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Venezuela and Brazil

SPEECH

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Senator BOB BROWN (Tasmania—Leader of the Australian Greens) (1.07 pm)—I want to report on the parliamentary travel trip that I have just made with my partner, Paul Thomas, to Venezuela and Brazil. It was an intense couple of weeks and I came away with four main conclusions, the first of which is that there is a very strong case for us to reopen our embassy in Venezuela. Australia had an embassy in Caracas, the capital, which has seven million people, until it was closed by the Howard government in 2002. Venezuela maintains an embassy in Canberra. Now, the only Australian embassies on the huge South American continent are in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, and in Santiago, Chile. Absurdly, the last government closed our embassy in Venezuela but kept open the High Commission in tiny Trinidad and Tobago in the nearby Caribbean Sea.

Compare Australia's presence with that of Canada, which has 14 embassies in resource-rich South America and Central America, including an impressive modern multistorey building in Caracas's commercial centre. Until 2002, Australia's embassy occupied one floor of the Canadian building, but now Canada looks after Australia's interests.

Venezuela is oil rich, with a highly educated elite and a strengthening democracy. Its President, Hugo Chavez, was one of few world leaders with the gumption to publicly contest the mistakes and exported violence of the current US presidency—though George W Bush is now recognised as a failure by most of his fellow Americans. Some people estimate Venezuela's oil reserves to be the largest in the world. They account for 30 per cent of the country's economic output. Venezuela has huge mineral and water resources as well as enormous agriculture and tourism potential. In 2006-07 Australia exported \$21.929 million worth of goods and services to Venezuela. That puts Venezuela at 93rd on the list of Australia's export partners. Australia imported \$3,013,000 worth of goods and services from Venezuela, which puts Venezuela even further down the ranking at 126th among Australia's import partners.

Due to the Chavez government's popular—and that is what all the opinion polls show—concentration on helping the millions of poor people on the land and in Caracas's huge barrios, or slums, the small but highly educated richer class are emigrating. At the Canadian embassy, where I had talks with Ambassador Perry Calderwood, I met two young engineers, one male and one female, who were emigrating to Canada. They told me that the countries of choice for their graduate friends are Canada and Australia but that Canada's frigid winters make Australia the real choice. Yet Australia has no embassy in Venezuela, so Canada wins and Australia loses.

There is growing interest in Venezuela from Australians, which would also be fostered by us having an embassy there. Venezuela has the world's highest waterfall, the fabulous Angel Falls. It has stunning national parks and wildlife, a colourful cultural mix and history, and world-class art collections. The downtown museum of art in Caracas is simply the best collection of artworks I have ever seen. It includes works by Van Gogh, Picasso, Monet and Venezuelan artists that elsewhere one can only dream about.

Caracas also has a reputation for urban violence and after-hours dangers—you are told to take your rings off and not to go out after a certain hour. It is just like Washington and Houston. An embassy there would make doing business, as well as simply visiting this beautiful country, a much brighter prospect for Australians. The Rudd government should undo the mistake made by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and re-establish our embassy in Caracas.

In that city I held talks with members of the Chavez government. I was aided by Brisbane scientist and former resident of Caracas Coral Wynter and the Vice-President of the Latin American parliament, Dr Carolus Wimmer. The major topic of these talks was Ingrid Betancourt. I will come to her shortly. I am grateful to the Venezuelan embassy in Canberra and its charge d'affaires, Nelson Davila, for assistance in arranging these meetings and facilitating my visit to Caracas. The Venezuelan government provided a car and driver.

I met the President of the Permanent Commission of Foreign Relations for the National Assembly, Mr Roy Daza. He explained the difficulty in progress with Ingrid Betancourt's release since the Colombian government's

invasion of Ecuador in March. I also met with the secretary for Asia and Oceania in the Department of Foreign Affairs, Maria Elizabeth Rodriguez, and then with Queenslander David McLachlan-Karr, who is the United Nations' Resident Coordinator in Venezuela.

