

# **Toni McLennan Speech**

## **Launch of HEAR OUR VOICE**

Thank you, Dan, for that energetic welcome.

I would also like to thank Dan for his unfailing support and enthusiasm in co-founding Hear Our Voice. His tireless efforts and wisdom inspire me on a daily basis.

I also want to thank all of you for coming along today to support us in launching HEAR OUR VOICE, a political party dedicated to the principles of honesty, equality and fairness.

I realise most people are cynical about political parties and politicians who say they are dedicated to these values because the political process makes it difficult to live up to these ideals at times.

So who am I to stand before you and ask you to believe in me and my promises?

I began this journey many years ago, believing that one day I would contribute to help make the world a better place. But it has only been in the last few years that I have taken actual steps to become a politician.

I come from a single parent family, and I grew up during a time when we were the only divorced family I knew. My mother raised four children on her own in an era when divorce was not easy to get or socially acceptable, and she faced many challenges and hardships.

My childhood shaped me into the person I am today. Although I encountered much adversity during my youth I am grateful that those experiences have given me an understanding of human nature and a deep appreciation and tolerance of human frailties.

I have always had a strong conviction to fight injustice, whether that was in my personal life, in the lives of my friends and family, in the workplace, and now in the political arena.

It is my abhorrence to inequality and injustice that I stand here today and I will continue this journey until I see equity and fairness reign in a number of areas.

Firstly, I want to address the imbalance of women in politics and in decision making environments. Let me make it very clear – HEAR OUR VOICE will campaign on bringing equal representation of women in parliament.

In Australia there are 226 members in both houses of parliament and of these only 64 are women – that is only 28% and evidence that the old political parties are not serious about women's equality in parliament.

Women bring a valuable perspective to the political process. Women have a different way of dealing with issues and with equal representation in Parliament women would help make Australia a truly great country where opportunity and prosperity are shared equally by all its citizens.

How can this inequality exist when Australia prides itself on the ethos of 'a fair go'?

Although Australia was the first nation in the world to give women the vote, over 100 years later women are still fighting for equality.

Over the past three decades there has been an increase in the number of women entering all levels of government but we have a long way to go before equal representation is achieved.

The reality in Australia is, women have little control over the policy that governs their social and economic well-being - we have minor influence over the economy, environment, employment, social justice, welfare issues, war and foreign affairs and trade. This situation must change and Hear Our Voice is here to make that change.

We need to make parliaments and decision making institutions more representative of women. But how do we achieve this? – what we need is a concerted effort by governments, political parties and the community to improve the imbalance.

If there were an equal representation of women in parliament, would Australia have so eagerly joined the Coalition of the Willing and invaded Iraq without UN sanction?

If there were an equal representation of women in parliament, would there be greater investment in finding alternative energy sources which do not harm the environment?

If there were an equal representation of women in the global arena would so many people throughout the world live in abject poverty without access to clean drinking water, quality education and simple medications that could improve the health of millions of people.

As a society we need to ensure that women are given appropriate input into all the issues that affect their lives, and we need to encourage them to pursue positions of influence.

I understand fully why women are reluctant to enter politics. Until recently I was a member of the Labor Party and during my years with the Party I ran for local government in 2004 and for many months I recently campaigned to be the candidate for the federal seat of Eden Monaro. I know first hand how women are treated in the political arena.

After spending many months travelling throughout the electorate to visit Branches and to meet members, the ALP hierarchy decided to do away with the democratic process and instead they imposed a candidate for Eden Monaro, as they did in other seats in NSW.

I understand the Labor Party's motives, they want to ensure the best contenders are in place for the upcoming election, and the candidate they selected for Eden Monaro has impressive credentials, but their actions ignored democracy and took away an opportunity for a woman to become the candidate.

During the many months I campaigned I was the only woman seeking pre-selection against three men. When I started campaigning I told members upfront that one of the main reasons I was running was because we need more women in politics.

I thought this was a reasonable thing to say but I soon realised that some people were reluctant to hear it. I was advised on numerous occasions 'not to bring out the female card' because it might offend some members, and I discovered that some people thought a woman could not win the seat simply because of gender.

