

Andrew Robb (Lib-Goldstein) – Maiden Speech

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This is the maiden speech to the House of Representatives by Andrew Robb, the Liberal member for Goldstein.

Robb came to the Parliament, at the age of 53, after a career in business and as head of the National Farmers' Federation.

He also served as Federal Director of the Liberal Party from 1990 until 1996. He was the campaign director for the party's losing campaign in 1993 and its winning campaign in 1996.

Listen to Andrew Robb (20m)

Hansard transcript of maiden speech by Andrew Robb, Liberal member for Goldstein.

Mr ROBB (1:00 PM) —From as early as I can remember, my mother and father instilled in me and my eight brothers and sisters that opportunity and freedom would come through education, personal responsibility and self-belief; that our destiny was largely in our own hands—how hard we studied and worked, the opportunities we took, how we dealt with people. I grew to believe that I was responsible for charting my own course—that I was free to follow my dreams, make my own mistakes, take the consequences of my decisions.

Importantly, my parents never seemed to convey any resentment or jealousy that others might have more than we had. There was no chip on the shoulder; rather, a notion of 'blue sky', a sense that if we really wanted what others had—whatever that might be—then the opportunity was there to achieve it. Ambition was presented as a good thing, something to be nurtured and applauded, and not only in sport. I embraced these simple truths as a philosophy, elements that I later came to see as best captured by the Liberal Party philosophy.

So there was no road to Damascus for me in my support for the Liberal philosophy. It evolved and owed most to my parents, which to some would seem surprising given their background. Many other life experiences have served to further entrench but also add to these principles or a set of 'tram tracks'—a set of 'tram tracks' that guide daily my responses to issues and events and will help to direct my response to matters in this House.

I come to this place keen to put my experience to good use and proud to represent all the people of Goldstein and I come very conscious of the trust they have placed in me. I intend that they will be well represented. I am also conscious of the wonderful support for my campaign from so many Liberals in Goldstein, under the very able direction of my campaign director, Jeannette Rawlinson.

Vida Goldstein, after whom my electorate is named, was Victoria's foremost suffragist for two decades, standing for parliament in 1903—the first woman in the British Empire to do so. Vida was a woman of achievement and conviction, as befits the people of my electorate. Vida grew up in the Western District of Victoria, like another accomplished woman in my life: my wife, Maureen. I acknowledge the presence today in the gallery of Maureen and our children, Tom, Joe and Pip. They are my strength.

On this occasion I am also mindful of the outstanding service given to the people of Goldstein by my predecessor, Dr David Kemp, over 14 years. David, a man of great intellect, integrity and endeavour, should be justly proud of his wonderful contribution to public policy over more than three decades. I suspect and hope that David's contribution is not yet finished.

I bring to this place 33 years of work experience, with 20 years in and around the political process. I have worked in the public sector, the private sector and the very private sector—the political machine. In the early to mid-eighties, I was the chief executive of the Cattle Council of Australia and then the National Farmers Federation. During those years I was involved in negotiating federal land rights legislation pertaining to the Northern Territory.

As it turned out, the land rights legislation was a totally inadequate response to the real issue—namely, the collapse of personal dignity and self-esteem among many Aboriginals, particularly the young. In seeking to come to grips with Indigenous issues, I spent many, many weeks over a period of years in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley and North Queensland talking to cattlemen, to businesspeople, to officials and to other locals. I visited Aboriginal settlements and outback towns.

On many occasions, I would be taken to a bend in a river on a cattle station and shown where 100, 200 or 300 Aboriginals had lived for decades, with the men employed on the stations as stockmen and drovers, the older men as gardeners, and the women in the homestead. In many cases, schools were provided for the children. Aboriginal people were disadvantaged, but they had work and self-esteem, reasonable quality of life, strong mentoring from their elders, schooling and strict controls on alcohol.

Of course, all that ceased in the early 1970s following the understandable granting of equal wages in the pastoral industry, along with the misplaced provision of unfettered and generous welfare handouts. The related exodus of these people from their ancestral lands saw them living in settlements and on the fringes of towns. The highly disturbing result in many Aboriginal communities today is that we have basically poisoned recent generations; poisoned their bodies with alcohol and other substances and poisoned their spirit and self-belief with handouts and welfare dependency. In many places we are seeing a total breakdown in the social order.