That brings me to Ingrid Betancourt. A former Colombian Greens senator, she is in her seventh year as a hostage of the guerrillas of the Forces for Armed Revolution of Colombia, FARC, in the jungles of southern Colombia. I am a friend of Ingrid's. Her speech on the need for courage and truth in the dangerous and corrupt world of politics brought thunderous applause when she addressed the first Global Greens conference in Canberra in 2001. A copy of that speech has been circulated, and I seek leave to have the document incorporated in *Hansard*.

Leave granted.

The document read as follows—

LATIN AMERICA - THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE GREENS - INGRID BETANCOURT

Ingrid Betancourt (Colombia) helped found Oxygeno Verde in 1998 and was elected to the Senate; she will be the Greens presidential candidate in 2002.

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PAPER PRESENTED AT GLOBAL GREENS 2001

Thirty years ago an ecological or environmental conscience arose in the world as a civic expression of concern for the future of humanity and of the planet. From there Green Parties were born. Today, the environmental current is strong enough to pose a serious political challenge in the face of the dramatic failure of the dominant neoliberal alternative.

At a time when our societies have fallen into the abyss of self-destruction, economic apartheid and the dictatorship of profits, the Greens turn out to be the only ones proposing a new social contract and a new economic model. Fortunately this current of thought is achieving its ideological maturity at the moment when humanity's survival is at stake.

In this global meeting of Greens, it is important to look at all the political scenarios that are being debated: Do not let us think of what we have not achieved, but of what we can do and what we must achieve. Let us not list our weaknesses but rather claim our strengths. What links us as the Green leaders' generation is to give battle and to win it. What we want is not justification for 'not to make', but leadership to change the course of history.

We are not entitled to be a marginal political option. Neither can we satisfy ourselves with being support forces for the construction of temporal political majorities. We should aim for power and obtain it. We cannot undervalue ourselves—the world looks at us and expects big things from us. That is the reality. We are flying the modern flag of the new humanism. Our fight is for the salvation of the planet. It is for the survival of the whole of humanity, its history, its dignity, its accumulated cultural richness, its diversity. This is our new frontier. It is an immaterial, universal, more dramatic frontier than the conquest of the new world or than man's first step on the moon. To reach it we do not depend upon our physical or technological effort but on our moral resistance.

If the great people of history defeated adversity, if those who changed the course of events did so although they were predicted to fail, if it is true that faith moves mountains and that David conquered Goliath, then our fight should be victorious. To defend the right to live, today as in the past, implies heroism, temper and courage. Let us not deceive ourselves. To be Green in this millennium, we have to take on the uniform of the new samurai, to defend our values, our principles, our ideals, above everything, even above our own life, because without those values, without those principles, without those ideals, life becomes a condemnation.

We should understand the essence of what we are outlining to the world. The salvation of the planet, the right to live, is nothing else than a fight for values. These values are ones that we human beings all share, regardless of the colour of our skin or of the name that we give to our God. And because they are essential values, they are not negotiable. To outline a new economic order, a new social pact, is not a utopia. It is simply the basic thing, the minimum thing to continue working as societies in a globalised world. I say this with force and with anguish because I feel that we cannot waste any more time. We still have time to stop the self-destruction that is imposed on us. But this depends on our will, on our character, on our commitment, and not on what power they choose to grant us.

The first thing that we should defeat is our own scepticism. We will win more quickly to the extent that we are able to communicate certainties to the multitudes. This is a modern confrontation where information is strategic and it will be won first with ideas. In this context, it is important to analyse what is happening in the world.

Everywhere people are looking to recover political power that has been usurped by the dominant classes allied to international capital. Their method of government is bribery, traffic in influence and secret deals that neutralise civic control. That is why

our fight as Green parties needs to restore democracy and combat corruption. Only by changing political practices will we be able to stop the irrationality and greed of our rulers, and be able to impose on our managers the ethics of sustainable development.

If President Bush in the USA has decided to ignore the Kyoto agreement on climate change, the reason must be sought in the deficiencies of the democratic system of that country. A system that allows political campaigns to be financed by private companies, instead of by the state, creates a dependence which is ethically inadmissible for any democratic government. This political practice in turn generates unequal access to power and stifles other political alternatives. Only those who can pay can choose the government. Democracy is kidnapped by those who can buy a spokesman and impose their wishes contrary to what the majority wants.

