

RAYMOND JAMES O'CONNOR

Condolence Motion

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [2.05 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house records its sincere regret at the death of Raymond James O'Connor and tenders its deep sympathy to his family.

Ray, or "Rocky" as he was known, scaled the heights of political life in Western Australia, but also attracted his share of controversy in a long career as a member of the Legislative Assembly. Raymond James O'Connor was born in Perth on 6 March 1926, the son of a policeman, Alphonsus, and his mother, Annie. As the family followed his father's postings, Ray spent his early years in Narrogin and York before he returned to Perth at 13 years old and attended Saint Patrick's Boys' School.

Ray O'Connor's first job was as a clerk for Southern Cross Windmills, but soon after he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in 1944. He was assigned to the Intelligence section and served in Bougainville and New Britain. Remarkably, one of his commanding officers in Bougainville was Charles Court, later to become the Premier of Western Australia, with Ray O'Connor serving for a time as his deputy. Ray O'Connor rose to the rank of corporal before he was discharged in 1947.

Following his service, Ray O'Connor commenced the first of a number of business enterprises, running the Beehive Tearoom in Forrest Place. He was also a proprietor in a car dealership called Sixth Avenue Motors, in Inglewood, and a director of the Town and Country Building Society.

Ray O'Connor was a gifted athlete. As a teenager he particularly excelled at hurdles and discus, and he later represented both the South Fremantle and East Perth Football Clubs. While playing for East Perth in 1950, he was awarded the Prendergast Medal as the fairest and best player in the WAFL reserves competition.

Ray O'Connor first ran for public office in 1956 when he stood unsuccessfully as an Independent Liberal candidate for the Legislative Council. He had been encouraged to stand by his father who, paradoxically, had been a long-time Labor supporter but had sufficient misgivings at that time to sponsor his son's tilt for a Council seat. Although unsuccessful, Ray O'Connor emerged as a charismatic candidate, with a sharp mind and an aptitude for hard work. He attracted the attention of Sir Keith Watson, a senior Liberal Party member in the Legislative Council, who suggested he might fare better with the backing of a party. Ray O'Connor joined the Liberal Party in 1957 and contested the seat of North Perth in the general election of 1959, defeating the incumbent Labor Party member, Stan Lapham. The electorate of North Perth was abolished in a redistribution, leaving Ray O'Connor to contest the seat of Mount Lawley in the 1962 election, which he did successfully against his Labor opponent, a young Joe Berinson. Ray O'Connor comfortably defended the seat at seven subsequent elections from 1965 to 1983.

Ray O'Connor had entered Parliament during a period of ascendancy for the Liberal Party, led by Sir David Brand. In 1965, Ray O'Connor was appointed Minister for Transport and, later, Minister for Railways. After two terms, however, Ray O'Connor found himself on the opposition benches following the downfall of the Brand-Nalder government and the election, by a single seat, of a Labor government, under John Tonkin.

After one term in opposition, the Liberal Party, then headed by Charles Court, was returned to government in 1974. Ray O'Connor was duly appointed a minister, with responsibilities at various times, for Transport; Traffic; Police; and Road Safety. Following the Court government's re-election in the 1977 election, Ray O'Connor was appointed Minister for Works, Water Supply and Housing. It seems he had responsibility at some point for every portfolio there was. Certainly, his ministerial appointments, particularly in senior roles, reflect the high esteem in which he was held.

Ray O'Connor recalled an occasion in 1978, when he was travelling back to Perth after attending an event to mark the opening of the Tammin water supply. A radio report provided details of a ministerial reshuffle announced earlier that day following the resignation of Bill Grayden. No sooner had Ray O'Connor remarked to his travelling companions that there was no way he would want Grayden's portfolios, than the report concluded with the news that Premier Court would be appointing Ray O'Connor as Minister for Labour and Industry, Consumer Affairs and Immigration, in addition to his existing responsibilities. In later reshuffles, he took on Fisheries and Wildlife, Conservation and Environment.

Ray O'Connor's colleagues elected him Deputy Premier after the 1980 election and, following Charles Court's retirement, Ray O'Connor became Premier on 25 January 1982. Timing is everything in politics, and although Ray O'Connor had reached the pinnacle of a long and successful political career, he did so towards the end of a golden era for the Liberal Party. A resurgent Labor Party proceeded to win the 1983 state general election, and although O'Connor initially retained the Liberal leadership in opposition, he resigned after a year and left Parliament.

