

Scott Ludlam's inaugural Senate speech



Scott Ludlam

16/09/2008

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we meet on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people, and by paying my respects to the custodians of culture and country. After 'Sorry' comes the other S word; Sovereignty over this island continent that was never ceded by the Traditional Owners. The tent embassy just down the hill is one visible reminder of the depth of the unfinished business still before this Parliament.

I'm the fifth Greens Senator that Western Australians have despatched to Canberra. Four strong women led the way in here, which is a wonderful political lineage. In 1984 Jo Vallentine won the first seat in any Parliament in the world on a platform of nuclear disarmament. I'm delighted to acknowledge Jo's presence as a mentor and friend in the public gallery tonight and use this occasion as a dedication to carry forward your work to set these weapons to rest once and for all.

Jo was followed by Christabel Chamarette and then Dee Margetts, who carried the load of balance of power in here for several eventful years. More recently, Senator Rachel Siewert joined an expanded greens team with Senators Brown, Milne and Kerry Nettle, who is greatly missed in here. I had the extraordinary good fortune to work for Rachel in the Senate office for two and a half years. I know many Senators also appreciate Rachel's special brand of passion and tenacity and I really thank you for the opportunity you gave me to support your work in here.

I can't go past this opportunity to also thank Robin Chapple and the rest of the wonderful Greens (WA) team. Robin is the once and future MP for the mining and pastoral region who mentored me through four good years on the road, during which time I discovered a lot about my home state.

I'm proud to be here this evening representing the State of Western Australia, not just the hundred thousand green voters who sent me here, but everyone who holds aspirations for an economy that serves the community and protects our spectacular environment. This is the theme of what I wanted to say tonight.

I grew up in the back of a van which was somewhere different every day, with my loving and generous parents Graham and Jude, who I'm really happy are here tonight, and my dear brother Glen who's going to be a father in a matter of a few weeks. My earliest childhood memories after distant impressions of New Zealand, are of Indian back roads, London snow and African railways. But since the age of eight I've lived in Perth, and Western Australia has been a good place to call home. It's a place that's been kind to me and I love the prospect of being able to give something back at a time like this.

My central preoccupation and reason for being here is that I share with my Green colleagues the optimistic sense that Australia, and the world, is poised on the edge of a historic transformation. I am convinced that we are up to this challenge.

We're surrounded by events that are just unrelentingly bleak. In our relentless insistence on pursuing the fossil growth economy, the industrialised nations have melted the north polar ice cap. It happened a hundred years earlier than the world's most sophisticated computer models said it would, so now within a year or two there will be no summer sea ice at all. That eight million square kilometre mirror was reflecting a lot of sunlight back into space. That was keeping the Arctic Ocean cold enough to hold the Greenland ice sheet together in one piece, and you know, we really need it to stay that way. Instead, it's coming apart so fast that there's now a discernable tenor of panic

creeping into reports from front-line climate scientists. There's 2.8 million cubic kilometres of ice perched above sea level there, and a similar amount impounded in the West Antarctic Ice Sheet where the situation is just as fragile and changing just as rapidly.

Mr President, humankind has kicked over the first domino. It begins with this vanishing sea ice. If we get the next hundred months wrong, it ends with something in the order of a five metre sea level rise this century, the death of the Barrier Reef, the passing of ecosystems all over the world, and the combustion of the Amazon rainforest as the carbon cycle slams into reverse.

To any climate sceptics whose company I've joined tonight, I say I celebrate scepticism. Without scepticism we'd probably still be living in caves. Denial on the other hand, has now brought humankind to the edge of something almost unthinkable. I also wish this wasn't happening to our battered little planet, but it is. It is time for determined, intelligent, coordinated action.

In a perverse twist, the northern ice melt has touched off a mad scramble to peg the Arctic seafloor for oil and gas acreage, an example of market forces at work which I would find darkly satirical if the stakes weren't quite so high.

I imagine historians of the future looking back on this time as the beginning of the oil endgame, the age in which Australia sleepwalked along behind a tiny handful of powerful nations armed with nuclear weapons into a disastrous occupation of Iraq, with the singular objective of cornering the world's shrinking reserves of cheap oil. China's behaviour in Burma and Sudan and Russian aggression in Georgia flow from this same terrible imperative.

