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**THE SENATE**

**FIRST SPEECH**

**SPEECH**

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## SPEECH

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**Senator HANSON-YOUNG** (South Australia) (5.26 pm)—Thank you, Mr President. It is a great honour to be standing here today, not just in this remarkable place that is the Senate but at a time when the challenges that we face as a country and the decisions that we will make as representatives are more important than ever in determining the destiny of future generations.

Today is the first day of spring, a day when we pull back the curtains and let the sun shine in after months of grey. May this spring mark the beginning of a new phase in Australia's history where fresh ideas and innovation are actively sourced and debated in an attempt to find solutions to our biggest challenge of all: balancing human needs with our finite and fragile environment. May this, the first day of spring, mark the time when we as Australians shake off those cobwebs of cynicism and distrust. It is a time to bring out the broom and sweep up the mess left after years of inaction, mindless consumerism and self-perpetuating fear.

The reality is, in our rapidly growing world, that the human impact on the earth is compounding to a point of no return and the gap between the world's richest and the world's poorest is getting wider. We have been taught, against our better judgement, to fear our neighbours for no other reason than that we do not know them. Can we not see that this is a world that is not sustainable? We need a transformation and a willingness to do things differently. We need to intervene and to change 'business as usual'—to change from business as usual to a country where we can take responsibility for our impact on the global effects of climate change; to change from business as usual to a community where those who are most vulnerable do not carry the burden for those more prosperous; and to change from business as usual to a parliament that is engaged with all sectors of the community and where as representatives we offer true leadership, with the compassion and honesty that our constituents so rightly deserve and expect.

I am humbled to have been elected by the people of South Australia, who have put their trust in me. I promise to work hard for a change in the legislative agenda from one of vested interests and short-term gain to an agenda focused on community, long-term sustainability and the health of our children and our environment. I am honoured that the Australian Greens' members and supporters have believed in me and have practised what we preach: a new, fresh style of politics, which has given a voice to a generation who will live long into this century and experience all that it brings.

Mr President, I do not come from a family with a history in politics. There are no streets named after my grandparents and there was never an expectation that a political career was something to which I should aspire. But I do come from a family who are passionate about the world they live in, and from parents who have always been engaged and active in their local community. I grew up in the bush—I am a kid from the bush—and, through that, I have an innate understanding that the health of our environment is connected to the health of our community. My parents, who are here today, have taught me to always stand up for what I believe in, but also to accept that not everyone will think what I think or believe in what I say, and that in order to bring people with you it is important to find a common point of understanding and respect. Mum and Dad: I am sure they are lessons that will become very useful in this place.

Despite always being an active member of my school and my town, I never thought that one day I would be standing in this chamber giving my first speech. As a kid there seemed very little to believe in when it came to politicians and their parties. Most of it seemed much like what I witnessed in the schoolyard—games and tricks played among those who sought power and privilege. So even though aspects of representing my community appealed to me I never wanted to become what I saw as a stereotypical politician.

I aspired to do and to be something quite different from that. I aspire to a change to 'business as usual'—a change that would see all types of people represented in our parliaments, a change to the way our representatives engage with their electors and a change so that Australians and Australia would honour and believe in our remarkable system of democracy. We should feel a sense of pride. We should all feel empowered that this is our

parliament, where the individuals trusted to make decisions on behalf of society will do so in the best interest of the community rather than pandering to big business or corporations. What do I mean by community? I mean the people and the environment in which they live. These are still things I aspire to and things I will strive for inside and outside this chamber.

I stand here today as a young woman and there is something I would like to speak about just for a moment. We are now more than a century into our country's parliamentary history, yet the number of women in politics is far outweighed by the number of men. If our parliament's role is to lead our progression as a community we must find ways of ensuring a more balanced participation of women in our political processes. There are many reasons for this gender imbalance and none is more stifling than the structures and culture of our political institutions themselves. One may argue that this is simply a reflection of our society, where women and girls still have to fight for equal treatment and recognition in the workplace, and where the extra roles women play in life are simply taken for granted rather than supported and celebrated.

Women and their families are too often caught between the mounting pressure of workplace participation and the care of children. Is it not time for a shift in the way we value the role of parenting and for us to support the needs of families within our workplaces, our communities and even our parliament? Australia lags behind the rest of the world in being one of only two developed countries without paid maternity leave. It is time that Australia introduced a government funded, paid parental leave system to support our mums and dads and their kids. It is time for the government to recognise the crucial role that parents play in ensuring we have a healthy and happy next generation and that we support this role. Paid parental leave will give our kids the best start to life. It is an investment for the future too precious to ignore.

