



Speech By  
**Jason Hunt**


**MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA**

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Record of Proceedings, 12 October 2023

**MOTION OF CONDOLENCE**

**Ahern, Hon. MJ, AO**

 **Mr HUNT** (Caloundra—ALP) (9.44 am): Michael John Ahern was born in Maleny, Queensland in June 1942 and left us in August 2023. I hasten to add that in the 50 years I have lived in Caloundra I do not think I ever heard anyone call him ‘Michael’. To Caloundra, he will always be ‘Mike’. When his friend and mentor premier Frank Nicklin retired as the member for Landsborough in 1968, Mike was preselected and won the ensuing by-election. Wikipedia tells us that he ‘handily won’ the ensuing by-election. Well, you might say that. Mike barely fell across the line, with 63 per cent of the primary vote!

The time spent with Frank Nicklin prior to his retirement seems to have been transformative for Mike. Frank was a well-regarded parliamentarian. I imagine the time they spent together driving around the electorate on Saturdays was invaluable to Mike in later life. At the tender age of 25, he became the MP for the seat and remained the member for over 20 years. When eulogising Mike, Malcolm McMillan stated—

He was a cultured man, a man of the arts, an educated man, a first class family man, a man of science and technology, who possessed a constant intellectual thirst to always keep on learning irrespective of what the subject might be.

Much has been said about Mike since his passing: his integrity, his clashes with his predecessor, his brief but highly active tenure as premier—all of which is vital to the commemoration of the man and his legacy. We here are all familiar with Mike’s impeccable conduct as it pertains to the Fitzgerald inquiry and his earnest desire to set things right after the disastrous previous few years of his predecessor, but by repetition we risk diluting the magnitude of what Mike Ahern was. The phrase ‘lock, stock and barrel’ is worth retelling certainly, but let us dig a little deeper and acknowledge Mike’s true worth. To do what he did, to say what he said, to enact the things he enacted and to take the stand that he took—these things show not just integrity but also courage, and when I say ‘courage’ I mean it in its most literal sense. Courage comes from two Latin words: ‘cor’ meaning heart and ‘agere’ meaning to act—to act from the heart. That is what Mike did in those dark days. He acted from the heart when many about him could find neither their heart nor their courage.

So far as his family was concerned, Mike did not just represent the seat of Landsborough; he loved it. It was his home. Mike continued to serve as patron of many local organisations long after he retired from parliament because he would never say no if the community needed him. As the member for Landsborough, he fought hard for local schools because he believed in the power of education to transform lives—something Mike and I have in common. To walk down the street with Mike was to feel as though he knew absolutely everyone. He had the most extraordinary memory for names and was always up for a chat—with a cheery ‘hello’ and a joke or a story to tell. Mike listened—and I mean he really listened, with an open mind and an open heart.

On 25 August Mike was given a state funeral. I had never been to a state funeral and I did not know what to expect. I imagined a service that might have been so ceremonial as to lose some of its humanity. This was absolutely not the case with Mike's state funeral. The reasons for that are sitting in the gallery today. Mike's grandchildren, but especially Mike's children, gave him a send-off such that we would all wish when our time comes. The love, the respect, the adoration, the humour and the palpable sense of loss all came across in the words of his children. I do not know the Ahern family, although I did go to primary school with Louise Ahern. I remember a small girl with a dusting of freckles, short pigtails and a hand-knitted green cardie. Those are my memories of Louise. I can honestly say that his children did him proud that day. It is testimony to the character of Mike that after 20 years in this chamber he was roundly and genuinely respected by both sides of the House, and how many of us will be able to say that?

In Caloundra, Mike will be remembered for his greatness, but equally he will be remembered as the kindly, softly spoken, silver-haired, extremely tall gentleman, for a gentleman he was by every measure. He strolled along the headlands of Shelly and Moffat beaches with ever a nod and a kind word for anyone who stopped to chat.

I close now with an anecdote that speaks about these very traits. Some years ago, while still a custodial officer, I was coming home after a night shift at six or 6.30 in the morning. I was renting in Moffat Street at Moffat Beach at the time, so I pulled into one of the cafes in Moffat Beach to grab a coffee. Mike was standing at the counter beside me when I ordered and he glanced down at my uniform—he was clearly curious. He asked me where I worked and I told him, 'Woodford Correctional Centre.' He said, after a pause, 'Yes, we had to close down part of Boggo Road jail. It was getting old and the Prison Officers Union was getting very militant.' He asked me, 'What do you do there?' I said with a tiny smirk, 'I am a prison officer and the union vice-president.' At that, with the merest suggestion of a smile, he laid his hand upon my shoulder and said, 'Step lightly, won't you.'

It is customary in this House to conclude a condolence motion with 'vale', meaning 'farewell', but instead I will be borrowing one of Mike's favourite bon mots with the permission of his family. Mike, abyssinia later. You are part of the fabric of Caloundra.