

Ms Janelle Saffin MP, Member for Page (NSW)

First Speech To Parliament 11/3/2008



I come to this place as the first female to represent the people of Page, and I come to this place as a fighter, having first fought my way out of the housing commission estate where I grew up. I do not mean the locality, which is still a nice place to live; I mean the thinking that confined and constrained me. We never went to university or did things like that. That was not our world. Although I lacked confidence, I always had a yearning, an intellectual curiosity, that drove me to seek something more.

I have achieved some good things—great things, really, for a girl with no education who went up the ladder, so to speak. My instincts and therefore my responses to situations are still very much rooted in the working-class girl from One Mile, Ipswich. I have to say these instincts have served me well.

Ipswich was my stamping ground for the first two decades of my life, and I accept membership of the parliamentary Ipswichians, Shayne. Ipswich formed me, and Lismore, my home for more than 30 years, gave me the substance that makes me an effective representative for the people of Page. So you see, I too can say: 'Hello. My name is Janelle Saffin. I'm originally from Queensland and I'm here to help.' And I truly am. It is my mission in life to serve and to serve well. Today in this great institution I pledge to do just that: serve all the people of Page, just as Kevin said he would serve all of the nation in his acceptance speech on election night.

I said I was a fighter. I fought my way into university without the credentials, into jobs without the experience and into politics without the network but with the passion to make the world a better place, to make a difference—and it was very much locally driven—to get women who were victims and survivors of domestic violence and rape access to services not available, to get laws created and laws changed, to get housing for home-less young people not old enough to be eligible for public housing, to get recognition, services and a voice for the mentally ill and for people living with disabilities and to change laws and policies so that they reflected and responded to our entire community.

The first time I went to our then local MP with some other women of action from our local community—and he was someone I respected—it was to ask him if we could get a house on a peppercorn rental for women escaping domestic violence. He said he did not see the need. That motivated me. It got me going—or, as my mum would say, it got my goat up—and we got the house, and it is still in public use today. We then went to open a bank account, and we were told that we needed some men of means to be our trustees or some such nonsense. We got our bank account open in our own community name. We could not get solicitors to effectively represent women and children, so we set about finding some and educating others, and I became a lawyer myself. I thought: 'I'll show them.' As Edna Ryan used to say, 'Don't get mad, get active.'

At the local level, I have fought for and secured many services, many firsts, and I am proud of it. I say this in full recognition that I was never alone and took up many issues collaboratively but always with the determination to get us what we needed and a better deal. I got millions when others could not for the Summerland Way, the regional baseball stadium, the establishment of the North Coast Community Housing Company, the North Coast Breast Screening Program and the Far North Coast Domestic Violence Liaison Committee; policy firsts: internet in schools—I wrote it; community justice centres in our region; regional domestic violence coordinators; and many more. This experience as a community advocate has equipped me well for this job.

I am here to make a difference, to make our patch of Page a better place for all of us lucky enough to live there. As federal MPs, we are charged with local leadership, we are charged to listen and we are charged to be community facilitators. During campaigning, especially when doorknocking in Grafton and Lismore, it was evident to me that people felt abandoned and taken for granted by the coalition government, by National Party representation and by not being listened to on any score. I pledge to listen no matter what, and I have been doing my best to do that since I was elected.

I know my way of working puts a bigger burden on my staff—Carmel, Lee, Paul, Peter, Maryn

and Sarah—and for that I say, ‘Sorry, but that’s how it is.’ I am not one to let things sit idle. If I see a problem, I hop to and help fix it. There has been so little listening over the years that people are literally coming out of the woodwork. People expect us to be compassionate, and we are, and they expect us to be good economic managers, and we are. This is a challenge—a challenge we are up to.

