

**FIRST SPEECH**  
**KELLY O'DWYER**  
**FEDERAL MEMBER FOR HIGGINS**  
**Monday, 8 February 2010**

Thank you Mr Speaker. Today I rise in this chamber for the first time as the very humble yet proud member for Higgins. At the outset, I want to place on record my thanks to the people of Higgins for their trust in me to represent them. I will always honour that trust. They have in me, just as they had in the previous members for Higgins, someone who will work hard for them, who will listen to them and fight for them. Who will respect and defend the values and traditions that have made this country great.

Higgins has in me someone who will not make decisions ruled by fear, or the short term media cycle. To do so sacrifices the future of this country on the altar of political expediency today. For the decisions that we make today, here, in this Parliament, will shape our future. We face big challenges. And I will not duck the task of tackling them.

Higgins has a strong tradition and a proud legacy. The people of Higgins have been represented well in the past – two Prime Ministers in Harold Holt and John Gorton, a strong local member in Roger Shipton, and most recently a Federal Treasurer in Peter Costello. Each man made a significant contribution to this country. Holt introduced the child endowment scheme; Gorton implemented a program to provide financial assistance to non-government schools; and Shipton advocated on many small business issues.

Family. Choice. Wealth creation. These threads bind the Higgins tradition.

In particular, I honour the contribution of my immediate predecessor, Peter Costello, a great Australian and a man who is both a mentor and a friend. Not only was he a much loved local member, but his economic vision and achievements ensured a brighter future for all Australians. His legacy, while understood today, will be properly measured and appreciated in the years to come.

Since Higgins has produced such giants of Australian politics, it is probably a good thing that I am wearing heels.

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Mr Speaker, Higgins is a lively inner city electorate, with landmarks like Chapel Street, the Yarra River and the Chadstone Shopping Centre. It is also a diverse electorate. Workers cottages abound in Windsor; flats and apartments dominate South Yarra. A vibrant gay community enlivens Prahran. Toorak has its mansions; Malvern, its parks and gardens. You can't pass through Camberwell and Glen Iris without seeing children playing cricket or kick-to-kick. Parents push prams in Ashburton and Malvern East. The café culture is alive and well in Koornang Road, Carnegie and High Street, Armadale. Throughout, there is a deep vein of multiculturalism: some communities are particularly localised, like the strong Greek communities in Murrumbeena and Hughesdale; others, like our dynamic Jewish and Chinese communities, are spread throughout the electorate.

One thing, more than any other, binds this diversity together: aspiration.

Higgins is full to the brim with aspiration. Young couples, renting for the moment, but desperate to own their own homes. Families wanting the best for their children, scrimping and saving to provide them with the best opportunities in life. Small business people, rolling up their sleeves, taking a chance and creating jobs. Older residents who have worked hard throughout their lives, whose accomplishments prove what can happen when you dare to pursue your ambitions.

The story of Gwen Dixon and her late husband Alec is a classic Higgins story of aspiration.

Alec was born in the early 1900s and lived in what was then the very working class suburb of Windsor, one of seven children. He left school at fourteen, and worked as a plumber's apprentice before he got a job on the wharves. Years later, he met Gwen. They got married, rented a house and in true entrepreneurial fashion started a small business together. Gwen made felt ties; Alec sold them door-to-door. Keen to make a home for their family, they rented a shop in Windsor and started a milk bar. They worked in the shop during the day and lived above it at night. They took risks. They employed people. Later, they set up a grocery business, going into debt to buy a small shop in South Yarra. A business they worked in together for over 30 years.

When they could, Alec and Gwen moved to a house in Windsor, renting out half of it to make ends meet. They took one holiday in their working life and that was on their retirement. Instead, they put money back into their business and the

education of their two children, sending them to independent schools in their secondary years to give them the educational opportunities that they themselves had been denied.

Today, we are joined by 92 year old Gwen Dixon in the public gallery.

I could not have asked for a finer grandmother.

Mr Speaker, the same spirit of aspiration that drove my grandparents, drove my parents. The first of their families to go to university, they worked hard and sacrificed to give me and my siblings a quality education. If not for their love and sacrifice, I would not be standing here today.

I joined the Liberal Party because we are the Party which helps people to fulfil their aspirations; those opposite are just as likely to stamp them out.

In my view, the best path to our collective prosperity involves giving individuals, families and businesses, the freedom, opportunity, and encouragement to build and secure their own futures. That is why I am here. I want to create the best possible environment that allows people to pursue their aspirations. And one that values family as the bedrock of our society – to be nurtured and protected.