So how did I, as a young mother, start my journey to Canberra? The tipping point for me was the way our country so poorly treated refugees and asylum seekers. I was appalled that here in the land of a fair go we punished and violated those people who needed our protection and safety. I still shiver when I remember the images of children with their lips sewn together, who, in desperation for understanding and help, had no other means of communication but the mutilation of their own bodies. I was disgusted that our government was perpetrating the fear of innocent children in the display of political might. A strong sense of rage fuelled me to take action and I felt compelled to join the Australian Greens, who had stood strongly against the disgrace that was the *Tampa*. Some parties used the *Tampa* to score political points but the Greens knew that was wrong.

Now, several years later, we are starting to see some positive changes and for that I do give credit. But we cannot simply turn over that ugly page of Australia's history or close our eyes to the lifelong effects of being locked up behind razor wire. The psychological harm of long-term detention, particularly when it comes to children, must not be swept under the carpet. We must face the fact that these children were denied a safe, healthy and joyful childhood—an opportunity that we would expect as a given for our own children. We must admit that this was a mistake that should never, ever happen again. We must make due compensation and provide support for those who have been wrongly treated.

I also stand here today at the age of 26 well aware that I am the youngest person elected to this place. This is a responsibility I relish and in which I take great pride. Younger Australians must be active in shaping our country and its fortunes. A senior journalist said something to me recently that made me realise how important as a young person my role in parliament is. He said, 'I don't mind if 20-somethings have jobs; I just don't think they should be running the country.' Is that not an example of the barriers placed in front of young people and the barriers placed in front of young women? Can I just point out that it is a statement I utterly reject. I have great delight that the voters do not share the same view as that senior journalist. Young people have a wonderful ability to effect social and environmental change by providing new ideas and creative solutions. It is young people who must champion these solutions to see them succeed in the long term.

Just as the first day of spring brings with it the hope of a fresh new season I hope I can contribute to fresh thinking and innovation, particularly from young people who want to forge their own paths in helping to address the challenges of climate change and the need for us to shift from business as usual. At the last election, South Australia voted in its very first Greens senator. Perhaps this was because for far too long the environment has languished at the bottom of the political agenda even though ordinary people consistently put environmental issues at the top of their concerns. This is yet another area in which we must challenge business as usual. We need a fresh approach and an understanding that the decisions we make today will impact on the future of our communities, the sustainability of our environment and the lives of our children and our grandchildren. Simply put, this is what the Greens stand for.

Today is the first day of spring and hopefully with it will come the spring rains, which are much needed for the many parched regions across the country, particularly in my home state of South Australia. The current crisis facing the River Murray is a tragic example of how we must better understand and respect the vital balance between the environment and the economy. Praying for rain will not solve the mess created by human mismanagement. Overallocation of water use spanning decades has left the once mighty Murray dying of thirst. How fitting that as I draw to a close I am thinking about the Coorong, at the end of the Murray. This beautiful lagoon is of deep significance to the Ngarrindjeri people and cherished by South Australians as *Storm Boy* country. Without urgent action, all of this could fade away into history as the Murray's freshwater flows no longer reach its mouth.

Finally, I just want to reiterate why I am standing up here today as the youngest woman ever elected to this place and the youngest person elected in almost a century. I am standing up for the young people of Australia and for generations to come. I am standing up to say, 'Let's challenge "business as usual".' I am standing up for the rural community in which I grew up—and hundreds of others like it. I am standing up for women, especially young women in Australia, and saying, 'We too have a right to be heard.' I am standing up and saying that we need to build an Australia based on caring for those less privileged in our society, like the refugees and the asylum seekers that so deeply affected me. I stand up to recognise that Australia can make the transition from a resource-dependent economy to a clean, green and clever economy that puts respect for each other and respect for the environment at the centre of politics. I am standing here today, standing up for the Murray and the precious Coorong.

In order to achieve a change from 'business as usual', we must accept that there is an inseparable connection between the way we treat our environment and the way we treat each other. We must accept that there is a connection between how we share the earth's resources between nations, how we share the environment with the creatures that depend upon it and how we value the health and security of our communities.

As a mother I feel a profound responsibility to ensure my actions and my decisions take into account my daughter's future. I feel deeply that I must work for a cleaner, greener and more secure planet. I have no other choice but to ensure that I work as hard as I can to help make my local community and my global community a safer, fairer and prosperous place. That is my job as a mother and now it is my job as a senator. Thank you.