I was very motivated to run as a candidate for Page for two compelling reasons. The first was that John Howard’s coalition government had taken Australia to a place I did not like. I was working and living in Timor Leste—or East Timor, as we call it—and coming home to the Northern Rivers every few months. I had the advantage of looking through another lens at my beloved community and homeland and did not like what was happening. Mr Howard played wedge politics on so many issues. His brand of ruling, not leading, encouraged us to give vent to our most unkind view of others. He never managed to lead us and inspire us to be better human beings. I never thought I would see attack dogs and men in black balaclavas on our wharves, locking out workers. I saw it with my own eyes the first night it happened. I was then a member of the Legislative Council in the New South Wales parliament, and we went down to express our solidarity with the workers on the wharves. I was stunned. ‘Children overboard’ was the last straw. This was not the Australia of the fair go.

I marched in Sydney, along with what seemed to be hundreds of thousands of others, against the war in Iraq, along with Judy Reid, a long-time friend of mine from Ballina and previous member of my staff, who is here with me today, and also Cameron Murphy, who is another previous staff member of mine—he is here as well. Thank you both for being here. I also thank my staff members Lee Duncan and Peter Ellem—they are up in the gallery—and my good friend Susan Conroy. Thank you all for being here.

John Howard dismissed us as a rabble, taking no notice. It was amazing though how many Aussies, those who marched and those with whom I have a beer on Friday night at the local pub, knew that we were going to Iraq on a lie to find WMDs that were nonexistent, yet we still went in. Aussies are basically a kind lot and would give a neighbour a helping hand before they would turn them away. John Howard’s coalition led us into a more selfish and aggressive way of doing politics. Every issue became a battleground.

This brings me back to why I stood and why I was singularly determined to win Page. Like other community members, I watched as we got less of the pie than we needed, after being continually told that we were in times of economic prosperity. But, worse than that, our representative was not even discussing the issues with us—not saying, ‘Okay, let us talk about it.’

Before I turn to the attributes of Page—and there are many, primarily the good, down-to-earth people—I want to say thanks to Kevin and to Tony for listening to us in Page regarding our floods in January, the worst in some areas in over 50 years. In Kyogle they are still talking about the first-ever visit by a Prime Minister. We got some extra dollars in Page and so did the people of Richmond.

My friend Harry Woods held Page for Labor from 1990 to 1996. He went on to become the state member for Clarence. Harry now lives in Yamba with his wife, Sandra, and I am pleased to say that he came with me to the declaration of the polls on 17 December last year. I want to place on record my thanks to Harry for his engaged and tireless representation and also for his wonderful sense of humour.

Page comprises over 16,000 square kilometres. It is rural and has a significant coastal community. It stretches from Ballina in the north through Wardell, Broadwater, Woodburn, Evans Head and Iluka to Yamba in the south. These coastal communities are under pressure from development and climate change. I live in Bundjalung country, the original nation of the Northern Rivers, and we have about twice the number of Indigenous people in Page as we do country wide. Our industry base comprises agriculture, beef, dairy, sugar, oilseed, horticulture, aged care, retail sector, hospitality and construction, and 42 per cent of all voters in Page are seniors. We have many sea changers as well, who are all coming to find a more relaxed but stimulating lifestyle.

Page goes from Lismore, my home town, to Casino, Coraki and Kyogle, up to Woodenbong on the Queensland border, back down through Tabulam, Bonalbo, Old Bonalbo, Urbenville and Baryulgil—and what a tragedy has beset the people of that village. James Hardie mined asbestos there, and friends of mine are still pursuing their compensation claims now. Down at the southern end we have the North Coast's first city, Grafton. We also have Rappville, Mallanganee, Mummulgum, Copmanhurst, Lawrence, Coutts Crossing, Nymboida, Tyringham and Dundurrabin through to Hernani. It is a poor seat. About 13 to 14 per cent of people living in it are at or below the poverty line—and I am not sure what the National Party were doing about that. They have held the seat, in some way or another, for nearly a century. I want to do something about reducing that number and later this year will run a poverty forum, marshalling some of the best and the brightest to help.

