



Speech by

**Hon. R. SCHWARTEN**

**MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON**

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Hansard 2 March 1999

**MOTION OF CONDOLENCE**

**Deaths of Mr R. T. McLean, MLA, and Mr L. J. Yewdale, MLA**

**Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN** (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (9.51 a.m.): There is a sense of irony in what we are doing today. Les Yewdale and Ron McLean were great mates and were quite inseparable in this place. I guess it is fitting that we send them both off in this way today.

Les Yewdale was my predecessor in this place. One could not have asked for a better mentor than he was. I knew him all my life. He was a person of great courage and great character. He was a decent human being who cared much about others. He cared about his family and he loved his sport.

Les was one of those people blessed with the ability to compete in any sport he chose to turn his hand to. He was an excellent footballer. He played for Rockhampton on a number of occasions. He played for Central Queensland. He played for Fitzroys and Norths in the city. When he got too old to play he turned his hand to the administration of Rugby League in Rockhampton and ended up a trustee of Browne Park and a member of the board of the Rockhampton Rugby League. Indeed, he was president of that organisation for a good part of the time he was a member of this Parliament.

As the Leader of the Opposition indicated, Les was in this place for 17 years. Through all of the frustration of Opposition, the sad thing was that he was robbed of the opportunity of being in Government. I also read his final speech in this place, when he said, "I rise in this place for the last time." That speech was about the people who surrounded him during that time. Right to the very end he was a very generous human being.

He was part of the Burns "cricket team". As one of 11 representatives of a party absolutely decimated at that election, with very few resources Yewdale was immediately a shadow Minister with a number of portfolios. He once told me how he spoke at 3 o'clock in the morning on a flour Bill he knew absolutely nothing about. I have read the speech and I have to say that he managed to make a fair fist of it.

Those were tough times to be endured, and he did endure it. In fact, it was no small effort on his part that in that 1974 election, when every Labor electorate in the State suffered huge swings against, his vote was the only one to actually improve. There was a historic reason for that. Those who are students of history will recall that in 1972 the endorsement of Yewdale's predecessor, one Mervyn Herbert Thackeray, was removed and Yewdale stepped into the breach. Thackeray contested the seat, and it was a nail-biting finish. In 1974 Yewdale got the old Labor vote back and improved the seat. That in no small way shows the talent of Yewdale to touch his fellow human being.

As I said, because of illness he was robbed of much of his retirement. He was certainly robbed of enjoying the privilege of a Labor Government, although he did get back here on one occasion. He came to a past members lunch where he, Ronnie McLean and I sat at the same table. That was the last time Les ever came to this place. Accordingly, there was a great deal of sadness in his retirement. I note Les' old mate Bob Scott in the gallery. Bob is another mate both Ronnie and Les were inseparable from. It is pleasing to see you here today, Bob.

I say to Marge, Kevin and Karen: you have lost a husband and a dad. The rest of us have lost a good mate and a true warrior in the Labor ranks—a person who came out of the trade union movement, much like Ronnie McLean came out of the waterside workers union, and who was never

frightened to tell people that he voted Labor, that he stood up for his principles and that he believed nothing was too good for the worker.

I turn now to Ron McLean, because that was his guiding influence: nothing is too good for the worker. He lived his life accordingly. From a very early age Ron fought injustice. His brother, Alan, was born with hearing and speech impediments. His father, Ken, who later became an official in the Electrical Trades Union, moved the family down from Townsville so that Alan could attend the deaf school. Ron always claimed that his ability as a pugilist went back to those days, when he stood up for his brother on the way home from school. No doubt all members would have experienced at some time or another how cruel children can be to other children. Ron was fighting injustice in those very early years and it was something that was to stay with him for the rest of his days.

First and foremost, Ron was a person who understood black and white. Either you were in or you were out. There were no shades of grey; you were either right or wrong. He lived his life pretty much that way. The Leader of the Opposition commented that Ron was a tough man, and he was in that regard. He held very principled views and those principled views required him to analyse or distil something down to a blackness or a whiteness. If you were on the black side of something, as far as he was concerned you were either a flea, a thing or a maggot. If you were the latter it was goodbye, Mr Chips. That was the end of the round for you.

Ron McLean was one of those people who sought to come into Parliament for all the right reasons. He is in the same frame as Yewdale in that regard. The traditional reason for a Labor politician to come here was to take from the industrial wing and bring it into Parliament, in the same way as our forefathers in 1891 sought to do. That was the reason Yewdale was here and that was the reason McLean was here.

I have to say: Ron did not enjoy this place. He did not like being a member of Parliament. As he described it, he was very much railroaded into the duty by his mates on the waterfront. He had fought things such as asbestosis and had fought for reasonable conditions for people on the waterfront all his working life. He understood that struggle, but he understood the futility of it when, as the Premier pointed out, three years previous to it happening in Australia the United States Government and some European Governments banned asbestos. Yet here he was some three years later still eating his lunch down the hold of a ship with the snow of asbestos falling around the workplace. He saw, as his mates on the waterfront saw, that there was only one way to change that, and that was by getting into Parliament and having some say on behalf of those people.