Believers in big government think Canberra can and should solve every problem. I do not accept this. Government action invariably involves some concession of liberty to the state. But that concession should be limited to what is vital. Canberra simply cannot know what is best for every person and every situation. The brainpower of 22 million people, each given the freedom to create solutions for their families and communities, and to create businesses which create jobs, will always yield better outcomes. Always.

When Government does act, it should look to maximise choice and opportunity. Non-Government alternatives are important. We need to encourage private health care and private health insurance, and independent schools, not undermine them. At the same time, it is critical to have strong public health and public school systems. We need to demand excellence and achievement from both to ensure real opportunities for all Australians.

Basic fairness and compassion mean a strong social safety net is essential. But I want as few people as possible to rely on it. In particular, we need to break the nexus of intergenerational welfare dependency, a problem tragically apparent in some of our indigenous communities, and equally tragically not confined there. Our policies must encourage self-reliance and resilience.

Social policy cannot be implemented without a strong economy. A strong economy is the ultimate form of social policy – with it comes the chance of a job and a higher standard of living, the chance to fulfil aspirations.

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This brings me to the first key set of issues which I want to touch on today.

This side of the House has a proud history of strong economic management.

Indeed, it seems that one of our defining roles as a political party is to repair the national balance sheet and to restore a framework that encourages productivity and growth.

Unfortunately, one of the challenges that will face a future Coalition Government will be the same challenge that faced the last one. Paying off Labor's debt.

While some form of stimulus package was appropriate in response to the global financial crisis, the current Government's package was excessive and poorly targeted. As a result, present and future generations face higher taxes to pay the interest bill. At a time when our population is ageing, money will be diverted from critical health, aged care and infrastructure budgets.

At the risk of oversimplification, the main reasons why Australia has performed well to date through the global financial crisis are because Australia was in a net cash position heading into it; because our monetary policy was, by and large, appropriately managed over a sustained period by our independent Reserve Bank; because our banking and prudential system was first class; and because we had a strong bilateral trade relationship with China which enabled us to piggy-back on her own massive stimulus spending.

These are all achievements of this side of the House.

Let there be no doubt – I am for less debt, and for living within our means. I am for a strong economy.

There will always be those who use a crisis to further their own agendas. Already, the Government has gone beyond its mandate at the last election, and significantly reregulated the labour market in a way which will smother our competitiveness and jobs growth over time. We cannot afford to repeat this mistake in our financial markets. I have long taken an interest in markets policy and regulation: as a lawyer, as a policy adviser and most recently in the finance industry. A sober review is appropriate; and it may be that some improvements can be made. However, a wholesale reregulation of our financial markets would undermine the companies and industries which are so fundamental to our growth.

In this place, I will seek to maximise the competitiveness of our economy, and our productivity; not to undermine them.

One area which is critical to this is taxation policy. We need to attract foreign investment; we need to attract the best talent from offshore; and, equally importantly, we need to retain our own talent. That requires a competitive taxation system, not a populist one.

We need a taxation system that is not simply a merry-go-round of money, but one that promotes workforce participation and wealth creation.

This is all the more critical given the projections for our population size and composition set out in the latest Intergenerational Report. It is clear we need to provide incentives for people to save and to stay in the workforce for longer.

We all await the release of the Henry Review into taxation and the Government's response. The challenge for the Government is not simply to use the Henry Review as an excuse to introduce higher taxes in its bid to find new revenue. Nor should it introduce new taxes which would pull the rug out from under our all important resources sector. Each would be the wrong response and would undermine the competitiveness of our economy.

More importantly, lower taxation is fundamentally the right thing. Once the basic services of government are funded, individuals are best placed to choose how they spend their money.

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Mr Speaker, the second key set of issues I want to touch upon concerns innovation: a natural product of aspiration and a key to Australia's future.

Australia's prosperity has been built on both our people and on our abundant natural wealth. However, our mineral resources are finite. And changes to our climate and water scarcity pose ongoing challenges for agriculture. Put simply, we cannot assume that our natural wealth will underpin our long-term economic prosperity. Our mining and farming sectors will remain critical for years to come. But now is the time for our country to invest significantly in education which drives productivity and innovation. Government needs to encourage new businesses and industries to flourish.

