 'the chief'. It was an apt title. And, at the risk of it seeming that former Senator Conroy has never left the chamber, Steve said to me yesterday to mention his deep gratitude to, and love of, Mehmet.

Mehmet emphatically didn't want me to acknowledge in my inaugural speech his vital role in helping me to be preselected when another Senate vacancy came along. In fact, my candidacy was very much his idea, and I took some persuading about whether it was a good idea to run to replace Stephen. When I realised he was serious about it, I realised I had a serious chance. When it came to a democratic contest, Mehmet was a seriously good ally. After the result—he did not like boasting; he didn't like people boasting for him—he didn't seek the limelight, despite a natural, theatrical flair, a schmoozer's charm and a comedic wit that lightened even the most tense situation. Now that he has gone, I very much hope he doesn't mind my acknowledging in this chamber at this time that he very much did play a vital role in that preselection. The simple truth of the matter is that, having been in the Senate before me, with the strong relationships he enjoyed with my predecessor, Stephen Conroy, and his supporters, Mehmet could very well have taken the position I now hold for himself. But he, and others working with him, chose to help me.

When people look at the cause of Labor, the labour movement, and marvel at our strength even in our darkest days, a very big part of explaining our mystery is selfless men like Mehmet Tillem. I was a little surprised initially about the events he'd helped set in train. Selflessness is all too rare in competitive environments; it's all too rare in this building. To paraphrase former President Truman who somewhat cynically said, 'If you want a friend in politics, get a dog,' I can tell you that President Truman obviously never met Mehmet. I have been truly blessed that a group of us, including Mehmet, touched base most days, and some nights, to discuss everything from policy to polling, to a good political campaigning book and to the latest Caesar-like demise. Mehmet was a key member of that group, even in pain in the ICU or at rehab. He would sometimes phone in high dudgeon late at night about something that was happening in the wonderful world of politics. I'll miss those calls.

In the Labor Party, as rough and tough as it can be, that selflessness emerges at many moments. It's why Labor is strong. Even after election defeats, even after being dismissed from office, even after being split in two by a mad leader, even after being outspent 10 to one, we endure. We are still standing and we will always be. The light on the hill will never be extinguished, despite the best efforts of our conservative opponents and our Greens political party enemies.

As his family and friends reel from Mehmet's death at 45 years old, with a son aged 14 years, and as we ache with longing for just one more phone call, one more preselection contest with him leading the charge and counting the numbers, one more wry smile, one more frank character assessment, one more victory, one more deep philosophical argument over latte, this is the perfect time and place to honour him. He was my good friend. I will miss him every day for the rest of my life. I will put up a photo of Mehmet in my office here and in

Melbourne to remind me every day why I'm here and how I got here—to speak truth to power, to fight for those being stonewalled by amply paid bureaucrats who won't answer questions at estimates, to fight for the working Australians for whom Labor exists and without whom Labor is worth nothing, and to do my very best in every way I can to be worthy of the trust and support that Mehmet invested in me. Vale Mehmet.