

WILLESEE, HON WILLIAM FRANCIS

Condolence Motion

HON N.F. MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the House) [3.32 pm]: I move -

That this House expresses its deep regret at the death of Hon W.F. (Bill) Willesee, a former member of the Legislative Council for the North Province and the North-East Metropolitan Province, Minister for Community Welfare and Leader of the Government and Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council; and places on record its appreciation for his long public service, and tenders its profound sympathy to his wife and members of his family on their bereavement.

Hon Bill Willesee had a distinguished career as a member of the Legislative Council for 20 years representing the North Province and the North-East Metropolitan Province. He was the Minister for Community Welfare from 1971 to 1973 and Leader of the Opposition and of the Government for seven years from 1966. At the same time he is remembered as a fair-minded, decent and unassuming man and a loyal member of the Australian Labor Party, well respected by his political opponents.

Bill Willesee was born in Adelaide in December 1911, but grew up in Wyndham and at Carnarvon where he attended primary school. During this time his father unsuccessfully contested the districts of Kimberley and Gascoyne for the Australian Labor Party on three occasions, establishing a family tradition of political involvement. Bill Willesee left school at the age of 13 and began working for the Goldsborough Mort pastoral company while qualifying as an accountant after studying by correspondence.

During his working career, Bill Willesee was employed in both the private and public sectors and most notably was Town Clerk of Carnarvon from 1936 to 1942 - when he enlisted in the Volunteer Defence Corps - and again from 1951 to 1954. It was a considerable achievement to be appointed a town clerk at the age of 24 and he proved a most popular incumbent. His younger brother Don Willesee was elected as a Western Australian senator at the 1949 election.

At the biennial election for the Legislative Council in May 1954, Bill Willesee contested the North Province for the Australian Labor Party. It was then a three-member province consisting of the districts of Kimberley, Pilbara and Gascoyne with a total of 1 500 electors. The restricted franchise of those days disadvantaged the ALP in North Province and only since 1950 have Labor candidates been successful. At the previous biennial election in 1952 the ALP candidate won by five votes. With the retirement of the sitting Liberal MLC, Bill Willesee polled 619 votes to gain an absolute majority of 35 over his two coalition opponents. The turnout of voters was an impressive 82 per cent, given that voluntary voting applied to Legislative Council elections prior to 1965.

Bill Willesee was a popular representative of the remote communities of North Province. At the 1960 election he received 65 per cent of the 1 500 votes cast. With the changes to the Legislative Council after 1963, each province had two MLCs in place of three, and North Province lost the Gascoyne district. In the transition arrangements, Bill Willesee's term was extended until 1968 and in 1965 he transferred to the new North-East Metropolitan Province comprising the districts of Maylands, Mirrabooka, Ascot, Swan and Belmont. He was returned unopposed at the 1968 election.

His contribution to Parliament is reflected in his appointment as ALP Whip in the Legislative Council in 1959, becoming Deputy Leader of the Opposition in this House in 1962. In 1966 he succeeded Hon Frank Wise as Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council. It is notable that all three MLCs from the old North Province - Harry Strickland, Frank Wise and Bill Willesee - successfully led the ALP in this Chamber between 1958 and 1973.

After the 1971 election, Bill Willesee was Leader of the Government and Minister for Community Welfare. Leading a government team outnumbered by the Opposition is not an easy task but he had the great respect of coalition members. He would even offer to move opposition amendments himself. He was regarded as a competent and conscientious minister, conscientious to the extent that his health became affected. In early 1973 he stood down from Cabinet and did not recontest the 1974 election.

According to biographical notes, after leaving Parliament, Bill Willesee worked as an accountant for a curtain company, and then as a crosswalk attendant for seven years from 1978. This is the measure of a man anxious to serve the community in small things as well as in high office.

It is clear that Bill Willesee was a man of humility and dedication. He served both as the representative of a huge, sparsely-populated province and of a numerically large compact urban province. He was a respected leader of his party. Such people enrich this Parliament and set a fine example. Our sympathies are with his wife and family in their loss.

