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Speaker Kitching, Sen Kimberley	Question No.

Senator KITCHING (Victoria) (17:00): It is unusual for a senator to offer to this chamber their first speech in their first week of service here other than, of course, in the first week of the Senate sitting after Federation, in my adopted home town of Melbourne some 115 years ago. My leader and dear friend Bill Shorten set this exciting challenge for me. As a former Queenslander who grew up swimming, a proud holder of a bronze medallion, who continues to enjoy swimming in Victoria's chillier waters, I am daunted yet delighted to be thrown in the deep end right here and now.

As it transpires, Bill's timing is perfect, for on this day the United States saw a woman on the ballot for President for a major party for the first time. Because of America's leadership role in the world, Hillary Clinton's achievement is a victory for all the women of the world. Wherever we are, whatever our politics, 3½ billion women in the world will long remember this day.

I am mindful and deeply humbled that only 591 Australians have ever served in the Senate. I am mindful that so much that is great about this nation comes from rising to meet challenges. We have taken arrivals who came without a word of English, and barely a dollar in their pockets, some of them, dare I say it, by boat. This vast land has seen them scale the heights of human achievement as billionaires, professors, surgeons, governors of states, legislators and judges. This is the Australian miracle.

I am mindful too that we meet today on Ngunnawal land. I acknowledge the traditional owners and I pay my respects to the elders past and present. Australia's disrespectful, and at times violent, treatment of our Indigenous peoples remains with us. Though never to be forgotten, it is an ongoing reminder of our need to stay true to the faiths most Australians profess. God gave us boundless plains to share, and mostly that is what we have done. We have shared. While other nations struggle with diversity, we have excelled and bloomed because of it. Our future prosperity is deeply connected with the huge benefits, in terms of trade and investment, that diversity brings. Diversity is central to our competitive advantage.

Our history as a people is truly exceptional in the literal meaning of that word. As the Queensland economist Scott Steel has said, we are:

... the most successful and unique economic and policy arrangement of the late 20th and early 21st century—the proof is in the pudding. A low tax nation with high quality, public funded institutions. A low debt nation with world leading human development and infrastructure.

This is no accident, no fortunate happenstance. The Australian model—prosperity through equity—happened by design through decades of hard work, patient compromise and sacrifice. It was made in Australia by the people of Australia.

In this parliament, we must proudly make the case for Australian exceptionalism. Australia is not exceptional because we have been divinely mandated, or because of some inherent quality unasked and unearned; Australia is exceptional precisely because generations of Australians have made hard choices and hard sacrifices. In a time of global change and uncertainty at home, we are called once again to choose: to choose an economy that creates good jobs with fair pay and decent conditions, to choose a society where opportunity is earned not inherited, and to choose a future that embraces and enhances Australia's exceptionalism.

I could not ask for a better role model than my predecessor Stephen Conroy. Stephen Conroy led the effort of keeping Australian Labor safe and relevant for working people, ensuring it stays firmly connected to the concerns of working people, powerfully championing pragmatism, incrementalism and moderation. Labor moderates like Conroy have to fight very hard indeed to win. It is often the case that those with extreme views are the most motivated and animated—the first to show up to vote, the loudest voices in a meeting and the most aggressive in their manner, sometimes with arguments whose extreme simplicity cuts through and is superficially appealing.

In a democracy in any party, this is a constant struggle. Australian Labor is winning that struggle. Sometimes my predecessor's role was misunderstood or misrepresented. Sometimes there is an insufficient appreciation of the significance of the behind-the-scenes hard work in which he excelled, the unglamorous nuts and bolts of politics: the numbers, the compromises and the tough decisions. Yet without being strongly organised Labor moderates would lose every single vote, every single argument and every single contest in the party every time.

I know and fully understand the straight line between that work and creating reforming, nation-building Labor governments. In my work to preserve Labor as the last best hope of social democracy in this country, I am incredibly fortunate to belong to a party led by Bill Shorten. Like Stephen Conroy, Bill has been there in the great battles to keep Labor relevant and connected with working people. I want to make it clear to the moderate Labor activists in Victoria and across Australia: the future belongs to you. Even if you do not stay in politics forever, your work and your sacrifice is building a foundation for Labor to stay true to the working families who are our reason for being. In so doing you are helping build your country up into the truly exceptional nation we have become. Australia's exceptionalism was undoubtedly very directly boosted by Stephen Conroy's hard work and clear vision.