His achievements were both vast and varied, as illustrated by a selection of his decisions made as a minister—extending the freeway south; promoting changes to the way public housing was provided; introducing legislation for mandatory seatbelts and the .08 limit on a driver's blood alcohol content; and limiting the seasons and catch sizes in the prawn and lobster fisheries. His career featured some 15 years as a minister, including one year as Premier. But Ray O'Connor will also be remembered in less happy circumstances following his conviction in 1995 for stealing, and serving a six-month jail term. The allegation had emerged from the WA Inc royal commission's investigation of events that occurred well after O'Connor's time in politics. O'Connor resolutely maintained his innocence throughout the court case, during his imprisonment and following his release. His conviction proved a painful burden and, undoubtedly, it was a traumatic time for his family and his many supporters and for Ray O'Connor himself. He perceived he had been treated unfairly during the royal commission and the subsequent prosecution, and he particularly resented the impact on his family. The situation was complicated further by Ray O'Connor's diagnosis with prostate cancer. Nevertheless, Ray O'Connor handled his imprisonment in typical fashion, making the best of the situation by assisting other prisoners when he could, providing advice on their cases and writing letters.

After his release, Ray O'Connor got on with life, continuing his consultancy business and moving into real estate. Given his history, it is little surprise that he worked as long as he could before Parkinson's disease took its hold. Surrounded by loved ones, Ray O'Connor died peacefully in a nursing home on 25 February 2013 aged 86.

Ray O'Connor will be remembered as a larger-than-life character, blessed with a sharp mind, great charm and determination. His tireless work contributed enormously to the advancement of the state. I attended his funeral, and after hearing some of his mates talk about his adventures throughout his life, no-one could doubt that Ray O'Connor lived life to the full. At times it was a controversial life, but he was much loved and admired by his family and friends.

On behalf of all members of this house, I express condolences to Ray O'Connor's wife, Vesna, his children, Craig, Lance, Jenny, Kim, Nola, Tom, Zina and Raymond, and their families.

MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [2.12 pm]: I join the Premier and the government in this condolence motion to Hon Ray O'Connor. It is a rare event to participate in a condolence motion for a former Premier of Western Australia. Mr O'Connor was born in 1926. During the course of his life, he saw many of the amazing events in both Australian and world history. As a child, he would have experienced the Great Depression, which affected Western Australia and Australia dramatically. He moved around country Western Australia with his parents and lived in towns as diverse as Narrogin and York, as well as attending schools in the Perth metropolitan area. He served the country in the Second World War, as most men of his generation did, and indeed served in both Bougainville and New Britain in the latter stages of the war. When he returned to Australia, he would have seen the amazing transformation of the country with the immigration scheme immediately after the Second World War.

As someone who had some entrepreneurial ability, he then took over a cafe in Forrest Place called the Beehive Tea Rooms. Immediately prior to his election to Parliament, he had an interesting occupation for someone who was elected to Parliament. He was a used car salesman immediately before his election to Parliament. He was one of those people who rose in the world when he was elected to Parliament in comparison with his occupation prior to arriving here!

He was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1959, which, according to my recollection, is when the Brand government first came to power. He was in Parliament from 1959 to 1986, a period of 27 or so years. It was a very long political career. He saw many of the titans of the period in state politics and, indeed, in the entire country. People such as Bert Hawke would have been here when Ray O'Connor arrived, having just lost the election. Sir David Brand, John Tonkin and Sir Charles Court all served as members of this place during Ray O'Connor's time here. Many of those people's names are now not commonly known in Western Australia and Perth; they are part of a bygone and forgotten era. He was part of that period of significant political figures in this state; indeed, he served as a minister in two governments: the Brand government and the Court government; and then as Premier in his own government.

I read both his valedictory speech and some of the oral history research project that he put together post his political career in the last few years in which he talked about his political career. His valedictory speech is an interesting speech. He talked about the demands and stresses on members of Parliament and the impact it might have on them and their families during the time that they are here. He also talked about the days in 1986, in the lead-up to the defence of the America's Cup. The main focus of his valedictory speech was around what we should do as a state to capitalise on this one-off event that was coming to Perth; so it was a plea for tourism in the state. He had various ideas. He talked about yacht races—around-Australia yacht races and many other races—to capitalise on the America's Cup. He wanted to organise a marathon challenge and to bring in some of the great marathon runners of the era, including Robert de Castella. He wanted to organise a superstars football

round—I thought that was a very good idea—with some of the best state-based teams to play a round robin over a couple of weeks here in Perth, with each of the states providing a team, which would attract interest. He also suggested that we have a major country and western show because, as he said, we had Ernie Bridge here, so we could bring in people like Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers as part of a country and western experience. I thought it was interesting that he mentioned Ernie Bridge, considering we will be dealing with Ernie Bridge's condolence motion in coming weeks.