HON TOM STEPHENS (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the Opposition) [3.37 pm]: On behalf of the Opposition, I speak in support of the motion moved by the Leader of the House in expressing the sympathy of this Chamber to the family of Hon W.F. (Bill) Willesee, a former leader of the Australian Labor Party in this place. In so doing, I take the opportunity of expressing the appreciation of the Australian Labor Party for the dedicated life and service of this former member.

Bill Willesee was born in Adelaide on 26 December 1911. Bill was the elder brother by three years of former Senator Don Willesee who was a Labor senator from 1950 to 1975 and who survived Bill and still lives in the northern suburbs of Perth. Bill and Don were the sons of William Robert Willesee. Bill Willesee senior was well known in the north as a drover, cattle buyer and stock inspector in Wyndham. He married Ethel May Flinders who had gone to Wyndham as the paid companion to my wife's grandmother, Mary Durack, back in the early part of this century when she married James Ebenezer Davidson. The links between Adelaide and those Wyndham families were manifold through the Davidson-Durack, Durack-Johnstone and Willesee-Flinders connections.

It was Ethel May who in many ways was the extraordinary strength in that family. She later went on to become the proprietor of a lodging house, and she helped support her young family later in Carnarvon working as a dressmaker.

It was Bill Willesee senior who, among many things he did in the township of Wyndham, took on the role of pioneering the cattle trade with the Philippines. That was a fledgling trade that M.P. Durack was trying to secure in the face of the difficulties that the station people had in getting their cattle from the east Kimberley to the Western Australian market. I find it fascinating to read in the records about the work done by Bill Willesee senior as he tried, in collaboration with M.P. Durack, to open up that trade.

In recent months I have been involved in some diplomatic efforts of my own in re-establishing the cattle trade with the Philippines that was for a while under threat because of a variety of issues about which people will know. I have had some success in ensuring that the cattle trade is once again available to those northern stations. Anyone involved in that will look with amazement at the work of someone like Bill Willesee senior, as well as M.P. Durack, in the early part of the century. All of that was an extremely formative experience for a young man who subsequently went on in this place to take up the challenges of championing the cause of the northern residents of this State.

From Wyndham the family moved to Carnarvon, but not before Bill Willesee senior decided to run against his former business partner, who was then the sitting member for Kimberley. M.P. Durack was elected as a member of the Nationalist Party, and recontested as a Country Party member. However, at the election in 1921, Bill Willesee stood formally as an Independent, but clearly an Independent Labor person, against M.P. Durack, but was unsuccessful.

At Carnarvon, Bill continued his studies with distinction. He had studied previously at the primary school in Wyndham. He then studied at the local primary school in Carnarvon. He left there at the age of 13 years but was later to complete his high school education, effectively part time, at the local Carnarvon convent. He went on to study accountancy by correspondence at the Perth Technical College, picked up his Diploma of Accountancy and was an Associate Member of the Australian Society of Accountants and an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries. From 1925 to 1932 he was employed by Goldsborough Mort, and during the depression years of the 1930s, having lost his work opportunities with Goldsborough Mort, he took casual work that included periods as a wool lumper, as a jetty and road worker, and as a worker with the local trucking companies in Carnarvon which carted the fuel and other supplies from Carnarvon to the station communities of the Gascoyne region.

It was through this work that he secured many relationships throughout the Gascoyne region that would subsequently stand him in good stead in his political career. In 1936 he became town clerk in Carnarvon, a position that he held until 1942, when he went on to serve in the Volunteer Defence Corps, taking the rank of sergeant in that year. After the war, he worked with the Harbour and Lights Department, and then from 1948 to 1951 was the manager of Thornett and Davis, the transport company and plantation owner - again resuming that connection with the station communities and the growers of Carnarvon. He returned to work as town clerk in Carnarvon from September 1951 until his election to this place in 1954.