This logic of paying for political campaigns to obtain favours from the powerful generates such questionable decisions as forcing the countries of the third world to open their agricultural markets while the USA and the European Community compete unfairly through subsidies to their producers. This practice is also the culprit in my country where drug traffickers can make laws in their favour by financing the political campaigns of presidents and legislators. All over the world we see this syndrome creating autistic democracies and leading governments to make indefensible decisions because they are beholden not to those who vote but to those who pay. While this is tolerated, while we accept these game rules as democratic, while as Greens we do not face up to this type of political practice, we are condemned to see that the most vital things are not a high priority.

To be Green is therefore to demand real democracy, not just to conform to its rites and formalisms. To be Green implies that we practise politics in the noblest sense of the word, not just through making speeches or in symbolic actions, but in fighting for access to power, for independence in power, and for using power responsibly so as to give it back to the people, to the citizens. When we become comfortable, lower our guard and lose the coherence of being Green in order to gain power, we stop being the alternative. Then we run the risk that others steal our ideas but, instead of applying them, file them.

As much as we have to confront difficulties, we also have to be aware of the opportunities presenting themselves. Across the planet, the fruit of globalisation, which is the empowerment of economic elites, is being put on trial. A long road has been travelled from the middle of the twentieth century until today and we no longer accept dictatorship as a lesser evil when social and economic stability is obtained by violating the fundamental rights of citizens. But there is more to be done.

Before our eyes we are seeing people react against the imbalances and distortion of power today. Our testimony from Latin America is of nothing less than a democratic and peaceful rebellion against so-called 'democracy' in favour of real democracy. For example:

In Mexico the will of the people, more than a party, was able to put an end to 70 years of subjection under the dictatorship of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Venezuela elected a head of state of popular origin who, independent of other considerations, defeated one of the most corrupt and entrenched political elites of the continent in an open and peaceful democratic contest.

Peru, after an immense popular mobilisation, was able to banish a corrupt dictator disguised as a statesman who until recently was presented as the model to imitate in the fight against terrorism and for economic development.

Ecuador in the last three years has been the scene of an immense Indigenous mobilisation that overthrew a president who proposed to save the economy by dollarisation and economic adjustment.

Chile and Argentina are beginning to clarify the truth of the military dictatorships that sowed the seeds of apparent economic and social order but watered them with the blood and the pain of many citizens.

What is happening in Latin America does not guarantee real ideological change. The experience of the Mexican Green Party, which worked with Vicente Fox (now president) in the presidential campaign but is excluded from power, must cause us all to think deeply and join them in solidarity.

The fact is that neoliberal models of public and economic administration are being rejected by people round the planet. As long as the operating balance of neoliberalism is the enrichment of a billion citizens at the expense of the exploitation and impoverishment of the other five billion, we will be witnessing deep political crisis. It is said that crises are opportunities. This is a historical opportunity that we cannot waste.

The change in direction of the state must also mean a new economic model. We need to imagine and propose mature and feasible alternatives to the status quo. As Green parties, it is our job to present a global platform with a new economic model and a new social pact. The new economic model should look fundamentally to setting up true economic democracy at the international level. This implies changes to the structures of multilateral organisations and the establishment of decision-making rules where countries are weighted proportional to their population and not their monetary wealth. Only so can we discuss equitably the rules of international trade which we are willing to adopt.

More than free trade, we want fair trade. This implies the creation of alternative markets to bring the consumer closer to the producer, and ensuring that the values which generate trade are the quality of the product and the sustainability of its production methods, including the dignity of the workers employed.

We also need to change the way wealth is generated, based on virtual flows of capital whose growth does not depend on real productivity but on speculative capacity. Our responsibility is to propose a financial model which stimulates employment-generating investment instead of accounting tricks.

As Green parties we have to design national politics to achieve true economic democracy. The proposals of Amartya Sen to liberate the productive forces of the people through a mix of taxes, tariffs, budgetary allocations and credits opens the space for the new economic order we are looking for. We should be the students of the informal economy, giving it the importance it deserves. In current circumstances, the priority is employment. Through employment we can correct the structural inequalities in society. For us, the development of micro-enterprises and small and medium industry is strategic.

