



Speech by

Hon. R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard 17 August 1999

MOTIONS OF CONDOLENCE

Death of Mr R. B. J. Pilbeam

Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (10.27 a.m.): I join in the condolence motion for the late Reginald Byron Jarvis "Rex" Pilbeam. I knew Pilly, as he was affectionately known, very well. We did not come from the same side of politics, but he seemed to be omnipresent. Wherever one went, Pilly was there. I remember on one occasion at university, on a table opposite a group of students, of whom I was one, stood Les Yewdale, who was the State member at the time, Rex Pilbeam and another local dignitary for a pie throwing competition. The three students all aimed their pies straight at Pilly. He said, "Don't worry." He had his own pies. He had brought a dozen pies which were under the desk and he proceeded to throw them at everybody's heads.

I tell that story to bring home the fact that Rex was a very down to earth human being, which is one of the reasons why he was able to beat Mick Gardner, who had ratted on the Labor Party and joined the QLP. At that time the people of Rockhampton were looking for somebody different. Pilly was different, believe you me. He was controversial. Who will ever forget the controversy that he elicited as a result of sacking women when they married! He mellowed a bit and kept married women on, but sacked them if they became pregnant.

He was a very colourful character. One of the famous stories about him concerned the 1954 floods in Rocky. He was being rowed down Depot Hill, where the water was lapping the floorboards of homes, telling people to get out of their homes. They pulled up at one dear old soul's house and he said to her, "You'll have to vacate the house." She said, "I can't, Mr Pilbeam. I'm under the doctor." He said, "Well, bring him, too."

He was also renowned as a very cunning politician. Tom Burns relates a story about when he and Peter Morris, who was then the Federal Transport spokesperson, turned up in Pilbeam's office to try to elicit from him some political capital. They wanted to inquire about the road funding in the area. They had just driven from Cairns. Firstly, Morris inquired about what share the Federal Government had put into the roads to the north. Pilbeam looked at him and he said, "Sewerage?" Morris looked at him. Pilbeam said, "Rockhampton is the best sewered town of them all. We burnt the night cart in the street." Morris looked at Burns and thought, "What's this bloke on about?" Then Burnsie had a go. He said, "What about the Yeppoon Lagoon and the work out there at the moment?" Pilbeam said, "Hyacinth? Hyacinth isn't only a problem in Rockhampton; it is a problem all over the world." Then he turned to Col Brown, who was in the room, and he said, "Have you had a cup of tea yet, Brownie? I don't think I have", and then he got up and walked out. Burns was left with Morris sitting there trying to work out exactly what political capital he would have got out of Rex Pilbeam. That shows what a cunning sort of fellow he was.

He was also a larger than life figure on the racecourse. He owned a horse—and this illustrates his passion for Rockhampton—that he had named Rex Hampton. It was a very good horse trained by local trainer Bing Crow. It won five very big races. But Rex was one of the worst punters I have ever met. I do not know whether he did it deliberately, but every tip he ever gave me lost. I used to dodge him on the racecourse.

He was also a keen sportsman, especially when it came to Rugby League. Every Sunday afternoon he could be seen at Browne Park sitting in the grandstand with all of the other supporters around the town. He would be joining in and barracking accordingly. As I said earlier, he was never one to be outside of the crowd. He did not distinguish himself as the mayor on those sorts of occasions at all.

The honourable member for Keppel mentioned Buddies. I do not think that was one of Rex's greatest ideas, but it certainly showed us what Rex was like as a Thespian. He starred in that movie as a person propping up the bar with a beer who, upon somebody bringing a mare into the bar, said words to the effect, "Get that bloody mare out of here." That was his sole line as an actor.

However, he was an expert on classical music—something that most people did not know about him. I saw him put to shame a lot of people who thought they were authorities on classical music. He was an expert on classical music and was a trained singer with a great singing voice, although anyone who looked at him would never have thought so.

Mr Mackenroth: You couldn't say that about Pavarotti.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I suppose you couldn't.

One of the stories that he told me related to his keeping the breathalyser out of Queensland. Rex did not mind a drink on a hot day. He was a rum drinker. Although I might be giving away a secret, I have to point out that he did not like Bundaberg Rum; he liked Captain Morgan rum. The other day, when I was in the council chambers, I noticed that they still have Captain Morgan rum there—Pilbeam's legacy! As the honourable Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations said before, he would sit there and have a couple of rums after the meeting—sometimes quite a few rums after the meeting—and drive home. At the time, he had a purple Fairlane. Around the town they used to call it "Pilly's purple people eater". It collided with a bauhinia tree outside the Rockhampton High School one evening when he was returning home from a council meeting.

