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Senator FURNER (Queensland) (4.59 pm)—
 Standing here today in this great democratic house before all senators, visitors and family is a humble and proud opportunity. I congratulate all senators for their success in the last election as either new or continuing members of this 42nd Parliament. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathered here today. When I was in Parliament House on 13 February this year, the focus of the day was consciously and quite appropriately on the apology to all Indigenous Australians.

As a newly elected senator, I cannot help evaluating the future. We are all fortunate and responsible in having a genuine opportunity to accomplish proper legislation to showcase our great nation as leaders in sustainability for our future generations—generations who should be able to take for granted access to better education, generations which should not have to live week to week and worry whether the family can afford to pay the next bill in the pile on the fridge and generations which should be able to hold their heads up high in their workplaces knowing they have dignity and equality to bargain with their employers for a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. For our future generations our biggest challenge is the environment. It concerns me to hear sceptics claim that there are no changes in the climate or that the economic price is too high to deal with climate change. If we do not act now, the droughts and unseasonable weather patterns we have experienced over the past several years will pale into insignificance.

Twelve February this year marked my inaugural journey to Canberra and Parliament House. I had never had the opportunity or occasion to visit this esteemed house until then. My journey to this house and Labor values, unbeknown to me, started back in my young prime as a youngster growing up in a housing commission home on the northern side of Brisbane in the suburb of Chermside. My parents never spoke of politics. Those conversations came from external discussions and debates with other families. Later on in subsequent years I was handing out how-to-vote cards for a Labor Brisbane City councillor. That was the start of my political journey. Shortly after, on 11 November 1975, Remembrance Day, while working as a trade's assistant at ACF and Shirleys fertiliser plant in Brisbane, I became embroiled in a stirring, momentous occasion. News had just been released

that the Governor-General had sacked Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. From there, there were gatherings of tradesmen and labourers to discuss this harrowing event. What I recall of the day is a mixture of anger and disbelief that one of this country's greatest Labor leaders had been sacked. It followed that every worker decided to withdraw their labour for the remaining part of the day in abhorrence over his sacking by the Governor-General.

Following my period of work as a trade's assistant and floor-covering layer, I ended up in the transport industry, driving initially small delivery vehicles then escalating to semitrailers. Little did I know at the time my further development in political life was about to unfold through the trade union movement. Not long after, at the age of 18, I became the youngest union delegate of the Transport Workers Union Queensland branch while working for Luya Julius. Furthermore, not realising it at the time, I would also become an elected organiser for the TWU 12 years later.

No journeys in life are possible without the assistance of caring people. The people in my journey are my families. Of these, I reflect upon three. The first family is the Furner family. As mentioned previously, I grew up in Chermside, Brisbane, along with two older brothers, Ken and Russell, and my younger sister, Helen. My parents were conscientious and worked to make ends meet and to provide a home and food and education for the family. Dad, who I am pleased is here in the chamber today, was a police officer, and Mum, who is ill and was not able to make the journey, was a nurse. Sometimes like ships in the night they passed each other when they came home off opposite shifts. Both were loving and caring, although with a stern hand. I believe they are both personally responsible for the strong work ethic and social justice values I have today, values and beliefs which shall hold me in fine stead when I converse with and represent people of our nation.

In my early twenties and having married my beautiful wife of now 29 years, we started the next generation of Furners. My darling wife, Lorraine, who is here today, I would like to thank you for all your love, patience, support and insight throughout the last two years of my Senate campaign. My son Troy I saw firsthand during the election campaign become a man of strength, encouragement and faith in the Labor

movement. Thank you for all your assistance. My two beautiful daughters, Stacey and Sally, who I believe slowly flourished and, like Troy, without their father's influence began to understand the social differences between right and wrong. I would not have survived to be here today without you all, so in many ways that means I owe everything to you. I would also like to acknowledge Lorraine's parents, who are in the gallery here today and who are really like second parents to me.

The second family is the Labor Party. I come to this chamber as a representative of the Australian Labor Party, one of the oldest and greatest social parties, a party forged out of the great union struggles of the late 1800s in Queensland to give workers a parliamentary voice, a party with the accountability to represent their interests and a party whose foundations have been built on values that I have always been committed to: fairness, parity of opportunity and social justice for all.

To the broader Labor family, I will run the risk of naming some names and inadvertently therefore leaving some people out. There are so many capable and dedicated people who deserve acknowledgement. I think in the current circumstances it is more crucial than ever that the contributions of these people are recognised. All of us in the Labor Party know that we would disappear overnight without the unselfish dedication and commitment of numerous people who contribute so much of their own time, money and energy simply because they believe in the ideals and policies of the party. Labor people who require mentioning include branch people like Bob McIntosh, Mick Colwell, Michelle McJannett, Patrick Bulman and Mark Warmsley, who are just the absolute salt of the earth. You are only a few of the countless many who gave up their valued time to help numerous candidates like me.