As I was driven around vast cattle stations, I witnessed cattlemen come across an Aboriginal elder known to them. The mutual respect was palpable. On the same day I saw the same cattleman come across young Aboriginal men seriously affected by years of

alcohol and aimlessness, young men stripped of any personal dignity or self-esteem. The cattleman's contempt was palpable. The chilling fact is that the very fabric of a proud and fascinating culture, many thousands of years in the making, has been brought to its knees in less than 30 years by well-intentioned but seriously misguided policy.

For me the lesson is clear. People are very, very responsive to incentives, for good or bad. The wrong incentives, no matter how well meaning, can debilitate a community in no time. In this case, unconditional handouts have provided the seeds of destruction in a breathtakingly short period of time. It is why every piece of public policy in this place is important. It is why every piece of public policy must be measured against a set of principles, a set of 'tram tracks'. It is why philosophy matters.

Clearly, restoring personal dignity and self-esteem is the bedrock of any solution for our Aboriginal community. In many places this means replacing the grog, the petrol and the paint with work. To this end, I commend the direction outlined by the Governor-General in his speech to the opening of the 41st Parliament.

During my years at the National Farmers Federation I was involved with two major industrial disputes: the Mudginberri abattoir dispute and the wide combs dispute. These two disputes proved that success is never easy, regardless of the merits. Importantly, they also proved the underlying strength of the employer-employee relationship in Australia. Mudginberri sought to establish a right for employer and employee to negotiate terms and conditions which best met the peculiar nature of that abattoir's operation. The wide combs dispute sought to establish the right of employers and employees to agree to adopt new technology—in this case, a wider shearing comb—on a workplace by workplace basis.

Nearly 20 years later it is now difficult to conceive that these rights were in dispute. Yet Mudginberri took 27 court cases, two years of litigation and a \$10 million farmers fighting fund to win. The wide combs dispute had to contend with bullets flying, shearing sheds being torched and paid thugs intimidating communities. These two disputes were only won because, despite the belligerent stance of the unions, there existed—and, I believe, still exists—a fundamentally healthy and mature relationship between employer and employee in Australia with a mutual trust that the benefits of change can and will be shared.

The disputes also highlighted that no two workplaces among the millions of workplaces in Australia are the same. The more we do as a government to free up employers and their employees to settle on terms and conditions which maximise the unique opportunities in each workplace, the more jobs and the more prosperity we will see. From my experience, many employers have come to realise that, if they give their team the right incentives, they can move mountains.

I have also observed that this power of negotiating one to one has parallels in the international trade arena. My experience on the international scene includes expanding a commercial business into the New Zealand market in the late 1990s; advising major New Zealand companies on their move into Australia; facilitating large commercial projects in

Asia, particularly in Thailand; employing trade lobbyists in Washington in the 1980s and negotiating with the European Union, the United States and Japan on agricultural trade matters over a decade. These experiences have long convinced me that the growing emphasis on trade agreements negotiated bilaterally between two countries is not only in Australia's best interests but also a harbinger of real progress on trade liberalisation on a global basis.

While multicountry World Trade Organisation negotiations obviously hold out the prospect of more comprehensive liberalisation, they proceed at a snail's pace, if at all, whereas bilateral trade agreements are delivering major benefits in our lifetime. The closer economic relations agreement with New Zealand is a wonderful case in point. Successful bilateral agreements, rather than stymying progress on multicountry agreements, are in fact creating a competitive imperative for non-participating countries to be involved, leading the way incrementally to more comprehensive removal of trade barriers.

Over the last 33 years in my roles as an animal health officer working in abattoirs and saleyards and on farms; as a tutor in macro-economics working with highly motivated, mature age university students; as an agricultural economist and farm organisation and political party executive setting up and running an Australia-wide direct marketing IT company and, in recent years, as an adviser on business strategy to global companies and large organisations, I have been regularly to all corners of Australia. Working with people and communities from Albany to Cairns and from Hobart to the North West Shelf has left me a committed federalist. I have a great distrust of any central power, by itself, understanding and effectively meeting the needs of far-flung communities and businesses.

While I see the federal government having a critical leadership role to play, I agree strongly with the sentiment expressed by Sir Robert Menzies in 1960 when he said:

... there is a deep instinct in the Australian mind for a system of Government which, by a division of legislative and administrative powers, limits centralisation (or "control from Canberra") and protects a measure of individual freedom by not giving us one set of rules—even elected rulers—who have absolute power. In a great island continent with widely scattered communities, this is a healthy sentiment.

No matter how much it might irk members in this place from time to time—and, I suspect, me in the future—I believe that our great history of stability and resourcefulness owes much to the decisions about local issues being taken locally. It owes much to the balance between our three tiers of government, including the sovereignty and authority of the states and the role played by local government in Australia. This balance has served Australia well.