Although Bill formally joined the Labor Party in 1943, he had been intimately involved in the Labor movement and campaigns in the north of this State from when he was a very young boy. Not only did his father run his first campaign from Wyndham but also he subsequently ran unsuccessfully for the seat of Gascoyne in 1924 and 1927. Bill Willesee records in his oral history, which is found in the library in a record taken in 1986, the great sense of disappointment that his family experienced as a result of the losses his father suffered at those three elections, especially the last, into which so much of the family fortune, time and effort had been sunk and which I am led to believe was in part the reason that his wife was faced with the task of taking on the responsibility of

running lodging houses, sewing and dressmaking to look after the young family members who were still wanting to take up an education. In those times, running for Parliament in those areas required an enormous amount of arduous work in a vast, sparsely populated region, with miles of road travel to seek out those pockets of voters who might lend their support and be persuaded to vote for a particular candidate in a contest that the Leader of the House has described as one that was inevitably close by virtue of the nature of politics in that part of the world.

Despite the early experiences and heartaches of politics, Bill Willesee stayed intimately involved in politics in that area. Subsequent to his father's lack of success, he was involved in the campaigns of Frank Wise. The first was the unsuccessful campaign that Frank ran in 1930, then the campaign when Frank successfully ran for Gascoyne in 1933, and subsequently he was involved in Harry Strickland's successful campaigns. He was involved again when Frank Wise resumed his period of parliamentary representation for North Province from the 1950s.

It was Bill's loyal support of the Labor Party and local Labor members of Parliament, his popularity locally, his work in support of the ordinary working men and women of the north west and his talent and success in local government that ensured his preselection when he ran successfully for North Province in 1954. His recall in the memoirs of which I have spoken of that successful campaign and subsequent efforts to serve the people of that vast, remote region illustrates the character and the life and times of our former colleague and my party's former leader in this place. The work was arduous, the travel was exhausting and the challenges and tasks were difficult. Bill travelled extensively by car, boat and increasingly by aeroplane, particularly to those northern centres of the then North Province, which stretched from Wyndham, through the Pilbara down into the Gascoyne.

It was in that role as a local member of Parliament for the people of the north west that Bill served with particular distinction. Interestingly, he is still remembered in a number of ways in the towns of the north. His family name graces an attractive street off the main street of Carnarvon, in which is located the family home of our former Labor colleague for that area, Kevin Leahy. Bill also lives on in the history books and stories of the north, one of which I came across when I was in Shark Bay-Denham last week. There, a lifelong resident and current local shire councillor, Dennis Hoult, described to me being given a lift from his home town of Denham when, as a youngster, he was being returned to his school in Geraldton by his family. He had been entrusted to the care of the local member of Parliament for the car trip south. He was in the member's car as it took off from Denham to take Bill back to Perth and to take Dennis to Geraldton via the route chosen by the local member of Parliament. Dennis described the trip that was taken by Bill at the time as incredibly educative. Bill's trek took much longer than the normal anticipated time for such a trip, because on the back seat of the vehicle was an ice chest containing the produce of the north - the mangoes and bananas of Carnarvon - as well as a catch of pink snapper from the Shark Bay-Denham area.

Hon Kim Chance: When they still had them.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes, when they still had them in bigger numbers. Bill called in at each and every station homestead to drop off a fish and some mangoes and bananas. Such was the nature of the electorate and the narrow margins upon which the local member was operating that he greeted the station people with an attentive, cheerful hello in an effort to stay in contact and intimately interested in their lives and welfare as he weaved his way south. It was a memorable trip for Councillor Dennis Hoult, who, as a young boy, was returning to Geraldton for schooling.