Employment has more dignity as it becomes better qualified. So, we should be the defenders of investment in education, science and technology and not be satisfied with technological transfers that often, unfortunately, result in a form of neo-colonialism. The science we promote should recognise and take advantage of the sustainability of natural and cultural diversity.

We should consolidate networks for the free transfer of information to feed the new model. If we are presented with free trade as the economic solution, we should demand the free transfer of knowledge, with payment that allows a fair return on the investment in science and technology but not the generation of monopolies of the knowledge.

Instead of the privatisation of state and public services, which expropriates social value for the benefit of private capital, we should propose new forms of stock democratisation and business ownership in which strategic alliances are formed among consumers, workers, private capital and the state. Again we must avoid creating monopolies.

All this should allow us to defend a new social contract where peace results from a new ethic encompassing human beings, other living beings and nature. The state should exist to generate social harmony, more directly related to indicators of collective happiness. This should re-open consideration of the priorities of public administration, in particular favouring a bigger investment in securing the needs of life ahead of budgets for arms and war.

As Greens parties we have travelled a long and fruitful road. This global conference should be above all an instrument to take stock of our possibilities and strengths. Delegations of 70 countries have come to Australia in an act of recognition for the founders of the Green party in Tasmania who identified the keys of political thought for the third millennium in a visionary way.

We must be ambitious for the sake of humanity. If today we congratulate ourselves on the number of Green legislators, Green ministers and Green activists, our goal for tomorrow must be no less than to govern the destinies of nations so that the Green dream, that dream of the new generations, becomes reality. Let us aim that the meeting of Green parties in the year 2011 allows us to demonstrate the success of our actions by the presence of numerous Green heads of state.

We must make ourselves ready for this. We are gathered today as the Green leaders of each one of our nations. It is our responsibility to aspire to and achieve the highest responsibility in the state in each one of our countries, or to prepare the way for those who will make it in the future. The future will be Green! This is how we will make it so!

Back in Colombia, after Canberra, Ingrid Betancourt publicly excoriated both the FARC guerilla leaders and the Colombian authorities when most others were silent. In February 2003 she was kidnapped at gunpoint by the FARC. At the Global Greens conference in Sao Paulo I met with Ingrid's husband, Juan Carlos, and Senator Luis Eladio Perez, a fellow Colombian who was held captive for four years with Ingrid. Senator Perez gave the conference a harrowing account of Ingrid's suffering at the hands of FARC. For the past 18 months, after a daring escape bid with the senator—and she went and got the FARC representatives when he fell too ill to continue—Ingrid has remained chained to a tree like a captive animal.

There are hundreds of other FARC captives, including three American businessmen. I call on the Rudd government to join President Sarkozy of France, the Swiss, Spanish and other European governments and the Red Cross to raise the international efforts to end the hostages' suffering. Firstly, support should be given to the Chavez government's efforts to negotiate with FARC, which led to the release of six prominent prisoners, including former Senator Perez, in March of this year. Secondly, pressure should be brought to bear on President Uribe of Colombia to cease bombing the areas where Ingrid is held and to negotiate her release. It was the Colombian army's invasion of Ecuador earlier this year and the killing of the FARC negotiator and deputy commander Raoul Reyes which led to the FARC closing off talks. Without Uribe's action, Ingrid Betancourt would now be free.

In Sao Paulo, at the Global Greens conference, Ingrid Betancourt was made Honorary President of the Global Greens. That conference followed the first conference, here in Canberra, which adopted a world charter which lays out the principles and policy foundations for Greens around the world. The four pillars of Greens policy are social justice, peace, democracy and saving the earth's living environment. The second Global Greens conference was held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, which has a population of 21 million to 35 million. It is one of the three biggest conurbations on the planet. The conference attracted representatives from 87 countries.

The Australian Greens motion to establish a Global Greens information centre and secretariat was adopted unanimously. The Australian Greens offered to host this global office in our country. There will be a proving-up process over the coming months as the working plan for the office is agreed, hopefully by the end of March 2009. If all comes to pass as expected, it is likely the global office will be set up here in Canberra. However, we will also explore options in the state and territory capitals. I expect the secretariat will become a hub of international exchange as Greens parties grow stronger this century. It will draw visitors, no doubt including young interns, from around the world. Its aims include breaking down language barriers and rapidly exchanging news on Greens policies, legislation, research and, of course, electoral successes or appointments at all levels of government from provincial, national and regional to the global governance of the United Nations.

