



Speech by

## Hon. Robert Swarten

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

---

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

**Hon. RE SCHWARTEN** (Rockhampton—ALP) (Minister for Public Works, Housing and Information and Communication Technology) (10.26 am): I rise to support the motion of condolence for Tom Burns, the former member for Lytton, a cabinet minister in the Goss Labor government and, as I said at his state funeral, a family friend, a colleague, a boss and a mate.

May I also pass on to Angela his most wonderful wife, his daughters Samantha, Linda and Gail condolences not only from Judy and myself but also from our sons, who fondly remember Tom's kite flying lessons in front of the Burns's home, and his old friends, my mum and dad, Bonnie and Evan, who had known Tom since 1960. I add to that list my brothers and sister who also want to be remembered to you. They pass on their condolences.

Tom Burns was a Labor man who made his way into the Labor Party because of an understanding that the way to an equitable outcome for battlers and for those who had not been dealt all the picture cards in life was a Labor government. Regrettably, he had to wait until 1972 to see a federal Labor government and until 1989, when he was aged 58, to become a minister in a Queensland Labor government.

I know of no other Labor Party member who has his credentials. He was a party organiser, a state secretary, a federal secretary, a state president and a state deputy premier. He saw the aftermath of the split and dealt with the fallout of it by travelling the state, being fed and housed by Labor stalwarts like my mum and dad, and sleeping in my bed while I slept on the floor.

He rebuilt the organisation from the ground up, member by member, via an ingenious postcard system. He mailed back to party office a prospective member's details by postcard. He went to shearing sheds, got bogged on dirt roads in the gulf, got shouted at in public meetings and caused as much grief as he could to the Tories and the Groupers while doing it. He campaigned in the pubs where the workers drank and he got into the remnants of the branches. He visited the shearing sheds, the railway workshops, the meat works—anywhere there was a worker, anywhere in the state.

On becoming state secretary he set about modernising the party. He went to the United States, the United Kingdom and European countries looking for ideas. One such idea was the cassette tape which could be played at branch meetings. Just ponder that for a moment! Another was boater hats made of polystyrene. Does anybody remember those?

The party was broke and he rebuilt the finances. He built bridges with business and he fought to keep radio station 4KQ, which later became a terrific financial asset to the party.

He was not particular with whom he crossed swords and mostly he won, except the time he told my mother that her women's branch was a bunch of old busybodies. He came off second best there, I can assure you.

Burnsie saw that there was only one game in town and that was in this place. Arguably he was one of the most influential Labor politicians of the time, as it was he who told the Queensland delegates to the federal executive not to come back if they did not vote to save Whitlam. Despite being part of the historic first Australian visit to China with Gough, a visit which was to influence him and others and endear him to

the Chinese people till the day he died, he knew that the only way to really get a fair go for those he cared about so much was to get into parliament, which he did on 27 May 1972.

Tom won the seat of Lytton and held it until he relinquished it almost 24 years later to the day, which ironically enough was almost 11 years to the day that he died on his beloved and often skited about houseboat, which I might add almost drove Angela to the point of distraction before it was completed by Christmas last year. Angela told me the story of how—typical of him—he had her running around in the heat painting it because it had to be ready for Christmas.

The *Courier-Mail* at the time of Tom's maiden speech recorded him speaking with a 'machine gun rapidity' as he covered all manner of topics. This speech was to set the tone for the rest of his parliamentary career—his larrikin style, his Aussie language and old-style sayings, his use of parliamentary privilege to say true things about everyone from the Governor, the judiciary, various public servants and police officers down to the fishmonger at the bay. If it had to be said, he said it and sometimes it was sanitised by Hansard. I do not know how many members remember when he said in this House, 'I'll bet you \$5 to a bunch of grapes and you can keep the steak in your mouth.' He did not really say that. He had another word for grapes and it was something to do with goat droppings. But Hansard faithfully records it today that he said 'a bunch of grapes', so that is what he said.

