




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Record of Proceedings, 16 September 2021

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE

McElligott, Mr KV

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (9.43 am): Can I start by acknowledging Shirley in the gallery, son Scott and Jen as well. I spoke with Toni who is in lockdown in Victoria and who would love to be here. I know she is watching this right now. I acknowledge Mark as well. I acknowledge also, Mike Reynolds, former Speaker. Many people are watching this on Parliament TV. It is an honour to speak to this condolence motion today.

Ken Victor McElligott was born in Maryborough—another champion from Maryborough—on 14 February 1940 to parents Harold Norman McElligott and Rachel Anne (nee Walker), attending Maryborough Central State School and the Boys High School. Ken married Shirley Mary Elizabeth Hair on 9 January 1960 at St James Cathedral and went on to have two sons and one daughter. Along with grandchildren, great-grandchildren, family and friends, they celebrated their diamond anniversary in January last year. It was such a honour for my wife, Amanda, and me to be invited along to that. What a wonderful achievement: 60 years of marriage. At breakfast this morning I was reflecting that my wife and I had just celebrated our 20th and Shirley said to me, 'Forty to go, Aaron!'

Ken met Shirley at Parks Hockey Club after he relocated from the Fraser Coast. It was said that it was a love affair which first flourished over a passion for sport, Ken's ability on the field catching Shirley's eye. After working as a clerk, an accountant and an administrative officer in research at James Cook University in North Queensland, Ken was elected to the Townsville City Council in 1976. He was first elected as an alderman on 29 March 1976 and from October 1980 to December 1983 was made deputy mayor of Townsville City Council, serving under Mike Reynolds, former member for Townsville and former Speaker of this House. He had seven-plus years in local government.

Ken was then elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly as the member for Townsville on 22 October 1983, and I know how proud the family was of that victory. On 1 November 1986 he transferred to the very new seat of Thuringowa and held that seat until 13 June 1998, a total of five terms. To put that in perspective: 15 years in state government, seven in local; all up 22 years proudly serving the people of Townsville and Thuringowa.

He made an enormous contribution as health minister, which I will talk to. That is no mean feat, and one I intend to—and promised Ken I would—replicate. To the members of the opposition, bring your best charge next time around. He was so excited at every single election. Shirley is fantastic. She will drop in to the electorate office for a cuppa and tell us to give it to the Tories. Ken was exactly the same. He never held back. I know how happy he was with me winning the last three elections in Thuringowa.

Immediately after his election, Ken was appointed opposition spokesman on welfare services, youth and ethnic affairs, shifting to health in 1985, to regional and northern development and small business in 1987 and to local government and small business in 1988—I think members will all agree, a broad range of responsibilities. With the election of the Goss government in 1989 Ken became minister for health, serving in that position until 1991.

During Ken's time in state politics, as the Premier said, he was a member of a number of committees and led a number of overseas delegations in his career, including a delegation to Taiwan and the United States. His proudest achievement, I am sure, was as the minister for health and the focus on decentralising the health system. As son Scott is quoted in the *Townsville Bulletin* as saying, we would not have the wonderful health care that we have today throughout regional Queensland without that concept that Ken brought in. You should be very proud. Ken was very well respected, irrespective of what side of politics you were on, also saying it was above politics. He was a proud Townsville representative first and a Labor member and politician second. He was a Townsville champion through and through.

Ken was a life member and former president of Wests Hockey Club, Townsville Hockey Association and Hockey Queensland. One of his crowning achievements was founding the North Queensland Games, now the North Queensland Sports Foundation. Ken was chairman of the Townsville Suns in the state basketball league. He was chairman of the Townsville Port Society and patron to over 30 organisations. Ken was given life membership of the ALP, described as his proudest moment.