Queensland Labor Party officials who guided and helped me through the campaign include: state secretary, Anthony Chisholm; lead organiser, Chris Forrester—my good friend; party treasurer, Damian Power; Linus Power; and past state secretary Councillor Milton Dick. Senator John Hogg and Senator Claire Moore—as a Queensland Senate team we campaigned well together and I am extremely appreciative of your help. To the other Queensland senators, Joseph Ludwig and Jan McLucas, it is great to be here with you. Member for Brisbane, Arch Bevis, member for Blair, Shayne Neumann, member for Dawson, James Bidgood, member for Rankin, Craig Emerson, member for Flynn, Chris Trevor, member for Oxley, Bernie Ripoll, member for Petrie, Yvette D'Ath, member for Longman, Jon Sullivan and member for Capricornia, Kirsten Livermore—thank you for all your committed support during my campaign. Of the Labor ministers of the 42nd

Parliament, I thank Kevin Rudd for his inspiring leadership and Treasurer Wayne Swan and the Minister for Trade, Simon Crean, for their guidance. And I thank past Labor minister the Hon. Con Sciacca who, with his business partner, Vince Kartelo, helped me no end.

The third family is the trade union movement. For the past 30-odd years I have been proud and honoured to be a member of various unions. They are, in sequence, the Transport Workers Union, the Australian Services Union and my own union, the National Union of Workers—and an official of three unions for over 19 of those 30-odd years. There are so many people I wish to acknowledge today for their role in developing me and assisting me throughout my union career and Senate campaign. My first union organiser, Allan McPaul, who subsequently became my union boss at the TWU Queensland branch has been an inspiration and friend to me. In fact, I would go as far as advocating he was my mentor in my union career.

For four years I served the honest professional men and women of the Queensland Police Service as an industrial officer for the Queensland Police Union of Employees. This role was both rewarding and challenging, with many disputed conditions achieved in the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission. I was honoured to organise the involvement of the Queensland Police Union members in two consecutive Labour Day marches for the very first time.

And, of course, there is my own union, the National Union of Workers. I first commenced employment with the Queensland branch in May of 1996 as an organiser, progressing to senior organiser then onto branch secretary in October 2003. The NUW is a progressive and professional union representing many types of industries throughout this country. I wish to thank branch secretary John Cosgrove, Les Seaman, Russell Vieritz, all other officials, staff, all the branch committee of management, union delegates and members who helped me tirelessly over the past years in Queensland. I wish to thank Derrick Belan and the officials and staff of the New South Wales NUW branch—which is well-represented in the chamber today—for their exceptional assistance during my campaign. Also, I thank the national office for their help. I recognise David Smith, secretary of the Australian Services Union and Dave Hanna of the Builders Labourers Federation for their generous support. And I, for one, will be working with Dave and his fellow members shoulder to shoulder in seeing the back of the excessive powers of the ABCC. Additionally, I thank the Queensland Teachers Union for their help.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned unions, no-one can disparage the professional and committed

'Your rights at work' campaign in which the whole of the union movement engaged workers and their families. The ACTU, under the stewardship of Sharan Burrow and Greg Combet, now member for Charlton, led a sterling campaign for workers rights and are congratulated. If it had not been for the 'Your rights at work' campaign and the election of a Kevin Rudd Labor government, with their commitment to introduce new IR laws which will bring back the fair go, many workers would be worse off under John Howard's insidious industrial relations laws.

During the election campaign the past government tried to demonise union officials. Despite this, my resolve became stronger in defeating that government and installing a Kevin Rudd Labor government. One only needs to look at the community work many unions are involved in to dispel the myth that union officials are thugs. One such example is, over the past three years, the National Union of Workers Queensland branch officials and members, Senator Moore, other local branch members and I have been involved in 'Relay for life' for the Queensland Cancer Council, raising up to \$50,000 searching for the cure for cancer—a far cry from thugs, in my view.

On Friday, 14 December 2007 I was privileged to be at the Australian Electoral Commission's declaration of the Queensland Senate results. As all successful elected candidates spoke, I listened with interest to their varied experiences during their campaigns. Personally, during my campaign I was fortunate in meeting and forming friendships with lovely people from our multicultural groups we have in this country. Thank you to Nabel and Awatief, from the Middle East, who I met on Anzac Day 2007 at a Lebanese memorial event; Lan and Chau and their son David, who have been long-term friends who helped me on 24 November in important Vietnamese election booths in the seat of Oxley; and Ramish and Satwinder, from the Indian Sikh community, who have shown me different cultures and rewarding experiences.

In spite of the number of persons I have thanked previously, it would be remiss not to pay tribute to all Queenslanders who put their trust in me and the election of an Australian Labor government on 24 November 2007. Queensland Labor performed to its optimum in the federal election, delivering the largest swing across the nation, a swing of 7.5 per cent to Labor. Queensland Labor added nine seats to its stocks, the best result of all the states. Queensland Labor now holds Blair, Bonner, Dawson, Flynn, Forde, Leichhardt, Longman, Moreton and Petrie. Additionally, Labor went marginally close to winning

Bowman, Dickson and Herbert, with exceptional candidates.

I would like to extend my genuine appreciation to all the Senate staff in the various departments who have made me feel welcome. You are a group of professional and dedicated people. To my own staff—Michelle, Jasmine and Alana—I do not think I could ask for more dedicated and committed electorate staff.