Innovation should also be core planks in our strategies to address the twin challenges of energy security and climate change. Both are critical issues facing not just this country, but countries all over the world. For many years, Australians have led the way in medical research. There is no reason why we cannot lead the

way in energy research. Indeed we are uniquely placed to develop solar, wind, geothermal, clean coal and innovative water solutions to maximise our energy independence and to reduce our impact on the environment.

Climate change is not the only area of environmental policy where action is required. As our population grows, our water supply has been, and will continue to be, increasingly stretched. National leadership is required. Future generations of Australians will rightly condemn us if we hide behind our federal system as an excuse for inaction.

The structure of our Federation has not kept pace with developments in water policy. To our great shame, the Murray Darling Basin is a looming environmental catastrophe. If the States are not willing to refer their powers on water to Canberra, a referendum will be necessary.

But I don't agree with those who would use this as a Trojan horse to centralise ever increasing power in Canberra in other areas. While it is right to ask how our Federation can work better, we must be careful not to undermine the elaborate system of checks and balances which has sustained Australia as one of the world's great democracies.

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Mr Speaker, energy and water security are by no means our only national security challenges. We face instability in our region and beyond. The threat of terrorism is ever-present, both through traditional means and emerging threats such as cyber attacks. We must continue to invest in Australia's defence infrastructure, but recognise that this alone is not enough. Our alliances have been critical in the past, are essential today and will continue to protect us into the future. But so too will investment in our region: in democratic structures and institutions, and in foreign aid – not just because foreign aid is morally right, but because of the huge national security benefits that it brings. Above all, we must maintain our vigilance.

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Mr Speaker, I spoke earlier of families as the bedrock of our society. The changing nature of work poses particular challenges to the aspirations of families across this country.

Families come in all shapes and sizes; and roles within families vary. A woman is increasingly likely to be the only, primary or co-bread winner, whether by choice or necessity. Parents are having children later in life, and then trying to balance parenting with their careers. Increasingly, grandparents are taking on more of the parenting responsibility.

This creates enormous challenges. We want mothers, fathers and grandparents investing time in their children and grandchildren's development. But we also want our best people in the workforce, adding to our productive output.

No one has yet worked out how to be in two places at once – so there are no simple solutions. Indeed, the right solutions vary from family to family. In some cases, the right solution will be for one parent to stay at home as a full time carer. In others, both parents will need to work or want to work.

Government should not discriminate amongst different family arrangements, or to put in place incentives which cause discrimination by others. It is important for our businesses to offer the flexibility necessary to allow our best and brightest to contribute both to the ongoing growth of their businesses and to the ongoing nurturing of our young.

But families are not just about parents caring for children; they are also about children caring for parents. Similar principles apply. Senior Australians built this country through their aspiration, sweat and taxes. They have a right to dignity and security. At the heart of this is flexibility and choice – giving power to older Australians and their families to determine their future according to their needs.

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Mr Speaker, these are some of the national issues which drive me and which should occupy the attention of this place in the years to come.

But local issues are also important to my constituents.

It is tempting for Federal politicians to say that local issues are not 'our issues'. I do not accept that. I will continue to campaign to help those crying out for better community safety through closed circuit television cameras in Prahran and more police in Ashburton. With my community, I will continue to fight State Labor's flawed planning policies which are damaging the character of our area.

In short, I will be an advocate for the people of Higgins, on local issues as well as national ones.

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Mr Speaker, no one who stands before this House does so without the support of a great many people. Let me start by thanking my wonderful team in Higgins and all of the volunteers, supporters and staff of the Liberal Party who worked so tirelessly on my campaign.

I am blessed to have so many wonderful friends. I am not so foolhardy as to attempt to list them all today, but each has enriched my life and I thank them all.

Some of those friends are now colleagues, here, and in the other place. I have valued their counsel for many years, but I have valued their friendships even more. I am excited to join them, and my other new colleagues, to strike a blow for Liberalism and good government.

Of course, it would be hard to embark on this life without the love and support of a strong family. I have both. I pay tribute to my parents, Karen and Dan O'Dwyer; and I can always count on my siblings - Kate, Tom and Nicki – to be there, through everything, and to keep it real.

I would not be here today without the love, encouragement and advice of my husband Jon – whom I met at university fifteen years ago and who shares this political passion with me. I am so happy to be on life's journey with him.

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I will never forget that politics is about people. And that people can make a difference. That is why I am here. I look forward to playing my part in building an even better Australia and thank the House for its indulgence.