Steven Conroy's NBN belongs alongside Bill Hayden's and Bob Hawke's Medicare, Paul Keating's modern economy and Bill Shorten's NDIS. Being a part of those reforms, sharing in their creation, is the dream of all those attracted to public life. It is very much my dream too. It is why I am a member of the Australian Labor Party. Labor does the big things. That is why Australian history so often records Labor leaders as the giants of our national story.

The giants of my own history are of course my loving parents, Leigh and Bill, and my brother, Ben. They were here with me on Monday when I was sworn in. Sadly, because of the fast-tracked timing of these remarks they are unable to be in the gallery today. But the truth is that they are always with me, wherever I am. My parents met at a friend's wedding, but in some ways they have come from different worlds. My father's father died when my dad was four. That was in an age before we really had a safety net for single parents. It was a difficult time and a huge challenge for my grandmother, but my father and his three siblings did her very proud indeed. My father excelled on the sporting field and academically, becoming a Fulbright scholar, a professor of organic chemistry at the University of Queensland and a fellow at St John's College, Oxford, and teaching and researching in all the corners of the world, taking us with him, where we learnt so much about the world beyond the idyllic avenues of St Lucia, in Brisbane. My mother, a woman with many strings to her bow, including as a leading physiotherapist, comes from a long line of powerful, confident women who believed nothing impossible for them. Like them, she goes about her life all the while with a twinkle in her eye. My mother has strong beliefs, and I think that most strongly of all she believes in me. My brother, Ben, like me, a lawyer, is my close friend, too. We are only 11 months apart, so we are nominally the same age for one month, which seems to be reflective of our relationship. He is a most loyal sibling and an extremely honourable man. They have all taught me to expect high standards of myself, but to be generous and understanding about others and about differences.

And so I come to my husband, Andrew Landeryou. Last Friday, when I came up to Canberra to be kindly taken through a practice run of the swearing-in ceremony by the Clerk of the Senate and the Office of the Black Rod, it was our 16th wedding anniversary. We were married on Derby Day in 2000. One of the wedding presents I gave to Andrew was the first edition of a book entitled *Derby Day and Other Adventures*; I did not know how prescient that was going to be. We have lived an adventurous life together—that much is certain. Equally certain has been his support and belief in me, his love, his loyalty, his resilience and his remarkable intellect. His father, also called Bill, took a union—then called the Storemen and Packers Union—of a few thousand members and left it 30,000 strong, from a weakling to a colossus, before serving with distinction in the Victorian parliament.

Despite being active in the rough and tumble world of Labor politics for two decades, I arrive here with an unusual background. Like many Labor MPs, I did work for a union, for two wonderful years. But I have also worked in the private sector, in the law, in information technology and in a global human resources company for more time than I have in a union or in government service. I have seen firsthand the pressures of meeting a payroll and implementing a business plan. Business, taking risks, is never easy, and the culture in this country can be pretty unforgiving about those who have a go and do not succeed the first time. We have much to learn from our friends in the United States and the start-up nation, Israel, who regard failure for what it so often is: an essential first step before success. I visited Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and the setting of the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, Ashkelon, late last year and saw firsthand the energy, daring risk-taking and brilliant innovation of some of its many start-ups. Israel is an amazing place. It is layer upon layer of history and beliefs. It is life itself.

There may not be many senators who speak glowingly about enterprise, entrepreneurship and risk-taking in their first speech, but I am proud to do so, knowing that, without entrepreneurs, investors and employers willing to step up and accept risk, there can be no jobs, no revenue, no growth and no prosperity.

I have worked in government, too, for one of the best state governments in Australian history. The Bracks and Brumby governments attracted unprecedented levels of investment to Victoria and maintained a AAA credit-rating and big-surplus budgets. Prior to that I served in local government, when I was elected a councillor of the City of Melbourne. Some might think that local government is the lowest form of government; I prefer to think of it as the nearest. I learnt much there, including that government can be a tremendous force for good in people's lives, if properly harnessed.

As a Labor moderate, I believe in a strong activist government that works hard to solve the intractable problems in the community. But I also believe that our duty as elected representatives is to check and limit the inexorable growth of the state and of the taxes that sustain the state. Those taxes come from real people, real pay packets, real families, and they must never be wasted or raised unnecessarily. This vision lies at the core of Australian exceptionalism.