In his oral history Mr O'Connor talked about what happened in the celebration of the America's Cup. Apparently he was engaged by the government of the day to assist in organising events. He said there were 30 separate events and 750 000 spectators. He said that Hawthorn Football Club came over here and played Subiaco Football Club. Hawthorn won by three points, but I suspect it might be a slightly different outcome these days! He talked about the great athletics event that was held, where we attracted Steve Cram, the great middle distance runner and also Ben Johnson, who also subsequently achieved fame! He referred to cycling and squash events, and he was even involved in negotiations with Don King to attract Mike Tyson to Western Australia for a boxing event, which he said he was happy did not take place.

In his oral history, which is an extensive project, he talked about some of the events he enjoyed while a member of Parliament. He said that people used to be parked outside his house in the morning to meet him and present their concerns, so he could hear their problems, both as a member of Parliament and a minister, prior to heading off to work. He then talked about some of his experiences when he was in prison and how he helped a lot of prisoners with forms, divorce papers, appeals, bankruptcy proceedings and the like. He expressed a lot of empathy for people in prison, and said that he thought about four per cent of the prisoners he served his time with were actually innocent. That was his view, having talked to and mixed with many of these people.

He talked about his regrets. In his oral history project he indicated that he did 18 years as a minister and that he regretted—I think as many people do in later life—the fact that during his working life he did not spend enough time with his family, and that he was trying to spend as much time with his family and in helping his family as he could post-political life.

I did not know him, and I do not think I ever spoke to him around the building, although I saw him around the building a number of times. He was very tall man, who seemed to have a large group of friends with whom he would arrive and have lunch and so forth. He actually used the building and the opportunities available as a former member of Parliament, which was a good thing. He certainly seemed to have an active social life and a wide group of friends composed of former members of Parliament and the like, and I think it is probably quite a good thing for people, as they get older, to relive experiences and talk to people that they once worked and served with and to have that ongoing social contact. To rise to be the Premier of this state is something worth acknowledging. On behalf of the state Parliamentary Labor Party, I would like to pass on my regards to Mr O'Connor's wife, Vesna, his children Craig, Lance, Jenny, Kim, Nola, Tom, Zina and Raymond, and their families.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren–Blackwood — Deputy Leader of the National Party) [2.21 pm]: On behalf of the Parliamentary National Party, I rise to support the condolence motion before the Parliament. Raymond James O'Connor was born on 6 March 1926 in Perth, Western Australia, the son of Alphonsus, a police officer, and Annie. He attended school in Narrogin, York, and St Patrick's Boys' School in Perth. He served in the 61st Battalion of the Second Australian Imperial Force between 1944 and 1947, serving under Sir Charles Court in Bougainville and New Britain. He rose to the rank of corporal before discharge in 1947. Significantly, he was a talented athlete. He was the state champion in athletics for hurdles and discus. He also played in the Western Australian National Football League for South Fremantle in 1944 and East Perth between 1948 and 1950.

Ray O'Connor joined the Liberal Party in 1957 and entered Parliament in the 1959 general election, defeating a sitting ALP member in the electorate of North Perth. In 1980 he was the most experienced parliamentarian on either side of the house, having successfully held 17 portfolios. Those of us who think we have had our fair share of portfolios have a long way to go. He held the portfolios of labour and industry, consumer affairs, immigration, fisheries and wildlife, transport, police, traffic, works, water supplies, housing, conservation and environment, regional administration, the north west and tourism. He became Deputy Premier in 1980, and he became Premier on 25 January 1982 on the resignation of Sir Charles Court. He extended the olive branch to Aboriginal people after the dispute at Noonkanbah by granting pastoral leases and making other arrangements in support of Aboriginal people. He diplomatically took on the unions by introducing laws to ban "closed shop" operations. He was defeated in the 1983 state election after one year and one month in that office. His 24 years in Parliament typified a conciliatory and diplomatic politician, a man of the people and the champion of a number of key reforms, including extending the freeway south, making key improvements to public housing, making the wearing of seatbelts mandatory and making key changes in the fishing industry.

Extract from *Hansard*

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Mr Colin Barnett; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Terry Redman

Ray O'Connor will be remembered as a diplomatic but determined and intelligent politician and Premier who made a valuable contribution to the state of Western Australia. He died on 25 February 2013 at the age of 86. On behalf of the parliamentary National Party, I express condolences to Ray O'Connor's wife, Vesna, his children, Craig, Lance, Jenny, Kim, Nola, Tom, Zina and Raymond, and, of course, to their extended families.

The SPEAKER: I ask members to rise and support this motion by observing a minute's silence.

Question passed; members standing.