Bill served in this House in the incredibly difficult years for Labor between 1956 and 1958, especially when item after item of the Government's legislative agenda was being given a rough trot. In fact, a substantial amount of the legislative program bit the dust because of the vigorous, robust approach that was adopted by the conservative majority at that time. The changes in the mid 1960s, about which the Leader of the House spoke, left two seats in the north for Frank Wise and Harry Strickland. Bill, their junior and in awe of his seniors whom he held in the highest regard, immediately indicated that he had no intention of contesting their preselections. He was quickly the beneficiary of a call from Joe Chamberlain at the party office who said, "Put your name in for North East Metropolitan." He secured preselection and successfully returned to this House as a metropolitan member of Parliament, uncontested at the 1965 by-election following the reconstitution of this House.

Bill served his party, this Parliament and the people of this State in various significant roles. He was Opposition Whip from 1959 to 1962. He was Deputy Leader of the Opposition from 1962 to 1966. He was the Leader of the Opposition from 1966 to March 1971, when he became the Leader of the Government in this place for the Tonkin Labor Administration. He was given the onerous responsibility of Minister for Community Welfare at a time of enormous social change in this State. It was close on the heels of the 1967 referendum and the changing nature of the Aboriginal population's position within our society. Bill was left with the responsibility of welding together a department that accepted the responsibility for the old native welfare office and also the statutory

obligations that came with looking after the interests of children in particular. The Department of Community Welfare was established, as was the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority. Bill basically charted the course for recognising that the interests and the responsibility of the Federal Government in this area had been awoken by the referendum. There were fresh opportunities for injecting into the community of Western Australia additional financial help that had already been available in the Northern Territory but which had not been significantly available in this State. He skilfully combined the role of a state commissioner for Aboriginal affairs with the dual role of being both a state and a commonwealth official. With the support of the Federal Government, he appointed Frank Gare in that unusual dual role, trying to do the best that could be done to harness and husband the resources that were needed for the Aboriginal community of this State. He was capably and ably assisted in that role by Frank Gare, who went on to serve the State with distinction for most of that decade.

In the community welfare portfolio Bill was capably assisted by his head of department, Keith Maine, whom I was pleased to see at the funeral of Bill Willesee, which I attended on behalf of the Australian Labor Party. Keith Maine went on to champion for his minister the responsibilities which flowed to the department during the Tonkin years. Bill took over the portfolio at a time when people were coming into the towns from the stations and facing enormous change and social dislocation, as new fringe dwellers were being effectively created as a consequence of the changed social policies and legislative responsibilities of their employers.

Bill, as minister, saw award wages arrive for the Aboriginal stockmen, and as a consequence large populations sprang up on the edge of towns like Wyndham, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Port Hedland, Roebourne, Carnarvon and many others. The Government of the day faced a huge task in finding ways to respond to the needs of that section of the Western Australian community. At the same time, the Labor Party was left with the responsibility of responding to the changed statutory position of Aboriginal people and transferring, among other things, drinking rights to Aboriginal people. These rights had already started to move into some sections of the State as into the rest of regional Western Australia. The minister had to preside over the inevitable, but also difficult, social transition that occurred at that time. It was enormously painful for anyone with a sense of compassion and an interest in the welfare of that section of the population to see, inevitably, Bill struggle with those realities as a minister.

I have heard a story that Bill, as a minister, had to watch the arrival of Aboriginal activists in what would have been the first demonstration on the steps of Parliament House. In the cold winter months of the Tonkin Government, the Aboriginal people effectively became occupants of the steps as they maintained a long vigil to protest the need for the accelerated transition to them of their rights, entitlements and opportunities that would come from the interests of Federal and State Governments. Bill Willesee, having responsibility for community and native welfare, quickly organised for those people to be issued with blankets to keep them warm as they huddled in the cold on the front steps of Parliament House, much to the chagrin of the Premier of the day, who summoned Bill and expressed his annoyance. He was hoping that they would move on quickly rather than cause the Government any further embarrassment. However, Bill wanted to see the Aboriginal people at least comfortable as they protested about his Government. Such was the character of this man.

Bill was also faced with getting extra resources for government to respond to the housing and welfare needs and the homemaker programs. Much of the housing was constructed on the best available advice at the time. Some of it was done well and some of it was disastrous, but all of it was done with the passionate commitment to doing the right thing and to looking after the needs of that section of the population.

