




Speech by

Hon. Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Wednesday, 15 June 2011

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE: EATON, MR AG

 **Hon. CW PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (Minister for Disability Services, Mental Health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships) (9.40 am): I rise today to support the condolence motion moved by the Premier. Andrew George 'Bill' Eaton was born in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales but spent all of his adult life in Far North Queensland. As a young man he was a keen sportsman and in particular an accomplished rugby league player. The Eaton clan was a fixture in community life and enjoyed a reputation for being close-knit and deeply involved in the Catholic Church.

Bill pursued a career as a linesman with FNQEB, the forerunner of Ergon. He was a hardworking employee who earned the respect of workmates and bosses alike. His work was demanding and sometimes dangerous, taking him far and wide where his reputation as a good bloke continued to grow. Almost every person I have ever spoken to about Bill sings his praises as a man of integrity whose generosity and honesty were legend. Bill would never be wealthy, as his compassionate nature meant he would give someone in need the shirt off his back. I heard a story where he actually did this. This is a testament to who Bill was. This aura of fairness and decency carried on into his political career, marking Bill Eaton as one of those rare politicians who drew the respect of both sides of the House.

On a personal level, tragedy struck with the death of his beloved wife, Shirley, whose passing at 28 years of age left Bill to raise a very young family. But the four children could not have asked for a better provider and role model. It is an absolute credit to his love and guidance that each of his children has grown into a fine adult. They have all carried on the family tradition of community service and become highly respected in their own right. Bill and his young family moved to Innisfail, where he continued to work for FNQEB. The Innisfail community was richer for their presence, with every child, like their father, becoming heavily involved in community life.

To say the Eatons were into politics would be a huge understatement. Bill's father, Sandy, was Labor to the core and it was no surprise that Bill would eventually put his name forward for election. He ran for the seat of Mulgrave in 1983 at a time when the gerrymander made it virtually impossible to win. On his campaign team was a very young schoolteacher—my father—who took on the task of fundraising for a man whom he admired so much. Bill was unsuccessful and in 1986 stood for the seat of Mourilyan, winning it for Labor. When the Goss government was elected in 1989, Bill became minister for lands and held that position until his defeat in 1992, when a redistribution cut the seat up to make it virtually unwinnable for Labor. This did not deter Bill and he gave it his best shot, showing great humility in defeat. Legend has it that many members of the National Party would man the booths all day, hand out for their party and then go into the polling booth and vote for Bill Eaton, the man. Some say that many of these very same people actually donated to his campaign.

In an era when the value of academic qualifications became much overrated, some would be less than kind about his limited time of formal schooling. It was obvious to any who cared to look deeper that Bill Eaton had a masters degree in the school of hard knocks. His practical knowledge and grasp of real life ensured he could identify with his constituents and represent faithfully their views. As a local member he was without peer. He and his electorate officer Connie Bartaska formed a formidable team. No issue was

too small or constituent unworthy of his full and undivided attention. Everyone got the same excellent service from Bill Eaton. Everyone was treated with courtesy and respect, supporter and political foe alike.

Bill Eaton was not always the favourite son of bureaucracy, whether it be departmental or party. He was a person who called a spade a spade. Hubris and red tape were foreign to his way of doing business. He was a plain talker and an individual who saw through the less-than-transparent utterings of some career bureaucrats—in fact some career politicians.

Mr Speaker, I had the honour of attending the funeral of Bill Eaton as the Queensland government representative along with my father, who had a lengthy friendship with this remarkable man. It was a huge funeral marked by the attendance of individuals from across the political spectrum. This in itself was a measure of the esteem in which he was held. Given to the occasional word of advice, my father has suggested I could do no better than to model myself after Bill Eaton in respect of the way I lead my life and more importantly carry out my political representation. I know that Bill had a big influence on him. This is one piece of advice I actually am willing to accept from my dad, knowing full well the magnitude of the challenge.

Many people have regrets—often many years later—about something they may have said or not said in their maiden speech. Mine came only days afterwards when I talked about those politicians who had given me good advice—like former Cairns mayor Tom Pyne, the late, great Tom Burns, Wayne Goss, Kim Beazley and Gough Whitlam. It was my great regret that I failed to include Bill Eaton among those Labor legends who have influenced me. I was fortunate to tell Bill this the night before he died. I was grateful that I was able to say farewell and that I had the opportunity to hold his hand and say thank you. In the same hospital, just down the hallway, my wife, Kerry, was resting following the birth of our third child. I would later find out that Bill remarked to his son Steve that it was fitting that as one life faded another was beginning. I am told that this made Bill very happy.

On behalf of my family, the Australian Workers Union, the Innisfail branch of the Australian Labor Party and my parliamentary colleagues from Far North Queensland—the member for Cairns, the member for Cook and the member for Barron River—collectively we say thank you. Today we mark the passing of a faithful servant to the people of Queensland. May his family be comforted by the knowledge his life was one well spent and one universally recognised by all who knew Bill Eaton.