



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

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MOTION OF CONDOLENCE

Hewitt, Mr WD

 **Mr NICHOLLS** (Clayfield—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (9.43 am): I join with the Premier and, on behalf of myself and the opposition, offer our condolences on the passing of Bill Hewitt. I welcome Shirley, Wendy and Sue here today. I note that Bill passed away at the age of 86 and only recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of his wedding.

Bill Hewitt will be especially remembered for the standing he maintained in two key areas throughout his 17 years in the Queensland parliament: from 1966 to 1977 as the member for Chatsworth and then from 1977 to 1983 as the member for Greenslopes. His two key areas of concern were, first, as an advocate for genuinely liberal positions on a range of contemporary policy issues at the time and, second, as a champion of the role of parliament and particularly the functions and responsibilities of the backbencher.

Like many of us, Bill said he held no 'burning ambition to enter politics' and in his early days felt he did not have the self-confidence. Bill's father was a First World War veteran, and it could be said that the Hewitt family shared the scars of their father's terrible experiences in the Great War daily. Bill's father often reminded his children that he saw 6,000 men killed in a day. By his own admission, Bill said this made him a 'rather serious child' who kept a war diary from the age of 12. His father's stories and experiences created in Bill an interest in all things political, even though he may not have realised it at the time and may not have felt he was able to take on that role because he did not have the self-confidence.

As the Premier has said, Bill's first job was as a floor boy at the Carricks Furniture store in Brisbane. From that, he felt he would try to secure an apprenticeship in a trade. Due to tough economic times, that was not meant to be. Instead, he took a job as an office boy at Castlemaine Perkins. The company paid for Bill's night schooling in accountancy and he grew in competence and confidence.

Bill's first contact with established politics was after his lifelong friend Ian Bunsley encouraged him to attend a meeting of the metropolitan zone of the Young Liberals, who met in Edward Street every Thursday night. In Bill's own words, he 'loved it and was hooked'. He loved the people, the questions, the arguments, the guest speakers. He was 'trapped'—in a good way, I think we would all agree. Through his involvement in the Young Libs, Bill became close to Jim Killen and took part in many campaigns. In 1960, after redistribution, he was asked to contest the seat of Belmont. He then took it as a compliment but later realised it was going to be a bit of a battle. He knocked on about 4,000 doors in that first campaign and secured 38 per cent of the vote. He said of that time that 'fighting a losing campaign doesn't do you any harm at all'. I am not sure that everyone would agree necessarily with those sentiments.

Bill was more successful in running for the seat of Chatsworth in 1966, when he was first elected as the local member. From that time Bill and several of his backbench colleagues sought to embrace a so-called small-l liberal approach. This reflected the changing nature of politics in Queensland where, after 10 years of coalition government, the winds of change were beginning to blow through both the parliament and, more broadly, society.

In the 30 years after Bill Hewitt left active parliamentary politics, his commitment to his principles never wavered. He continued to advocate for his beliefs and will be remembered as one of those members who was always willing to take the fight to his political foes. Indeed, I can remember in my own time in this place—much shorter than Bill’s—the tremendous amount of advice that Bill sought to impart not only to me but also, I am sure, to other new members in this place over many years. It was no surprise to receive a call in the electorate office, one of the ministerial offices or the opposition office from Bill wanting to catch up and have a chat to discuss some matter of contemporary political interest. As I say, he was always happy to have a chat and provide the benefit of his years of experience.

While Bill Hewitt served as a minister for nearly three years, it is as Chairman of Committees and as a campaigner for and guardian of the parliament that his memory will be treasured. In March 1971 Bill called for the establishment of a series of all-party parliamentary committees to review various significant policy areas, and in the late 1970s, along with future premier Mike Ahern, Bill Hewitt was one of the first to advocate for the role of the backbencher in parliament and for a system of parliamentary committees: public accounts, public works, subordinate legislation and parliamentary privileges—committees now regarded as the norm but which aroused considerable suspicion among the cabinets of decades ago. Bill always believed that parliament could function more effectively if its procedures better reflected modern practices. He was a measured but consistent critic of outdated standing orders and parliamentary procedures, something I wholeheartedly support. In 1972 he said—

There is a ground swell of opinion among honourable members that our procedures are not good enough.

...

It is our task to administer the affairs of this State efficiently and well. How can we be seen to do that when our own procedures are more in keeping with those of a bygone age?

As Chairman of Committees Bill forged a reputation for even-handedness at a time when bipartisanship could be said to have been in limited supply. Even Bill’s opponents recognised his professionalism as a presiding officer. The late Kevin Hooper, predecessor to the Premier’s father as the member for Archerfield and one of Labor’s most robust debaters, lavished praise on Bill Hewitt just before his elevation to cabinet in 1980 when he said—

It would be churlish of me if I did not pay tribute to the manner in which he has discharged his duties as Chairman of this Parliament ... I believe that the member for Greenslopes has been one of the fairest and most impartial Chairmen to have held that position since I have been in this House.

For those who recall Mr Hooper, this is a high mark indeed, but it captures the sweeping regard held for Bill Hewitt and his mastery of principled politics. Both the member for Mansfield and the member for Chatsworth attended Mr Hewitt’s funeral yesterday. On behalf of the opposition, I join with the Premier in expressing our condolences to Shirley, Wendy and Sue and to their extended family here in the House today.