When I spoke to him about this subject, he said, "Nicklin tried to bring in the breathalyser. I could use myself around a drink. He got me and another member up"—that member has since passed on—"and said, 'Go down to the bar for an hour and drink as much as you can.'" Down they went and they drank for an hour. They came back and put Pilly on the breathalyser and it did not register. The bloke who was trying to flog that technology to the Government said, "There must be something wrong. They obviously have not had as much to drink as you thought they would in an hour." So they went down again and this bloke produced \$20 out of his pocket, put it on the bar and said, "Drink that out." So he did. They went back and had another go at it and the breathalyser still did not register. Then Nicklin, who as members would know was a teetotaler, put \$10 on the bar, but the same thing happened. Pilly always claimed that he kept the breathalyser out of Queensland as a result of that. He thought there was some quirk in his system, because he had been breath-tested heaps of times and never recorded any alcohol. I do not know whether that is true, but I pass it on as a tale he related to me.

As I think most members have said, he had a great sense of humour. I remember when I was at the opening of the Yeppen deviation. In honour of Rex's hard work in lobbying for that project to make Rockhampton flood free from the southern approaches, Russ Hinze was there and so was our friend, Mr Morris, who was by that stage a Minister. I was sitting next to Pilly when Morris was standing up speaking—and Morris is not very tall. I said, "From where I'm standing, it looks like he is sitting." Pilly said to me, "Not much difference!" They invited Pilly to hold the ribbon while the two Ministers were going to cut it with pink scissors. When they cut it and everybody clapped, Pilly held it up and said, "They're both crooked. One is more crooked than the other, though."

As another member mentioned, he loved animals. He was a very keen supporter of the RSPCA. His dog took pride of place in his office and followed him everywhere. Pilly was an atrocious driver. People used to say that the only one who would travel with him was the dog; it had no option. It was legendary in the council that, if the staff did not put their wastepaper baskets on top of their desks, the next morning they would find them yarded into a corner. It was a border collie and it used to muster all of the bins together.

I could go on all day with stories about Rex. He was a larger than life and colourful figure. If people read his maiden speech, they would note that he tapped in very early to, as the honourable member for Keppel alluded to before, the importance of linking Longreach and Rockhampton by an all-weather road. He was talking about that 39 years ago.

He understood what Port Alma was about. His first piece of advice to me when I became a member of Parliament was, "Don't trust Treasury. I went down to Hiley in relation to Port Alma to get the money. I came back to Rocky as proud as punch. I thought I had a pup in a basket. I opened it up and it was a big Alsatian dog with long teeth that has been biting me ever since." The ratepayers in Rocky were paying \$90,000. When we got in in 1989, the then Transport Minister waived that debt. I think

David Hamill was the Minister who did that. It was one of Rex's finest hours when he saw the debt paid off in that regard.

As I said, he was a man of great vision. He loved Rocky. It was a great, sad irony that he actually died in Brisbane, away from his friends. I know from talking to him in recent years that his great wish was to get back to Rockhampton. Unfortunately, he was robbed of that.

I will finish on the last anecdote that I have of him. He introduced talkback radio—the mayor on radio—into Rockhampton. Over the years one could plot how he had finally got tired of the job. When people used to ring up saying, "I have got a pothole", he would say, "What is your address? I will send somebody around. The boys will be around to fix it up." On this occasion he said to this woman, "You have rung me up before about this, haven't you?" She said, "Yes, I have." "Well, stop ringing me about it. Do you own a wheelbarrow?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Have you got a shovel?" She said, "Yes." "Have you got any dirt around your place?" "Yes." "Well, fill up the wheelbarrow and take it out and fill it up yourself and don't ring me up again."

That was Rex Pilbeam. I say to his grandson, Rod, and to his granddaughters, Wendy, Deborah and Kathleen: you have lost a great patriarch in your family. Rex was very, very distraught about the fact that both his sons predeceased him, and of course, when his wife predeceased him, that was basically the end for him as well. As I said, he was a larger than life character and a true politician and a true Rockhampton identity. Of course, "Mr Rockhampton" suited him to a tee. Rest in peace, Rex.