At the conference I flagged a much greater world interest in global democracy and governance in coming decades. Here, the Greens are taking a lead. World affairs are dominated by the global reach of multinational corporations and financial and market institutions. Global democracy and the interests and rights to a say of the earth's seven billion citizens should catch up, take over and get back the governance of the world's future. I expect the Global Greens information centre will meet approval here in Australia, including support from non-government organisations and business interests across the board. It is an exciting prospect for our country as well as for the world's Greens. It was a great outcome from Sao Paulo, and we can look forward to the centre flourishing over the coming decades and contributing to our world's wellbeing in an age of rapid climate change, bewildering investment in armaments, inexcusable poverty amongst unbelievable riches and the real prospects of food shortages, oil depletion, global pandemics and economic turbulence, as well as the prospect of greater human welfare than ever before.

Finally, that brings me to Iguacu Falls. The Brazilian and Argentinian authorities have moved, impressively, to allow and facilitate 1.2 million tourists each year to visit what is perhaps the world's most splendid waterfall. Iguacu, 1,000 kilometres south-west of Sao Paulo, is simply a stunning part of the world's natural domain. Since I first visited the falls in 1994, a railway and kilometres of steel walkways have been built on the Argentinian side. Two trains, looking a little like Australia's sugar cane trains, carry 100 visitors each to the 1.2-kilometre walkway which takes them over the upper Iguacu River to the lip of the greatest part of the falls, Gargantua or the Devil's Throat. These little trains are slow, safe and open-sided but roofed. There are three stations: at the visitor's centre and car park, at the walk centre and at the Devil's Throat walkway. The rail line has a maintenance road beside it for the use of pedestrians. It is a very narrow gauge. It is a perfect mode of national park access to minimise environmental impacts and to begin and end the visitors' experience with a relaxed and comfortable transport experience. It has great potential for Australia's most popular natural attractions.

The Iguacu River is a west-flowing tributary of the south-flowing Parana River, which adds its flow, eventually, to the River Plate and the Atlantic Ocean. In the 1980s, the giant Itaipu Dam across the Parana obliterated the Guaira Falls, which carried seven times the flow of the Iguacu. The Guaira were the world's most voluminous cataracts. The Itaipu Dam, which also displaced 40,000 indigenous locals, piggybacks on the Iguacu Falls tourism publicity like a cane toad on a waterlily. The fact that the great majority of visitors to Iguacu leave the much-promoted Itaipu Dam off their agenda is testimony to the human bond with nature which is central to ecotourism. Australia's political leaders who are backing Gunns' pulp mill in Tasmania are ignoring this reality and the best interests of human wellbeing in its widest and deepest dimensions. The long-term economic and employment consequences will be substantial.

Speaking of Gunns, the corruption of environmental processes by Tasmania's Labor authorities has a dreadful parallel in Brazil. The Amazon's largest tributary, the 1,700-kilometre long Madeira River, which rises in Bolivia, is threatened by a series of dams and hydroelectric schemes with globally significant consequences. Besides thousands of indigenous people again being driven from their homelands, the heart of one of the world's greatest concentrations of animal, bird and fish habitats will be obliterated. The largest fish migrate 4,000 kilometres up the Amazon and Madeira rivers each year—about 19 kilometres a day. When the Brazilian environment ministry, despite huge corporate and government pressure, reported these concerns, President Lula sacked the ministry's entire leadership team. On 9 July last year, the environment minister, Marina Silva, granted a licence with 33

conditions for the dam builders to go ahead to tender stage, with huge construction and financial consortiums lining up. I will be presenting progress reports to the Senate on this disastrous scheme and I call on the Australian government to support worldwide environmental consensus to save the mighty Madeira River.

As our Lan Chile plane flew home across the Andes at night, a bronzed new moon hung low over the South American continent. I thought of Ingrid Betancourt, chained by her leg to a tree in the jungle. I hope she too could see that moon and that one day her noble and humane spirit will be freed from the violent and inhumane politics which now hold her hostage.