I have many interests, including the following. Having coached my son and fellow team members of Pine Rivers United Soccer Club, I am interested in most codes of football. As a keen bush trekker, I hold a deep empathy for the environment. Having visited and trekked many of Queensland's national parks, my second home is the bush. My favourite walks and relaxation are O'Reilly's in the Lamington National Park, not far from the Gold Coast. In fact, 2008 commemorates the establishment of Witches Falls, the first Queensland national park in 1908, later becoming a section of Tamborine National Park. I am interested in diverse cultural and culinary experiences not only in Australia but in other parts of the world. I am a strong believer in human rights for all. I believe in fitness of the body and mind. Therefore, I will no doubt see many of you in the Parliament House gymnasium of a morning. As a unionist, and having spent over half of my working life thus far devoted to the union movement, I am interested in industrial relations and the union movement.

As a Queenslanders, I have been fortunate to travel most of the state either through work or on vacation. Queensland, in my biased view, is a vibrant and beautiful part of this country which develops good people and amazing opportunities—people like Andrew Fisher, the first Queensland Labor Prime Minister, whose term as PM commenced on 13 November 1908. He was the first Prime Minister to hold a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, in 1910. During Fisher's period as Prime Minister a number of important projects were undertaken. The Royal Australian Navy was established, the Commonwealth Bank was set up, the northern territory of South Australia was transferred to the Commonwealth, the federal capital of Canberra was founded, and the construction of the trans-Australian railway line linking Perth to the other capitals began. As well as introducing maternity allowances, Fisher acknowledged the need for greater political equality for women.

Ironically, a century on in the same month, November, we saw the second Queensland Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and his government elected. Why would you want to be anywhere else other than in Queensland? This Friday, as a Queenslanders I will stand proudly in this chamber watching Quentin

Bryce's swearing-in as Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Queenslanders face many challenges in the next decades. However, we are well positioned to govern for the future. Queensland grew 6.8 per cent in the last financial year—the 11th consecutive year in which Queensland exceeded Australia's economic growth rate. For the seventh year in a row, Queensland will outstrip the growth of every state other than Western Australia. Queensland now contributes \$187 billion to the national income and \$35 billion to the national exports.

In the past five years, Queensland has created more than 367,000 new jobs and the population has grown by close to half a million. Our challenges include population growth, with approximately 1,700 people crossing the borders into Queensland every week. Infrastructure in South-East Queensland is under enormous pressure. Queensland is Australia's most decentralised mainland state, with 40 per cent of those who come to Queensland every week moving to our regional areas. With booming cities like Gladstone, Mackay and Cairns, in 2008-09 the government will invest \$826 million in nation-building road projects. After 11 long years of neglect, the artery that runs through the heart of these communities, the Bruce Highway, will receive from this government a \$2.2 billion upgrade.

Our challenges come after 11 years of neglect in workplaces, where the past government's Work Choices industrial relations laws created divisive barriers and confusion between employers, employees and their unions—insidious divides to satisfy ideology of a past-obsessed government, a government which was hell-bent on destroying the 'fair go' in our workplaces. Now we are faced with creating a fairer Australia.

This year the Rudd Labor government honoured its commitment to abolishing Australian workplace agreements. Only this government is committed to building a modern, fair and flexible industrial relations system that will provide a decent safety net for future workers—a safety net that provides for national employment standards that prevent workers from falling through the cracks.

On the back of the population growth in Queensland we are faced with an ever-increasing skill shortage not just among our trades and professional workers but among semi-skilled workers such as labourers, forklift operators and fast-food operatives. The past government's only answer was to bring in overseas migrants on 457 visas. As a modern government, we need to encourage and build our skill base through tertiary education. This government is modernising our

employment services system by changing the focus to skill up workers, to engage with employers and, indeed, to provide real incentives for providers to get people into jobs that industry needs to fill. Over the next five years this government will provide 238,000 training places for job seekers at an expense of \$880 million.

Our biggest challenge, not only in Queensland but across the nation, will be climate change. There are predictions that Queensland will see the demise of one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the Great Barrier Reef, as we know it and of increases in temperatures of 4.5 Celsius, leading to impacts in the state's ability to produce agriculture. Out of all the challenges we will face as senators in this 42nd Parliament, I would strongly advocate that we should not be responsible for the demise of our beautiful country and should show initiative and responsibility before it is too late to act on climate change.

I come to the Senate in some trepidation of the history and tradition of this place and of the importance of its part in the democratic life of our nation. I come with an excitement and enthusiasm at the challenge and the trust which the people of Queensland have placed in me. With full respect, I bring the challenge to you, fellow senators, that we combine our skills to be part of the generation that took the opportunity to change the direction of climate change, and not the last generation that was responsible for the demise of our nation and the world.

The commitment I solemnly provide here today is: over the next six-year term I shall work enthusiastically and convincingly to be part of an Australian Senate which delivers for the needy, for equality and for fairness to all. Regardless what school, what work or what culture, creed or religion, you will be the focus. Thank you for your indulgence.