The federalist imperative was further reflected in the intent of our founding fathers that the Senate be a states house of review, a chamber designed to ensure that the interests of communities in each state, large and small, were taken into account by the government of the day. In recent decades this intent has been progressively eroded, especially with minor

parties in some cases being far more concerned with propagating an extreme left, international agenda than considering the impact of national policies on local communities in their state. This is one key reason why I favour consideration being given by a simple act of parliament to dividing each state into six regions with two senators selected from each region—one at each election.

Drawing senators from a smaller area within a state and being accountable to that area would go some way to restoring the original intent of the founding fathers for a strong state perspective to be present in the federal parliament without requiring any change to our proven institutions. This imperative to preserve our proven institutions underscored my support for an Australian head of state involving only minimal change to our Constitution. I still see, some time in the future, an Australian head of state providing a powerful and stabilising symbol without detracting from our proud history and the stability of our institutions.

My involvement with the Garvan Medical Research Foundation has opened my eyes to the recent revolution in medical and biological science—a revolution which, proudly, Australia is in the thick of. While it is now 51 years since DNA was discovered, it is only in the last six to seven years that scientists have seriously begun to unlock this genetic code which not only controls our development from a fertilised egg to a complex human being but also determines what goes wrong in disorders as diverse as cancer, mental illness and obesity.

The innovations flowing from these discoveries in basic science are only just emerging and will reach well beyond health and disease. We will see genetically modified micro-organisms used in the creation of energy products, industrial products and a host of other traditional areas of manufacturing. Biotechnology will have an unimaginable impact over the next few decades, and the critical factor in gaining benefits for Australia is owning the intellectual property. If we do not own the technology, the profits will go elsewhere. It is about taking responsibility for our own future. To achieve this will require Australian investors to take big risks. Areas such as biotechnology, at this stage, involve high risks and low returns.

My last seven years working with the top end of town suggest to me that our capacity for risk taking is fading. Our great entrepreneurial spirit is residing in fewer and fewer people. Perhaps our self-belief is being eroded. The clamour for endless reporting, misplaced accountability and draconian regulations are choking the boldness of business and need a serious rethink. In my view you cannot legislate for ethical behaviour. The values of a society and its institutions dictate acceptable ethical behaviour.

Reducing high personal income tax rates must also play a big part in promoting risk taking. If we are to encourage individuals and businesspeople to pursue opportunities, if we are to reignite our entrepreneurial spirit and if we are to discourage some of our best and brightest from remaining overseas because of uncompetitive tax rates, personal tax rates need to come down.

The biotechnology revolution also has major implications for older Australians and how we cope with a rapidly ageing population. Over the last 100 years in Australia, life expectancy has increased from 55 to 77 years for men and from 58 to 82 years for women. Yet this life expectancy stands to quickly reach much greater ages in the wake of the genetic revolution. As such, providing a decent quality of life for our older Australians presents a real challenge, especially with the birthrate at its lowest point ever. In my view, increased taxation is not an option; it is a backward step.

The best way to meet the challenge is to grow the economy. Getting many healthy Australians to keep working into their 70s in the years ahead is fundamental to achieving this objective. Many of these older Australians would prefer to continue taking responsibility for their own lives by undertaking permanent part-time contract work. If they were able to secure up to 100 per cent of their income from one employer, and still achieve independent contractor status, this would seriously encourage continuing involvement in the work force. We should not underestimate the challenge. It will require a serious cultural shift.

While I look forward to a rich and varied political experience in the years ahead, both in my electorate and in this House, I do expect that two types of security issues will dominate that experience. The first is our national security. The world has changed dramatically since 9-11. Terrorists have declared war on us for ideological reasons of their own, and there is no easy way out of this conflict, which is not of our making. Appeasement is not an option. It will be a long fight, and we will need our traditional friends.

The second security issue is one of personal security. My years of political observation have led me to understand very clearly that what the majority of Australians aspire to most is a secure life—put simply, food on the table, a job, a manageable mortgage, a holiday, a movie with the kids, an ability to exercise some choices. To this end, maintaining a strong economy is paramount. I understand that aspiration and in this place I will do what I can to deliver it. In particular, I will take whatever opportunities I get to convey, especially to our young people, that true happiness and true freedom come from achievement—using whatever god-given talents we have to chart our own course, to take the consequences of our decisions, to have a go. If we do this, success and security will follow. I thank the House for the courtesy extended to me today.