And so now there are more than six billion people sharing the globe, one third of them children. More than half of us now live in cities, with fully one billion people crowded into simmering slum encampments. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, are bound together unknowingly in near-total dependence on fossil fuel, fossil agriculture and fossil architecture.

This fossil economy knows only how to grow. It has to be larger this year than it was last year lest its debts and contradictions collapse upon itself and people's lives and careers get crushed in the wreckage. When our economy fails to grow we call it a recession. But an entity that knows only blind growth we call a cancer.

The fossil growth economy gives us pulp mills that erase ecosystems while showering its neighbours with toxic emissions. It gives us the tragic industrial vandalism of the ice-age heritage on the Burrup Peninsula. It gives us the expansion of uranium mining to feed the 436 plutonium factories we know as nuclear power stations. It gives us burnout, family breakdown, and fly in fly out workforces. It gives us an industrial relations system that sought to treat working Australians as components to be deployed and discarded like any other business asset. Can you believe we live in a country that throws away \$5.3 billion dollars worth of food a year and now dumps 40 million tonnes of waste each year?

Our greatest tragedy is to imagine that this is the only kind of economy there is.

My favourite author William Gibson observes that "The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet."

What would a closed loop, conserver economy look like if it became widely distributed?

One in which every industrial output became an input for something else in cradle to cradle product cycles?

One in which chemical toxins were not proliferated under voluntary industry codes, but designed out of the system entirely?

An economy under democratic control which resumed its role as an essential subset of exchange and allocation within our community rather than this blind growth machine which is asset-stripping the biosphere?

What would our economy look like if we substituted the frenzied incineration of our finite energy base with the limitless and infinite flows of renewable energy?

Most importantly, what would our economy look like if we erased the degrading word 'consumer' from our vocabulary and took back our power as citizens of this wonderful country which has so much to offer the people of the world?

This kind of Australia isn't merely possible, it is coming into being right now by the sheer force of will of thousands of people in every town and city in the country. Some of the ideas are new, and some of them are very old. What keeps me optimistic is the collective vision held out by so many people working everywhere toward a renewable community, because that's the place I want to live.

This isn't the end of economic growth, but the beginning of a conversation about what kind of growth we need and what kind we can no longer afford. It's about how to truly live as human beings on this fragile planet.

In the early nineteenth century it was discovered that all you needed to do to generate an electric current was to spin a magnet. So let's go back to first principles.

An a few metres of seawater off the coast of Fremantle there's a beautifully simple device attached to the seabed that harvests the energy of the incoming swells and pumps water at very high pressure through a pelton generator onshore, producing electricity. Throw a switch and the salt water diverts through a reverse osmosis filter and comes out fresh. The company is so impressed after several years of testing that they are now proposing wave energy farms with dozens of these devices arrayed together on the seafloor generating baseload electricity and fresh water day and night.

Senators might also be aware of the quiet genius behind the oil mallee plant under development in the Western Australian town of Narrogin, a facility that will produce electricity for domestic use as well as exporting activated carbon and eucalyptus oil while giving farmers a cash crop and a chance to restore the landscape of some of our most important agricultural areas.

You are probably also aware of the modest uptake of wind energy under the former Government's mandatory renewable energy target. That restricted programme could have laid the groundwork for world-class wind energy hubs and community-owned windfarms that give regional areas another badly needed revenue stream while drawing cheap, reliable, large scale renewable energy out of the air itself.

A couple of weeks ago some of us attended a briefing here by one of Australia's pre-eminent geothermal energy companies, who are poised over the next few years to affordably tap the heat of the deep inner earth for the first time anywhere in the world. Hot rocks technology is deceptively simple, but its' potential is virtually limitless.

It is an acknowledged tragedy that a decade of neglect saw Australia lose our edge in the field of solar research and development, but we're going to get it back. Give us a national feed in tariff and legislated renewable energy targets and within a few years we will be on our way to living in a solar nation. We are going to transform our sunburned country with PV on every roof and large solar thermal plants feeding baseload electricity into the grid around the clock.

A couple of years ago the Federal Government's own studies showed that with off the shelf technology with an average payback time of four years we can cut domestic energy consumption by a massive 30%. Up the ante with more ambitious efficiency measures with an average eight

year payback and we can cut demand by 70%. Efficiency is the hidden gift in energy policy that we've ignored for far too long. With the kind of leadership inspired by Senator Christine Milne's Energy Efficiency Access and Savings Initiative (EASI) scheme it's time to grab this gift with both hands and pursue energy efficiency as though our lives depended on it.

