

THE EVOLVING STATE OF DEBATE IN AUSTRALIA

THE HONOURABLE PETER DUTTON, MP

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great honour to be here with you. I was very pleased to accept the invitation to speak and I want to pay special tribute to John and Nancy Stone, for the work they have done for our country and for many great causes, including the Samuel Griffith Society.

I also want to say thank you for the privilege of addressing the Samuel Griffith Society. It has for many years played a particularly important role in public debate by defending our *Constitution*, and protecting and preserving Australia's cherished institutions and values, and I want all of you to be very proud of that.

The *Constitution*, and associated conventions and traditions, have served as a bedrock of our nation for more than a century. It is a foundational document that has provided the social underpinnings from which Australia has come to enjoy unparalleled prosperity, safety and security.

When the colonies came together as one indissoluble federal commonwealth in 1901, they laid the foundations for one of the world's most stable and successful systems of government. Australia, while still a young country, stands as the world's sixth oldest continuous democracy.

From the outset, our nation inherited a Westminster system of parliamentary democracy refined through centuries of practice and convention, and in drafting our *Constitution*, esteemed legal minds, Sir Samuel Griffith chief among them,

adopted and incorporated international innovations to craft a uniquely Australian document.

We are all beneficiaries of the work of Sir Samuel Griffith and his peers and it now falls to all of us as constitutional conservatives, including many distinguished people within this room tonight, to defend that work – which is exactly what you have been doing over the course of this weekend – and to secure our constitutional arrangements for future generations.

But, of course, not everyone shares our views. There are those who protest that the *Constitution* is woefully deficient and must be urgently amended. Republicans are caught up in a misguided ideological argument about national identity. They want to shake the foundations of our nation for no practical benefit to Australian citizens. Centralists ignore the benefits of competitive federalism and of local decision-making. They blame federalism for the maladministration of bad state governments. Heated public discussions also arise about issues like bills of rights, constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians, and the constitutional position of local government.

There is a long tradition of robust debate over proposed constitutional amendments in this country. But Australians are inherently conservative and resistant to that change. As we know, of 44 referenda that have been put to the Australian public, only eight have been successful since federation.

But constitutional conservatives cannot afford to be complacent. It is important that we understand the ways in which the state of debate in Australia is evolving and I want this to be the theme of my speech tonight. The goalposts are shifting and the players themselves are changing.

In particular, the role of business in political debate has radically changed in recent years. There is a growing trend of businesses rather zealously participating in social and political debates on issues which have absolutely nothing to do with their chosen industry. These companies are using company funds and brand equity in pursuit of pet political social causes. Some businesses are now acting in the manner of special interest activist groups. For the management of these companies, commercial interests and the interest of shareholders are indeed becoming secondary considerations – that’s if they’re considered at all.

The most well-publicised example of this kind of corporate activism in recent times was the support by Qantas of the same-sex marriage ‘Yes’ campaign. Regardless of your view on that topic, this was a multi-billion dollar publicly listed company throwing its weight and its shareholders’ wealth behind one side of a debate it had no business getting into. This is not an argument about free speech. There’s nothing wrong with Alan Joyce voicing his personal opinion on same-sex marriage. But imagine if Virgin had come out and adopted the opposite position? I suspect people would have boycotted the airline.

What is wrong with using considerable brand equity and resources of Australia’s flag-carrying airline and other businesses with those significant brands is that it influences a national debate which has dramatic outcomes. It is an ideological indulgence.

Management engaging in corporate activism is only half the problem. Perhaps even more concerning is the retaliation against businesses who don’t take a particular side in relation to a certain debate. This is where the power of social media is really in play. Last year, a video was released by the Bible Society featuring Tim Wilson (for) and Andrew Hastie (against) drinking Coopers

beer while having a cordial discussion about same-sex marriage. Coopers, which took no part in the creation of the video, was consequently slammed by activists who found the idea of mere discussion offensive. It was an issue beyond debate they claimed, and these people then set out to destroy the company. The boycott movement saw Coopers be removed from taps around the country and, under pressure after doing absolutely nothing wrong, Coopers was forced into a public apology and into supporting the 'Yes' campaign.