Ron McLean, and Yewdale for that matter, always took a strong interest in things such as workplace health and safety, because they understood just what it was like and they never forgot. They resolved to continue to fight for that cause right to the very end—especially in Ron's case when he became a Minister, when he was in a position to do something about it.

As the Premier said, Ron McLean started his working life as an apprentice carpenter in the Works Department. He finished his working life for that department as the Minister with the responsibility. In anybody's view that is a fair sort of achievement. He also never, ever forgot the start that the building trade gave him, and his apprenticeship, and where that led him in his life. He was eager to repeat that experience for other young people.

I must pause here to apologise for Pat Purcell, who is absent from this place today due to a bereavement in his family. He would certainly, as Ron's replacement, want to say a few words about Ron. There are a couple of tributes that have come in that I think are worth placing on record. I notice that two of Ron's good mates, John Lutteral and John "Skinny" Conway, are also in the gallery to pay tribute to him.

I have mentioned the asbestosis which ultimately took Ron from this place and, no doubt, hastened his departure from this mortal coil. He never, ever stopped fighting for that cause and for compensation for the victims thereof. I have also mentioned Ron's pugilistic ability, which is renowned. One of the areas that he liked to frequent was the Wharfies Club, and that is not a place for the faint-hearted. It had tiled floors, for obvious reasons; it enabled them to be hosed out the next day. That was a place where niceties were dispensed with, doors were closed and human rings were formed. As a result of taking the law into two hands, I guess, the matter was resolved and nothing was said.

One of the things that Ronnie was involved in, ironically enough, was the peace movement. He was a great opponent of the Vietnam War, as indeed were the waterside workers. One of the things that one can say about the waterside workers union is that they have taken up every social justice cause possible, and they still do that today. Whether it is international conditions, nuclear disarmament or whatever, one will find the wharfies dipping into their pockets, holding up ships and whatever else is required to support their cause.

During the Vietnam War, the wharfies took a very strong view about it. There were quite a number of Vietnamese nationals in Brisbane at that time, and they decided to take the law into their own hands and proceed down to the Wharfies Club armed with nunchakus and various other devices,

wanting to square the ledger. But they found that, although they advocated peace, the wharfies were quite capable of doing the reverse, and Ronnie was at the forefront of that. Certainly when the Wharfies Club went, there was a great deal of history that went with it. Ronnie certainly missed his mateship there, but it did move down to the Breakfast Creek Hotel, and he was able to get down there and have a beer from time to time. When the Leader of the Opposition was referring to Ron as being up all night, no doubt he was agitated as a result of a heavy intake of coffee during the evening and at breakfast.

There are a couple of good stories about Ron that I would like to relate. The Birdsville School swimming pool is a good one. Ron was out in Barcaldine when he was a Minister, and he was met by the P & C at Birdsville, who stated that they were never, ever going to be able to afford a swimming pool. The reason was that, just as they would get to the amount of money that they needed for a subsidy, the price would go up. So in true wharfie's style, Ronnie said, "We have to fix this", although he would have used words that were a bit stronger than that. He went back and saw his then director-general, Ross Dunning, and instructed him to fix it. And indeed it was fixed, and today there is a swimming pool in Birdsville because Ron McLean listened. He had that common person's touch. Ironically, Ron remarked that we would not pick up one vote there, that we would never win the booth at Birdsville, and we never have. But that did not stop him making sure that kids were looked after wherever they were. This was something that dominated him in terms of being a Minister. "You cannot hold kids responsible for the way their parents vote", he used to say. I might just add that the people of Birdsville have written to Ron's widow, Anne. Amongst what else they had to say, they said that he made an outstanding contribution to improving the quality of life for Queenslanders. He certainly did for the people of Birdsville.

The Wolffdene dam was another story involving Ron. Former Premier Wayne Goss spoke about that at the funeral, and I do not intend to go over how we delivered the policy and made the policy in that regard. Ron took up that fight as the shadow Minister of the day. Again, the people in that part of the world have not forgotten Ron, and they have asked to place on record their condolences as well and their statement that he hated things not aboveboard. "He would stand up and fight against them" was their comment on him. That gets back to what I said at the outset. He was a man who understood black and white.

Ron McLean's and Les Yewdale's passing is to be mourned by this side of politics. They were a breed of people who kept us going all those years in Opposition. During all those years in the wilderness, those people never lost their heart or their spirit. Wherever they are today, I am sure that they carry their spirit with them. The world is a sadder place for both their passing. To Anne, I offer the condolences of this House. Wherever you are, old friend, sleep well.

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