

JOHN FAULKNER SPEECH - Integrity Awards. John Button Awards recipient. 15 June 2010

Ladies and gentlemen let me begin by honouring the traditional owners of this land and by paying my respects to their elders past and present.

Let me also acknowledge Sir Anthony Mason, Petro Georgiou, Tim Smith, chair of the Accountability Round Table and the other members of the Roundtable here today; Parliamentary colleagues.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured, if a little apprehensive to receive this award.

Honoured, because I have always believed that the accountability, scrutiny and review mechanisms of parliament are fundamental to our democracy, critical to holding governments to account and essential for good policy outcomes. I have maintained that belief throughout my time in Parliament.

And apprehensive, because I suspect that as much as I might wish to live up to the words of the citation, like everyone, I will from time to time, of course, fall short of the lofty standards invoked.

And while I like to think that I do my best to maintain standards of integrity I am mindful of the remarks of the eminent thinker, French renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne more than four hundred years ago, "There is no man so good that if he placed all his actions and thought under the scrutiny of the laws, he would not deserve hanging ten times in his life."

In the context of Australian modern politics, that would be not so much hanging as keelhauling through the media.

So I consider this award, not as an achievement but as a challenge, as a goal to live up to rather than laurels to rest upon.

And, ladies and gentlemen, it is fitting that this award be named after John Button.

John Button's political career was dedicated to integrity. He once described his beloved Labor Party as a Party of "integrity and humility". He began his career of political activism striving to bring about change in the Victorian Branch of the ALP so as to make it more representative and more accountable to its members and supporters. And he sought and ultimately succeeded in bringing about changes that were not simply general expressions of high hopes and good will, but structural changes, organisational changes, that reformed the operation of that Branch.

John Button's generosity of spirit and optimism about people was tempered by an understanding that good process underpinned good intentions and good will. His activism within the Party, and later his participation within the parliament, was expressed through the pursuit of practical measures that would support the ideals he believed in. He was an especially firm supporter of and participant in, the committee system, which I believe, when it is working well, brings a level of scrutiny and accountability to our system as good as any in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen I am pleased to see the introduction of an award for integrity in the practice of politics.

Politics, and the political processes of parliament, are often seen as inimical to integrity. There is a cynicism about politicians and their motives, not just in Australia but in many Western democracies. This cynicism is corrosive of democracy because it undermines the link of representation between elector and elected: it undermines the concept of *mandate* if citizens cast their vote without the expectation that their representatives will represent their views or act in their interest.

Seen in this light, trust is central to the social contract of democracy.

And parliamentary and political integrity is crucial to maintaining that trust. I am not talking here about the integrity, the *personal* integrity of individuals in the political process, although that is a necessary component. I am talking about the integrity of our political system – the processes, the checks and safeguards that ensure transparency of the operations and decisions of government. Transparency is, in my view, the best way to achieve integrity and accountability in government.

I was pleased to have the opportunity as Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State to work on a range of important integrity measures, such as FOI reform, protection of whistleblowers, an ethics advisory Service for the public service, a code of conduct for Ministerial staff, a code of conduct for lobbying and a lobbyists register, and the green papers on electoral donation, funding and disclosure changes.

Becoming Minister for Defence raised new challenges. I have always acknowledged there are instances where disclosure of information was not in the national interest, where national security interests are at stake. As Minister for Defence, I have endeavoured to negotiate a path between the public interest of transparency and the public interest of national security.

And I hope we are getting that balance right. We have been increasingly open with the public about the challenges in defence and the steps we are taking to resolve them. I am also making regular and comprehensive statements to parliament on Afghanistan. Defence is now making more information available in relation to both our troops wounded in action and allegations of civilian casualties.

I believe that Defence's handling of FOI applications shows a very positive change in the Department's approach to transparency. Defence today is fully compliant with the FOI Act. A year ago there were 33 overdue FOI requests sitting in Defence. Today there are none. This is a real achievement. Defence has not been able to make such a claim at any time since the Act was introduced in 1983.

I believe that Defence is actively fostering a more pro-disclosure culture, and an increased willingness to release information is evident across the organisation. For example, more than 95% of the incoming brief for the new Secretary of the Department, Dr Watt was released under FOI late last year.

Ladies and gentlemen in the last letter he wrote to me, in November 2007, John Button expressed his hope that Labor would win the election, and his hope that I would, as a member of the Labor government, take on the issues of parliamentary reform and accountability in Government.

I was honoured by his trust, and I am really very pleased that this award in his name has been given for some of the work he wanted done.

I sincerely thank the members of the selection committee for this honour.