The Australian Labor tradition, despite what our opponents might occasionally pretend, is of fiscal responsibility. We know that government can only achieve what the people can pay for. We know that only a strong economy can ensure every Australian is employed, and full employment should be one of our clear and stated goals. As a Labor senator, Australian jobs are now my most important job.

Some senators arrive to this chamber with great fanfare, some with universal praise, some with stringent criticism from the political commentariat and some are barely noticed at all. I want to record here that I embrace all of it—the good, the bad and the ugly. History tells us that if our elected officials are held to account by a rigorous, vigorous media, it is as strong a defence against government failure and neglect as exists in our democracy. Australians, especially those on the progressive side, should be very proud that Australian-style aggressive, punchy, passionate journalism is one of our great exports. You do not have to agree with every word uttered in every News Corp publication to share my worry that private-sector newsrooms are shrinking and that the public accountability of government and corporate leaders will retreat with it. That great Australian company and others employ some of the best and brightest, most creative and brilliant Australians. I honour them all, even the ones I will never agree with. I hope to do all within my power to protect a free press and public accountability in Australia, even and especially when it is critical of whatever it is I am doing or not doing. I say these words knowing I may well be reminded of them at a later time. I say them because I mean them.

Labor is committed to creating an Independent Office of Animal Welfare. This is a particular passion of mine. I have two dogs, Ronnie and Nancy-Jane, named by my husband after the late American President Ronald Reagan and his two wives. Community standards have rightly shifted on cruelty to animals, and I think it is high time the laws of the land and, most importantly, the enforcement of them shifts with community expectations and basic standards of decency. Federal leadership in this area is clearly necessary.

I also wish to put on the record that I believe this parliament should give serious thought to the best and most effective ways to fight corruption wherever it exists. I do not argue or pretend that corruption in the federal government in Australia is a huge unaddressed problem. Upholding high standards in this place, knowing that enforcing the honesty of our public officials is not just the right thing to do but eliminating corruption is also a key part of our competitive advantage in the world. In so doing, we ought to learn well from the outrageous excesses uncovered by New South Wales ICAC, the Victorian Ombudsman, the WA CCC and recent royal commissions. The question *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*—'who will guard the guards themselves'—is clearly an important one.

Our current Prime Minister knows very well what damage an unchecked, unaccountable royal commission can do. As Kerry Packer's lawyer, he penned for that great Australian the famous denunciation of the Costigan royal commission:

It is so extraordinary that this disgusting publication should place me in a position where I effectively have to prove my innocence—

he said.

However, so ludicrous and misconceived are the allegations that my innocence is easily established.

He rightly denounced that royal commission for the travesty and sham that it truly was. It serves only to make his current position all the more remarkable. Like the rest of the nation, I am disappointed to find that our Prime Minister is not the man he pretended to be. While Mr Turnbull now finds himself pretending that the Heydon royal commission was a credible process just to score some cheap political points, on this side of the chamber we know the truth about the Australian union movement. We know the truth, because we have lived it. We have been there and seen it for ourselves. Unions are struggle.

I will never forget the call I got from a mother of four, a union member whose supervisor had unilaterally imposed a roster change without notice. She was sobbing in despair; she could barely get the words out. English was not her first language, but the agony and the desperation in her voice did not need words. The change in roster meant she would no longer be able to pick up her kids. And if she could not hold down her job she would not be able to feed them. On the other end of the line, I did what union reps do all over the country every day: I listened, I reassured and I promised to use every bit of strength the union had to solve her problem. And we did. That is what unions do. That is what I learnt.

It is why I am so thankful I took up the offer to work at the Health Services Union, made to me one day by the inspirational Diana Asmar as I was preparing to be called to the Victorian Bar. She asked if I would help her at the HSU. 'Just for three months,' she said. I agreed. Diana did not mince her words about the challenge in front of us: recovering from the corruption and mismanagement and neglect of the previous regime. The good name of the union, built over a century, had become toxic. There was multi-million dollar bank debt, secured on a huge building that was mostly empty and not fit for purpose. Membership was in freefall: it was down to 7,000 financial members, with members resigning every day as more and more revelations made the press about the corrupt former officials. There was every risk of collapse and the threats, intimidation and false accusations aimed at our mainly female team from Kathy Jackson allies and other disgruntled opportunists, or political foes who bitterly fought the loss of a union they had used for their purposes and never for members, would be long, hurtful and vicious. But I am proud I took on that challenge and so proud of what we achieved.

