



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 18 June 2002

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE—DEATH OF MR C. J. BENNETT, MP

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier and Minister for Trade) (9.32 a.m.), by leave, without notice, I move—

1. That this House desires to place on record its appreciation of the services rendered to this state by the late Colin James Bennett, a former member of the parliament of Queensland;
2. That Mr Speaker be requested to convey to the family of the deceased gentleman the above resolution, together with an expression of the sympathy and sorrow of the members of the parliament of Queensland, for the loss they have sustained.

Colin James Bennett was born on 10 May 1919 in Townsville, Queensland. He was educated at the Catholic primary school and state school in Ayr; St Joseph's College, Nudgee; and the University of Queensland, where he gained a Bachelor of Laws degree. Col became chairman of the Queensland University Students Council and a member of the Newman Society. Before entering politics, he was engaged as a law clerk in 1941, the maths master at Brisbane Grammar School in 1942 and served with the Royal Australian Air Force from 1943 to 1945. After the war Col served in the Commonwealth Crown Solicitors Office from 1945 to 1948 and then entered private practice as a barrister. From 1949 to 1960 Col served as an alderman on the Brisbane City Council, becoming vice mayor from 1952 to 1955.

Col Bennett held office in the Labor Party for many years, including secretary of the Coorparoo branch; leader of the Municipal Labor Party for 10 years; and president of the Griffith federal division executive for 20 years. Col won the seat of South Brisbane in the state election on 28 May 1960 and held it till 27 May 1972. Col stood for parliament in the 1960 election. He chose the biggest and most formidable opponent—former Premier Vince Gair—in a bitter contest for South Brisbane. The Liberal candidate polled 2,630 votes, Gair 2,738 and Bennett 4,250. In one of his first speeches in parliament, Col said—

It is rather amazing that at the CI Branch very few, if any, voluntary confessions are obtained from people who are allegedly invited to enter the CI Branch while in the company of friends ... But not long after they are separated from their companions, out pops a confession, freely and voluntarily admitting every element of the offence in such a fashion that one might believe that the accused was a lawyer who understood how to make admissions acknowledging the truth of every aspect of the charge.

Col Bennett's questions about rotting by ministers and by crooked police led to the government doing everything it could to gag him. On 8 November 1960, he only got as far as saying 'Having given notice of a question' when Premier 'Honest Frank' Nicklin jumped up and interrupted, saying that the question contained a statement. The Speaker ruled: 'Order! I thank the Premier for drawing my attention to the question, but I might say it was not necessary because on several occasions already I have had to delete certain sections from questions asked by the honourable member for South Brisbane which in my opinion, and according to standing orders, were provocative.' How things have changed, and thank heavens, Mr Speaker, for the changes! These days I seldom hear an unprovocative question in this House. In August 1961 he was again gagged when his questions were withdrawn by the Speaker.

Col Bennett waged a long and fearless campaign against corrupt Police Commissioner Frank Bischof and two of his hand-picked detectives, Glen Hallahan and Tony Murphy, whom Col named in parliament. He also had to withstand fierce attacks from the *Sunday Truth*, a great supporter of the corrupt commissioner. On 20 October 1963, Col launched another attack on Bischof, Detective Glen

Hallahan and the *Sunday Truth* for being in league with the officers. The newspaper's headline was: 'Wild claims: Bennett is way off the beam'. But the article was revealing about Col's unusual lifestyle. The *Sunday Truth* said—

Mr Bennett—the sometimes likeable, always unpredictable man of law and parliament—over the past few years has been involved in more touchy situations than any 10 other members of Parliament.

The facts are that Mr Bennett knocked off from appearing in court for a policeman named O'Malley.

You see, Mr Bennett, although he is a member of Parliament, still is one of the most constant legal practitioners in Queensland, whether or not Parliament is sitting.

Down he raced to Parliament late on Tuesday and immediately launched into an attack on Detective Glen Hallahan, Police Commissioner Bischof and *Sunday Truth*.

It was a double life but one in which the criminal grapevine gave him an insight into the corruption in Bischof's force, and he used this information frequently in parliament to denounce the corruption. Prostitute Shirley Brifman told Col how detectives and even Bischof were involved in a callgirl racket at the National Hotel. Col said in parliament on 29 October 1963—

... the Police Commissioner and his colleagues who frequent the National Hotel, encouraging and condoning the call girl service that operates there, would be better occupied in preventing such activities rather than tolerating them.

On 3 November 1963, the *Sunday Truth* attacked Col for having exposed Bischof. Its front page leader said—

The campaign Mr Colin Bennett MLA is waging against the Police Commissioner Mr Bischof is now completely out of control and in the public interest the State Government can move in only one way. It must order an immediate Royal Commission.

It said—

The facts are that the honour and integrity of the Queensland Police Commissioner have been attacked ... His name has got to be cleared.

In other words, the Police Commissioner should be found not guilty. As the Fitzgerald report made clear, the royal commission did not uncover the corruption and he was cleared—a sad day in the history of this state. When Col denounced the inquiry in a speech in parliament and ordered 3,000 copies of the speech, the government refused to print the speech. In March 1965 he was kicked out of parliament for a week after a row with the Speaker about a question he wanted to ask.

In 1967 the *Sunday Mail* received a letter from notorious Sydney gangster Ducky O'Connor saying he was going to get Col. When he arrived in Brisbane, O'Connor was confronted by Bennett and said that he had travelled all the way from Sydney to assure Col he did not intend him any harm and the letter had been a forgery. Col continued his fight against corruption until 1972 when the boundaries of his seat were redrawn and he was not re-endorsed by the Labor Party. He first stood as an Independent and then, so angry was he at the decision, he even stood for the National Party, despite having fiercely attacked Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen for some of his business dealings.

Col believed in finding solutions and his commitment to assisting local communities extended to involvement in numerous community groups and organisations. This was highlighted by his work as co-founder, with his wife, of the St Veronica Welfare Centre, an association for underprivileged children. He was also a member of the Brisbane and Sunshine Coast Hospital Boards, the Australian Workers Union, Lions and Johnsonian Clubs, patron and life member of the South Brisbane Returned & Services League, and patron, member and honorary legal adviser for many sporting and charitable organisations. Mr Bennett is survived by his wife, Eileen, and children—Mary, Judith, Christian, Bridget, Walter and Imelda—and their families.

Col Bennett was a man of courage. I went through that little bit of history to show how strong that courage was. Queensland was a corrupt place in those days. It was a place that really was a shame on the history of this state. It did require some people of courage to take on that corruption. It was a corruption that pervaded all sections of government and particularly the Police Service. As we have seen, it also had support from the then *Sunday Truth*. It was very difficult for an honest man to break through. Col Bennett did. I know that Col Bennett left the Labor Party and eventually ran for the National Party. He was also an Independent. He was also a man of strong will and strong views which, in a sense, explains why he took the position he did.

I remember Col Bennett from when I was a university student. There was a public forum at the University of Queensland in 1971 which I went along to. Col Bennett was giving forth and when he had finished his speech he took questions. I got up and asked a fairly provocative and innocent question, and he looked at me and said, 'You'll never amount to anything. You don't have a bright future. I don't know why you're even asking me a question.' Well, he was not right on everything!

I have to say that I admired his guts. I admired his courage. This parliament is a better place for the fact that he had the courage and commitment to pursue the views he had. I extend my sympathy and the sympathy of the government, the whole Labor Party and this House to his family.