I now turn to some of the concerns of young people, particularly those that my son, who is 23, raises with me all the time. He keeps me honest and keeps harping at me about issues of

concern—issues, he says, that we do not talk about but that concern many people. I look at their websites and I look at their blogs, so I know some of the things that they are seized with. In general, they are concerned about things like corporate power, particularly that of the chemical industry, with its vast empire stretching out across the world. Most of the chemicals that we find in our food—and there are many—were not made for such use and are not necessary.

Other issues of concern—and they are ones that concern me—include the death penalty. I remain an active campaigner against it, having worked for a long time with the Asia-Pacific anti-death-penalty coalition. I am concerned about child abuse in any form and how to give better protection to children. There is child pornography and the violence that has permeated our daily lives through our films and our television—our media. There are the late hours that pubs and clubs are open—and I am not a wowser—when many of our young people spill out drunk, out of control and have more fights, more violence and more sexual assaults. Another issue of concern is why, in 2008, we do not have paid parental leave. That just seems ridiculous to me, when our economy depends on parents making their contribution to the economy. We do not have childcare rebates for all types of child care; public transport is not available in rural areas; and dental care is not covered by Medicare.

Mr Speaker, our first sitting week was a momentous week for me in two ways. I came to parliament, this great institution, after having won the seat of Page in a fiercely contested election battle, wresting it from the increasingly out-of-touch, lost-touch Liberal and National Party coalition. What a privilege it was to be part of a parliament that said sorry to Indigenous Australians. How humbled I felt to be in the presence of people had been wronged so cruelly yet found it in their hearts to accept the apology and to forgive.

For me, that first week was momentous for another reason: events in Timor Leste. Mr Speaker, it is known that I lived and worked in Timor Leste from 2004 to 2007 as His Excellency Dr Jose Ramos Horta's senior political adviser. Jose is a man of peace, a man of vision, a pragmatic man, an international statesman, a diplomat and a leader. I was with him in foreign affairs and cooperation, in defence—I learned a lot about defence; he was the Minister for Defence—when he was Prime Minister and then when he became President.

On the first day of parliament I had just arrived and done a brief doorstep, announcing myself, as proud as punch, as Janelle Saffin, member for Page, dah de dah de dah, and was walking down the hallway when I got a call telling me that Jose had been shot and was in a critical condition. Jose is my friend, my colleague—or amigo and kolega, in his language. I was devastated. That week I maintained focus on my duties to the people of Page, feeling delighted but also devastated at the same time. I was with Jose when the crisis broke out in East Timor in

2006 and witnessed his heartbreak and determination to make things work. For me, it was a singular and unique experience, one that was formative, and it made me fearless.

I have to say that Jose inspired me to 'go for it' in the election campaign, although he told all publicly—also in the local media—that he hoped I would lose so that I could continue to work as his adviser and for his country. I can see my colleague Gary Gray laughing; he knows him well too. When I worked in Timor Leste, I used to see Gary quite regularly, so I know he understands just what I am saying. Timor Leste is a country I love with a people that I miss, but it is one that I am happy now to support from within the framework of our government, the Rudd Labor government. I have faith that they will make it, and I am so pleased that Jose will resume his duties as President in the not too distant future. He is healing well and sends his thanks to all of us in this place—and I mean all of us—because he knows that we support him. He is back to SMSing me, so I am getting messages; I know he is healing.

I have faith in people, particularly in the people of Page. They are not demanding more than their fair share. They just want a fair go for their kids and their families, and they want their communities to be safe and sustainable. I have faith in our representatives, our government led by Kevin, and I have faith in politics. I have to say that on our side we are blessed to have such talent on the front bench and on the back benches. So watch out, Justine; there is a lot of talent here. We are very lucky. I also acknowledge my colleague the Hon. Justine Elliot, who represents the electorate of Richmond, which is next door to mine. She is the first female to represent Richmond. Justine goes before me and is someone who also has inspired me.

Mr Speaker, let me recount, in brief, just some of the legacy of the coalition that has impacted on services in Page. Up to \$1 billion was taken out of the public health system in New South Wales alone. There was the axing of the Commonwealth dental scheme, causing untold misery for people—some in Page have waited years for treatment and dentures. The coalition also ripped the guts out of public housing—a huge disinvestment.