Again he worked hard and again he stepped into the breach after the terrible hammering that came our way in 1974 when we were down to a cricket team. Some of those people who formed the cricket team had never been in parliament previously and became shadow ministers like Bill Prest. It was a tough task as the 11 members did not all agree. On one occasion one member disagreed with another over a transport bill by one claiming that he drove better drunk than sober and the other advocating that people who drank alcohol should be sentenced to jail. Burnsie at the time held a press conference out of the Colmslie Hotel—and I might add, Angela, that the McGuires also send their condolences—where he advocated that the way to ban people from drink driving was to ban petrol—a particularly rational statement! But unlike those who find themselves in this hapless position today, he won respect. He built a team, he developed policies, he worked hard and he won 23 seats at the 1977 election—which included people like Terry Mackenroth and Bob Gibbs. He in fact created the platform for Labor's return in 1989—just the way that he did in the Labor Party after the split. On this side of politics we owe him a huge debt.

Back in his state secretary days he met a Labor member, a very capable journalist named Jack Stanaway, who was to become his lifelong mate and press secretary. Tom stuck to Jack when Jack's health failed, and indeed they remained mates after Tom left parliament until Jack died in 1996—a friendship of over 30 years. Jack could write like Burnsie talked, although Tom never followed the script of written speeches. Jack used to lament the fact, saying that he had 'banged out a few pars'—'banged' being the operative word because people thought he typed with his feet—only to have Burnsie ignore them. I will take his advice; I will not follow a written speech from this point on.

He then became the state president of the Labor Party at a dark time in our history of federal intervention. The Premier knows all about that. That was a rebirthing of the Labor Party in Queensland, and Tom took it on the chin and we got on with life, and there was nobody happier in 1989 when we formed government. I remember them saying that we would have to get a case of lemons to get the smile off his face. Will you ever forget that interview that night when he just kept smiling and smiling as we won seat after seat? He told me later that that was the happiest moment of his political life. Finally we had got across the threshold to actually make a difference in people's lives, and that is what he did.

The first thing he did as the housing minister was the sorts of things that the member for Lytton just talked about. A great story that he told was of the battler that he met out in Boulia many years before as a party organiser who still kept his card in his pocket. He was killed in Stanley Street and they found his sandshoe about 40 feet up the road. As a result of that death Burnsie was contacted because he had no other relatives here. That dreadful incident stuck in Burnsie's psyche and when he became the housing minister he was the first minister to create seniors units west of the Great Divide. In all the 32 years that the Tories were in, never once did they ever think about keeping those people who had worked hard in the shearing sheds, who had never married and who had no other assets in the bush. That was a crowning glory of Tom.

The other thing that he did was set up tenant participation groups. People did not complain because they were frightened of getting chucked out of their houses, as the member for Lytton said. So he set up a tenant participation group which allowed tenants to give feedback on the decisions of government.

He worked well with backbenchers. Any backbenchers will recall that he would turn up to a show with you, he would go to a fete with you, he would support any backbencher and he would travel the state to do so—and drag Angela along. It is ironic that this week is the start of the Ekka. He loved the Ekka. He actually built the bridge for the Goss government to go into the Ekka, and we will be there on Thursday night.

In 1993 I joined his staff as a policy adviser following that great redistribution of one vote, one value. What a great idea that was! I ended up on his staff as a result of it. He gave me a job and I appreciated it

very much. We had admin services at that stage. Then in October we went on to take emergency services. I see Lyn Hewlett in the gallery. She will fondly remember the first day we started. He said, 'Right, you pair: Lyn, you start in Coolangatta; Schwarto, you start in Rockhampton. I want you to go to every fire station and ambulance station and I want you to give me a daily report.' It was a bit like going back to his days of the cassette. Within about a month he had a report of every fire station, every ambulance station and every SES in every area because there was a lot of turmoil at the time and we were trying to get ambulance officers through their ADs. It shows that he believed in listening to people on the ground.