The prevailing mentality of activists is that if you don't bend to their will then you don't deserve to exist. Forget the blood sweat and tears that went into the creation of that particular business; forget the staff whose jobs are put at risk; forget the mum and dad investors. All that seems to matter to activists is the advancement of their cause in compliance with their own infallible opinion.

This sinister and arrogant brand of politics is not confined to the same-sex marriage debate, as we well know. We constantly see pressure heaped on businesses to observe all manner of ideological fetishes. All of us at university experience these sorts of debates, and in an environment where there is a contest of ideas among young minds, that's accepted. And it's a welcome development in society that there is a contest of ideas amongst young people. But this has now infiltrated its way into boards of publicly listed companies and that is a very bad development.

Activist shareholders and investment funds are increasingly targeting many companies, including Woolworths, Commonwealth Bank, and BHP, with their goal being to pressure businesses into policy changes on issues like climate change or in some cases to force board resignations.

Some universities, including Queensland University of Technology only a kilometre from here, have buckled under pressure from protest groups and agreed to divest from fossil fuels. In my own portfolio, activist groups attempt to use boycott movements to cripple the day-to-day operation of Australia's regional processing and detention centres. Organisations like GetUp! aggressively target businesses that provide services in support of 'Operation Sovereign Borders' and many other businesses as well, particularly in the resources sector in this country. Companies are worried about impacts at Annual General Meetings from shareholder activist groups that are influencing the outcome of investment decisions within these publicly listed companies.

The difficulty is that many of these companies have now withdrawn completely from any discussion about economic or industrial relations policy in this country. No company is out there at the moment flying the flag on business tax cuts and very few companies are talking about the need for industrial relations reform in the twenty-first century in our country. This is not good for public debate at all.

Economic reform becomes much harder if the government is left as a lone voice in any argument. It becomes much harder to win the political fight when activist groups affiliated with their opponents dominate the airwaves and dominate social media. As a result, governments pursuing reform agendas are now often left twisting in the wind. When the business community is more comfortable pursuing pet political issues than it is standing up for its shareholders, something has gone terribly wrong. And when Australian businesses are routinely bullied into supporting ideological positions, we have a big problem.

It's not just corporate activism that's a problem with today's debate. It's becoming increasingly hard for anyone to speak frankly and confront issues of real significance for our society. It's an attitude which goes against the Australian value of frank and fearless expression of opinion. Taking offense has become weaponised to the great detriment of the Australian community, and when it becomes impossible to talk about issues as important as the rates of violence and sexual assault in some indigenous communities, how can policymakers protect vulnerable children? It's unacceptable that, in 2018, a child could be sexually assaulted in an indigenous community tonight and yet for cultural reasons, people say that that child shouldn't be removed from that community. It wouldn't be tolerated in any of the streets in which we live from one end of our country to the other.

One of the worst perpetrators of this brand of dangerous political correctness is the Victorian Government, one of my favourites. The Victorian Government has a problem with people of Sudanese background who are involved in gang violence in Melbourne. The problem is that you can't refer to these people as Sudanese gang members. If you're from a Sudanese background and you're involved in a gang, you can't be referred to as a Sudanese gang member.

I've been on this issue since January 2018 when people were being followed home from restaurants and having their houses broken into and their cars stolen. People even as late as this week have been attacked by Sudanese gang members in Victoria. Small businesses have been trashed and robbed, and yet the Victorian Premier refuses to acknowledge the fact that these people exist, or that these crimes have been committed, or that victims have been suffering at the hands of these criminals. I'm told recently by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and

Human Rights Commissioner that there's been a significant increase in complaints to the Commission this year because of my comments in January that these crime gangs existed.

You can point to many examples of this around the country. The point I am making is that there are many distinguished Australians in this room and beyond that need to speak up. There are many conservatives across the country who find themselves in a difficult predicament, who are worried about the public backlash, particularly if they're on public boards or if they're in positions of responsibility otherwise. This is a dangerous point in our history. We can't allow it to continue. I'd be naive to say that this kind of political correct madness and belligerent social activism will be isolated to one cause or another. There is a bigger issue and a bigger movement at play here and we need to rise up against it because if we don't, we have true threats to our freedom of speech in this country. If you hear this cry tonight, we need to speak up against it. We need to deal truthfully with the problems that we have as a country and if we do that, we have a particularly bright future as one of the greatest countries in the world.