In coming to the close of my first speech in this place, I will cite the monetary election commitments that I gave, supported of course by the leadership. There was \$780 million for Pacific Highway projects from Ballina to Ewingsdale—covering the two electorates there, Page and Richmond—\$90 million for the Alstonville Bypass; \$23 million for Grafton Base Hospital to upgrade the operating theatre and emergency department and for a GP superclinic with no strings attached; \$15 million for radiotherapy services at Lismore Base Hospital to accelerate its opening; \$3 million for the Casino community centre; \$2 million for the Casino town centre revitalisation; up to \$2 million for the Yamba Sport and Recreation Centre; \$1 million for the South Grafton town centre; \$250,000 in recurrent funding for the Northern Rivers Business

Enterprise Centre; and \$200,000 for the Lismore homeless shelter. That was the first commitment that we made, showing our concern for homelessness. There was also \$125,000 for the upgrade of the Grafton saleyards and about \$2 million spread across the region for community projects under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy so that they could have continuity for the next three years. I will be working over the next three years to add many more much-needed projects to my list of priorities.

I would like here to make some acknowledgements. First of all, to the Your Rights at Work campaign, spearheaded by the ACTU and Greg Combet, I say well done. Greg Combet's uncle lives in my seat. Greg has family in my seat, and his uncle talks to me endlessly about Greg. They are very proud of him. To the local Your Rights at Work campaigns and the two people I most interacted with, Graeme Flanagan and John Hickson: thank you. Thank you to USU, Craig, CFMEU, Bluey, LHMU, Carmel, CPSU, ASU, AWU and AMWU. When I say thank you to the AWU, I thank my now colleague Bill Shorten. He campaigned with me in Page when he was still the National Secretary of the AWU. They campaigned hard on Work Choices, as did I. It was very unpopular. It was a big issue in the seat of Page. To my Page campaign team, thank you. I thank Elma Stewart, whose blood pressure I caused to rise but who stuck by me through every day of a relentless campaign; Doug Myler; Felix Eldridge; Colin Clague; Kevin Bell; Liz and Richard Adams; Marg Barden; Glenys Ritchie; Jenny Dowell; Rick Smith; Ron Tinker; Wally Mulgrave; Don Blackmore; all the boys from Ballina; Melanie Doriean; Eric Kaiser; Andy Moy; Therese Shier; the Iluka Maclean mob; Mark Kingsley; Ron McGeorge; Cave and Ray Emily; and Megan Lawson, who is in the gallery today and now works in this place. She worked in my Grafton office. There are many, many more, and I know I have forgotten some.

I want to give two personal significant acknowledgements: firstly, to His Excellency President Jose Ramos Horta, whom I have already mentioned; and to Brigadier Mick Slater, who was the force commander of the joint task force in East Timor in 2006. Over a cuppa one day at Camp Phoenix—I used to go there to get better food—I was considering whether to run for parliament and just chatting about it. He said, 'Janelle, if that's what you want to do, do it. You only have one life'. He had no interest in the politics, and it was a personal chat, but that one really made me sit up and take notice and I never looked back.

I will finish by also thanking my husband, Dr Jim, as he is known; my son, Ned; my sisters, Denise and Donna; my mother, Oriel; and my dad, Phil, who is over 80 and came out and doorknocked with me. My father was the only person I allowed to have a beer while he was doorknocking. No-one else was allowed near it. I know that they are very proud of me. In closing, I will speak of a remarkable woman I know, one who has great strength of mind and character. It is Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, who is still under house arrest. Suu is a beacon of hope for over 50 million people who are held prisoners not by any occupying army but by their own military dictatorship. Suu is a Buddhist and there is an enlightened principle in Buddhism

which Suu refers to in her writings. It is instructive for all of us in public life. She says: 'Just continue to do what you believe is right. Later on the fruits of what you do will become apparent on their own. One's responsibility is to do the right thing.'