One rather profound consequence of a renewable energy system is that once the infrastructure is in place, the fuel costs are largely free. No-one can own the sun, wind, and tides, and perhaps it is this which scares the fossil corporations more than anything.

I think it's time we admitted that far from being an economic and social disaster, greening our communities is going to transform our society for the better.

Traffic congestion, for example, is something we will leave behind as our urban areas evolve toward pedestrianised, human-scale urban villages linked together with world-class broadband and fast, affordable mass transit. Transit-oriented developments like these are taking shape all over Europe, East Asia and North America, anchored by medium and high density cores that blend affordable housing with retail services, healthcare, education and childcare centres and cultural institutions.

Electrified light rail systems and electric vehicles hold out the promise of a transport network that runs on sunlight. Imagine if we could invent a zero carbon form of personal transport that had no fuel costs, emitted no toxic chemicals and improved the physical health of the passenger? Such an invention is already in wide use in parts of our community where planning policies favour bikes and pedestrians instead of cars.

In a renewable society we will no longer have the debatable luxury of eating heavily processed, over-packaged food-like products from the far side of the planet when community supported agriculture is restored to its rightful place at the foundation of good health and neighbourhood development.

Instead of condemning families on low incomes to badly designed, mass produced, car-dependent housing in bleak fringe areas, Australian cities can become places of artful beauty again with a diverse mix of private and affordable community housing more appropriate to an ageing population and changing demographics and lifestyles.

An energy-efficient Australia can be renewably powered within a generation. With determination and a bit of foresight, we can now step past the desperate handful of fossil advocates who are scaremongering about the end of the economy as they know it and demanding that Australia not get too far in front of the rest of the world. The most damaging myth of all is the one which says this can't be done.

People who say it can't be done need to get out of the way of those who are doing it.

The Greens are the tip of the iceberg really, the parliamentary expression of much deeper currents within society. I wouldn't be here tonight without the work of thousands of Greens (WA) volunteers who gave up a Saturday last November to work on a polling booth, or the wonderful campaign team who gave up the better part of 2007 so that we'd have a fighting chance come election day. Four good friends saw me through the personal highs and lows, so to Elize, Steph, Rina and Marie, thank you.

Warmest possible thanks are due to Ray, Trish, Luke and Khristo who were the nucleus of this huge effort, and in particular to Dave and Alison who were there for me right from day one until we saw it through. Having you here tonight is really a gift, so thank you. We had a superb team of lower house candidates and their supporters who put in the hard work in their local communities all over Western Australia. In turn, we were part of a huge mobilisation nationally, guided by the inspiring, gentle humoured and seemingly inexhaustible Senator Bob Brown. I can't help but reflect

on what might have been for those who shared the rollercoaster with Sarah and I - Richard, Larissa, Alan, Kerry Tucker and of course Kerry Nettle, but for the capriciousness of our electoral system. I know you're here with us in spirit as we carry this work forward.

Senators will notice a number of new faces and some familiar ones behind the scenes. With formal party status for the first time, the five of us in here are supported by an expanded and very talented team of researchers, advisers and campaigners who are already too numerous to thank individually for their work. I'll settle for singling out my team for huge gratitude; Trish, Ray and Flick, thanks for being here and taking this journey with me.

In my work as a campaigner and researcher over the last few years I've come into contact with some exceptional people. My enduring passion has been for an end to the nuclear age, and this has taken me from the blockade of Jabiluka as a guest of the Mirrar to the heavily contaminated villages surrounding the Jadugoda uranium mine in India where the struggle is the same. Last month Flick and I spent the 63rd anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a guest of Mayor Akiba in Hiroshima, which has left afterimages that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

So tonight is dedicated to the atomic survivors, the Hibakusha, and to people like Uncle Kevin, Mitch, the Kungas and their supporters everywhere. Our work for a world free of the curse of uranium mining, nuclear weapons, and nuclear waste began on the humid morning of August 6, 1945. May we successfully conclude this work before the next Chernobyl is visited on some familiar city or Hiroshima comes home in the back of a parked van.