As the current state member for Thuringowa, I am absolutely humbled to have been asked to speak today on Ken's amazing contribution to Townsville and, in particular, Thuringowa. Above all, Ken was a mentor and a friend. When I first indicated I was interested in running in mid-2014, my mentor in the ambulance service, the OIC of Kirwan station, said to me, 'You need to go and speak to someone who has been there before. You need to go and speak to Ken McElligott.' Ken was in what was the Masonic home, now Regis. Ken was battling MS. Whilst he might have needed a chair, his mind was incredibly sharp. I loved his letters. I dropped in there and we kicked off a fantastic friendship that has lasted these last six years through to his funeral. I was incredibly proud to be asked to speak at his funeral.

From time to time, I would drop in. I have to reflect on a couple of funny occasions. I do not know how I am going to get through one of them because it is just not parliamentary. Ken loved my visits. If I was in a meeting with the member for Townsville and had a bit of space between meetings, on the way back to my office I would call in unannounced. He loved it. We would sit and talk about the politics of the day. On one occasion I walked in and a look of relief came over Ken's face. He was sitting in his chair and he had a friend there, who got up and left. Ken wheeled himself to the door and made sure that his friend was down the hall. He said, 'Thank God you've arrived. He's a bloody Tory and he's been talking my ear off all morning!'

Ken was very proud of my achievement after the first 2015 election. He said, 'You're going to stamp your own brand on this, Aaron.' I absolutely committed to him that I would follow each of his terms. He did four terms in Thuringowa and I am not giving up any time soon. Ken, Shirley and their family, particularly Scott in Townsville, have been there supporting me in every which way, including Toni through messages on Facebook. Shirley, I do love it when you drop in for a cuppa. You are absolutely welcome at any time. Your help has certainly been appreciated.

Early last year my wife, Amanda, and I had the great pleasure of being invited to Ken and Shirley's 60th wedding anniversary where I had the opportunity to recount another funny story. Members might recall that in the lead-up to the 2017 election the Townsville Chamber of Commerce held its annual 'throw us to the wolves' debate for candidates. We know what we are walking into. I love it. I love getting a little bit combative in these things. The morning before the debate I was preparing in my office. My mobile rang. It was Mike Reynolds. This is the hard bit as I am not sure how I will say this. Members will just have to fill in the 'dot, dot, dots'. Mike said, 'Don't take a backwards step in there tomorrow, Aaron. Don't take any ... !' Anyway, that phone call ended and the office phone rang. It was Ken. Ken said, 'And don't lose, you ... !' They both had my interests at heart. I am deeply grateful for that consistent advice and support.

On 19 April 2018 we had a very special naming ceremony. I thank the former member for housing, Minister de Brenni, for allowing us to name buildings proudly built by our government in memory of local champions who have given so much to our local community. Ken certainly did all that and a hell of a lot more for our city. I know members will probably react to this, but we held a very special naming ceremony at No. 771 Riverway Drive. Riverway Drive is something I am incredibly proud of.

Ms Palaszcuk interjected.

Mr HARPER: Riverway Drive, Premier! Riverway Drive! It is a \$5.5 million, 14-unit housing complex with disability access. Ken and family proudly attended the ceremony. That is a great and lasting legacy. It is named Ken McElligott House for a very good reason. It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to honour his legacy and everything that he has done. We named Ken McElligott House in very special memory of Ken McElligott and his enormous contribution.

Shirley, the last thing I got to do with both yourself and Ken was after the 2020 election. Amanda and I dropped in at Regis for morning tea. Ken was so excited to hear about the result and how we had gone. That was a really special morning. I want to again thank you so much for all of those times and for all of the private conversations. I have to tell you that every time I drive down that road and past the unit now, it brings back a lot of memories of how Ken really got behind us. I greatly value his friendship and that of the entire McElligott family. I could not have done it without you.

I want to keep my promise and match Ken's terms in Thuringowa, plus one more. Why not? From the beginning I told him that I would do that so I will keep cracking on. His legacy is fantastic. I am so proud to follow in his footsteps. Thank you very much for being here. Vale, Ken McElligott.