



Rachel Nolan MP

Member for Ipswich



Electorate Office
125 Brisbane Road

Telephone
07 3202 3452

Email
ipswich@parliament.qld.gov.au

Postal Address
PO Box 98, Booval Q 4304

Facsimile
07 3202 4778

Web
www.rachelnolanmp.com

Rachel Nolan MP, Member for Ipswich
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Ipswich Mall
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Special guest, Sharan Burrow, my colleague the Member for Ipswich West Wayne Wendt, Mayor Paul Pisasale, and Ipswich councillors -

Friends, you know me well but it's not well known that some years ago I lived in the United States. I visited there again a little while ago.

I moved to the States when I was 20. I arrived in San Francisco, a city that's a lot like Brisbane. The first thing I remember on the afternoon I arrived was walking around and being shocked – utterly shocked – by the beggars in the street. There were people holding out paper cups and shaking the change. I remember having tears in my eyes because I had never seen anything like it and I thought it was so sad and so wrong.

More recently I went back there and again was really troubled to see people working in shops – in Subway and at Burger King - looking tired and run down because they work two and three jobs just to try and make ends meet.

I'm not anti American by any means. I think the United States is an extraordinary nation but I think they have this all wrong.

The difference between Australia and America is the social safety net – not just the minimum wage but a set of values that says we will look after the most vulnerable. Our values say we are all responsible for the poor and the vulnerable and that we won't let people beg and die in the street.

Right now in this industrial relations debate that Sharan is here talking about, we are fighting not just over industrial relations but over those values and over that social safety net.

Australia didn't just happen to turn out differently from the United States. We have universal health care, good public education and a minimum wage because people have fought for them. In the 1890s Australian workers unionised and in 1907 in the Harvester Judgement, Justice Higgins determined that a working person should have a living wage.

Those principles and that social safety net lie at the heart of what is so good about Australia.

This industrial relations debate is also not just about the poor or about workers who are vulnerable.

It might seem easy for us to look around and think - I'm OK, I'm middle class, I can negotiate a good wage and I can sign an AWA. That might be true for you or for me but we're not all just individuals, we live in a society.

The effect in the United States of having a whole class of working poor; black, white and Hispanic, who cannot get their heads above water no matter how hard they work is not just bad news for them, it affects the whole society. It means there's a huge income gap, that there's a lack of social mobility and a real culture of crime.

That fear of the poor and fear of crime affects middle class people. It means they live in gated communities, many of them have a gun and they certainly don't want to look a poor person in the eye on the train.

This fight that we're in now is not just about industrial relations. It's not just about the minimum wage or working conditions. It's about the very values that underpin our society; the values and the institutions that make Australia fair and the values that make Australia safe.

With these industrial relations changes, this government is cutting at the heart of the institutions that ensure fairness for and between working people. They are cutting right into our values and endangering some of the best things about Australia. That's why it's important now that we stand up for what we know to be right.