It's dedicated to Nic and the rest of the Sea Shepherds who are gearing up for the next voyage to Antarctica to stay the harpoons on behalf of our ecological cousins the great whales. It's dedicated to the crew camped in the Weld Valley tonight, in East Gippsland and Chester forest in the wild southwest who have pledged to silence the chainsaws that are still hacking into our country's precious native forests, our irreplaceable carbon banks.

It is dedicated to those who stood up against the Burmese military a year ago this week in pursuit of democracy in their country, and their supporters and family members here in Australia who remind us to never take our democratic safeguards for granted.

And, it is dedicated to the new generation of young activists who held Australia's first camp for climate action in the coal terminals of Newcastle in July. They are acting because of our failure to act, and they are doing so with such powerful grace and good humour that it is impossible not to be inspired by their clarity of purpose.

These young Australians are your sons and daughters, and they must be heard. They are from the same lineage as the people who raised the Southern Cross over the goldfields of Victoria, or stood up for land rights, an end to the carnage in Vietnam, the right to organise collectively in the workplace, and for every woman's right to vote. Rather than reflexively setting our security forces against them, tapping their phones, vilifying them in the media or playing out all the other sad rituals of state intimidation, I urge the Government to pause and reflect on their message of collective survival. Please don't baton charge the messenger.

Many of the people who do this work are tired of fighting against poorly conceived mega-proposals, toxic developments and wars, one after another. It's exhausting work, and even when you win, often all you have to show for your efforts is the absence of something awful.

At our campaign launch last year I recalled an allegory I'd read of a group of washer-women on a river bank who notice a young child floating past, clearly in trouble. They wade in and manage to rescue the child. Then they notice another, and they save that one too. But then another floats by, and another, and soon they're struggling to cope.

Finally one of the women throws up her hands and retreats from the river bank. The others panic, "We need you here comrade! Where are you going?"

Without breaking stride she replies, "I'm going to find whoever it is who's throwing them in".

It is up to every one of us to keep rescuing the children, but we also need to figure out what it is we're doing collectively that's putting them in harm's way in such great numbers.

Millions of us marched to prevent harm coming to the children of Iraq. Starting here in Australia on 15 February 2003, millions of people around the globe in more than 800 cities warned against going to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction that weren't there. George Bush called us a "focus group", in fact it was the largest protest in world history, and history has proven us right.

What we need is a mass destruction of weapons. The Iraq war must teach us this lesson and can become the exit strategy from war itself.

This year the world will spend \$1.3 trillion dollars on narrow-minded military security, in the pursuit of ever more efficient and deadly forms of state-sanctioned violence. Australia's contribution to this wilful "theft from those who hunger and are not fed," as President Eisenhower put it, is \$62 million dollars a day according to forward estimates. This is feeding back predictably into regional arms races. You don't have to be a pacifist to recognise that this is a pathological and tragic misallocation of resources that can't be allowed to continue. We need those resources to buy climate change mitigation and adaptation, to build sustainable cities, to close the gap, and to bring about the transition to a world where this vast infrastructure of collective insecurity will be obsolete.

As a society, we have inherited an interlocking set of crises that were set in motion long before any of us were born. Climate change was not caused by people in this Parliament. Peak oil is manifestly not the fault of anyone sitting here tonight. But a failure to act decisively given the stark evidence piling up all around us is no longer excusable.

There are so many signs of hope. The Apology in February lifted the spirits of the whole nation. The Prime Minister's commission on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament is a truly welcome initiative. This country is overflowing with good ideas and a willingness to get on with this great work, but people are looking to this house for a sign that the political will exists to harness our national and global collective intelligence.

I am starting my time here on the assumption that every one of us in this building wants the best for our families and friends, wants to serve the community, and wants to pass the place on to our kids in better condition than we found it.

We know the media dines out on the spectacle of conflict and abuse which our Westminster system seems to imply, but in my very short time here it's already apparent that a vast amount of what the Senate does is based on collaboration, hard work and a certain grudging respect for different points of view.

Mr President, in the time it has taken me to deliver this speech, three thousand children were born into the human family. 300,000 tonnes of greenhouse pollution were injected into the warming air. And \$51 billion was wasted on global military spending. We have only a short time to set our house in order and bring these priorities into balance.

I realise it's an exceptionally rare thing to have the undivided attention of this room; I thank you for that, and I really look forward to working with you as we bring our collective efforts, wisdom and good grace to bear on the challenges which confront us all.

Thank you.