



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Patterson, Hon. Dr Rex Alan**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 2 May 2016**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 2 May 2016  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Shorten, Bill, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr SHORTEN** (Maribyrnong—Leader of the Opposition) (14:03): I second the motion. Today our parliament salutes the life of a man of grand designs and big ambitions. Like so many of his colleagues in the Whitlam cabinet, Rex Patterson had an imagination built above scale; a vision splendid for his community, for Northern Australia, and for the great hinterland of our nation. Rex's dreams of developing the North owed a lot to the Australia Unlimited tradition of men like John Bradfield and Ion Idriess—the idea, in the words of the latter, that: 'Our home is a great continent containing the riches of the world. It depends on us alone whether we make or mar it.' And yet, for all the sweep of his ideas, he was also an immensely practical person. He believed in the power of human hands putting nature to work. He shared the frustration of all of those in the North who battled droughts while they watched the surging floodwaters of the Burdekin run out to sea. His focus remained always on unleashing the economic potential of ordinary Australians; supporting cattle farmers, cane growers and miners.

As a young man, Rex was a champion athlete, gifted at tennis and rugby league. At age 18, he enlisted in the RAAF for what would turn out to be the final few months of the war. In 1966, he won the Dawson by-election, and throughout his rise to government and cabinet remained a thoroughly down-to-earth local member. Paul Keating tells the story of his first visit to Mackay as the new Minister for Northern Australia and Rex, as the local member, meeting at the airport. PJK, as you can imagine, Mr Speaker, was dressed in the best; Rex was in what he called his working clothes. He kindly took Keating's suitcase from him before throwing it in the back of his ute with one of his dogs. As Paul said, 'that is the North Queensland way'.

Perhaps Rex's finest hour came in the aftermath of tropical Cyclone Tracy in 1974. The enormous devastation Tracy inflicted on Christmas Eve 1974 has somewhat faded from our national memory with the passing of time, but, in the words of one report, 'by Christmas morning Darwin had, in material terms, ceased to exist'. In a city of 13,000 buildings, an estimated 400 remained intact. The airport was unusable. The wharves were destroyed. The power lines were down. Every telephone line was cut, every radio transmitter was out of action. Rex was there by Boxing Day. He was deeply shocked by the sheer immensity of the destruction, and greatly moved by both the sadness and stoicism of the survivors. The breadth of reconstruction required in the wake of Cyclone Tracy was a task made for a minister of Rex's determination, his energy and his vision. While some urged complete abandonment and a new location—and others sought merely the cheapest, swiftest job—along with Tom Uren, Rex persuaded the Whitlam government to plan for the rebuilding of Darwin as a modern city, not merely as a repair job for an old town. In the face of disaster, he saw the opportunity to do lasting good. In the 1975 landslide brought on by the Dismissal, Rex would lose his seat, and when the new parliament convened it did so in an atmosphere still thick with bitter partisanship and recrimination. But Rex's successor as the member for Dawson, Ray Braithwaite, began his first speech with kind words for Rex's dedication to his electorate, his idealism, and his passion for developing the North.

This was the measure of the Hon. Rex Patterson. Respected and admired by all for the sincerity of his views, we honour his memory today. We offer our party and our nation's condolences to the people who loved him and the people he loved. May he rest in peace.

The SPEAKER: As a mark of respect, I ask all present to signify their approval by rising in their places.

*Honourable members having stood in their places—*

The SPEAKER: I thank the House.

Debate adjourned.