



Speech by  
**Jeff Seeneey**

**MEMBER FOR CALLIDE**

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

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**MOTION OF CONDOLENCE: DEATH OF HON. TJ BURNS AO**

**Mr SEENEY** (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (10.09 am): I rise to speak in support of the motion of condolence that has been moved by the Premier and seconded by the Deputy Premier and to extend the sympathies of everybody on this side of the House to the family of the late Tom Burns. As the Premier indicated, Thomas James Burns was born in Maryborough on 27 October 1931. His parents were Thomas James Burns, who was a canefarmer, and Elfie Rock. Tom attended Albert State School in Maryborough and the Pialba, Hervey Bay and East Brisbane state schools. When his family moved to Brisbane he attended Brisbane Grammar School.

Tom joined the RAAF and served as a radio technician from 1951 to 1957. He also became a state councillor and state executive officer for the ETU and operated his own electrical service business at Kangaroo Point. Tom joined the ALP at 15. At 28 he was elected to be state organiser. Tom travelled all over the state rebuilding the ALP after the 1957 electoral split and building an intricate knowledge of every nook and cranny of rural and regional Queensland, which was to stand him in good stead later in his political career. Tom was elected state secretary of the Queensland ALP in 1965 and became federal president in 1969. In 1972, Tom was elected to the state seat of Lytton. After the electoral disaster of 1974 he became, as the Premier referred to, the captain of the ALP 11 here in the House. After standing down as leader in 1978, Tom continued in numerous shadow ministry roles and as deputy leader from 1984. Tom was elected deputy leader under Wayne Goss in 1989. After the ALP victory he continued in that role unopposed until his retirement in 1996.

Tom served in several portfolios during that time, including housing and local government, emergency services, consumer affairs, administrative services and tourism. But I am sure all of us from regional Queensland will remember him most as the minister for the bush—a term that he very famously acquired during the years of the Goss government. It was in his capacity as minister for the bush that I first met Tom Burns. I knew of him long before that, of course, as a follower of Queensland politics. I also knew of him because my grandfather took a very close interest in Tom's political career. He and Tom's grandmother were members of the same family—a family of 13 kids who grew up on the banks of the Burnett River in Gayndah. While I knew about the family connection, I never knew Tom. I had never met Tom until that protest movement when we were fighting the closure of the railway system under the Goss government.

I was leading the protest committee in Monto. Tom and his committee came to town and it was a fairly typical protest meeting. We were all there full of fire and brimstone and with some very vigorous speeches prepared. I stood up to make my address to the committee and Tom from the stage up the front, in that famous interjecting voice of his, quipped across the hall, 'You be nice to me, boy, we're family.' I certainly learned a heck of a lot about politics that day. I also learned a heck of a lot from the way Tom handled that whole issue and the respect that he was able to engender, even from those of us who were on the opposite side of the argument. Still today there are many people in regional Queensland who respect and admire the great job that Tom Burns did in his capacity as minister for the bush.

I did get to know Tom somewhat during a trade trip to China, of which I had the privilege of being part, with the Hon. Judy Spence, the now minister for police, and which Tom accompanied. During the

couple of weeks of that trip I got to know the man apart from the public image that we all knew as the politician. I came to know that he was a very genuine person. Like so many other people of his generation, he was moulded and forged by the hard years of the Depression and the war. He was very genuine about the things that he undertook and the things that he said. It was a privilege to know Tom in that capacity. I can certainly confirm the comments that the Premier made that he was as comfortable talking to high-level Chinese delegations as he was sitting and having a beer with me—one of the hated Tories—in the bar afterwards. He was comfortable in every situation. I think that is something that everybody who knew him would recognise him for.

I last met Tom earlier this year at Parliament House. He was here having dinner with some members of his family. I happened to meet him on the balcony. I remember he scolded me for my record of involuntary absences from this House—not in the way that most people scold me for that but in the context of having a long way to go to keep up to him. He suggested that involuntary absences were a lot harder to earn nowadays than they were in the past. However, I beg to differ, of course, Mr Speaker. Tom was proud of his record in this House. He was proud of the fact that he stood firm in his arguments and he never backed down. That, too, is something that I think Tom is certainly well remembered for. I was very proud to meet the members of his family that night. He introduced me to some of the younger members of his family. He was never more proud than when he was introducing members of his family to other people. In the time that I did know Tom—and I know that other members who knew him better will confirm this—I came to know that his family were the most important thing to him and it was his family of whom he was most proud. I extend to you our sympathies and condolences today.