He travelled around the state and visited rural communities. He left me behind on more than one occasion, sometimes because the jet had to be recalled to retrieve an organ for transplant. So he would leave me with a crowd complaining about closed railway lines or something, with no clothes and no way of getting home. He would leave me at the airport because I went to the toilet and I was not in the car. He once left without me because I got stuck in a lift at the Executive Building, saying, 'Fair dinkum, digger, you want to wake up to yourself,' as though it was my fault that the lift broke down.

I travelled overseas with him. What a joy that was! Burnsie never made decisions on the run—like hell he didn't! The day before we left he had lunch with the Chinese ambassador, who said, 'You must go to China, Mr Burns.' We were going to London, Glasgow and Ireland. But now we were going to China. Did we have any visas? No. Did I know anything about getting visas? No. But he said, 'You'll learn.' I have in my electorate office about six or seven of those printouts that you get for your passport, because you have to get a photo. Angela was particularly cooperative in getting her photo. Tom could never sit still. You had to put a quid in a machine at Liverpool station to get a passport photo. He was yelling out, 'You haven't put the quid in, digger.' 'Yes, I have, Tom; just sit still.' The next thing you know he is out. So I have these photos of him variously looking out. It took about five quid to get one decent photo.

At the Chinese embassy there was a turn put on there. They threw everybody out. Luckily I had a diplomatic passport and we got a visa to go to China, and the rest is history. We got to Glasgow and we were told of a terrible incident here with rural fires, and Tom cared so much about it that he made up his mind to come back. Guess who got the job of doing that? Guess who was least qualified to be calling airline companies in the middle of the night—it was about nine o'clock at night—to try to get us back the next day? By the time I had it all organised, I went to see him at the hotel. I vividly remember it; he and Angela were having breakfast. I said, 'It is all organised to go back,' and he said, 'We're not going, digger. I've been talking to Goss and he said, "Don't come back."' I had about a nanosecond of sleep all night and he said, 'You want to wake up to yourself, digger. You should have done that today. You've wasted all that time.'

I could go on and on and on about him, and I do not intend to do that. He was a very good mate. I feel as though I have lost a very close family member. Post politics we did not keep in touch with one another as much as we should have, although on the day to which the Leader of the Opposition referred I was walking out of the chamber and Tom was there with Samantha and her husband and Angela, and he yelled out 'Schwarto, I can see your gut coming out first.' He was irreverent right to the end. As I was walking out of the chamber he said, 'Fair dinkum, digger, I'm not related to you.' He never lost that great ability to be right on the spot with his comments. He was funny, entertaining and charming to be with.

One great regret that I will never have in my life is the day that I decided to drop over and see him on my way to a community forum. It was a month to the day before he died. We had a great conversation. I was trying to con him into taking a group of master builders to Vietnam and he agreed to do that. We talked about water, we talked about politics and we talked about family. One thing he said to me was, 'Digger, I don't want to end up in an old people's home being a burden on the taxpayer. It'll do me to go out there on the bay.' You got your wish, Tom, in that regard. We wish it had not been so soon. You are sorely missed by your Labor family, as the Premier pointed out.

Too infrequently in life we meet people who make a difference. Too infrequently we pause to actually understand what a difference people do make in our lives. Tom Burns is such a person. He made a hell of a difference in my life. He made a hell of a difference to the lives of those in the Labor Party. He is sorely missed. He is an icon of the Labor movement; an icon of the Labor Party. I miss him greatly; the Labor Party misses him greatly.

My dear old friend, wherever you are, rest in peace. But if you are with Stanaway one could only imagine what they would be saying now. Stanaway, three sheets to the wind, would be saying, 'Ah, but really and truthfully, Tom, the department ought to be looking after this.' And Tom would say, 'What is the point. I'll write it myself. I'll get on and do it. I'll get on and do what I've got to do.'

Angela, it is a very, very sad day for you but a proud day also. This place is all the better for him being here. We are better people for knowing him. As I say, wherever you are, old friend, rest in peace.