



Speech by

## Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

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

**Hon. PD BEATTIE** (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier and Minister for Trade) (9.50 am): I move—

1. That this House desires to place on record its appreciation of the services rendered to this state by the late Honourable Thomas James Burns, a former member of the parliament of Queensland and minister of the Crown.
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 in Queensland, in the loss they have sustained.

I understand that Angela and her family are with us today, and I want to acknowledge all family members in the gallery. As you know, Tommy Burns was one of those very special people and he was held in great esteem and affection in the Labor Party. To have his family and Angela here today is a very special moment. I want to acknowledge them at the outset.

Today I would like to pay tribute to the Hon. Thomas James Burns, a very eminent figure in the Australian political landscape for over 40 years who sadly passed away on 4 June 2007. Tom Burns as we all knew him—or Tommy Burns—was born in Maryborough on 27 October 1931. He was educated at Albert State School in Maryborough, Pialba, Hervey Bay and the East Brisbane State School and Brisbane Grammar School. From 1951 to 1957 Tom served in the Royal Australian Air Force as a radio technician at Ballarat, Pearce, Sale and Amberley before moving on to be elected as a state councillor and to the state executive of the Electrical Trades Union until 1960. From 1960 to 1965 Tom served as a state organiser in the Australian Labor Party and from 1965 to 1972 was State Secretary of the ALP, and a very fine secretary of the ALP I should say. In 1969 Tom also served as federal Treasurer of the ALP and was federal President of the ALP from 1970 to 1973—an historic time for the party and Australia with the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972. We all know that he was also part of that historic visit that Gough Whitlam made to China when he was not just a pioneer but a leader in world affairs in making that special link with China, which was then subsequently followed by most of the world.

Tom was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly on 27 May 1972 as the member for the newly created Brisbane based seat of Lytton. From this time until his resignation on 31 May 1996, Tom served in many leadership capacities within the parliamentary Labor Party. He was the Leader of the Opposition from 1974 to 1978 when he famously led the Labor 11—or the cricket team—and he rebuilt the state team here. He was Opposition Whip from 1982 to 1984 and Deputy Leader of the Opposition from 1984 to 1989. Upon Labor's historic election to government in December 1989, Tom served as Deputy Premier until the government of this state changed hands in February 1996. In addition to being Deputy Premier, Tom served in many ministries under Premier Wayne Goss. From December 1989 to September 1992 he was minister for housing and local government and from September 1992 to October 1993 he was minister for administrative services and minister for rural communities. From October 1993 to December 1994 he was the minister for emergency services and minister for rural communities and consumer affairs, and from December 1994 to July 1995 he served as the minister for emergency services and consumer affairs and minister assisting the Premier on rural affairs. From July 1995 to February 1996 he served as the minister for tourism, sport and youth. As you can see, Mr Speaker, it was a very long and impressive and distinguished parliamentary and party career. In 1999 my government appointed Tom as chair of the Queensland China Council, a post he held until his passing. In 2001 Tom was awarded an

officer of the Order of Australia for his contribution to Australia-China relations for over 30 years. As members are aware, a state funeral honouring Tom was held at St John's Cathedral on 12 June 2007.

The official record shows that Tom Burns devoted a lifetime of hard work and dedication to the people of Queensland and the Australian Labor Party, and it was indeed a great achievement. If anyone ever stood up for the battlers of this state—the workers—then Tom Burns did. But what that record does not show is the quality of the man. Tom Burns was a legend within the ALP and the broader Queensland community. He loved fishing and he loved people and people loved him. He was completely comfortable with everyone and would routinely go out of his way to do someone a good turn. He was a true person's person. He was as much at home sitting down to a banquet with China's leaders in Beijing as he was chewing the fat with a rail worker or stockman at some out-of-the-way bush camp. Tom was a larrikin in the best Australian sense of the word and a larrikin in the best Australian tradition, and that is why we all loved him. His smile was his trademark, his handshake was his contract and his friendship was valued by political allies and foes alike. With Tom Burns what you saw is what you got. He was a special person and we are all the sadder for his passing.

I have to say that when Tom retired—and I alluded to this in my formal remarks—the contribution he made in developing special links in China and Vietnam will hold this state in good stead for a long time to come. As I said at his state funeral, whenever I visited China with Tom, which I did on a number of occasions, he was much more appreciated and much more well known than I ever was, which gives you some idea of someone who had left public life but had developed such close links. I also told this story at the state funeral, and it is worth retelling to put on the record. Tom talked me into going to Nanjing to meet the Governor because he thought that HOK Sport had a chance of winning a contract because, as you know, it was building quite a lot of stadia across China for all sorts of soccer and other events.

At that time HOK Sport was 33rd on the list of people that had applied for the work. As you know, in China whenever there are applications for major projects bids come from all over the world. The Germans are very competitive, as are the French, the Italians, the Spanish and the English. People from all over the world tender for these things, including the Japanese of course. Tom thought it would be very strategic if we had a dinner with the Governor, which we did. People that HOK Sport had not been able to previously get to see were actually at the dinner. While I will not go into the appropriate amount of alcohol that was consumed by people—but only in the state's interest, because most people know I am not a big drinker—Tom more than held his own. He held mine as well! At the end of that long evening, the business that was done resulted in HOK Sport—not that evening but subsequently—winning the contract. That was the sort of ability that Tom had. He understood the Chinese community very well. He knew that HOK Sport had a good product. He knew that if we actually went there and did government-to-government business we could produce a result, and we did.

Whether it was HOK Sport, doing business in Nanjing or selling dairy cattle to Vietnam—and I went around with Tom and visited a number of the farms where he was so proud of the business that he had done—Tom Burns opened so many doors and was so well regarded that replacing him in China and Vietnam, frankly, will be impossible. We have not replaced him; we are obviously looking at how we try to replace someone of Tom's standing.

Moving to another part of Tom's life, I can remember when Tom was party secretary and then subsequently Leader of the Opposition and he set about encouraging young people within the party of which I was one. Tom was one of those people who wanted to ensure that the Labor Party was well represented. In the time that he led the cricket team—the 11—it was a dark hour for the Labor Party. We had very small numbers in this House. It was a very difficult time. We know exactly what that is all about, which is why we do not intend to go back there for some time—hopefully. It was a very difficult time. Tom led the party and he took the number of seats held from 11 to 23 in one election. That is an amazing result at a time when there was not much credibility, at a time when there was a politically dominant party—the National Party under the late Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. It was a very difficult time. Tom had enthusiasm, Tom had commitment and his passion was what encouraged other people to do amazing things. In a sense, Tom Burns kept the Labor Party alive in this state. He did that when he was an organiser after the split. He went out and travelled around this state along with other organisers such as Jim Keefer. They did a fantastic job as well. Tom had to go through that difficult rebuilding time after the split in the late fifties and early sixties. That was not an easy time. We really needed people of character and people of determination, and that is exactly what Tom had.

I have to say that Tommy was a very special person. I know the Leader of the House, Robert Schwarten, was a very good mate of his and will talk at some length about this. However, it would be remiss of me if I did not say to you, Angela, and to all the family—and I want to mention Gail, Linda and Samantha and all the other family members—we all understand that when you are a senior person like Tommy you share your life with the party. Inevitably, the family is the one who misses out on a fair bit of that time. Tommy in a sense had two families—and I know Angela will not mind me saying this—he had his family at home but he also had the family of the Labor Party. Both his families loved him. Both his families certainly will miss him. I say for the record: Tommy, we loved you. You were a great guy and you will be sadly missed.