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Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

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Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP	Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (13:25): I second the motion.

The SPEAKER: Before I call the member for Fairfax, I remind the House that it is the honourable member's first speech, and I ask the House to extend the usual courtesies.

Mr TED O'BRIEN: I am honoured to rise in the chamber today and make my maiden speech in this, the 45th Parliament of Australia. Maybe I could say from the outset, Mr Speaker, how encouraged I am that you have asked people to extend to me the usual courtesies. I suppose that means they cannot heckle me. So maybe I should say that, unashamedly, as the new member for Fairfax, I represent by far the single most important electorate in all of Australia. That is the 'Hear, hear!' prompt there.

Named after Ruth Fairfax, the wonderful founder of that organisation, the Country Women's Association, my electorate lies in Gubbi Gubbi country right in the heart of Queensland's Sunshine Coast, where an eclectic mix of towns and villages combined with unrivalled natural beauty and a near-perfect climate. For me, it is a rare place that still possesses all that old-style romantic charm of a small community but with a happy, vibrant, modern population. It is one of those unique places in Australia where the values of the past and the opportunities of the future genuinely coexist.

Idyllic though it is, some people in Fairfax are still doing it tough. Many seniors are struggling with cost-of-living issues, many young people are leaving the region because of limited career prospects, and too many small businesses and families are carrying too much debt and struggling to make ends meet. Part of the solution for these people and for all residents of the Sunshine Coast is for us to build a better future, one anchored to a vision of becoming the healthiest place on earth, a region that protects and leverages its natural beauty while diversifying its economy into clean, green, high-value industries enabled by modern infrastructure while never losing its family friendly and community oriented culture.

It has not been an easy road to get here. In fact, being elected to the seat of Fairfax has been the longest and toughest job interview of my life. And, of course, I did not do it on my own. My colleagues, from the Prime Minister down, provided enormous support, encouragement and counsel along the way. I also had a very strong team on the ground—an army of volunteers, in fact; too many to mention by name, but they deserve the credit for my being here today. I am delighted that some of them have been able to make the trip down and are in the gallery today. Together we reclaimed the seat of Fairfax for the people of Fairfax—and, indeed, for the people of the Sunshine Coast. In fact, this last election gave birth to 'team Sunshine Coast' as three new MPs, Andrew Wallace, Llew O'Brien and I, join Senator James McGrath to work as a team collectively to put our region first. As part of that team, my pledge to the people of our region is to be the Sunshine Coast's man in Canberra and not Canberra's man on the Sunshine Coast.

I said before that I would not mention any volunteer by name, but I will make one exception. It is for one who is more a conscript than a volunteer, and that is my wife, Sophia, whom I love and adore more than anything in the world. How anyone can pursue public life without the support of a loving family I just do not know. But what I do know is that I have the very best of them in mine. It helps too that Sophia is far better looking and more charming and twice as smart as I will ever be.

Government members: Hear, hear!

Mr TED O'BRIEN: I got a hear, hear for that one, Mr Speaker.

I am the ninth and youngest child of Tom and Bernice O'Brien. My mother, Bernice, is here today. To speak plainly, I love my mum. I thank my mum for dedicating her life to being such a wonderful wife to dad and the most extraordinary mother to us, her nine children.

We lost dad to Parkinson's disease nearly five years ago. He was a man of great humility, gentleness and wisdom, yet hard as nails when pushed or his values were challenged. His advice to us boys before we ran on the rugby field was: 'Run straight and tackle hard, my son.' Run straight and tackle hard—sage advice for far more than just the sporting arena.

I am one who believes that we are all largely a product of our own backgrounds and personal experiences. To that end, nothing has influenced me more than growing up the youngest of my family—the youngest of nine children. By the way, don't believe those who say the youngest child is always spoilt. If you grow up one of nine kids, seven of whom are boys, and you are down the bottom, I swear it is not all kisses and cuddles, but you learn a lot.

As a schoolboy it did not matter if I was a leader among my mates, back at home around that long kitchen table—mum at one end, dad at the other and us nine in between—good luck if you thought you were going to call the shots. When I was little I used to be put on the table, or get there myself, because that was the only way I could be heard. I have checked out these tables here, and I take it I am not allowed to do such.

No matter how loved I was or how secure I felt, no matter what I was able to achieve in the outside world or what positions I held, back home I was still just one of nine. This ingrained in me from my very beginning an appreciation for what it is like to be part of something far bigger, far greater and far more important than I. It is with that same sentiment that I stand here today as someone who sees politics as a vocation to serve and not as a career to progress. I recognise that by virtue of being elected to this chamber I now am part of something far bigger, far greater and far more important than I.

Another aspect of my early years was growing up in our family business, started by my forebears as a flour milling company on the Darling Downs in 1899. They named the company 'Defiance' to signify a determination to take on the mainly international companies then dominating the industry.

My first job was as a trainee baker with Defiance. I started at an age where I still needed to stand on a chair so I could reach the workbench.

Defiance opened my eyes to the world when, straight out of school, I did my first stint living and working in Asia, helping the family business break in to new markets. I quickly came to realise how good we have it here in Australia—how safe, how prosperous and how free our country is—and how important good and stable governance is for maintaining this. That remains my view today.

This week I enter parliament after 20-plus years in business, with experience from industries as diverse as agriculture through to high technology, from small start-ups through to multinationals. Much of that time has been spent living and working predominately in Asia, giving me a perspective of our country that I do not think I would have otherwise gained. Australia is a medium-sized free market liberal democracy operating in an increasingly integrated, yet highly volatile, global political economy—one that is experiencing rapid change: change that on one hand presents us with enormous opportunities but on the other hand presents us with great risks and challenges. Whether we like it or not, as a nation we do not control all the levers that will determine our future. We don't, and that is just the nature of the world and our place in it.

