



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Wilton, Mr Gregory Stuart

SPEECH

Monday, 19 June 2000

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Questioner
Speaker Fitzgibbon, Joel, MP

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Mr FITZGIBBON (Hunter) (1.12 pm)—I have had the opportunity, the privilege really, to talk with Greg's sister over the last few days. I know that she would want me on behalf of all the family to extend their thanks to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and indeed all those from both this side and the government side who I know will contribute to this condolence motion. I know that the family also appreciates the fact that the government has accepted quite a disruption to its legislative program over the next couple of days to facilitate this process and those that will follow it. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition mentioned the gymnasium. Most people in this place will know—well, maybe not an ideal number—that Greg was a regular there. I do not know what time Greg got to the gym—

Mr Martin—Before you, brother; I'll tell you that.

Mr FITZGIBBON—The member for the Northern Territory and others make the point for me; he was always there when I arrived. Come to think of it, he was always still there when I departed. When I arrived we always had a little ritual to undertake—I would always identify him by his seat: 'Member for Isaacs,' I would politely acknowledge, and he would always respond in the same way by saying, 'Brother Hunter,' and we would go on with our business—he, again I acknowledge, more actively than I.

I understand that Greg Wilton has always been a bit of a fitness fanatic, but I think it is true to say that, in the cold confines of this building, he was happiest when he was in the gymnasium. You see, the gym is a great leveller; it is a place where only ability matters, where hard work and commitment count for more than allegiances and loyalties. It is also one of the few rooms in this building—a building in which all of us have many friends but probably even more potential enemies, on both sides—where a true sense of camaraderie exists. As the Deputy Leader of the Opposition said, Greg Wilton was not at the gym when we arrived this morning, and of course none of us can be sure why.

No doubt the reasons he decided he must leave us early were many and complex, but I do know three basic things without any doubt at all. First, once he was over the initial euphoria that election to this place brings, Greg never really enjoyed the Canberra end of the job. Sure, he liked the work, but he did not deal well with the dislocation from the family that the Canberra end of the job brings. In short, he missed his family very much. Second, both the breakdown of his second marriage and the consequent further separation from his children cut very deep. Third, it became increasingly obvious to Greg, in his final days, that the one important thing he had left in his life—that is, his position here—was about to be taken from him. No event would have made that more clear to Greg than an article which appeared in the *Herald Sun* last Tuesday, which treated his political demise as a *fait accompli*. Greg understood the challenge he faced in retaining his preselection, but he was ready to take up that fight. Yet there were some, it seems, who were unwilling to allow him to continue his good work in the current parliament, let alone afford him the opportunity to consider another term.

Greg Wilton worked hard to become a member of this place. Most members, particularly those on this side, know that only too well. They know he worked very hard initially to secure preselection for the seat of Holt but was persuaded to move aside to accommodate Gareth Evans. But Greg, typically, did not take his bat and go home. Instead, he turned his efforts to the marginal Liberal held seat of Isaacs, a seat he knew he could win if he put in the hard yards, and, of course, that is exactly what he did. It is now history that Greg Wilton did win Isaacs and was subsequently rewarded for his hard work and effective representation with a significantly increased electoral margin at the 1998 poll.

Isaacs was a good move for Greg. He was born in Chelsea hospital, attended kindergarten and primary school in Edithvale and gained his secondary education at Bonbeach. All of those institutions are in the electorate of Isaacs. Indeed, Greg lived in the Isaacs electorate for 42 of his 44 short years. Greg was not only a good local member but also a good parliamentarian. He was a good and persuasive orator and had a passion for his committee work. Underpinning all he did in this place were his commitment, true sense of social justice and his fight for a better Australia.

His commitment to the labour movement was a longstanding one. He was heavily involved in student politics at Monash University, and he became a member of the Australian Labor Party at a relatively young age. After enjoying the mandatory extended overseas experience, he worked for a number of trade unions, as has been mentioned. But in between that, and lesser known, he had a taste of life as a blue-collar worker, taking a number of labouring jobs within a number of organisations, including the railways. Greg loved the labour movement and, more importantly, he was proud to be part of it. In his first speech in this place, he said:

There is no greater institution for improving the lives of Australians than the Commonwealth parliament. There is no greater forum for debating national issues than the Commonwealth parliament. Nevertheless, I am mindful that the House of Representatives is the house where governments are both made and unmade. If this House is to be more than simply a house of debate and a forum for debate, the Australian Labor Party must once again assume the mantle of government. I dedicate my entire efforts in this parliament to achieving that goal.

At the risk of politicising the debate, I say to Greg, 'Mate, you may have had only 18 more months to wait.'

For recreation, Greg loved to surf, but even more he loved bushwalking. Probably one of the lesser-known facts about Greg is that the science graduate could cite the botanical name of just about every Australian native plant. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition mentioned that he began taking guitar lessons soon after his arrival in this place, and I know that was in part motivated by the infamous Tuesday night drinks sessions the Labor Party has. Some may have, but I have to say that I never really saw him put those talents into effect. His sister tells me that he wasn't very good.

Greg's dad, Allen, died a few years ago, and I know that loss cut very deeply. As has been mentioned by previous speakers, he is survived by his mum, Joy, who of course has had a torrid time, and his sister, Leeanda, who are both devastated by the events of the last week or more. Greg told me that, following an earlier incident, his dad remained very strong until the age of 81, and stood by him. He also leaves behind his wife, Maria, and two beautiful and very young children, Lachlan and Eliza. Unfortunately they may never fully appreciate how much he loved them.

On the subject of the children, I want to say this: Greg assured me that he did not attempt to harm them in any way. While he readily conceded there was an incident, I believed him when he told me that in his own mind he knew he would never have proceeded with any action that would have brought any harm to them. I believe that the police may have a statement from a third party which will confirm this to be the case, and I only hope that legal procedure allows them to make those facts known to the family at some point. Anyone who knew Greg Wilton well knows that he was a very gentle, humane and loving person. Greg Wilton was a mate of mine, and I am very proud to be able to say that. The class of 96 has suffered a great loss.