These views shocked me and made me more determined to raise the issue at every opportunity.

If these views are held by people who actively participate in the political process - how can women ever achieve equality? Political parties must stop the rhetoric and start implementing real reform to address the imbalance.

Community members can also help to change the way things are in Australia – firstly, by acknowledging and questioning the imbalance, by encouraging women to enter the political arena and by getting to know, and voting for, female candidates.

HEAR OUR VOICE is also dedicated to making life better for our older Australians – we are concerned that many of them are doing it tough despite our strong economy.

HEAR OUR VOICE acknowledges the valuable contribution older Australians have made, and continue to make, to the prosperity of our nation.

We believe that no older Australian should struggle in their retirement. They have worked hard all their lives to help build our nation and they have contributed to its financial stability and cultural richness, so we believe they should not endure hardship when they leave the workforce.

HEAR OUR VOICE supports an increase in the age pension – the current rate is simply not adequate for people to live on.

Could you live on around \$260 a week? I know I couldn't.

According to an economic analysis by the Sydney Morning Herald in March this year, the cost of the Iraq war to Australian taxpayers was approaching \$3 billion and rising.

HEAR OUR VOICE believes this money would have been better spent helping age pensioners.

And in the last tax cut round I was one of the lucky people who benefited well as a high income earner. But I would have forgone my tax break to increase the level of the aged pension.

HEAR OUR VOICE will not only fight for the rights of our age pensioners, we will also stand up for self-funded retirees.

We believe older Australians have the right to participate in all aspects of life - socially, economically and politically, and we will do all we can to ensure they have access to services, financial support and programs that afford them the quality of life they deserve.

Gay and lesbian people also deserve a voice in parliament.

HEAR OUR VOICE believes these people have a right to the same opportunities and rewards as other Australians, and we will work toward removing all discrimination in the law and our society.

HEAR OUR VOICE will work toward including same sex couples in the definition of de-facto spouse across all laws, including employment, superannuation, social security, tax, family law, veterans' affairs entitlements, workers' compensation, aged care and migration.

HEAR OUR VOICE recognises that love and relationships come in many forms and that unity and commitment are just as strong in same sex families as they are in heterosexual ones.

HEAR OUR VOICE will stand strong on this issue and we will continue to fight until justice prevails for gay and lesbian people, and we will work hard to change community attitudes so that persecution, discrimination and alienation are things of the past.

It is a lack of understanding and intolerance that stops us from being the truly great country we are destined to be. HEAR OUR VOICE will strive for an Australia where all people are considered and treated as equals.

HEAR OUR VOICE will also be the voice for those who are often forgotten in our society.

We will stand up for low income families who struggle to make ends meet. We will stand up for people with a disability to make sure they, their families and their carers get the support and respite they need. We will stand up for single parent families because they have special needs and face many challenges. And we will stand up for rural and regional Australia because they always seem to get a raw deal.

An issue that HEAR OUR VOICE will not compromise on is the environment. We need to act and it must be now. For years governments throughout the world have ignored the warning signs and as a result much damage has been done to our environment.

Australia is enjoying the fruits of a mineral boom and the sale of coal brings great financial prosperity to our nation. However, this prosperity has clouded our vision – our actions have been short sighted and negligent and future generations are likely to suffer as a consequence.

As a nation we need to invest in finding alternative energies that will meet the needs of a modern world – it is not going to be easy and it is going to

be expensive but it must be done. Our focus must be on saving the planet, our home, and not short-term policy that is driven by profit.

I promise you that HEAR OUR VOICE will stand strong on all our convictions. We know some of our policies and viewpoints will not be shared by everyone but our actions will always be about creating an Australia that is culturally tolerant, benevolent to its citizens and progressive in its policies.

We want to remind Australians there is more to life than the accumulation of wealth and HEAR OUR VOICE will not measure our success through economic statistics but through the quality of life and happiness of our citizens and a healthy environment.

HEAR OUR VOICE will do all it can to ensure that all Australians, irrespective of age, income, gender, education, sexual orientation, religion and cultural background, is valued and given every opportunity to reach their full potential.

Together we can change our Nation for the better - through courage and strength and holding firm to our convictions.

Thank you, thank you for coming.