We have a choice. Either we be complacent as a nation, leave things to fate, react as challenges arise as best we can and otherwise hope to God our future is as safe and prosperous as our past or, in my preference, we take control of our own destiny.

My wife, Sophia, and I often reflect on what the world will look like when our little girl, Alexandra, who is now four, is our age. My hope is that the future Australia that she and her little mates at kindy will enjoy will be one driven not my major events, not by political parties nor ideology but by values. The foundation upon which I hope our future is built is a common set of values—values that bind all Australians regardless of race, religion or creed.

I believe there is no greater value than that of freedom, for nothing else guarantees happiness and fulfilment like freedom, freedom realised through independence, self-reliance and dignity of the individual—ideals that in turn promote protection of free speech and property rights and encourage human endeavour and free enterprise. Of course, freedom expressed in these terms can be interpreted as individual rights, and I believe they are. I also believe that in our society the pendulum has swung too far in favour of individual rights without a commensurate degree of individual responsibilities.

Built on these foundations lies a vision for a future Australia. I see a future Australia that is well governed, not because we inserted government into every aspect of our lives or because we ensured conformity by dumbing down public debate, but because we revisited the simple notion of the role of government and let go of activities beyond the scope of what government should be looking after and because we acknowledged that our founders' intent for the federal compact was a sound one, with different tiers of government responsible for different things in accordance with our Constitution. Thus, we devolved more responsibilities to the states, including the areas of health and education.

I see a future Australia that is prosperous, not because we struck it lucky with a never-ending resource boom but because we had the common sense to leverage those industries in which we have a competitive advantage and we created and commercialised new intellectual property, and because we had the courage to repair our fiscal position, reform the tax system and welfare system, and bring flexibility to the labour market, thereby creating jobs, opening opportunities for Australian businesses, and freeing younger generations from a financial burden not of their making, while also taking care of our seniors and guaranteeing a generous safety net for struggling, hardworking individuals, families, pensioners and others in need.

I see a future Australia that is highly competitive because we reformed competition policy, improved productivity and restored profitability back to the land by empowering regional and rural Australia—not because we chose winners, protected incumbents or cleared the way for big companies to grow even bigger but because we found ways to entice super funds and capital inflows to invest in new, productive assets, including world-class infrastructure, and because we dismantled monopolies in both industry and the labour market, removed unnecessary regulation and put the interests of small businesses first.

I see a future Australia that is safe and secure, not because we denied the threat of Islamic terrorism and thereby weakened our resolve or we feared it so much we retreated into isolationism but because we asserted our national interests, strengthened our traditional alliances and deepened relations with emerging powers within our region; because we invested wisely in national defence, protected our strategic assets and looked after our service men and women; and because we welcomed with open arms immigrants who respected our values, our way of life, our system of government and our rule of law.

I see a future Australia that is compassionate, not because we were shamed into submission by media-savvy activists or those who confronted us on our doorstep but because we generously allocated resources that were distributed on the principle of helping those most in need—people suffering from disease and starvation in poverty-stricken nations, and people fleeing persecution in war-torn countries or in countries of first asylum.

I see a future Australia with a strong civil society, not because we solved social issues by even bigger welfare programs but because we made local communities more resilient, helped not-for-profits become more commercially sustainable, and found new ways to build and reward volunteerism and philanthropy; because we increased participation in our democracy and restored trust in our institutions and honour and dignity to public office; and because we fostered a high standard of public debate—debate which was honest and fearless, not censored by politically correct media or cheapened by cowardly social media trolls or keyboard warriors.

I believe this future Australia can eventuate, but it will not just happen. It has to be got. It has to be fought for. And its beneficiaries will be not only my little Alexandra but young people right across the seat of Fairfax, from Mountain Creek to Mudjimba, Nambour to Ninderry, Kenilworth to Coolumb, and everywhere in between, and not just them but all Australians of younger generations and those yet to be born.

But this will not be easy, and it will require us to break some myths. We need to break a myth that there is a political choice to be made between, on one hand, growing the economy and, on the other, delivering vital services: health, education and the like. There is no such choice, because without one you cannot have the other. Having a strong economy is the means by which we can deliver vital public services on an ongoing basis to every Australian. And, as the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and others have been rightly pointing out, we need to break the myth that we can keep living beyond our means. We are a formidable economy, especially compared to most other nations. There is no doubt about that. But just because others are in worse shape than we are does not mean we ourselves do not have a problem. If we are to avoid the severe pain that an economic crisis would inflict, we need to accept that as a country we have been living beyond our means, and we need to adjust our behaviour accordingly.

To my mind, breaking these myths requires nothing short of a cultural shift, and in my experience it does not matter how smart you are, it does not matter how clever your strategy, how persuasive your words. There is only one thing that ever changes culture, and that is leadership. Leadership is the secret ingredient—leadership displayed in this chamber, in this modern-day colosseum where the battles of ideas are to be fought, and leadership displayed beyond these hallowed halls: on the street corners and in the shopping malls, in the grandstands and in the town halls, wherever we have an opportunity to speak with those we are here to serve.

I am honoured to have been elected to a government that will provide that leadership, and I will play my part to ensure that as a nation we do not walk complacently into the future but we control our destiny and, with a clear line of sight to the future, we run straight and we tackle hard. Thank you.

Debate interrupted.