With Diana and our team of organisers, we visited members all across the great state of Victoria: from Mildura to Moe, Warrnambool to Wangaratta, Horsham to Hopetoun. We went everywhere. The reason I mention these towns is that they are some of the places where members had not seen someone from their union, in some cases, for 12 years. Member by member, workplace by workplace, Diana weaved her magic. She listened. She shared a vision. She stood up to bullies and stared them down. The job I had agreed to do for three months in an emergency turned into two years of the most satisfying and inspiring and uplifting work I have ever done. Diana Asmar saved that union. My part in helping her taught me something that 20 years of active involvement in the ALP had not and could not. It was not like working in a law firm. It was not like the privileged, mostly very lucky life I have led. It was not like the quiet corridors of Victorian Treasury, not at all like the oak-panelled meeting rooms of the Melbourne Town Hall or the sandstone buildings of the University of Queensland. It was a feeling every union member knows: the joy of winning small battles and building a better world.

That is why I am so honoured to serve here as a member of the Australian Labor Party, supported by John Berger at the Transport Workers Union, Diana at the Health Workers Union, Ben Davis at the AWU and my dear friend Earl Setches, the national secretary of the plumbers union, and many other good comrades. I will never ever allow their work to be diminished or their good names besmirched in this chamber without contest. And there is no divide between the union leaders who represent Australians in the workplace and those Labor members who carry that task in the political arena.

I want to tell you about some of those members who hand-picked me for this role. A pensioner, originally from Uruguay but active in the community life of her adopted country; two lifelong unionists; two accomplished female local councillors; another, a young female lawyer working in private practice; one an accountant who is serving with distinction as a state government minister; one a childcare centre operator; my former local federal MP Kelvin Thomson; and my predecessor himself, Stephen Conroy. All are active within the great Australian Labor Party. All were democratically elected and enjoy great respect within the party for their wisdom. To receive their trust after a thorough series of discussions, to succeed their life-long friend Stephen Conroy, was as warm an embrace as I have ever felt in politics. And so, through all of them, with the experience gained from every chapter of my life so far, I come here to this place.

I come here to represent everyday Australian people: the working Australians, the families, the students, the hospital cleaners, the retail workers, the mortgage holders, the renters, the mums and dads, the 4 am shift workers,

the nurses, the police, the firefighters and the factory workers. I take up the great privilege of a place in the Senate, on behalf of those whose lives are not privileged. I come here to speak for those who know life can be messy and difficult and imperfect—the people who choose to go without so that their children can have a better chance in life, the people who sacrifice for their parents' comfort and security, the parents who give up time with their children because they have to work that extra shift, those extra hours, that Saturday or that Sunday. I come here to represent the people who work hard, pay their way, do the tough things, build our community and only ever ask in return that we remember them in this place and make their opportunity the focus of every decision we make in their name. It is not so much to ask, I think.

And if we fail to remember them—in this place, in our politics, in our public life—then our failure gives room and oxygen to demagogues and those who proffer simplistic answers to complex needs. We have seen this across the Pacific, in Donald Trump; we see this in England, in Jeremy Corbyn; and occasionally we hear the echoes of it in this chamber. I will fight against these voices as hard as I fight for anything. And I will not allow the peddlers of prejudice to deceive Australians against our own interests.

Once again, it is time to decide. It is time to decide what kind of parliament we will be. Will we live down to the cynicism of the community about politicians, or will we show leadership in challenging days? It is time to decide what kind of party Labor will be. Will we be seduced by the glamour of narrow interest-group politics, or will we continue to fight for all Australians? It is time to decide what kind of country we are. Will we shirk the decisions that face us, or will we once again rise to the moment and choose what is hard, what is complex, what is right?

It is our responsibility to lead that discussion and win that fight, to carry on the work of building an exceptional Australia—a nation and a future worthy of the people who call this great country home. And from this day forward I pledge myself and my service to that high and noble task. It is a task I take up from this moment forward. I do not shy away from this high goal to secure an exceptional future for Australia. I rely on an old inspiring quote: 'And to the love and favour of my country I commit myself, my person and the cause.' Thank you.