Bill made it quite clear in his memoirs what happened to him. In those two short years as a minister, he found that the portfolio wore him down enormously. His health started to fail. He worried about his inability to deliver all that was required to respond to the needs of that section of the population. As his health failed, and under pressure from his family in the light of that reality, he stood down from the ministry and as government leader. He was succeeded in this place by his friend and close colleague, Jerry Dolan, who became Leader of the Labor Government in this House.

Much can be learnt from the character and the parliamentary life of Bill Willesee. He retired from this House on 21 May 1974, having served in this Parliament during the terms of Presidents Loton, Latham and Diver. In his record, Bill described that period in this place as a difficult time. He also spoke of how the presiding officers of the time championed the rights of the House and of individual members. His recorded history refers to the great lengths to which each of those presiding officers went to adopt political impartiality and to embody that impartiality in the way they operated in the Chair. There is much to learn from the life and times of the likes of Hon Bill Willesee. He was the embodiment of the fine characteristics of loyalty and dedication to his constituents as their MLC, to his State as a minister, and to his party as a lifelong member. Bill knew what was required of a Labor Party member elected to this place and he accepted that role and those obligations right

through to the end of his career. Bill's electors and electorates, this State of Western Australia and the Australian Labor Party are richer for having had Hon W.F. Willesee, MLC at their service.

Bill returned to family life with his health soon restored. He took up an active working life as an accountant for a Perth business and then later, as the years crept up on him, accepted the role of a school crosswalk attendant in his suburban neighbourhood, from which neighbourhood the stories still emerge of this charming and generous man and his close friendships and relationships with the youngsters of that suburb as they were carefully guarded to school across the dangerous crossings. He took particular interest in the multicultural community that was emerging at those crosswalks and pleasure in the role that this section of the community was playing in the life of his suburb. He kept up an active role in various organisations, including the Italian Club and the Epilepsy Association Inc. (WA). He was the honorary auditor for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's Western Australian branch and also the honorary auditor for the State Parliamentary Labor Party until the late 1980s, and it was in both those roles that I knew him best.

Bill died on 18 August this year at the age of 88. He leaves behind his wife Sadie, their children Kathleen, Shirley, William and Ian, and their grandchildren, and his brother Don. On behalf of the State Parliamentary Labor Party I accepted the honour and responsibility of representing the Australian Labor Party and joining with a number of Bill's former Labor colleagues who attended his funeral service where we joined with his family in saluting him and celebrating his life and times. On behalf of all those constituent elements of his life that made up his professional career - as town clerk of the Shire of Carnarvon, representative of the north, as Leader of the Government and the Opposition in this place and as minister - one is left with the task of saying "thank you" to a family that was deprived of this particularly loving man for an extended period of his life - some 20 years in political life and a large number of years before in local government.

His final speech to this House included these words -

Therefore, I believe the Government should finish its term before a full-scale election.

One can imagine the controversies at the time.

I hope that this Bill will be passed . . .

I do not have the name of the Bill; I did not think it was germane to this condolence motion.

. . . but I cannot let these serious imputations about our coloured people go without comment.

His final words were -

We have to squarely face up to what we did when, in the grandeur of 1967, we said we would give Aborigines equality.

Mr President, Hon Bill Willesee may now rest in peace but I am sure the ideals for which he stood live on in the legacy that he has left this State, this Parliament and our party.

THE PRESIDENT (Hon George Cash): Before I put the question, I join with the Leader of the House as the mover of this motion and the Leader of the Opposition as the seconder in this expression of profound sympathy to Mrs Sadie Willesee and the Willesee family on the sad occasion of the death of our esteemed former colleague, Hon Bill Willesee. As is the practice of the House, I will ensure that a copy of this condolence motion is forwarded to Mrs Willesee and the Willesee family. I now invite members to rise and stand in their places for one minute to indicate their support for this motion.

Question passed, members standing.